

Role of Language in Education

Dr.Manjushree Sardeshpande

Head, Department of English

R.S.Mundle Dharampeth Arts & Commerce College, Nagpur

Abstract

This paper throws light on the role of language in education. Language is the backbone and integral part of education. Knowledge and language are the two sides of the same coin. Language plays an important role in man-making- character building. Not only developing the cognitive abilities, psychomotor skills but providing the correct mental make –up and critical insights is also the main function of language. The role of mother tongue is vital at least in the formative years of a child. It provides a solid foundation in the making of every individual as concepts are best understood in the mother tongue and innermost thoughts of the individual are also best communicated in the mother tongue. All the Indian languages, mother-tongues of the large Indian population have a rich cultural heritage and indigenous knowledge and wisdom can be brought to light only by studying and promoting our Indian languages. English has also become an integral part of the country. It is the second-largest spoken language in the country. It is also the language of information, communication and technology. Hence bilingual mode of teaching and learning is recommended to reap the benefits of the Indian languages and English. In this case the mother tongue- (Indian Language) and English (foreign language) will be equally developed. “Submersion” to be totally avoided.

Key words

Language ,Education, Mother tongue, Multilingualism, Bilingual Mode

Introduction

Language plays a very important role in human life. It is the light of mind. It shapes thoughts and emotions and determines one’s perception of reality. Language is the road map of a culture. It tells you where its people are coming from and where they are going. Language is the divine gift of God and finest asset of mankind. Language is not only means of communication but it builds economic relationships, friendships, and cultural ties. It is a means for intellectual development.

Language and Education

Nature is an expression of God. The whole creation has umpteen messages embedded which can only be unravelled through different perceptions kindled by intelligence and thought. There is a language of nature, of animals, of every living and non-living things. They respond to particular stimuli. To understand this language requires a refined insight. There is a communication going on in nature and to understand this requires learning and understanding. This is called knowledge. Different schools of thought including logic, philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, chemistryetc can have different dimensions depending on the language.

Swami Vivekananda on Language

Swami Vivekananda says that “education is the manifestation of perfection, manifestation of the divinity already present in man, knowledge resides within the individual, he simply discovers or realises it.” To him, education is not the amount of information, put into one’s brain, which may be there undigested all one’s life, it is, rather a life-building assimilation of ideas. Swami Vivekananda’s famous speech wherein he began with “Sisters and brothers of America.... clearly indicates the impact of language. Language communicates, culture, character, knowledge, intelligence, insights etc. Swamiji introduced the philosophy from the Upanishadas to both the occidentalists and the orientalist. In ‘Vedanta and its Application to Indian Life’ he said: Sanskrit language is so intricate, the Sanskrit language of the Vedas is so ancient, and the Sanskrit philology is so perfect, that any amount of discussion can be carried on for ages in regard to the meaning of one word’ (3.233). In one of his writings he stated: ‘The miracle of language which was called Sanskrit or “perfected”, lending itself to expressing and manipulating them [poetic insight] better than any other tongue. The aid of melodious numbers was invoked even to express the hard facts of mathematics’ (6.158). There are computer scientists who are of the opinion that Sanskrit can act as a perfect language for programming and scientific applications. Sanskrit is already widely used as a meta-language for knowledge-representation in machine-translation and other areas of natural language processing, because of its highly regular and unambiguous structure. It was not that Swamiji spoke only about the Sanskrit language. It is just that he found the Sanskrit language better than other natural languages. He held that all languages act as basic tools of communication within their own structural and conceptual limitations. All languages, from the standard to the least used vernacular, have their own importance. He clarified: ‘The difference between the language of the highest philosophers and the utterances of the babies is one of degree not of kind. What you call the most correct, systematic, and mathematical language of the present time, and the hazy, mystical, mythological languages of the ancients, differ only in degree. All of them have a grand idea behind, which is, as it were, struggling to express itself’ (2.74).

