

Multilingualism as a CLASSROOM RESOURCE

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Introduction

Multilingualism is now widely recognised as a natural phenomenon which relates positively to cognitive flexibility and achievement at school. Its potential in the classroom has not, however, been fully exploited. It is ironic that as language research has come to appreciate the importance of multilingual competence, classroom practices generally, and language classes in particular, have become more monolingual. The languages children speak at home and in the community are increasingly neglected at school and are often stigmatised in the classroom.

Diverse languages are seen as obstacles and sources of interference in the learning of the target language. When different subjects are taught, they are predominantly associated with a specific language and, in the language class itself, the use of any other language except the target language is generally forbidden. Because of this, schools are simply reinforcing the negative stereotypes about the languages of children who are already socially disadvantaged and perpetuate the situation in which language contributes to exploitation. We have reached a point where socially and politically neutral sympathies for the languages of the deprived will do more harm than good. What we need to do is to make language awareness a part of the social struggle for justice and equality.

Meaningful and creative education is the key to social struggle and language is at the centre of all educational activity. Apart from the fact that most of our knowledge is acquired through language and that language structure encodes social differentiation and exploitation in a variety of ways, language, very subtly, also structures our thoughts and delimits our articulations.

The legend

As Newmark (1966) reminded us, we know perfectly well how languages are learnt and yet we interfere with their being learnt all the time. Languages are learnt best when the focus is not on language learning. In fact, most children in multilingual societies learn several languages simultaneously since their focus is not on language but on the messages contained therein. In order for language learning to be successful, the situation needs to be informal; the learner should be free from any anxiety; the teacher should essentially be a friend, observer and facilitator; and most of the learning process should be centred on meaningful tasks and peer-group interactions.

The history of language teaching unfortunately shows that teaching methods have continuously moved away from these basic principles. The obsession with correctness, with memorisation of paradigms and with a handful of select classical texts must go back

at least to Panini,¹ followed by the Greek, Roman and, in more recent times, the British and the American traditions. The colonisers in different parts of the world took responsibility for creating norms, not only for their languages, but also for the languages of those colonised. For example, missionaries provided the first written document in the form of the Bible (of course in Roman orthography) for several unwritten Indian languages. For the native speakers, the norm for their language was really created by the British missionaries whose perception of these Indian languages was inevitably coloured by the phonology of their own languages.²

Yet, during these times, second or foreign-language learning was not characterised by the kind of disdain for the language of the learner that we witness today. Most of the eighteenth and nineteenth century language-learning primers³ were bilingual and could easily be used for learning either language. They were also based on authentic situations likely to be familiar to the learners. The language(s) of the learners were frequently used for teaching both vocabulary and grammar, and translation exercises constituted the field in which the vocabulary and grammar of both the languages involved could be meaningfully tried in a given context. They were also informed by the very pragmatic considerations of trade and travel. Howatt (1984:67) tells us about *The Tutor*, the first primer prepared in order to teach Bengalis English. Published in 1797 in Serampore in Bengal (India), it centred on familiar and interesting day-to-day situations consisting of bilingual dialogues using simple colloquial words rather than archaic and scholarly vocabulary.

Several factors converged to make monolingualism, normative standards discouraging

variability, and an obsession with correctness, the order of the day. It was in the interest of colonisers to denigrate native languages as 'vernaculars', fit to be used only in the peripheral domains of home and street. The traditional knowledge articulated by these languages was described as false and erroneous. In the case of India, for example, Macaulay (1835, from Aggarwal 1983:11) believed that the administrative and financial support for classical languages like Arabic and Sanskrit should be withdrawn and, in the interest of the Raj and Indians themselves, all education should take place through the medium of English, and English Literature and History should be compulsory subjects in schools and colleges. Macaulay⁴ (1835) believed that this education would produce a class of persons, 'Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect'. He was clear that even the interests of 'vernacular' languages would be best served by these Anglicised Indians.

The fact that these policies proved disastrous for the colonised countries is evident from the resulting major social division between the élite (with an English-medium education) and the deprived ('vernacular-medium' education) which characterises all hitherto colonised countries (Das Gupta 1970:44) and the dismal state in which we find most of the 'vernacular' languages today. Colonisers had to prove the 'superiority' of their language and culture. Intervening in education in this manner was the most effective way of doing it.

