
The ‘Critical Reflexive Approach’ (CRA) A Theoretical Model Towards Bilingual Education Policy and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces bilingual education as an integral part of critical education practice in Indian classrooms. Contrary to the belief that bilingual models of teaching are modern, Indian pedagogy has a long tradition of bilingual education which is over three hundred years old. Through this paper, I have built a case for bilingual education as a means to achieve socially and critically inclusive teaching and learning. In addition, I have also addressed some practical concerns which are often discussed in the context of bilingual teaching. Further, I have proposed a theoretical model—Critical Reflexive Approach (CRA) as a tool to reconstruct the bilingual education culture in the Indian classroom. Finally, I have discussed the implications of bilingual teaching materials, and the opportunities they afford to teachers and learners.

Keywords: Bilingual education, critical pedagogy, bilingual textbooks, education history, bilingual teachers

INTRODUCTION

Bilingual education in India has a peculiar presence. The multilingual students in most Indian classrooms necessitate bilingual and multilingual approaches of teaching. The inclusion of Indian languages along with English forms the core of critical teaching practice that sustains language diversity. Most people educated in English will recount how their teachers would sometimes use an Indian language to explain a concept better. Yet, the methods and principles which comprise the “bilingual” approach are unclear. Bilingual approaches used by teachers are eclectic and largely dependent on the teacher’s motivation and proficiency in languages. Moreover, there are hardly any bilingual textbooks published by the

National and State Boards of education, except as part of remedial programs for socially deprived communities. In fact, the introduction of bilingual textbooks is one way to concretize bilingual methods which teachers can then use as part of their everyday lessons.

Using an Indian language in an English medium classroom is often accompanied by an element of guilt on the part of the teacher. This is partly because there is no official policy or teacher directive which outlines the benefits and use of bilingual methods as part of school level teaching. Therefore, using a local language in English medium classrooms is generally perceived as “diluting” the quality of education. This stigma of using an Indian language in an English language classroom can be removed by using bilingual textbooks. However, for this, explicit bilingual education policies must be put into place by teachers, policy makers and education organizations.

This paper is based on the hypothesis that when teaching draws from the learner’s language and context, it is easier for them to relate it to their education. Specifically, in English language classrooms, bilingual methods enable the learners and teachers to place their own languages alongside English as “useful” learning. These methods also empower them to make use of English in a way that does not uproot their own language and knowledge systems. Bilingual education is one of many feasible solutions that can help learners gain knowledge without alienating them from their own languages and cultures. Besides, this method of learning will also help maintain the language ecology in India.

ARGUING A CASE FOR BILINGUAL MODELS IN INDIAN CLASSROOMS

Besides enabling students to learn English effectively, bilingual education plays a pivotal role in sustaining the language of the local community. In this section, I will discuss the reasons why bilingual education is also beneficial for developing critical thinking skills in Indian classrooms.

Local knowledge

The “local” as Canagarajah (2002) points out is the sum total of “texts, talk, poetry, art, memory, desire, dreams, and many unstated assumptions” (p. 249), that people have about their own community. Local knowledge is the lifeline of one’s thought process and intellectual growth; creativity and critical thinking emerge from this source. When textbooks, tests and other education material use only English, it is difficult to elevate local language and knowledge to an equal position of value in the eyes of policy makers, education institutions, teachers, learners and researchers. Therefore, the main question that translators and policy makers must

ask themselves is whether the knowledge (about diseases, cures, rules of expected social behaviour, arts, scientific facts, rituals, seasons, cultivation, etc.) which is transferred through our mother tongue, can then be transferred into English. Given the long-standing neglect of bilingual methods in Indian education, it is important for textbook designers and education policy makers to make a conscious effort to construct bilingual approaches to ELT.

