MULTILINGUALITY AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

ABSTRACT: This paper argues that the actual heterogeneity rather than the assumed homogeneity of the classroom should inform the project of education. The unmarked classroom in India is essentially multilingual and multicultural and these features can be used as resources rather than seen as obstacles. A similar approach should inform the teaching of English. Children do need to learn English but not at the cost of their own languages. In the paradigm of multilinguality suggested in this paper, it is eminently possible to organize methods, materials, teacher training and classroom transaction in a way that the languages of children are not ignored and English still gets acquired, with levels of proficiency not commonly witnessed hitherto among children.

KEYWORDS: multilingualism, language education, English Language Teaching, multilinguality as a resource

0. INTRODUCTION

In the standard transmission model of education, several assumptions are made and implemented in a rather religious manner. For example, it is assumed that there is a cohesive body of knowledge largely encapsulated in the form of a textbook which will be transacted in the classroom by the teacher in a fairly prescriptive way and at the end of the term or semester, every student will be evaluated using the same question paper where there is only one possible correct answer to every question. This model also assumes, though it is completely contrary to fact, that every classroom is homogeneous in terms of language, culture and individual experiences. In fact, it is considered to be the obvious truth that if you have to teach, then the teacher and the children must share the same language and to a great extent the same culture too. There is in this model thus no space for the linguistic and cultural diversity present in the classroom.
In one of my earlier papers (Agnihotri 2007), I had argued for a pedagogy rooted in multilinguality that would ensure the emergence of a society that is marked not only for its happiness and peace but also for its justice, equality, liberty and care for others. It should also be a society that encourages rationality and respect for diversity. In this paper, I propose to outline a possible scenario for the teaching of English in India which will be consistent with the proposals made in the 2007 paper and will present an alternative to the transmission model of education. The central issue is that English in India should and will flourish in the company of other languages and not at their cost. If English continues to neglect other languages as Sanskrit, Arabic or Persian did, it will inevitably meet their fate. It seems obvious today that every Indian child needs to learn English but I think it should be equally obvious that Indian Englishes, though sharing their syntactic properties with other varieties of English across the world, will be significantly different in their phonologies and lexicons.

1. MULTILINGUALITY: THE DEFAULT HUMAN CONDITION

Language has traditionally been seen (by both lay persons and professionals) either as a mere ‘means of communication’ or as an external object, or as an innate capacity for careful systematic enquiry by linguists. Its diversity, iconicity, symbolic power and its association with ethnicity, cultural practices and socio-political dynamics have often been ignored. The most celebrated of our politicians including Gandhi and Nehru, though using language with great skill and intense emotion themselves, could not appreciate the symbolic and iconic aspects of Indian multilingualism (King 1997). Those who know the story of Potti Sriramulu’s suicide for Telugu and the Andhra state or the Hindi-Urdu or Serbo-Croatian divide or the revival of Hebrew in Israel, or the failure of Irish in Ireland or the case of Turkish under the Kemalism of Ataturk, would immediately appreciate the iconic value of language. Also, the Cartesian dictum that ‘I think, therefore I am’ is in fact realized through language. The ‘I’, ‘me’ (self-identity) and ‘you’ (the other) and the world of natural objects, all in a sense get constructed through and in language.
Multilinguality thus defined subsumes not only linguistic resources but also cultural practices and the local knowledge systems. One of the major reasons for ignoring multilinguality, in addition to the linguist’s obsession with ‘a system’, has been the emergence of the concept of nation-state in which a territorial identity has to be, even if by force, coupled with linguistic and religious identity. I suggest that language be conceptualised as multilinguality seen as a verbal repertoire which is constitutive of being human. Societies and individuals across the globe – Africa, Asia, Australia, USA, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, the UK – you name it, have maintained different degrees of multilinguality at different points of time in their history. India of course has always been an example of multilinguality par excellence. As early as the 13th century, Amir Khusro (1253-1325) counted over 10 major Indian languages; later Abu’l Fazal (1551-1602) counted over 12. Today we know that these must have been substantial underestimations. Today the estimates vary from about 400 to 1652 languages. The number is really inconsequential so long we recognize that it is variability (rather than the homogeneity of the transmission model) that facilitates communication and sharing of knowledge systems. That is why Pandit (1969, 1972, 1988) could say, variability in India is a facilitator and not a barrier in communication. Responding to Gumperz, Pandit (1969) said:

Bilingualism can be described as a special frame for observation of language change; besides the proposed models of stratified equilibrium, can we not think of a model which measures the dynamics of bilingual situation.

