
Medium of Instruction in Indian Classrooms: English versus Mother Tongue

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Abstract:

This is an ever-going debate generally in the third world countries whether English should be preferred over mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the initial level, that is in primary and secondary schools, or vice-versa. English as a global language does hold great significance, but learning a new language and learning everything in that language are two different things. The former end can be achieved irrespective of the later one, whereas the later one requires the former one to be accomplished first. In most of the English medium schools in India, both the things go side by side though, without taking into cognizance the linguistic background of a child. This paper attempts to discuss the relative merits and demerits of the same as arriving at a correct strategy in this matter may go a long way in enhancing the academic efficiency of both teachers as well as students in most of the Indian schools.

Key words: Indian classrooms, English medium, mother tongue, education, school

In an era replete with theories and movements propagating all kinds of equalities between people, like Postcolonialism and Feminism, where deconstructing the power structures has become a fashion and efforts are being made to reduce the gap (though only on paper) between the privileged and the unprivileged ones to bring them at par with one another – socially, politically, economically, and educationally, there is one thing that is paradoxically thwarting these efforts – the preference given to English over the use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction in educational institutions in countries like India (or any other foreign

language like French in some parts of South Africa). This attitude is prevalent mostly in developing countries which have been former colonies of one or the other European power and it is consciously or unconsciously based on the notion of superiority of such foreign languages. English has taken the lead among such foreign languages firstly because a large number of such developing countries had been British colonies, and secondly because English is also the language of the current super power, the United States of America.

Many arguments have been put forward to justify this fascination with the English to be used as the medium of instruction, not just at higher levels, but from the very beginning of one's educational career. The first and foremost among them is that English has become the international or universal language, spoken and understood all over the world. But in a world where roughly 6500 spoken languages exist, questions like how and why English has dominated the scene boil down to the only fact that it is an imperial language – a tool of cultural and linguistic imperialism. Unfortunately, it is the same elite class which is the most vocal against such imperialistic tendencies and propagates all kinds of theories against them which favours English over mother tongue in schools, colleges and universities in countries like India.

Language, as per Ferdinand de Saussure¹ (the famous Swiss linguist who is generally perceived as the “father of modern linguistics”) is just a sign system – consisting of the signifier (the sound pattern) and the signified (the concept represented by that particular sound pattern) – used for the purpose of communication. What's important about Saussure's theory here is his concept of arbitrariness. According to him, the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary, which implies that no logical or intellectual thought lies behind the origin and evolution of a language or sign system. Once we understand and accept this arbitrariness, we can do away with the language hierarchy or the superiority of one language over the other since all languages are arbitrary in nature. And once we do away with this

notion of language hierarchy, we can realize the need to treat all languages equally, not giving preference to any one over the other.

Now, if we assess a language in terms of being just a medium to communicate or a facilitator in the process of communication, mother tongue holds the most important place as it is understood by its speakers in the simplest, easiest and the most nuanced manner. It is easier for everyone to receive and transmit messages and to understand things in his/her mother tongue. The language of the mother is the first language acquired and it is the language best known to a person with absolute command as he/she can express anything with the help of mother tongue and will not have to struggle with the limited vocabulary as one has to do in the case of a second or foreign language. It is the language in which a person learns to think and to reflect. It is the language in which a person dreams. Thus, mother tongue is psychologically significant to students, especially children. It helps develop perspective as language and thought are connected and it is impossible to think without knowing language. It is the first medium of education for any person since learning or education begins at home, not at school. Basic things about life are learned in the mother tongue within the framework of family, society and community. This learning and education can serve as a strong foundation for further learning if learners are given a smooth transition from home to school, which is not possible if English or any foreign language is used as the medium of instruction.

In India, the educational scene is dominated by English. There is a growing obsession with English medium schools, not only among the elite and the affluent classes, but also among the middle and the lower middle classes as this has become a status symbol. Everyone wants to admit their children to English medium schools which have sprung up in almost every part of the country. This makes the learning process challenging for children as English in India is not a language spoken commonly at home, and a number of students even come from low educational background. On starting school, learners find themselves in a new physical

environment. The classroom is new, most of the classmates are strangers, the centre of authority (the teacher) is a stranger too. The structured or formal way of learning is also new unlike the informal learning that takes place at home. The problem gets compounded if, in addition to these things, there is an abrupt change in the language of interaction. It has been found through research that changing the learning medium from mother tongue to a different language makes students insecure and leads to low self-esteem. Students may even start disliking school, education and teachers.²

However, by using the learners' home language, schools can help children navigate the new environment and bridge their learning at school with the experience they bring from home. Second, by using the learners' home language, learners are more likely to engage in the learning process. The interactive learner-centred approach – recommended by all educationalists – thrives in an environment where learners are sufficiently proficient in the language of instruction. It allows learners to make suggestions, ask questions, answer questions and create and communicate new knowledge with enthusiasm. It gives learners confidence and helps to affirm their cultural identity. This in turn has a positive impact on the way learners see the relevance of school to their lives. But when learners start school in a language that is still new to them, it leads to a teacher-centred approach and reinforces passiveness and silence in classrooms. This in turn suppresses young learners' potential and liberty to express themselves freely. It dulls the enthusiasm of young minds, inhibits their creativity, and makes the learning experience unpleasant. All of which is bound to have a negative impact on learning outcomes. The level of comprehension of the language of instruction can negatively affect performance because students may experience difficulties in grasping the underlying basic concepts that are taught in various subjects. This difficulty could cause some students to resort to memorizing and 'regurgitating' information, which leads to limited success when answering examination questions that require analytical approaches based on comprehension of the basic concepts involved.