Contesting “Submersion” models

Studies as mentioned below show that mother tongue based learning provides learners with a familiar context. Benson (2004), points out that bilingual education makes the classroom a level playing field, where both the teacher and the learners create meaning together. “Submersion” classrooms (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty, 2010) on the other hand, force the learner to learn in a language that is not their mother tongue. Moreover, they do not provide the learners with sufficient opportunities to draw on their critical thinking skills. A “submersion” classroom is a place where the medium of instruction is English only. This mostly happens in situations where both the teacher and learners lack adequate knowledge of the local language. This model places teachers at a disadvantage as it deprives them of a collaborative learning environment in the class. The burden of teaching in L2 falls on teachers, who themselves struggle to understand the textbook. In “submersion” classrooms, therefore, insufficient learning combined with unclear explanations result in examinations becoming not only a formidable challenge but also a source of anxiety for learners. In such situations, bilingual education models act as a remedy to help contest the difficulties faced by teachers and learners alike in the process of instruction and examinations.

Preserving language ecology

Bilingual models in education have larger implications which go beyond schools—these models are agency for conserving the Indian languages. Despite the diversity and number of languages in India, several are no longer being used actively. Language death (Crystal, 2000) is the disappearance of a language due to lack of effort in maintaining it. When a language dies, it means that it is no longer spoken or used. Schools, colleges, universities and government organizations are the platforms where one can arrest the loss of a language. While learners are the main stakeholders in the education system, teachers and policy makers hold the power to induce a change in the existing education system. Education policy makers and teachers must recognize the power they wield, and use it to protect the diverse and varied language ecology in India. Adopting a bilingual approach to teaching, and formalizing it at the policy level has far reaching implications for

the preservation of Indian languages.

Implications for social change

A bilingual classroom is a microcosm of a multilingual society. Bilingual models of education will not only help to save Indian languages, but will also create new socio-cultural patterns at the level of Indian democracy. In the course of time, they will enhance the prestige and cultural value associated with local languages. They also rebuild the importance of our languages at a global level, leading to a reverse-flow of language learning. That is, with an increase in demand for speakers and users of Indian languages (like the case of Mandarin in China), more individuals across the world will need to use them. This will bring about a change in the widely held attitude towards Indian languages that they have a lower social prestige as compared to English. However, this social change is possible only if bilingual education is promoted and implemented both at the school level as well as in higher education in India; and to achieve this a clear-cut plan to design bilingual teaching programs and education policies is necessary.

FINDING ROOTS FOR THE “BILINGUAL APPROACH”

At present, there is a dearth of well-defined bilingual education policies in India (Baker, 2011, p. 89). There are both historical and political reasons behind this “illegitimacy” of bilingual methods in the Indian teaching and learning scenario. In this section, I will discuss the historical and political reasons which led to the absence of bilingual approach in the official policies and practices. Addressing this absence, I will reflect on how/why bilingual approaches have come to be seen as “supplementary” or “additional” to monolingual teaching.

The first step towards building a “bilingual” culture of teaching and learning is to look for any previously existing bilingual education models in India. Studies in the field of Sociolinguistics (Kachru, 1998), English Applied Linguistics and TESOL (Brutt-Griffler, 2002; Ramanathan, 2005), highlight the history and use of bilingual teaching in India. Kachru discusses the emergence of bilingualism among Indians. He outlines the spread of bilingualism in the colonial period, when the British first came to India. He focuses on how common people have begun to learn and use English along with an Indian language. Brutt-Griffler’s study focuses more on describing the “vernacular” approach in the British education of 19th century India. She argues that British education is mistakenly construed as monolingual, and criticises the over emphasis on Macaulay’s Minute as an authoritative account of how education worked in the colonial period. According to her, Macaulay did not have the last word on Indian education—English as well as other subjects

were largely taught in both English and the local Indian language. Instead, Brutt-Griffler offers convincing evidence based on the British education policies about the use of Indian languages in education. Her evidence shows that not all schools in colonial India taught in the English medium; some schools used an Anglo-Vernacular approach (Indian language medium at the primary level and English medium for the higher classes). A third type of school—Vernacular medium—using only Indian languages to teach was also prevalent. This vernacular approach (Indian language medium) must not be confused with bilingual approach (use of an Indian language in English medium).