He talked of situations where a bilingual tongue is so internalised that it becomes the mother tongue. Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985) have shown through detailed empirical analysis of contact situations that in multilingual communities, language boundaries are porous and fluidity and not stability is the norm. India is often described as a linguistic and a sociolinguistic area because languages here travel across all kinds of boundaries without any passports. It is not inconceivable that a group of people develop a secret argot with a new lexicon and frame it in the morphology and syntax of an existing language. Multilinguality then is a default human situation and every classroom is inherently multilingual.
In a variety of ways, recent research (Cummins and Swain 1986, Edwards 1998, Agnihotri 1995, 1997, 2005, 2007) has established how this multilinguality can be used as a resource, a teaching strategy and a goal. We need to do this because it correlates positively with cognitive growth, divergent thinking and social tolerance. It is also now well-established that levels of language proficiency enhance significantly with metalinguistic awareness which is most eminently achieved if multilinguality is maintained at the centre of language teaching activities. We will return to these issues presently.

2. THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN INDIA

The number of people wishing to learn English has been multiplying exponentially given the forces of market economy and globalization. Over twelve years ago, we (Agnihotri and Khanna 1997) had conducted a large-scale survey across the country and shown that even though people wanted to preserve their languages, they did wish to add English to their repertoire. The fact that most states in the country have decided to introduce English from Classes 1 or 2 (even though trained teachers, suitable materials and innovative methods that would inevitably be needed are not available) and the rapid mushrooming of ‘English-medium’ schools across the country has borne out our findings. On the other hand, we are also aware that the neo-imperialism associated with English has contributed to linguistic genocide and socio-economic exploitation (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, Suleri 1992, Phillipson 1992 among many others). That the gulf between the elite and the marginalized sections of society in India is consistently widening is certainly partly due to the way we have organized our school system and the teaching of English. Pennycook (1994) argues that English constitutes an eminent site for future discourses and counter-discourses for the de-colonization of our minds and the minds of the colonizers. A dialogue on English in India/Indian English held at the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore (January 4-6, 2007, see Agnihotri 2008) made two things very clear: that Indian English was an integral part of the language ecology of India, a variety in its own right which need not look at any external norms and
secondly, it is no longer possible to ignore the socio-political matrix in which English functions. Responding to Singh’s target paper ‘Reflections on English in India and Indian English’, Lele argues that unless we explore the conditions that would ensure the articulation of human body-mind freely, equally and authentically, we will not be able to do justice to human creativity (Agnihotri and Singh, forthcoming). We do need to reformulate the curriculum, syllabus, materials, teaching methods and evaluation systems of English against this background. However, even before that what we need is a common school system.

3. A COMMON SCHOOL SYSTEM

Noticing the widening social distance between the different classes, the Kothari Commission (1964-66), over forty years ago, recommended a common school system based on the concept of a neighbourhood school. This is obviously the most rational and humane thing to do. All children, whatever be their background, must have access to comparable schools and education. There is no doubt that irrespective of their political ideology most successful countries including Russia, Japan, Germany or Canada have a common school system. It also seems obvious that such a system will have to be run by the State and the right to education will be a fundamental right. One major advantage of the common school system would be that it is the multilinguality of the neighbourhood that would get reflected in the classroom and the school. Languages available in the classroom will no longer be strange objects. This multilinguality will also receive automatic support from the community outside. It will be far easier to build bridges between the knowledge systems that children bring to school and the ones they are expected to acquire through formal education.
4. CURRICULAR OBJECTIVES

We do need to remind ourselves of some of the basic facts about the nature and acquisition of language before we formulate the objectives of English language teaching. Some of these are:

♦ Every child is born with a Language Faculty that enables her to acquire as many languages as she needs.

♦ Languages can’t be taught; they are acquired. They are acquired as the child’s Language Faculty interacts with processes of socialisation and language becomes inextricably linked with the social, political, gender and power structures of society.

