

English Medium Sections in 1,000 Government Schools: A Reality Check on the Pilot Study

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Abstract

The challenges confronting the government's controversial decision 'to introduce English as the medium of instruction in government schools from Grade 1 seem to be enormous. Although teachers, parents and children are excited about the new initiative, using another language other than the home language as the medium of instruction seems to create barriers in learning and promote teacher-oriented pedagogical practices in classrooms.

Keywords: Mother tongue, education policy, medium of instruction, pedagogy, translanguaging, curriculum

Introduction

The National Curriculum Framework (2005: 14) states that 'mother tongue(s) should be the medium of instruction all through the school, but certainly in the primary school'. It further reports that the Working Group on the study of Languages constituted by NCERT in 1986 also recommends that 'the medium of early education' should be the mother tongue(s) of the learners. In the Indian context, it is all the more necessary because:

- (i) It enables people to participate in national reconstruction.
- (ii) It frees knowledge from the pressures of limited elites.
- (iii) It builds interactive and interdependent societies.
- (iv) It provides a greater opportunity for the advice and consent

of a greater number of groups and thus is a better defence of democracy.

- (v) It leads to the decentralization of information and ensures free as opposed to controlled media; and it gives greater access to education and personal development to a greater number of people. (NCERT, 2005: 14)

According to UNESCO's Educational Position Paper (2008), mother-tongue instruction is essential for initial instruction and literacy and should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. Some studies (for example, Sehgal 1983) have shown that children who study through the mother-tongue medium do not suffer any disadvantage, linguistic or scholastic, when they compete with their English-medium counterparts.

The Education Policy of 1968 suggested that the medium of instruction at the primary stage should be the mother tongue and the state governments must adopt the three-language formula.

Findings from research studies conducted in schools where English is offered as the medium of instruction in Indian and international contexts reveal that children learn better if the home language is the medium of instruction (at least until Class 4). A study conducted by the British Council, The Open University, UK and Education Development Trust, UK. 2017 in Bihar (India) and Ghana (a sub-Saharan African country) found that in many South Asian countries including India, the majority of students who complete primary school are doing so without having attained the levels of home language literacy, core subject knowledge and English language ability. In Ghana, the recent studies (2013, 2015) conducted suggest that for many students levels of English are not high enough for them to be able to learn through the language when it becomes the medium of instruction in primary Grade 4. It is found that higher learning outcomes are achieved when the local language is used as the medium of instruction¹.

The following are the findings from a study² conducted by the University of Oxford and British Council in 2014:

- English Medium Instruction (EMI) could be divisive and create inequality. Concern was expressed that not all teachers were competent or able to teach through EMI with a possible generation gap; older teachers are not able to teach through EMI.

Students might suffer too, finding it too demanding to learn many languages and not able to fully comprehend the academic input.

- Lack of competent teachers: 83 per cent of countries responded that they did not have enough qualified teachers. This is a huge cause for concern.
- Lack of clear guidelines on how to teach through EMI.
- Lack of teaching resources: Difficulties were found resourcing EMI exams, securing the appropriate number of qualified teachers and providing the learning materials and textbooks.
- Lack of guidance on code-switching: 76 per cent of countries have no written guidelines specifying whether or not English should be the only language used in the classroom. Principled code-switching could be very beneficial in an EMI situation.

A study³ done by Pauline Rea-Dickins (2014), Aga Khan University, Tanzania reveals the following:

- Examining of school subject knowledge in English medium perpetuates social and economic exclusion.
- Data from examination results in EMI context reveals that there are low levels of literacy and numeracy.
- Since 2008, there is a significant increase in the proportion of secondary students failing. A small proportion of students belonging to elite group pass exams.
- English is a significant and substantial predictor of the students' performance in Mathematics, Biology and Chemistry.
- Exceedingly low levels of English vocabulary: How can these learners engage productively in English medium instruction with such low levels of basic English vocabulary?
- There is an inherent contradiction between aspiration for English and reality on the ground.
- Monolingual English language use in examinations is a barrier to access education.
- One language policy does not give all students a fair chance, does not lead to valid assessment of all students.