India has a rich tradition of exploring the mind, perception, cognition, and consciousness. The analysis of the language of a people can reveal its overall philosophy of life. Swamiji, at various places, explained how different linguistic conceptualizations for the same action or event can reveal the cultural framework, spiritual grounding, societal acceptance, and attitudes of a people. One of his most quoted examples about ‘death’ is as follows: ‘In Western language [English], a man gives up the ghost, but in our language a man gives up his body. The Western man is a body first, and then he has a soul; with us a man is a soul and spirit, and he has body. Therein lies a world of difference’ (3.380).

Role of Mother tongue

Swamiji favoured the use of the vernacular over Sanskrit as a medium for teaching. He stated: ‘Therefore the ideas must be taught in the language of the people; at the same time, Sanskrit education must go along with it, because the very sound of Sanskrit words gives a prestige and a power and a strength to the race’ (3.290). ‘It is culture that withstands shocks, not a simple mass of knowledge’ (3.291).

Simplicity is a key to success in all spheres of life. It is equally true of a language. Swamiji believed that language should be simplified, only then can it be accepted and used by all. A

language accepted by all is the language that lives the longest. The use of the simplest language is the best, and a teacher who uses simple words succeeds. All the great philosophical teachings were made available to people through popular mythological stories in the vernacular. ‘Of course, scholarship is an excellent thing; but cannot scholarship be displayed through any other medium than a language that is stiff and unintelligible, that is unnatural and artificial? ... Do you not think of your scholastic researches in the language which you are accustomed to speak at home? Why then do you introduce such a queer and unwieldy thing when you proceed to put them in black and white?’ (6.187).

Though all natural languages are capable of expressing sublime thoughts, modern scholars believe that the **language one acquires as the mother tongue is the best medium for transmitting information, ideas, and knowledge**. The concepts presented in the mother tongue are grasped much easier than any language that one learns later through formal instructions. The mother tongue is to the mind as blood is to the body. Therefore, teaching children in the mother tongue can produce better results. There is enough evidence to show that learning and language are closely related to each other. ‘Every man is capable of receiving knowledge if it is imparted in his own language’ (5.263).

Gandhiji’s Views on Use of Mother tongue in Education

Gandhiji was of the opinion that youths should receive education through the medium of their vernaculars. English people have ruled over our nation for nearly 200 years. It is a fact that we have nearly 19, 500 languages or dialects spoken all over the nation and due to such a diversity we do not have a common language throughout the nation. There are political differences too and even though the English medium schools are mushrooming, English can never become our national language. Our best and deepest of thoughts can be expressed in our native languages only. It is so sad that our students have to run a race with every English lad and our precious years are lost in learning a foreign language. It is indeed an eye wash that English-educated India is leading and doing everything for the nation. English medium has created a brain fog in our children putting an undue stress on them. They have become crammers and imitators. They have been rendered incapable of producing original thoughts, they have lost their power of expression and these English –educated students are incapable of infiltrating the learning to the family or the masses. The English medium has practically made our students foreigners in our own land. This English medium has cost us heavily on our vernaculars and stunted their growth. Imposing English medium on our students is one of the greatest evils of the British rule over India. It has sapped the energy of the nation, it has shortened the lives of the pupils, it has estranged them from the masses, it has made education unnecessarily expensive. If this process is still persisted in, it bids fair to rob the nation of its soul. The sooner therefore educated India shakes itself free from the hypnotic spell of the English medium, the better it would be for them and the people.

Need for Quick Action

If the medium is changed at once and not gradually, in an incredibly short time we shall find text-books and teachers coming into being to supply the want. And if we mean business, in a year's time we shall find that we need never have been party of the tragic waste of the nation's time and energy in trying to learn the essentials of culture through a foreign medium. The condition of success is undoubtedly that provincial languages are introduced at once in

Government offices and courts, if the Provincial Governments have the power or the influence over the courts. If we believe in the necessity of the reform, we can achieve it in no time.