English medium puts an extra burden upon the students. They have to struggle even with the basic concepts which they can understand, analyze, and express effortlessly in their mother tongue, just because the language is not familiar to them. Most of the time and energy of our students is utilized in understanding the language itself, which can be put to other more productive uses if English is replaced with the mother tongue. A number of developed nations do not use English, but the native language to impart education to children. All the potential of their students is thus used to understand the concepts and phenomena. This can be translated as the reason behind their rapid scientific and technological advancement and our lagging behind in the field as the attention of the learners there is not diverted to grasping the language in the first place, and they can easily devote themselves to creativity, innovation and higher goals and pursuits. This can be termed as a great privilege which our students are being deprived of by having forced to learn everything in a new language.

India needs to implement vernacular medium of instruction in classrooms also because there is dearth of skilled teachers at all levels and changing the instruction medium can solve the problem to a large extent. Performance of the students can also be affected by the quality of teachers in terms of their command of the language of instruction as well as their comprehension of the basic concepts of the subjects they teach. It is critical for teachers and students to interact effectively so that students can express their questions well and teachers can explain explicitly with relevant examples or demonstrations if applicable. This requires teachers to have a good command over the language which is unbeatable in the case of mother tongue or vernaculars. This will lessen the burden on teachers, especially where the teacher speaks the local language well (which is the case in the majority of the schools in India). Research has shown that in learning situations where both the teacher and the learner are non-native users of the language of instruction, the teacher struggles as much as the learners, particularly at the start of education. But when teaching starts in the teachers' and learners'

home language, the experience is more natural and less stressful for all. As a result, the teacher can be more creative and innovative in designing teaching/learning materials and approaches, leading to improved learning outcomes.

Some may argue that learning English is inevitable since English has become a global language and the majority of literature in the field of scientific and technological innovation is available in English, that English is a connecting language of this multilingual global village, i.e. the world. English is being seen by most of the Indian parents (particularly by those belonging to upper middle class) as the way to success and career advancement. However, English is not the one and only way to achieve success in a country as vast and varied as India (it should be noted that over 75% of population in India does not speak English). Some outsourcing assignments cannot define the destiny of all the people. Moreover, how many Indians can afford to go abroad for educational, professional or any other purpose? Why the whole population be burdened with English medium for the sake of a small proportion? Besides, empirical research has also shown that the use of mother tongue or *lingua franca* in early literacy and content learning stages is more effective than use of a foreign second language.³

At this juncture, we need to differentiate between education and English. Learning English does not mean acquiring education and education does not mean learning English. As far as learning English is concerned, this can be addressed by teaching it separately as a subject with adequate weightage as a part of the overall curriculum. A number of universities in India introduce courses in foreign languages at higher levels. If those languages can be learnt directly at graduate or post-graduate level without any prior foundation, how is it not possible to gain expertise in English when taught from the very beginning? Knowledge and skills are transferable from one language to another. This implies that skills and concepts taught in the learners' home language do not have to be re-taught, learners automatically transfer

knowledge acquired in one language to another language as soon as they have learned sufficient vocabulary in the new language. For example, if you teach learners in their mother tongue, that seeds need soil, moisture and warmth to germinate, you do not have to re-teach this in English. When they have developed adequate vocabulary in English, they will translate the information. Thus, starting school in the learners' mother tongue does not delay education but leads to faster acquisition of the skills and attitudes needed for success in formal education.

Replacing English with the mother tongue as a medium of instruction can also help in reducing the social hierarchies and discrimination, since English has become a status symbol. The people who cannot speak English are looked down upon by those who can, no matter how learned they might be otherwise. Speaking English is wrongfully been equated with possessing knowledge and intellect. Students who are not proficient in speaking English sometimes develop inferiority complex and hesitate in expressing themselves in the classroom, which hampers their learning process and negatively affects their personality development, thus having lifelong implications. Moreover, languages also preserve, enrich and pass on the culture, history and tradition to our future generations.

We can conclude this discussion safely with the following words from *Monographs on Fundamental Education: The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, published in 1953 by UNESCO, a volume based on the report of a meeting of specialists on the use of vernacular languages in education which was convened in Paris in November, 1951:

“It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among the

members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.”⁴

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