The invention of the magnetic tape and its multiplication, the language lab, current sociological positivism, psychological behaviourism and linguistic structuralism all

1 Panini was a fifth-century grammarian whose codification of Sanskrit (Tongue Perfected) has remained normative for the correct use of the language ever since.

2 [An almost identical process took place in Africa, and particularly in South Africa, where Christian missionaries described and wrote down various indigenous languages in order to propagate the gospel. Very often they described close varieties of the same language as being different languages altogether - Eds.]

3 A primer is an introductory book, an elementary textbook used for teaching children to read (Concise Oxford Dictionary).

4 Macaulay, a British historian, who spent four years in India, during which time he had the responsibility of structuring a national system of education with a Western orientation for this country (1835, from Aggarwal 1983:11).

demanded that oral fluency, accuracy and a native-like control of the language be learnt. Learners were increasingly viewed as empty receptacles who could be programmed by the environment to write the required message. Language was seen merely as a set of structures and the learning process as largely linear and additive.

These are the basic principles which underlie such celebrated language-teaching methods as the Direct Method and Audiolingualism. The Cognitive Theory reaction to these principles in recent times simply idealised the concept of a native speaker. One fortunate consequence of the Cognitive reaction was that the learner was no longer seen as empty but as being equipped with innate abilities and an enormous potential for creativity. The developments in sociolinguistics brought out the significance of social and psychological aspects in language learning.

Yet the asocial and apolitical nature of the work in the cognitive sciences and in sociolinguistics undermined the whole language-teaching enterprise. Even in recent methods and models such as the Monitor Model, the Communicative Approach, the Silent Way, Suggestopaedia, Total Physical Response, etc., the dominant mode is still monolingual and the acquisition of an élite standard still the target.

The pressures of global trade and marketing have only made the situation worse in the sense that language learning is increasingly seen in terms of acquiring certain skills only. A process that could meaningfully constitute the basis of a critical awareness about both language and social structure is designed only as a craft in which one acquires the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing or, at best, the ability to negotiate social encounters successfully. A metalinguistic awareness – about the nature of language structure, acquisition and change, or the ways in which language encodes processes of social exploitation – does not form a part of any language-teaching curriculum. As Fairclough says,

... a language education focused upon training in language skills without a critical component, would seem to be failing in its

responsibility to learners. People cannot be effective citizens in a democratic society if their education cuts them off from critical consciousness of key elements within their physical or social environment. If we are committed to education establishing resources for citizenship, critical awareness of the language practices of one's speech community is an entitlement. (1992:6)

Multilingual societies and language teaching

We need to recognise multilingual people as normal human beings and multilingual societies as not just normal but the most commonly-found human aggregates in the world. Russia, China, India, Africa – the most densely-populated regions of the world – are multilingual. As Illich (1981:30) suggests, except in the case of isolated tribal communities or industrialised societies having had compulsory schooling for generations, monolingualism is uncommon. We also need to take the overwhelming evidence in favour of a positive correlation between cognitive flexibility and multilingualism seriously (Peel and Lambert 1962; Gardner and Lambert 1972; Cummins and Swain 1986). Further, children do not find learning several languages simultaneously a problem and the multiplicity of languages in a multilingual society is not a headache (Bright 1969) but an asset. In the case of India, scholars like Pandit (1969, 1972), Uberoi and Uberoi (1976) and Khubchandani (1983) among others have shown how different languages perform different functions in multilingual societies and are associated with the maintenance of multiple identities. We also need to recognise the potential equality of all languages and realise that stigmatisation of the home language of children can leave them with irredeemable psychological scars.

As discussed above, we need to analyse how language has been used as a tool for exploitation generally, not only by the recent colonisers. In the case of India, for example, English simply supplanted Sanskrit and Arabic in the stigmatisation of the native languages of people. Finally, we need to appreciate the fact that language is at the centre of the whole educational enterprise. If we keep all the above in mind, a very

different language curriculum will begin to take shape. The implications for methods and materials, teachers and publishers and teacher-training programmes are radical. It would also mean involving parents and members of the community in planning the curriculum, syllabuses and teaching materials in an active and creative way.