♦ It is not possible for teachers to teach the rules of language simply because they don’t know them (not their fault at all; what is available in the name of school grammars and what is taught as grammar is often inadequate and wrong). The child has the potential to acquire the most complex rules at the levels of sounds, words, sentences and discourse on her own. She gives us enough evidence of it as she becomes a ‘linguistic adult’ by the age of three, at least in terms of the basic lexicon and structures and rules of discourse.

♦ No amount of formal teaching of grammar can promote the levels of creativity and fluency and accuracy that a child so effortlessly displays at a very young age without any formal intervention. In fact, most parents enjoy and celebrate the ‘errors’ children make in the process of learning.

♦ There is no reason to believe that what works in the acquisition of first languages in childhood will not work, with some careful effort, in the acquisition of additional languages.

♦ The role of the teacher is not to teach the rules of grammar or paraphrase texts but as Krashen has often reminded us, to facilitate maximal exposure to languages being used in different domains in anxiety-free situations. The tasks that children undertake should have the message at their centre and children should feel engaged in activities that would challenge their thinking abilities; as thought is not divorced from language, language proficiency will automatically develop.
Languages flourish in each other’s company; their nature is fundamentally porous; they tend to wither away if they are isolated from other languages.

‘Errors’ are necessary stages in the path of language acquisition; they automatically disappear in due course. The amount of time a teacher spends on ‘correcting errors’ (they are not errors if seen in terms of the system a child has at that point of time) could be more usefully spent on carefully planned language exposure and innovative activities.

Language is not a set of skills. It is not a sum of LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing). As stated above, it is constitutive of us; it is at once an instrument and a product and it is difficult to conceptualise a disjunction between the two at any point. If anything, it needs to be seen as a system of unique knowledge.

Language is best acquired in a holistic context where a total text (it could be a picture, a couplet, a story or an advertisement) is at the centre of classroom activity.

We also need to ask ourselves: Is there anything special about teaching English in India? As a language, perhaps not. Many scholars will talk in terms of second, third or foreign language and inadequacy of exposure to English. But if we were to talk of say teaching Tamil in Rajasthan, the situation may in fact be worse. The fundamental principles of language acquisition do not change. However, the political economy of English in India is quite a different matter. The teaching of English therefore has to be planned far more carefully. It is on the one hand the language of opportunity, social status and upward social mobility and on the other hand, in glove with the processes that consistently enlarge the distance between the elite and the marginalized. We therefore need to ensure that every child attains a high level of proficiency in English without losing any of her own languages; and also exploit the teaching of English as a space for generating subversive discourses. I think a socially sensitive discourse to examine and evaluate rational propositions can most effectively be generated through the site of English. As to the more specific goals of language curriculum, it is perhaps best to turn to the Position Paper on the Teaching of English of the National Curriculum Framework (NCERT 2005). A national curriculum should aim for:
a cohesive curricular policy based on guiding principles for language teaching and acquisition, which allows for a variety of implementations suitable to local needs and resources… (NCERT 2005, 1.4: 3)

Consistent with the principles suggested above, the Position Paper also points out that English does not stand alone and that it travels across subjects. The main purpose of English language teaching as in the case of teaching any other language is to sustain multilinguality and encourage critical thinking. The whole English language programme should encourage the ability to speak effortlessly, listen and understand patiently, read with comprehension and sensitivity, write with confidence, clarity and precision, and learn to respect other languages. In a nutshell, the child should be able to fulfil, as far as possible, a la Halliday, interpersonal, aesthetic and mathetic functions in all the languages she knows.

5. MATERIALS

It is extremely important to grow out of the obsession with ‘a textbook’. We are increasingly becoming used to a package that consists of an MCB (Main Course Book), a WB (Work Book) and a TM (Teachers’ Manual). In higher classes, it is sometimes supplemented with a literature reader. More often than not, these materials have a text followed by questions on comprehension, vocabulary, speaking and writing and sometimes a small project. This kind of a strait jacket imprisons the teacher and the pupil completely and even in the Primary and Upper Primary classes where total freedom is in principle available, both teachers and children function like slaves of the MCB-WB-TM package. That there is a whole world of material available both inside and outside the classroom does not even strike the teachers. This is the kind of material that would engage children, raise their interest and motivational levels, and encourage them to think critically. First of all, the languages and cultural practices available in the classroom can be most effectively used to promote proficiency levels in English. With some professional training in linguistics (a must for all teachers), a teacher can easily elicit data from children in different languages, provide equivalents in English
and then break the class into small groups to analyze that data to come up with rules that can be tested against more data. Advantages: new English expressions are learnt in a context that children understand, children engage in the scientific method of data collection, classification, categorization and rule formation, the teacher also becomes a learner, children feel that their languages and cultural practices have a place in the classroom and hence do not feel alienated dropping out of school and they begin to realize, as they discover systems of different languages present in the class, that English is linguistically not superior to what they speak. There are materials available from the other content areas including Science, Social Science, and Mathematics. How about an exercise in which children are asked to convert a maths sum into a set of sentences? How about working on the ‘biography of a plastic bag’ and weave in environment, chemistry and different languages into its discussion. Consider the following set of materials: hoardings, wrappers, tetra packs, newspaper clips, cartoons…just look around; the list is endless.