In spite of these findings and recommendations, the government of

Karnataka introduced English as the medium of instruction from Grade 1 in 1,000 government schools from the academic year 2019. In these schools, English medium sections were opened, on a pilot basis, in addition to the existing regional/Kannada-medium sections. The justification given for the introduction of English medium sections in government schools is as follows:

- As reported in the 'Karnataka budget 2018: 1,000 schools to welcome English medium classes' (2018), in a step that could meet the aspirations of lakhs of people from weaker sections, who wish to get their children educated in English, H.D. Kumaraswamy has announced that English-medium classes will be run along with Kannada medium ones in 1,000 government schools.
- 'Kannada is our mother tongue and it should survive, but we must ensure that children of poor people also get enough opportunities. This is a question of the education of our children. We are ready to give the poor in the state quality education in government schools and it is not right to deprive one section of children of quality education'. (Chief Minister of Karnataka, 2018).
- 'English can help youngsters in the state gain employment anywhere in the world'. (President, Karnataka Congress Committee, 2018).
- 'Government schools are dying gradually. Only children of poor Dalits and backward classes are going to government schools with no financial support to afford private schools. These children cannot compete with those in private schools. Why should students of government schools alone take the responsibility of safeguarding Kannada?' (Deputy Chief Minister, Government of Karnataka, 2019).
- Children will be given a choice as to which medium of instruction they prefer. (officials from the Department of Primary Education).
- Manika Ghosh (2019) stated: 'English is the language of heightened opportunities. It is the language of everyday living—from medical instructions, food labels, nutritional information, government forms, advertisements, street signs, to even hotel menus. It is the only intra-state and international communication

mode. English is also the language of commerce, of science and technology, of social media, of employment, and hence of development. It defies reason as to why anybody in the right frame of mind would oppose a move that will elevate the life and livelihood prospects of a large section of poor children. The progressive step taken by Karnataka will herald social engineering in the true sense of the term’.

- The State Project Director, Samagra Shikshana, Karnataka, during his interaction with the Master Resource Persons of English Medium Teachers’ Induction Programme, said that ‘this was a long pending demand. Many parents voiced their desire for having English medium sections in government schools. Teachers have also started demanding English medium sections’.

However, several writers and activists opposed the government’s decision to open English medium sections in 1,000 schools.

The Chairman of the Kannada Development Authority stated the following in response to the government’s decision:

I am against this move. It might result in the erasure of our language. We have nothing against English as a subject. It is necessary. But, it should not become the medium of instruction. If English becomes the medium, a day might come when Kannada will be forgotten completely. The government can introduce English as a medium of instruction from Class 7, but from Class 1, Kannada has to be the medium. A UNESCO study says children who get primary level education in their native language have higher IQ than those studying in a foreign language. A government school in Sira (near Tumkur), which had just three or four children, now has 800 because of the special interest taken by a headmaster. If a teacher can turn things around, why can’t the government? (English medium debate rages, 2019)

Shukla Bose, the founder and CEO of the Parikrama Humanity Foundation (2019) who successfully runs five free English medium institutions for underprivileged children, feels that the switch in the medium is not necessarily a guarantor of good education. She agrees that teaching children in English does improve their confidence, but it is possible to run great Kannada medium schools that have good facilities

with an earnest attempt to teach children the basics of language. 'There is very little child-friendly literature in the regional languages,' she points out. 'It is important to ensure that the fundamentals are put in place.' She is convinced that 'converting' to English will be more of a problem than a boon to education if it is executed without proper thought or planning.

Maya Menon, founder-director, The Teacher Foundation (2018), says:

'There is a scarcity of qualified teachers who can teach English. The government should have ideally worked on training teachers for at least three years before making such announcements'.

In spite of the dissenting voice, the government stuck to its stand and opened English medium sections from Grade I in 1,000 government schools from June 2019.

Selection of Schools

The selection of 1,000 schools was made more or less randomly but partly based on the geographical location and the infrastructure available. On an average, English medium sections were opened in 30 government schools in each district.

Media reports and statistics from the Department of Education reveal that there is an increasing demand for English medium in government schools. The data gathered from the department website reports that as of now 26,156 children are studying in 1,000 English medium sections (as opposed to 11,526 in Kannada-medium sections). This has adversely affected the admission of children in Kannada-medium sections. Nearly 250 schools have admissions less than 10 in Kannada medium and a few schools have closed Kannada medium sections as there is no admission.

