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Teaching English to Young Learners in Multilingual, Multicultural, Heterogeneous- Economic Background in Sikkim: Study of Current Practices and Beliefs, and Innovation

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Abstract

In the paradigm of multilinguality 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 (Agnihotri, 2010 *Multilinguality and the Teaching of English in India*). This paper attempts to study the current practices in teaching and learning English language in Sikkim chiefly among young learners' and establishing scope for further detailed research in the field suggesting innovation in practices in demographic area of Sikkim considering the vast linguistic and cultural diversity of the land. Thus, establishing the need of 'Multilingual Education in Sikkim.'

Keywords: *Sikkim, Multilingual Education, English, Young Learners*

Introduction

The Human Resource Development Department in Sikkim has made English mandatory in primary schools from grade 1 and as per the guidelines teachers are encouraged to use the target language as much as possible in their teaching (Raj 2015). In this context the department has initiated many in-service training programmes to improve the proficiency of the existing teachers and a component of proficiency in pre-service programme. The pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes lack training the participants in using the students' resource and language as a resource. This has led to this paper where the need of innovation in teaching young learners is established. The need is established through an analysis of questionnaires and interviews both from the school principals and language teachers.

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Rationale and Aims

The assumption that the Indian classrooms are homogenous in terms of language, culture and experiences i.e. Indian language and culture generalized for all, does not help in bringing children with better proficiency in English Language. This paper assumes that better innovation and implementation of teacher training where they are trained to use students' language, and culture as a resource in a classroom which helps in bringing better proficiency in young English language learners.

The following are the objectives of this study:

- To find out the teaching problems faced by the teachers teaching heterogeneous classrooms.
- To analyse the current teaching practices in teaching English to young learners' in Sikkim in terms of consideration to linguistic and cultural diversity.
- To investigate the language use, practices and language teaching strategies and on the other hand the opinions and needs of primary school teachers.
- To establish scope for *Multilingual Education* through methods and pedagogy rooted in multilinguality that would ensure the emergence of social justice through linguistic and cultural consideration.
- To establish the philosophy that English in India should and will flourish in the company of other languages and not at their cost (Agnihotri, 2010. *Multilinguality and the Teaching of English in India*).

Literature Review and Theoretical Underpinnings

Some key aspects on which the present research is grounded are discussed below:

Multilingualism

Multilingualism has always been and shall be an essential human condition through which people communicate or be inquired or investigated by linguists. However, diversity, power, ethnicity, culture and varied economic background associated with languages have been ignored. The time has come when these aspects are considered especially in classroom scenario. 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). *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. Today India has about 1652 languages in all and counting (Agnihotri, 2010. *Multilinguality and the Teaching of English in India*).

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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 (Agnihotri, 2010. *Multilinguality and the Teaching of English in India*).

Sikkim and its Language Diversity

Linguistically, Sikkim is as diverse as the rest of India. Out of 76 main languages, of Sikkim, according to 2001 Census, out of the first 15 major languages, Hindi is the 3rd, Bengali is the 9th, Urdu is the 10th and Punjabi, Malayalam, Assamese and Marathi are from 12th to 15th In the list. If one leaves out immigrant Tibetans (11th in the list) then Nepali, Bhotia, Lepcha Limbu, Sherpa, Tamang, Rai are counted as languages by Pundits. The rest are called mother tongues, minor languages, dialects, endangered languages.

There being no language policy and planning in any of the States, comparative pedagogy and area studies have not found place in the development debate in education and state formation. Shrinkage of languages at the grass root level leading to language shift is a pointer to language death. Death of a language signifies death of a culture and death of a world view. It is the shrinkage of indigenous knowledge systems. Stopping language death is in the interest of both dominant and minority language speakers. The States now face the challenge of bridging the mother-tongue with the State dominant language and implement mother tongue based multilingual education (*Pattanayak, Foreword to Language Survey of India*).

National and International Research

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. (Agnihotri, 2010. *Multilinguality and the Teaching of English in India*).

Multilingual Education (MLE)

Multilingual Education typically refers to "first-language-first" education, that is, schooling which begins in the mother tongue and transitions to additional languages in this case English. Typically MLE programs are situated in developing countries where speakers of minority languages, i.e. non-dominant languages, tend to be disadvantaged in the mainstream education system.

The following are the components of MLE:

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- **"Strong Foundation"** - Research shows that children whose early education is in the language of their home tend to do better in the later years of their education (Thomas and Collier, 1997).
- **Strong Bridge"** - an essential difference between MLE programs and rural "mother tongue education" programs is the inclusion of a guided transition from learning through the mother tongue to learning through another tongue.

A widespread understanding of MLE programs (UNESCO, 2003, 2005) suggests that instruction take place in the following stages:

Stage I - Learning takes place entirely in the child's home language.

Stage II - Building fluency in the mother tongue. Introduction of oral skills in L2.

Stage III - Building oral fluency in L2. Introduction of literacy skills in the second language (L2).