Techniques in the multilingual classroom

A teacher who recognises multilingualism as an asset will inevitably think of ways of creatively exploiting the different languages available in a given language classroom. Accuracy and/or fluency in the target language or acquisition of specific skills to negotiate social (mainly business) encounters ceases to be the goal of language learning.

Discourses already available to children, and the interaction of these with new and non-linguistic discourses, will be at the heart of a new language-teaching methodology. For example, the language class in a place like Delhi (where the class could easily include children who speak, say, Bengali, Tamil and Hindi) could begin with a Bengali poem and its translation into different languages including, if need be, English. The Bengali children in the class could actually take over the class when explicating the nuances of the poem and, as children attempt to render the poem in their own languages or in a second language, they begin to appreciate the similarities and differences between different languages.

This could subsequently form the basis of discussions about the nature and structure of language. The advantages of such an exercise are indeed manifold. Children play an active role in the process of learning. The focus is not on language, even though an enormous amount of language learning is taking place. Grammar, an otherwise hated aspect, could become both interesting and essential. The interaction of the literary discourse with the social and the historical would inevitably form part of the discussion of the poem.

Languages of children are not just tolerated; they are creatively used in the classroom. Teachers, themselves, are learning as well. Several activities involving cognitively-

challenging tasks could easily be planned. Instead of teaching rules for making plurals in English, the teacher could plan an activity which examines the whole phenomenon of marking plurality across languages. [See Versfeld chapter 4 in this volume - Eds.]

Materials

The teaching materials will inevitably undergo radical changes in response to the above suggestions. We will have to stop thinking in terms of having teaching materials for a language; we will instead have materials for language, society and education. Teachers, parents and learners will participate actively in producing materials that will cut across the boundaries of language, region and discipline. It would not be necessary to produce a standardised textbook that would desperately try to meet the needs of students coming from strikingly different linguistic and cultural regions. In fact, such textbooks will actively be discouraged. Given a set of sample multilingual materials, children, parents and teachers will collaborate in producing their own local learning materials. Local languages, history, geography and culture will not appear on the margins of this enterprise, but will actually form the very essence of the educational process.

The overall objectives of these materials will not be the perpetuation of the status quo in society. They will aim at inculcating a critical awareness that would hopefully initiate processes of social change. Language proficiency is no longer conceptualised in terms of a set of skills but in terms of an ability to read critically between the lines and an ability to articulate one's experiences in different domains of activity.

Teachers and teacher training

In this sociologically-sensitive perspective on the multilingual classroom, the teacher has an increasingly participatory role to play. First of all, the authoritarian posture and overt presence in the classroom will have to be minimised. The teacher does more than just impart knowledge to students; he or she also listens to them. The first target is to break

the barriers of inhibitions among children and make every possible effort to create opportunities in which children can say and do what they wish. Linguistic and cultural differences are not seen as deviations from a standard norm. Errors are seen as necessary stages in the process of learning and not as pathologies to be eradicated through punishment. The teacher-training modules, correspondingly, will have to undergo radical changes. Trainers and resource persons no longer behave as 'experts' from a different world 'talking down' to the 'untrained' teacher. A teacher comes to a teacher-training camp with a rich experience of teaching and learner response; a teacher-training programme must capitalise on this solid base.

Secondly, the modules should clearly demonstrate how multilingualism in the classroom can be used as a resource. Comparative grammar, theories of language learning, critical reading of texts of all kinds, intertextual reading, role play, sociolinguistic aspects of language, development of writing systems and the relationship between speech and writing, translation and the analysis of the translation process, data elicitation and analysis techniques in a multilingual classroom, etc. will be essential components of such teacher-training modules.

Conclusion

For human aggregates, multilingualism rather than monolingualism is the norm. There is strong evidence of a positive relationship between multilingual competence and cognitive flexibility. It is not unnatural for human beings to learn or use several languages at the same time. In fact, in many speech communities, it is common practice to use mixed codes in several domains of activity. A multilingual classroom thus is simply a section of society and is a natural and normal phenomenon. In the interest of our children we must move away from monolingual norms and practices towards better education and social change. Teaching materials, methods of language teaching and teacher-

training modules will have to change accordingly. If language is at the centre of the whole educational enterprise, the sooner we recognise the potential of the multilingual classroom, the better for us. □

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