It has been 75 years now that we have got independence and the fact cannot be overlooked that the English language has developed strong roots in India. The language has mushroomed so much that it is the second largest language spoken in our country after Hindi. In our own country we do not have one common language but India is a country full of diversities and we have had unity in diversity. All the Indian languages have a rich cultural heritage. They are the sources of our ancient knowledge and wisdom. Our scriptures are the gateways to the modern knowledge and intelligence. From astronomy to science, mathematics, architecture, medicine etc we have it encoded in our scriptures. We need to interpret the information contained in our scriptures. We need our students to refine their intellects, their perceptions through our indigenous languages which are treasure-mines of knowledge resources. In this age of globalisation where English is a widely spoken language, it is the language of information, communication and technology and hence we cannot avoid English.

Using a bilingual approach is the best way to reap the benefits of both languages. The new education policy advocates multilingualism. With three language formula, use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction at least till Std five and bilingual mode of teaching and learning, if implemented strictly in all government and private schools the situation will change in no time. In this age of technology we will have all the information and knowledge available in English and other languages in all our Indian languages. Only when there is demand, the supply will increase.

The research of Carol Benson on 'The Importance of Mother tongue based schooling for educational quality' would prove to be a strong support in this direction. The findings are as follows:-

Advocating Bilingual Mode of Teaching and Learning

Instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called "submersion" (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Compounded by chronic difficulties such as low levels of teacher education, poorly designed, inappropriate curricula and lack of adequate school facilities, submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

Mother tongue-based bilingual programs use the learner's first language, known as the L1, to teach beginning reading and writing skills along with academic content. The second or foreign language, known as the L2, should be taught systematically so that learners can gradually transfer skills from the familiar language to the unfamiliar one. Bilingual models and practices vary as do their results, but what they have in common is their use of the mother tongue at least in the early years so that students can acquire and develop literacy skills in addition to understanding and participating in the classroom. Bilingual as opposed to monolingual schooling offers significant pedagogical advantages which have been reported consistently in the academic literature (see reviews in Baker 2001; Cummins 2000; CAL 2001):

Use of a familiar language to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence. Learning to read is most efficient when

students know the language and can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies; likewise, students can communicate through writing as soon as they understand the rules of the orthographic (or other written) system of their language. In contrast, submersion programs may succeed in teaching students to decode words in the L2, but it can take years before they discover meaning in what they are “reading.”

◆Since content area instruction is provided in the L1, the learning of new concepts is not postponed until children become competent in the L2. Unlike submersion teaching, which is often characterised by lecture and rote response, bilingual instruction allows teachers and students to interact naturally and negotiate meanings together, creating participatory learning environments that are conducive to cognitive as well as linguistic development.

◆Explicit teaching of the L2 beginning with oral skills allows students to learn the new language through communication rather than memorization. In submersion schooling teachers are often forced to translate or code-switch to convey meaning, making concept learning inefficient and even impeding language learning, while bilingual programs allow for systematic teaching of the L2.

◆Transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills is facilitated in bilingual programs. Once students have basic literacy skills in the L1 and communicative skills in the L2, they can begin reading and writing in the L2, efficiently transferring the literacy skills they have acquired in the familiar language. The pedagogical principles behind this positive transfer of skills are Cummins’ (1991, 1999) interdependence theory and the concept of common underlying proficiency, whereby the knowledge of language, literacy and concepts learned in the L1 can be accessed and used in the second language once oral L2 skills are developed, and no re-learning is required. Consistent with these principles, it is possible for children schooled only in the L2 to transfer their knowledge and skills to the L1, but the process is highly inefficient as well as being unnecessarily difficult.

Students learning can be accurately assessed in bilingual classrooms. When students can express themselves, teachers can diagnose what has been learned, what remains to be taught and which students need further assistance. In submersion schooling cognitive learning and language learning are confounded, making it difficult for teachers to determine whether students have difficulty understanding the concept itself, the language of instruction, or the language of the test.

