Multilingualism with English for Empowerment: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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Abstract

India is a country of multiple languages. Where there exist 1652 mother tongues, they use 33 languages as the medium of academic instructions. Assam is a diversified state of India when it comes to language use. Each community has its language or dialect and cultural traditions. The teaching process becomes very critical in this situation as Students who belong to the other communities feel neglected and left out in the classroom and end up being cognitively impaired and it also triggers low self-confidence in their personality. This paper will try to explore the multilingual nature of ESL classrooms in Assam with the need of addressing students home language with special emphasis on the English language. This paper will also try to see how the language of teaching acts to 'dissociate' rather than connect the knowledge of the outside world from the local environment of the child. The researcher would examine how multilingualism with English should be used as a resource to bridge the gap between Home language and School Language. This paper tries to suggest that Multilingualism is an asset to Indian classrooms, not a barrier which in the real sense makes Indian multilingualism unique. This paper is based on an observational study that is carried out as a part of the Language and Language Education course (EG455) of the Department of English, Tezpur University which is conducted in the Primary level school students of Napaam M.V. School situated in Sonitpur district of Assam in the year 2019.

Keywords: English, Multilingualism, Resource, Second Language, Diversity, Cross-Cultural Communicative Skill.

Introduction:

"It shall be the endeavor of every state and every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups"

-Article 350A, The Constitution of India.

It is rightly stated in the Constitution of India that State should provide adequate facilities to the students belonging to the linguistic minority groups but it should be noted that no such facility is seen in the schools of Assam. Assam which is a northeastern state of India is a linguistically diverse state where the language of the people largely falls under Tibeto-Burman, Indo-Aryan, and Tai-Kadai. The Assamese community comprises of various sub-communities like Tie-Ahom, Tie-Phake, Missing, Karbi, Kalita, Tiwa, Rabha, Dimasa, Tea Tribes, Maran, Mattak, Khamti, Kachari, Sonowal Kachari, Bodo, Bengali, and many more. Each community has its own unique ethnic identity which makes them different from one another. Each community has its language or dialect, food habits, and cultural traditions. Hence, when it comes to the language classroom, it becomes a very tough activity to address all the learners as the classroom also becomes a place of multiple languages. This confrontation between the academic medium of instruction and the language that pupils use in their home affects students' overall learning and development negatively. It is also observed that most of the children leave school without completing their school education from these minority groups. Through this paper the researcher is trying to throw light on the multilingual classroom situations she has observed in the Napaam M.V. School situated in Sonitpur district and tries to trace them to suggest some effective strategies to tackle the same.

Language is a very important aspect as it is the instrument of expression as well as a tool for communication. It can act as a unifier or bridge to gap the diversities among various communities. Through the English language, people from different parts of the world can share their feelings and thoughts, it helps them to connect and share information; without language, it would be difficult to live in a collective world. Therefore language is an essential part of human life. English has acquired the status of a global language due to its wide use by various native as well as non-native speakers. It is a necessary skill to cope up with the present world, to connect, to

integrate. The problem arises when a section of society is not empowered with their mother tongue, they can't connect with the outside world. As Assamese is the official language of Assam, the medium of instruction in Government school is also the Assamese, they are taught in the Assamese language only. Hindi and English are other languages which in reality are taught as a subject only, not as a language. Though these communities use their language within their community members for social works, education, trade and commerce, cultural transaction they feel the need for a second language to interact with other language communities. Because of this necessity, they use the Assamese language as lingua-franca and as a result of that bilingualism emerges. Though they use the Assamese as lingua Franca in Assam, yet in the wider perspective, the Assamese language can not fulfill the global demands. For job interviews, higher education, and other opportunities are related to the English language. Therefore it is high time to think about relocating the English language in these multilingual classroom situations.

Aim and Objectives:

The basic objective of this paper is to identify the challenges of teaching in a multilingual classroom in Assam. Secondly, to relocate the English Language Teaching in these Government Vernacular schools of Assam. Thirdly, to propose some insights on how the adaptation of certain strategies can help to build a more equitable justice in a multilingual setting.

Methodology:

As the paper is an Observational Study, therefore the researcher has relied mainly on the secondary sources and some unstructured interviews with students and teachers. No, any questionnaires were used, the researcher has only asked face to face questions to the stakeholders during the observational phase, thus the paper is qualitative.