6. THE TEACHER

In case materials such as the above have to be transacted in some of the ways indicated above, it is imperative that a teacher must undergo a rigorous training programme. There is no short cut to this and this cannot be achieved by short in-service training programmes which must continue as updating, sharing and content enrichment activities. Any teacher who proposes to teach English must undergo a basic but intensive programme in linguistics with special reference to English not because she would teach grammar better to her students but because she can avoid all grammar teaching and organize different activities and tasks in such a way that they lead to simultaneous content enrichment and grammar discovery. For example, at the level of sounds, a teacher should know what the sounds of human language look like, how they are produced and what kind of combinations are generally allowed. She should also know the structure of RP (Received Pronunciation). However, she should be made aware that there is now a fairly well-established General Indian
English Pronunciation and that is all we can use as a reference point and that in addition to that, as in all other countries, ‘native/ non-native’, there is a multiplicity of varieties of English and that it is a legitimate normal thing to happen. So we have Tamil English, Telugu English, Panjabi English etc. just as we have Canadian English, Texan English, Yorkshire English, Australian English etc. Similarly, at the level of lexicon, it is important to realize that words travel rather freely across languages and that it is a good idea to let that happen rather than interrupt fluency. At the level of syntax, teachers will soon discover, there is not much to write about. The syntactic differences across the varieties of English, if any, are perhaps minor. In addition to being trained in the nature, and structure, of language and its acquisition and change, a teacher also needs to be aware of the psychological and social aspects of language. She should be able to see what role language can play in steps towards creating a just society.

7. METHOD

The multiplicity of language teaching methods (mostly ELT or English Language Teaching methods) from the Grammar-Translation Method to the more recent communicative approaches have all assumed that there is ‘a language’ to be taught to ‘a homogeneous group’ of students. As we have shown above, all these assumptions are wrong. We do need an approach that is rooted in multilinguality and that keeps the multiplicity of languages and cultural practices available among children at the centre of classroom transaction. As a teacher of English, our first task should be to draw up a sociolinguistic profile of our class and to examine how the multiplicity of voices present in the classroom can be most effectively used for teaching English. The fact that all of us learnt our English through our own languages is evidence enough that there is no need for ‘English only’ classes. Secondly, it is important to realize that except for an overall shared approach, every situation, every class will dictate its own method and sequence of steps. That is another reason why a teacher needs to receive rigorous training. Just to give a few examples of some of the techniques that could be used, translation, genre transformation and setting
questions on texts could be used in a holistic manner. Translation ensures that you understand the text and you use more than one language and often feel compelled to appreciate that there is no choice but to mix languages. It also provides legitimacy to one’s version; all translations though different are in some way acceptable. According to Baker (2006:1), in this conflict-ridden world, translation is central to the ability of all parties to legitimise their version of events, especially in view of the fact that political and other types of conflict today are played out in the international arena and can no longer be resolved by appealing to local constituencies alone. Similarly, changing a story into a play in any language could be a very rewarding activity; children could then act out the play. Almost invariably, we give children a passage and ask questions. I think one of the most reliable ways of making sure that a text has been understood is to ask children to make the questions!

8. CONCLUSIONS

English is here to stay, at least for the time being. Most children of this generation must learn English, not at the cost of their languages but along with them. There are domains in which English may never be used. In the paradigm of multilinguality proposed above, it is eminently possible to organize methods, materials, teacher training and classroom transaction in a way that the languages of children are never pushed into oblivion and English still gets acquired, with levels of proficiency not witnessed hitherto.
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