The English Medium Teachers' Induction Programme (EMTIP): Orientation to MRPs

Consequent to the decision of the government, a plan was rolled out to train teachers to teach in English medium. A cascade mode of training was planned and teachers who completed a one month English Empowerment Programme at the district level were selected as Master Resource Persons (MRPs) to train in-service teachers who would teach English medium sections.

A 10-day state level training was conducted for 136 MRPs from April 29, to May 9, 2019; the MRPs cascaded the training at the district level for 15 days and trained nearly 1000 teachers.

Description of the Module

The English Medium Teachers' Induction Programme (EMTIP) was a face-to-face teacher empowerment programme for 15 days designed to help teachers use active, learner-centred, language supportive pedagogies (RIESI, 2019).

The salient features, as stated in the module, are:

- It provides opportunities to learning by doing for teachers.
- It aims to build their confidence and empower them through reflection and action.
- It integrates building proficiency, developing perspectives and practising meaningful pedagogy.
- It is embedded in the language across curriculum and multilingual approach.

There are a total of 11 themes identified for the module. These themes are rooted in the fundamental principles of language learning.

The themes identified are:

1. Context and Vision of English Medium Sections in Government Schools
2. Understanding Young Learners, Learning Styles and Strategies
3. Learning Outcomes and Assessment
4. Building a Language Rich Environment
5. Language across Curriculum
6. Multilingual Approach - Code Switching and Code Mixing
7. Listening and Speaking and Total Physical Response Tasks for Young Learners
8. Picture Reading
9. Stories for Young Learners: Story Telling and Story Reading
10. Sound-Letter Relationship Through Texts and Contexts
11. Reading and Writing for Young Learners

The training also suggested a few transitional tasks that teachers should do in the initial period. The rationale for suggesting a transitional plan, as given in the module, is as follows:

‘It would be too ambitious to expect children getting into the English medium section of Grade1 to acquire English and learn content in English. It would be irrational to start to transact textbooks without preparing children to receive content through English and respond in the same....Teachers teaching in the English medium section will have to explore the advantages of the multilingual context and ensure smooth transition through code mixing and code switching.... Comprehensible input through a fine blend of mother tongue and English can create a strong base for learning. It cannot happen if teachers begin to transact the textbook and focus on suggested learning outcomes. This transition period plan followed by simple and interesting activities provides a kind of preparatory experience to learners. The activities aim at providing an easy and joyful start to lead young learners to become confident in learning English through content and content through English.’ (EMTIP: Transition period plan and activities’. 2019, p. 3)

A few MRPs made the following observations during an interaction with them on the sixth day of the 10-day orientation:

- Teachers’ selection for English medium schools should be done carefully. Teachers must have basic spoken English skills and minimum proficiency in English language.
- Teachers are not able to handle English second language textbooks in Nail-Kali (i.e. Kannada-medium) classes even today. We need to empower them. So we need more content and activities from the textbooks to help them.
- This MRP training is for 10 days but we have to cascade it for 15 days at the district level. How can we extend it for another five days?
- Those who are good at English and those who are really interested to teach in English medium sections should be selected. There should be a follow-up. Only then will the project be successful.
- Textbooks (prepared by the NCERT) are very well designed but teachers, when handling for the first time, might think it

is somewhat heavy. How teachers are going to present it in an acceptable manner is a challenge.

- What is the focus of this module? Is this focusing on the child-oriented process or on strengthening the teacher?
- How do we train teachers to teach NCERT textbooks? They are not familiar with these textbooks, they do not know the content of the textbooks.

MRPs mainly felt that as new textbooks are being introduced for English medium sections, the training should help teachers understand the content of those lessons and units and conduct the activities suggested in those books rather than focusing on general principles and theoretical aspects of teaching English. The MRPs did not find much connection between the themes chosen for the training and the textbook lessons and activities.

EMTIP: District Level Training

Teachers from the randomly selected 1,000 schools were deputed for a 15-day training at the respective District Institute of Education and Training (DIET). Although teacher selection was crucial in the entire process, much attention was not paid towards inducting competent teachers who were proficient in English language. A diagnostic test was conducted along with written and oral tests (50 + 10 marks) for the selected 1,000 teachers. However, the module used was the same for training teachers irrespective of their language ability and varying scores/high or low performance (21/80) in the tests.