What is Multilingualism:

Multilingualism is a situation where a child can use more than two languages at a time when the situation demands. It refers to the communicative ability of a person, who are proficient or have the basic communicative ability as a social skill, which helps them to survive in a society. British Council has defined Multilingualism as, " A

Multilingual classroom is a class where the learners speak a variety of first languages." In today's context multilingualism has gained wide popularity due to its diverse and heterogeneous nature of assimilating different language groups together. Multilingualism can be defined as an occurrence where a person can speak more than one language, this quality will make him more acceptable in a society like India which is diverse. Children who can speak more languages will have more exposure to the world around him, he can access more knowledge and know more about the world.

Multilingualism with English:

In this multilingual world, English serves as the lingua franca for education, trade, and employment, and is an essential skill for anyone wanting to succeed professionally or academically in the 21st century. English offers enormous opportunities, and language policy rightly focuses on how to give more equitable access to high levels of English language proficiency so that these opportunities can be inclusive rather than exclusive, open to all socioeconomic groups. The students from vernacular medium schools of Assam have to face lots of difficulties to communicate in English in real-life situations, which in a way hampers their socio-economic as well as individual life. They gradually develop anxiety for English for not able to express their feelings to another person who is not from their community. They feel like all their knowledge is of no use as they cannot comprehend their thoughts in English. A language is a tool through which we express our feelings. English is just a language like the other languages of the world but with more prestige and power and nowadays people cannot do away with English as it opens an ample amount of opportunities. Vernacular schools of Assam, be it private or government-funded; teach English not as a language to be communicated, but only as a subject. Therefore in a state like Assam, which is very diverse the teaching of English in the multilingual classroom needs to be revisited so that students who once go out of that school don't have to face difficulty to face the real-life communication problems.

Now the question arises as to whether these communities should get an education through the Assamese language, which is one of the official languages of Assam as a medium of instruction or their language. These bring the uncertainty between their self-identity and their unification. Again the growth of English medium schools in Assam is seen as another predicament of this aspect. However, the state Government imposes monolingual and monoglossic policy and ideological practices in the name of

multilingualism. Also how far Assamese language can lead people who would like to go beyond the traditional boundary of knowledge?

Thus, English in the schools of Assam should give importance to the teaching of English along with the other languages of the community. Knowing the English language in today's world can empower one human being; not knowing this language will close many opportunities automatically as it is linked to every social skill. In a globalized world, multilingualism is very necessary along with the proficiency of the English language.

Report on School Observation on Language Teaching:

The name of the school which the researcher chose for observation is Napam M.V School. It is situated in Napam, near Tezpur University, Sonitpur, Assam. It is located beside the connecting road between Solmara and Tezpur. Napam M.V School has classes from I to VIII. During the 10days visit researcher had interacted with the students of class V, VI, VII, and VIII respectively. The age group of the students from 10 to 15 years. The researcher during her study observed the students from different communities who were enrolled in that school. She tried to learn about their socio-economic backgrounds. The researcher found that most of the students coming to that school were from very poor backgrounds, their parents earn daily wages for a living by working on the University campus. Most of these students belonged to Nepali, Bengali, Assamese, and Adivasi communities. Almost all of them could understand the Assamese, But no one was found proficient in English.

Language refers to those sounds and written symbols through which humans communicate. A language is a vehicle to exchange thoughts, ideas, views, etc, among people or different communities in a different part of the world. It plays a key role in a teaching-learning process and works as a medium between the learners and the teachers. Despite its many advantages, language also acts as a hindrance to attaining knowledge. The students of the vernacular medium schools face many problems while dealing with the English language as a course subject. Most of the subjects are written in the regional languages that the students also use as a medium of communication. They are not even trained or encouraged to speak in English.

The students of the Napam M.V. School face similar problems as mentioned above. They encounter many problems in understanding English as a course subject because their medium of instruction as well as communication within the school premise and in the outside world is very different. The language selected for education as a medium should enable students to acquire knowledge with the facility of expression so that they can communicate with clarity of thinking. Since the students are not familiar with the language due to their vernacular background it is the responsibility of the teachers to make them more aware of the language by using it as a medium of instruction.

