Appropriate education strategies in diverse language contexts

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A significant proportion of students in primary schools in India face a learning disadvantage since they enter school speaking a language that is very different from the standard language used at school. In the early primary grades, there is no scope to help such children learn the school language before they are expected to start learning through that second language. The instruction methodology followed in most government schools in India is one of monolingual submersion-teaching through an unfamiliar second language from the first day at school, with no effort to make the input comprehensible to children who come from a different language background. There is also no effort to develop the children’s first language. This is definitely the most inappropriate methodology for such situations. The ideal strategy, from the point of view of the child’s social, affective and cognitive development, would be instruction in the first language till as late a stage as possible.

Certain Non-negotiable elements:

Ideally, context-specific bilingual/multilingual education programmes need to be designed for these situations. However, there are four non-negotiable elements that need to form part of the primary education school system and all education programming:

I. Development of the children’s first language should be promoted.

II. Textual materials and classroom transaction in the second language should be in a form that is comprehensible to the children at every stage.

References


Endnotes

1 The Multilingual Education (MLE) Program is a part of the Education for All (EFA) in Nepal. It is funded jointly by the governments of Nepal and Finland. It started in January 2007 and it runs till July 2009. It aims at developing MLE models for all non-Nepali speaking students so that they can have mother-tongue based multilingual and quality education. The MLE program is piloted in seven schools and in eight languages. Two schools have a multilingual student population and five schools are monolingual in one mother tongue. The goal for all students is strong bi- or multilingualism. The MLE settings vary enormously from community to community and therefore the approach must be as bottom-up as possible to enable each school to develop the best model for their needs.

In the MLE program, the role of Indigenous Knowledge and the role of the community elders in the formal education of children were discussed and explored as the first step towards mother-tongues as media of instruction. This is in keeping with the spirit of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples 2007 (http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html), according to which different peoples have the right not only to their language as the medium of instruction but also to appropriate cultural content and teaching methodology. In the non-Nepali speaking communities in Nepal, the community elders—or IK holders, as they are referred to by the MLE program—are much respected. Throughout the project they have been the core members involved in the review of national curriculum, collection of Indigenous Knowledge and in the development of materials.
III. Teachers should be bilingual, i.e. have fluency in the children’s first language as well as the language that is being used as medium of instruction in the later stages.

IV. Use of appropriate first and second language teaching methods.

Factors to be considered for framing educational strategies:

The language situations in schools are very diverse in various parts of India as well as within a state or even a district. Therefore, a range of approaches would be necessary to address the needs of children who are presently studying in a language that is different from their first language.

These are:

i. Distance of the children’s first language from the school language

ii. Status of child’s home language in the society

iii. The motivation of the children, parents and society for the learning of second language

iv. The socio-economic and literacy status of the social group and the exposure to the standard language

v. Multilingual or mixed language background situation at school, i.e. children with different first languages in the same classroom

Mother Tongue Instruction in the Indian Context

It is a commonly held belief that India has too many languages/dialects and it would never be possible to introduce mother tongue based instruction in so many languages. But, Papua New Guinea has managed to introduce and sustain 400 languages as the medium of instruction at the primary stage. Countries like New Zealand, Ethiopia, Bolivia and many other countries have established multilingual education as the programme strategy for equitable quality education. Late-exit bilingual/multilingual education programmes are most appropriate in certain situations. However, the solution is not always a structured model of transition (from L1 to L2) that prescribes all the materials and sequence of classroom instruction. Such a fixed model would apply to only one kind of language situation. It would definitely be useful for remote areas with (say) tribal populations that have remained somewhat isolated from other areas and maintained their own language. But, language situations in most parts of the country are more complex, and need more flexible strategies.

Based on the linguistic diversities and language distribution in the society, it may be inferred that four kind of approaches would be necessary to address the children’s first language issues. These are:

a. For areas/schools where the children’s first language is a well-developed language that is being used as a medium of instruction elsewhere

b. For areas/schools where the children’s first language is a dialect of the main state language (whose standard dialect is used as the medium of instruction in schools)

c. For areas/schools where the children’s first language is a very different language that is unwritten and needs to be elaborated and standardised

d. For areas/schools with a multilingual situation

Each of these categories of approaches would include a variety of strategies based on various situations.

There have been some initiatives in a few states to address the problems faced by children who study through an unfamiliar language. Most of these have targeted situations where the school has a monolingual situation (in terms of children’s home language) in tribal areas and the medium of instruction is a completely unfamiliar regional language. Presently, two very promising pilots of MT-based MLE programmes are being implemented in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Orissa in ten and eight tribal languages respectively in about 400 primary schools. The distinguishing features of both these experiments are:

a) maintenance of the MT has been planned at least till grade 5, though the MT is not proposed to be used for teaching other subjects after grade 4

b) the entire process has drawn strength from the motivation of local communities

c) the curriculum has been developed by incorporating local knowledge and culture and the materials are, therefore, child-centred in the true sense

d) these are comprehensive approaches that include dimensions of curriculum development, teacher development, additional supplementary materials

e) they are state-owned and part of the regular state-run EFA programmes and are, therefore, more likely to be sustained.

However, planning and implementation of these strategies requires strong backing on the part of state governments, a clear academic perspective, a sustained long-term vision and policy and a commitment to working with local communities. The challenge of multilingual contexts, which are most common, is really daunting. There has been little work in India in primary education in multilingual situations. This should be pursued seriously.