Stage IV - Using both L1 and L2 for lifelong learning.

Multilingual Education in India

The Indian education system is truly multilingual in its character. The Bombay Municipal Corporation runs primary schools in nine languages. The Karnataka State runs primary schools in eight languages. The secondary schools in West Bengal give their students the option to choose from 14 languages. The three-language formula widely in the country aims at developing and strengthening the multilingual character of our educational system.

There are 500 Central Schools with the bilingual medium consisting of English and Hindi. There is also a compulsory language, Sanskrit, in addition. There are 500 Navodaya Vidyalayas where some competence is English and Hindi is imparted simultaneously. But the students who graduate from these schools go to the English medium colleges, because there is no college in the country that offers a bilingual medium of instruction. The Indian education system blocks multilingualism as one moves into higher education (*Subash, 2013. Three Language Education Formula in Multilingual India: Problems and Prospects*).

Teacher Training for MLE (Multilingual Education)

Monitoring teacher training and recruitment for MLE schools is very important for the success of any such programme. There is acute shortage of teachers who are familiar with linguistically diverse educational curriculum and effort towards that direction is necessary. It is a major priority for success of any MLE programme.

Given below is suggested guidelines toward Teacher Training by "MLE Policy and Implementation Guidelines for Odisha. Each MLE Teacher/Sahayak/instructor should have at least a 14 day MLE training at the district level offered by the DIET supported by a team of Master Trainers. The current practice of grade--specific training needs to be discontinued and replaced by a composite MLE process based training with emphasis on language pedagogy for MLE classrooms. The teacher preparation for the MLE programme should not be one time affair rather should be a continuous process to empower the teachers to address the

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emerging pedagogical and management issues and to be aware of the innovations in the process.”

UNESCO Guidelines on Language Education

Mother tongue instruction is essential as initial instruction for L2 and L3 literacy and should ‘be extended to as late a stage in education as possible’.

With regard to teacher training and mother tongue instruction: ‘All educational planning should include at each stage early provision for the training, and further training, of sufficient numbers of fully competent and qualified teachers of the country concerned who are familiar with the life of their people and able to teach in the mother tongue.’

UNESCO supports introduction of English language as ‘the second language... as a subject of instruction-the amount of which ‘should be increased gradually and which should not become the medium of instruction ‘until the pupils are sufficiently familiar with it.’

Measures should be taken ‘to eliminate discrimination in education at all levels on the basis of gender, race, language, religion, national origin, age or disability or any other form of discrimination.

Participants

The pilot study to establish the scope for further research was carried out in, a public school and a private school in a district of Sikkim. The target participants of the study consisted of school principals and language teachers. The participants were a principal and English language teacher each from a public and private school from the east district of Sikkim. The English language teachers selected for the purpose of the study taught at least at two different grades ranging from grade 1 to grade 4 with an average of 25 students in each grade

Methodology and Research Tools

The methodology adopted was qualitative i.e. open-interview both for teachers and principals so that participants answer them without any inhibitions for the success. Only free responses would bring out issues which the researcher may have not thought of before.

The interview question schedule for the teachers would reflect various aspects such as teachers profile and background, school’s general organization especially with regard to language education, language beliefs and practices, problems faced by teachers’ teaching a multilingual class, effectiveness of the current system and assessment of multilingual students.

The interview question schedule for the principals would reflect their profile and background, language policy of the school as well as their language education beliefs.

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Sample Data01: Language Teacher

• Background Information of the Teacher

- Age, year of graduation, years on the job, number of different schools

Answer: 35 years, 2002, 13 years, 2 schools

- Teaching which classes

Answer: Grade 1 and 2

- Pre-service training: quality, strong and weak points

Answer: D.El.Ed. Purely theory oriented, Exposure to English

- First language

Answer: Hindi

- Did you obtain special training for bilingual or multilingual education?

Answer: No

• School's Organisation

- General

- Which text books are used? *Answer: English and Oxford*

- Who decides on textbooks, how often new ones bought?

Answer: School administration and its bought every year

- Language Related

- What is the formal/official language policy of school?

Answer: English

- What kind of integration of three languages does the school follow?

Answer: All three languages are taught from Grade 1

- Do you know language of fathers and mothers of each child?

Answer: No

• Language Beliefs and Practices

- What are the goals of language learning (levels to be achieved)?

Answer: They need to know the language well to pass the exam.

- Is English used as a medium of instruction? If not, specify the language of instruction.

Answer: Yes

- What are your beliefs on teaching/learning through another language?

Answer: How is that possible? English should be taught through English.

- What kinds of method(s)/learning materials are used in the classrooms?

Answer: We use Smart Boards, Explanation and giving notes.

• Assessment

- How is progress of pupils measured?

Answer: Report cards

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- Which is the language of the test itself?

Answer: English

- What are the main challenges to achieve when it comes to goals for language(s)?

Answer: They don't understand what I teach, perhaps they are slow learners.