As they speak a language that is different from classroom teaching so many students have difficulty connecting with the lessons taught in the classrooms. They have a hard time understanding the concepts as they were not given instructions in their mother tongue, so a kind of hesitation and lack of interest grows among them, they no longer feel motivated to learn new concepts and acquire new knowledge.

It is important to mention that To examine their understanding of the language, the researcher carried out various informal activities with the students. She has conducted a spelling test for different classes to analyze their writing skills as well as their pronunciations. The results are quite shocking for us as most of the students are not familiar with the spellings of even some basic English terms.

To test the student's knowledge of English vocabulary, the researcher conducted a spelling test in all the four classes i.e. Class 5, Class 6, Class 7, and, Class 8. The same set of words were dictated repeatedly in all the four classes. The words chosen were simple and common. E.g.; Tree, Taste, Butterfly, Pepsi, Facebook, WhatsApp, Flower, Nature, Friends, Blackboard, Door, Chair, Wall, Idol, Desk, Bench, Window, Cupboard, House, Stone, School, Apple, Bat, Ball, Cat. Along with the words, their meaning was also mentioned in their vernacular language, i.e.; "Assamese" for their understanding and ease. They were also shown real objects for better comprehension.

This exercise also helped to test their listening ability and capacity to understand the words. It was found that the students had problems with the basic foundation itself. They wrote the spellings in the way they heard them e.g.; Pepsi as 'pepci', nature as 'naser', wall as 'owal', cup board as 'cupbot', cat as 'ket', bench as 'bens', ball as 'bol' and so on. Most of the students pronounced 'iskul' for school and 'iston' for stone.

However, they wrote these spellings correctly. Some even mistook the letter 'd' for 'b'. After the test, the researcher made a group correction. She called some students to copy their answers on the board or read them aloud, and we checked all together. The correct spellings were later displayed to them on the blackboard.

Some other noteworthy observations are while observing the class the students were not able to comprehend whatever the researcher tried to communicate in English as they have very less understanding of the language. Moreover, they never got the exposure of speaking in English as their medium of instruction during the English classes were also in vernacular language. Students usually used their mother tongue while communicating with their peers and thus it was a bit difficult for the researcher to interact in English. Many times we faced difficulty in understanding them due to their use of "Sylethi" i.e.; the local dialect. Students lacked interest in learning which resulted in their less active participation in the classroom activities. Students are not confident enough to speak without any hesitation due to their fear of a second language. The fear of English creates problems in speaking and writing skills as they think that whatever they write or speak is not correct.

The Role and Multilingualism and English Language:

The role of multilingualism is crucial to enhance student's linguistic abilities. Schools should provide an inclusive non-judgemental natural environment that allows students to share their language and thought without any hesitation while encouraging them to learn the English language as a communicative tool. Vygotsky (1962, 1978) strongly displays the centrality of mother tongue in conceptualization. In Ladson-Billing multilingualism is seen as a scaffolding tool. She emphasizes on the fact the students' mother tongue is very crucial for a successful learning process, as the child can understand the concepts effortlessly. In terms of teaching a second language, the use of a Mother's tongue can act as a facilitating tool. The classroom should not be rigid, they must respect each language as Multilingualism helps students to deconstruct and reconstruct what they are learning using their different languages as a resource.

Language learning is just a matter of acquiring the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing but it consists of developing communicative competence. Knowledge of more than one language helps children in many ways. As Assam is a

linguistically diverse state so the children have different mother tongues which they use for daily conversation with their family and friends. Some children come to school with prior knowledge of more than one language and also have the capability to learn several languages at the same time. So the government along with the school authorities should take firm steps to facilitate and develop these linguistic and cognitive capabilities, which will help them to become a multilingual speaker who can understand as well as communicate in those languages. But in reality, policies that are designed for schools do not address these kinds of issues that need be highlighted. The school in which the researcher conducted her observational study also does not take into consideration these serious issues of multilingualism. The medium of instruction in the school is the Assamese language. All the textbooks are provided in the Assamese excluding English textbook. But English which is taught as a subject is also taught with the help of the Assamese. Moreover, at times teachers use students' mother tongue if they fail to understand something. But multilingual education is not well promoted in the school. In Assam English is introduced at the primary level from class I.Research in second language acquisition has increasingly focused on multilingual contexts thus "acknowledging that SLA nowadays should be seen as the acquisition of multilingual and multicultural competencies, even if the object of instruction is one standard linguistic system" (KRAMSCH, 2012, p. 108). Multilingual contexts, therefore, refer to contexts where more than one language is used in or out-of-school settings. The concept of multilingualism goes beyond the use of traditional bi-lingual use of language. Multilingual classrooms are supposed to be more inclusive and accommodating where all strata of children feel valued, appreciated, and not left out for not having the Official language as their mother tongue. Multilingual classrooms focus on how all the diversity in the classroom can be addressed for a greater cause as a resource for collective growth.