The 15-day district-level EMTIP was organized from May 13-27, 2019. Some of the concerns raised by teachers during the induction training are given below:

- Are the classrooms provided with advanced facilities?
- Which is the first language in English medium sections, English or Kannada?
- How can a first standard child get English language competency when he/she is beginning to learn the first language?
- Will the child be able to grasp concepts suddenly in the foreign language?

- How can we take English medium classes along with Kannada medium sections?
- Will the Department supply bilingual textbooks till the third standard?
- What are the prescribed steps to teach English, EVS and Maths in the first standard?

Maths and EVS textbooks were bilingual in nature. Though it was decided to use Kannada as the first language, the induction training did not address the issues of teaching Kannada in English medium schools.

Some of their expectations and suggestions were as follows:

- Most of the teachers need an empowerment programme for more than 15 days to help them teach in English medium schools.
- Students may be eager to join English medium schools but this will affect Kannada medium sections.
- Teaching in the English medium section may be challenging in the first year.
- The English medium textbooks should be colourful and attractive.
- TLM kits should be supplied for support.
- Convincing the Headmaster and staff members about the implementation of English as the medium of instruction is important.
- The training should be more activity-based rather than being theoretical.
- We should go to class with preparation and a concrete plan.
- Provide rich infrastructure for English classes.
- Recruit qualified English teachers for the first standard.
- Teachers are worried about regular Nali-Kali classes.
- A separate English teacher should be appointed in each school.
- Providing training to teachers who are interested in teaching English will be more useful.
- Allot only first standard English medium section, not any other classes.

- Teachers are worried about the academic progress of children from the marginalized sections of the society.
- Selection of schools should be done properly.

During my visits to the training centres and interactions with the MRPs, I have observed the following:

- A few headmasters have been deputed to attend the training. They expressed their inability to handle English medium sections as they have other responsibilities at the school.
- Other subject teachers are deputed to the training. They are not interested and not willing to teach in English medium sections.
- Teachers are worried that they may not be able to fulfil the expectations of parents of English medium sections. They feel they cannot do justice to the children as they themselves need to improve their English skills.
- The 15-day training is not enough to enhance their teaching skills and English language proficiency.
- Many administrative issues were raised:
 - (i) Lack of resources and TLMs for effective teaching-learning. Teachers expect more resources such as stories, reading cards and audio video materials for creating an English rich environment in the school.
 - (ii) Teachers are forced to teach other classes besides teaching Grade 1 English medium section.
 - (iii) Concerns about the availability of teachers and classrooms for next year's English medium sections.
 - (iv) Concern for Kannada medium sections.

Classroom Implementation

Visits to a few schools (in Mysore, Ramnagar and Bangalore districts) after the three months' of introduction of English as the medium of instruction have revealed the following:

Almost all the teachers seemed to be very excited about the new venture. They shared their sincere efforts in making this initiative successful. Most of the students also show an interest in learning English. Teachers use a variety of TLMs for teaching English, EVS and Maths. They

have prepared Big Books for reading based on the lessons and stories. Transition period tasks were carried out by teachers and were found to be very useful.

Unfortunately, teachers are not documenting their experiences and are not keeping any reflective notes or classroom diaries/journals. They are not able to gauge students' progress in learning, not maintaining any document to track children's progress. The stages of learning, the trajectory of students' successes in language acquisition have not been documented. They seem to rely on their memory and the oral tradition.

Parents seem to show a keen interest in English medium education. They seem to be happy when their children express a few sentences such as 'He is my grandfather', 'She is my grandmother', 'Give me a mobile', etc. at home.