Sample Data02: School Principal

• Background Information of the Principal

- Age, year of graduation, years on the job, number of different schools

Answer: 50 years, 1987, 28 years, 5 schools

- Teaching which classes, if teaching and subjects

Answer: Not teaching any subjects

- Pre-service training: quality, strong and weak points

Answer: No Training

- In-service courses taken

Answer: Yes

- First language

Answer: Lepcha

- Did you obtain special training for bilingual or multilingual education?

Answer: No

• Language policy of the School

- Who designs curriculum? How much autonomy teachers have in implementing it?

Answer: We follow CBSE curriculum. Teachers are to implement it strictly.

- Which text books are used?

Answer: Oxford English

- Is there any availability of technology: computers? Digital board?

Answer: Yes, Smart board

- Is In-service training available (about what), encouraged?

Answer: In-service training every year. Mostly testing and CCE.

• Language Beliefs and Practices

- What are the goals of language learning (levels to be achieved)?

Answer: Pass the Exams

- Is English used as a medium of instruction? If not, specify the language of

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instruction.

Answer: Yes, English

- What are your beliefs on teaching/learning through another language?

Answer: Teaching English is possible only through English.

- What kinds of method(s)/learning materials are used in the classrooms?

Answer: Smart Boards, Explanation and giving notes.

Data Analysis

Yet another aspect of the study which is of importance is the data analysis, which forms the backbone of any research findings. Following is an analysis of data collected in the pilot study.

Language Teacher

• Background Information of the Teacher

The information collected gives a comparison between experience and language use and teaching. We can see that despite 13 years of experience s/he does not have much to say. However, s/he has *Diploma in Elementary Education* from SCERT Sikkim and has negative opinion about it as s/he claims to be purely theory oriented than practice oriented. The participant at the same has neither heard nor have any idea what a multilingual education is and has no training of any sort in the relevant field.

• School's Organisation

➤ General

The text book used in the sample school is Oxford English and it's bought every year by the authorities for the learners'. This reflects that the books are monolingual English and there is no scope for multilingual textbooks.

➤ Language Related

The teacher in the school has no idea of language policy of the school and considers English to be formal language of the school. They follow the three language formula given by the State and follow it without adapting it to the context. Thus, the participant does not know what kind of integration of three languages is followed and problems that arise from it and relationship they share.

• Language Beliefs and Practices

The participant again has very narrow goal or aim of language learning and that is only for exam purpose. The teacher treats language as subject and not as a language for cognitive development. They have English as medium of instruction and have a strong belief that English to young learners' should be taught through English. Thus, Multilingual Education is not known here.

• Assessment

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It is interesting to know teacher's perspectives on the goals on language learning and his/her opinion on kinds of challenges faced is very shallow. The progress of the child is reported through report cards which show traditional practices. When it comes to challenges, the reply "They don't understand what I teach, perhaps they are slow learners" show they need to change their perspectives on the learners'

School Principal

The interview question schedule for the principal reflects the profile and background, language policy of the school as well as the language education beliefs. The principal here has 28 years of teaching experience and has been promoted to the post of a principal despite any teacher training. He however does participate in some In-service training but has not taken any training in Multilingual Education. The school according to him uses Oxford English and has English as medium of instruction. Teachers of the school do go for various In-service trainings but so far not gone for any language training. The principal also share the same aims of language teaching as of the teacher which is of passing the exams and share the same strong belief that English can taught through English only.

Overall Analysis

Thus, it is clear from the mock sample data that Sikkim lacks behind In Multilingual Education and strongly believes in teaching English through English to young learners.' This is why we can see that the learners' proficiency in English language is low and they are not able to follow the teachers in the classes. The teachers in turn blame the learners to be slow and dull, in fact the culprit the faulty language policy which has not take into consideration the linguistic and cultural diversity of the learners.

Significance/Contribution/Scope

In the light of the data collected and findings may reveal that Sikkim does not have policy on multilingual education in true sense and follows the traditional system of teaching English to young learners through English when the children themselves do not know English. Thus, violation or non-compliance of the accepted belief that the teacher and the children must share the same language and to a great extent the same culture too. It may also pave the way for designing a modular component in Multilingual Education for Pre-service and In-service teacher training. Thus, set a trend or policy where children will be taught English but not at the cost of their mother-tongues, considering the heterogeneous-economic and linguistic background.

Limitations of the Study

Though the study has its aims, there are few limitations that need to be acknowledged and addressed regarding the study. The first limitation concerns the time. The study conducted in a short time may not provide sufficient information and fulfill the objectives of the study. Secondly, the teachers' may not be motivated enough to support the study and data collected may not be free from personal prejudices.

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Conclusion

It should be obvious from the discussion that effort should be made to begin multilingual education and allow it to grow than suppress it. Researchers have revealed that children learn English better only when they have learnt their languages well. Our educational system is not conducive to multilingual education for English to young learners especially in Sikkim. Education planners and policy makers should pay attention to this need and make every effort towards it before it's too late.

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