It is observed that in this Assamese medium government schools English is merely taught as a subject and is often neglected which imbibes a sense of fear among the students. The lesson is read in English while the explanation and discussion are carried out in the medium of instruction that is the Assamese which is not the medium of some students. English pronunciation of the students of Assamese medium schools is comparatively poor and the students hesitate to speak out aloud English words. This

happens because in Assamese medium schools where English is taught as a second language the four skills of LSRW are not given equal attention at the same time.

Students develop an awareness of a hierarchy of languages and feel their language as being placed low, which imbibes a sense of inferiority complex among the students belonging to different strata or community of the society. Therefore schools should be aware and conscious regarding the mental conditioning of the child and should provide a healthy environment to make these pupils grow as a language learner.

Teachers should be multilingual themselves and serve as models for their learners, they should know how to foster Multilingualism in the classroom. They should also be sensitive regarding the cognitive and affective differences of the learner. It is also important that teachers should be willing to collaborate with other (language) teachers to enhance learner's multilingualism. Teachers should have highly developed cross-linguistic and metalinguistic awareness. Multilingual pedagogy aims to increase the efficiency of language learning, but if teachers lack the time to collaborate or lack the recognition that a multilingual pedagogy may be more efficient, then these teachers will not surprisingly be resistant to implementing yet another approach. Learner's previous linguistic experience also helps them to reconnect what they learn to what they already know, interpreting incoming information, and even sensory perception, through the lens of their existing knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions .learner's previous linguistic knowledge helps them to identify and fill gaps, recognize when students are applying what they know inappropriately, and actively work to correct misconceptions. their previous linguistic knowledge helps students activate prior knowledge so they can build on it productively. Multilingual proficiency development constitutes an intellectual endeavor in which in the process of language learning a learner uses the knowledge from various languages (Baker, 2011; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Brutt-Grifflfler and Varghese, 2004; Swain and Lapkin, 2000).

Recommendation and Conclusion:

Studies have indicated that children who grow up in a supportive environment speaking more than one language from an early age are more perceptive and intellectually flexible than those who speak one language. This is also practical in the classroom context whereby students who are exposed to many languages will tend to be intellectually flexible. The benefits of being multilingual are overwhelming. It is

because it encourages in carrying out multitasking abilities. Our cognitive development is enhanced by simply being multilingual. In a Talk delivered by Stephen Krashen, he gave importance to 'Read for Pleasure', in which activity children can acquire a large number of inputs and exposure to the target language. In a study conducted by a linguist, it is found that people who read fiction have more sophisticated habits of mind. It also helps in knowledge expansion as it involves self-analysis and interaction. In this regard Teacher should captivate the learner through his innovative enterprises; and by using certain activities he can make the learning process enjoyable. He can also employ storytelling methods and audio-visual aids to facilitate learning. Besides, he should also constantly monitor and supervise the students to make the progress meaningful. At the core of a learner-centered approach, researchers need to pay attention to student engagement (affective, cognitive, and behavioral) in learning (Brutt-Grifflfler and Kim, 2017). A student-centered approach to teaching needs to be adopted.

In the NPE 2020, Part IV, Sec 11 suggests the usage of Mother Tongue till class V or VIII. This decision is appreciable in terms of quality education as the children understand more in their Mother Tongues. As in the primary stage, there will be no exam-oriented class and school will focus on some basic concepts, their foundation will be strong. However, the need for expert communicative language class of English in these vernacular schools needs to be addressed seriously as considering the importance of the English language. Besides, School should take serious care about enriching the vocabulary of the students in language classrooms, they should carry some out of classroom activities where they can ask their pupils to read about some stories and later ask them to tell that story in the class, this can help them to get familiar with the spoken skill and enhance their confidence. Thus Incorporating Multilingualism with the English language can help in empowering the child.

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