In spite of the initial euphoria following the introduction of English medium, there are many concerns and challenges to be addressed:

- In most of the English medium schools that I visited, choral repetitions, mass drilling, rote memorization, etc. are found to be common practices.
- Many teachers believe in 'English only' approach. Either they have not understood a few themes such as multilingualism, language across curriculum discussed during the induction training or are not able to integrate these principles into their lessons owing to their own beliefs, prior practices or certain systemic constraints.
- There is no admission for Kannada medium sections in some schools. It was reported by some teachers that Kannada medium students were forced to sit in English medium sections. As reported by them, it was done in order to avoid discrimination among children. In addition to the 30 children in English medium sections, which itself is a huge challenge to handle, there are an additional 10 or 15 children from other sections.
- Some teachers reported that they have to teach English medium sections in addition to Nali-Kali classes, that too in the same classroom.
- A few teachers reported that they have to teach higher classes in addition to teaching English medium sections

- There are students belonging to two levels in the same English medium section– those who have come from English medium LKG, UKG classes and those who have come from Kannada medium ‘Anganawadi’ classes. Children who have studied in LKG and UKG classes seem to know English letters, words and can read and write to some extent whereas children from ‘Anganawadi’ background are just beginners as far as English is concerned. It seems to be a challenge for teachers to cater to these two different levels.
- There are differently abled children in some English Medium sections. It seems to be a challenge to teach such a mixed, heterogeneous group.
- Language seems to be thrust on these children. They are able to reproduce rhymes, stories and sentences but at the expense of comprehension. Children do not seem to know the meanings of simple words such as ‘in’, ‘out’, ‘under’, ‘above’, ‘inside’, ‘outside’, ‘near’, ‘far’, etc. which have already been introduced in previous lessons. As the ‘Poverty of the Stimulus’ argument suggests, children are not exposed to enough data to acquire the language.
- Teachers are not able to use different techniques, provide other contextually relevant examples to help children understand concepts. They have not understood the principles and benefits of multilingualism.
- Teachers are not using L1 as a pedagogic resource. L1 is at times used for giving instructions but not for teaching lessons and concepts. There is no clarity among teachers as to why and when to use other languages. English-only belief strongly persists in teachers.
- Parents seem to have great expectations from their children, teachers and the newly opened English medium sections. They seem to believe that English medium will fetch white collar jobs. These expectations have made teachers anxious and feel whether they will be in a position to fulfil parental expectations while teaching in difficult circumstances.

A Way Forward

Introduction of English as the Medium of Instruction in 1,000 government schools seems to have hindered children's classroom participation as they lack the necessary language ability. Students seem to engage in very little meaningful communication in the classroom and their language use seems to be limited to choral responses and mechanical repetition. It is important to adopt a multilingual approach, encourage teachers to make judicious and strategic use of code switching. Students can understand concepts and participate actively during lessons only if teachers code switch and if students are given opportunities for translanguaging to enhance learning.

As students coming from less privileged linguistic background and socially and economically disadvantaged families have few resources to engage with English outside the classroom, they should get access to quality, print-rich and audio-visual materials.

In rural areas where there is a shortage of qualified teachers, a lack of materials and very limited English available outside the school environment, it is perplexing to see how English medium instruction can guarantee social justice, equity and inclusion.

Teachers' lack of competence in English may lead to teachers resorting to traditional methods of teaching. Teachers who are not confident in English are likely to rely on drilling, memorization and the 'chalk and talk' method. English medium can make it difficult for teachers to use student-centred pedagogic practices. Classrooms are most likely to become teacher dominated and the focus will be on rote-learning as it is the case in many private English medium schools in India.

If monolingual (only English) approach is adopted, students will feel insecure. They will be more comfortable using their own languages to interact with teachers, ask/answer questions. They will find it enjoyable to take part in the classroom process. 'English only' approach will make classrooms teacher-centred.

As teachers' lack of competence in English and the complete absence of student talk in the classroom are two significant factors contributing to low learning outcomes, a flexible approach to language use, both by the teachers and students, should be adopted to enable learning.

Teachers' capacity building is crucial. In schools where English is

the medium of instruction, teachers' competence in the language of instruction is vital. Teachers should be empowered to develop strategies to use active, learner-centred, language supportive pedagogies.

Weblinks to the Full Reports

1. <https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/continuing-professional-development/teacher-educator-framework/demonstrating-effective-teaching-behaviour/multilingual-classrooms-opportunities-and-challenges-english-medium-instruction-low-and-middle> retrieved on August 14, 2019
2. https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/english_as_a_medium_of_instruction.pdf retrieved on August 14, 2019
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