◆The affective domain, involving confidence, self-esteem and identity, is strengthened by use of the L1, increasing motivation and initiative as well as creativity. L1 classrooms allow children to be themselves and develop their personalities as well as their intellects, unlike submersion classrooms where they are forced to sit silently or repeat mechanically, leading to frustration and ultimately repetition, failure and dropout.

◆Students become bilingual and biliterate. Bilingual programs encourage learners to understand, speak, read and write in more than one language. In contrast, submersion programs attempt to promote skills in a new language by eliminating them from a known language, which may actually limit learner competence in both. All of these advantages are based on two assumptions: one, that basic human needs are being met so that schooling can take place; and two, that mother tongue-based bilingual schooling can be

properly implemented. Simply changing the language of instruction without resolving other pressing social and political issues is not likely to result in significant improvement in educational services. However, because language cross-cuts race, ethnicity, gender, and poverty, even minimally implemented bilingual programs have the potential to reach those who have traditionally been left behind by L2 submersion schooling.

Challenges and how they have been confronted

Mother tongue-based bilingual schooling is seldom disputed on the basis of its pedagogical reasoning, and if decision-making were to be based solely on how to provide the highest quality education for the learner many more of the world's languages would be used in education today

The following myths and attitudes are regularly used to challenge use of mother tongues in education, yet their false arguments are easily revealed:

◆The one nation—one language myth

The colonial concept that a nation-state requires a single unifying language has influenced policy-makers in many parts of the world, yet imposition of a so-called “neutral” foreign language has not necessarily resulted in unity, nor have relatively monolingual countries like Somalia, Burundi or Rwanda been guaranteed stability. In fact, government failure to accept ethnolinguistic diversity has been a major destabilizing force in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Owane 2003).

◆The myth that local languages cannot express modern concepts

Another colonial concept is the supposed inherent worth of European languages in contrast to others, but all human languages are equally able to express their speakers' thoughts and can develop new terms and structures as needed. Léopold Senghor once illustrated this by translating Einstein's Theory of Relativity into Wolof, a lingua franca of Senegal. The difference lies in which languages have historically been chosen for “intellectualization,” or development, through writing and publishing (Alexander 2003).

◆The either-or myth

This myth holds that bilingualism causes confusion and that the first language must be pushed aside so that the second language can be learned. The research evidence to date shows the opposite to be true: the more highly developed the first language skills, the better the results in the second language, because language and cognition in the second build on the first (Cummins 1999, 2000; Ramirez et al. 1991; Thomas & Collier 2002). Further, there is no evidence that the L2 must be a medium of instruction to be learned well; countries like Sweden achieve high levels of L2 competence by teaching it as a subject and preserving the L1 for instruction.

◆The L2 as global language myth

The foreign L2 is often seen as necessary for further education, work and other opportunities, yet as Phillipson (1992) points out this has not happened in a political vacuum but is the result of deliberate promotion by powerful countries or groups of their respective languages. Meanwhile, employment in the informal sector of low-income countries involves 50 percent or more of the population and is increasing, and primary schooling is still terminal for most. The vast majority will not be

integrated into the global marketplace and will have little use for the L2 (Bruthiaux 2002).

◆**The myth that parents want L2-only schooling**

The poorest and most marginalized are acutely aware that their access both to education and to the high-status language has been limited, and they have a right to expect the school to teach their children the same language that has benefited the elite. Undoubtedly parents will choose the L2 when presented with an either-or proposition; however, studies (see e.g. Heugh 2002) have shown that when parents are allowed to make an educated choice from appropriate options, they overwhelmingly opt for bilingual rather than all-L2 programs, and most bilingual program evaluations report high levels of community support (CAL 2001).

In this age of globalisation we are living in a multilingual world. India itself is a treasure house of languages. More than 19,500 languages or dialects are spoken in India. It is said that you live a new life for every new language you speak. If you know only one language, you live only once. Knowledge of language is the doorway to wisdom.

The new education policy 2020 lays special emphasis on multilingualism and the power of languages. It mentions that mother tongue should be the medium of instruction till std five. Three language formula and bilingual mode of education is recommended.

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