With an existing tradition of rich bilingual textbooks and other teaching material for over three centuries, there is a crucial need to define clearly what comprises “bilingual approach”. As Amaliraj rightly points out,

the term ‘bilingual education’ cannot be used in the same sense as it is in countries which adopt monolingual models of language learning. Further, the diversity of Indian languages, varying from state to state makes the term ‘bilingual education’ very difficult to define in India. (Amaliraj, 1995, p. 17)

In the context of this paper, bilingual approach is the use of an Indian language alongside English to teach, test and evaluate, as part of formal education. There is a dearth of a strong tradition of bilingual teaching theory and practice for both teachers and learners to pick from based on their learning/teaching contexts.

Towards a Theoretical Model: The ‘Critical Reflexive Approach’ (CRA)

The first move towards rebuilding a “bilingual culture” is to look at the old bilingual models from earlier textbooks, curriculum and education policies. As Krishna Kumar points out (1988), the Indian education system prescribes the teaching material a teacher must use in his or her classroom. The education system does not leave the teacher much “choice in the organization of curriculum, pacing, and the mode of final assessment” (p. 452). This reliance on textbooks or the “textbook culture” (Kumar, 1986), is still largely practiced in India. Therefore, textbooks are the primary means by which bilingual teaching can be critically re-evaluated to highlight its rich “bilingual” traditions of pedagogy.

The second important source of information about the history of bilingual models in India is the education mandates issued by government authorities in colonial India, as well as after independence. In tracing the lineage of bilingual approach in India, it is also important to verify if the education policies and curriculum of the past have congruence with the teaching material of its time. Falk Pingel (2010), uses the terms “active” and “formal” curriculum to highlight the gap which is

often present between the education policy and the actual teaching practice in a classroom. Sometimes, a textbook maybe prescribed by official mandate to be included in “formal curriculum”. However, whether the textbook was actually used in classroom teaching as part of “active curriculum” can be ascertained only by looking at multiple sources of pedagogic history.

The third category is both the most important and often neglected source of pedagogic history—the recollections of teachers and learners. Pedagogic memory embedded in teacher and learner recollections provide a valuable, and often, unexpected perspective of how teaching took place in the past. For this purpose, oral interviews can be conducted with teachers and learners who were a part of teaching systems in the past.

Bringing together these aspects, I would like to propose a theoretical model of “Critical Reflexive Approach” (CRA) in the history of bilingual education. Such an approach must necessarily encompass three types of sources. They are:

- Teaching material: Old bilingual teaching material that was prescribed, used and circulated.
- Bilingual education documents: Policies, teacher manuals, directives, debates, etc.
- Oral interviews: Teacher and student recollections of bilingual models used in the past.

Old bilingual education material

- Bilingual textbooks, workbooks, teaching material that was prescribed, used, circulated.
- Publisher forewords and teacher guidelines in textbooks as valuable sources of reconstructing bilingual approaches.

Oral interviews

- Oral interviews of teachers and learners to record their recollection of bilingual teaching practices.
- Teachers’ and learners’ memory as a tool to gauge the congruency between education policy and practice.

Bilingual education policies, teacher manuals, directives and debates, etc.

- Documents which report contesting views about bilingual models and their use.
- Various bilingual curriculum prescribed all over India.
- Landmark policies which could have impacted the rise/fall of the Bilingual method.

Figure 1. Model of a Critical Reflexive Approach

To reconstruct the history of bilingual education in India, CRA tools can be employed by teachers, learners and researchers in various regions in India. The awareness that methods and principles of “old” teaching practices are integral to the present-day teaching culture is the key to Critical Reflexive Approach. Over time, historical accounts of bilingual education from various parts of India can help teachers, language learners and researchers understand the reasons why bilingual approach began to take a back seat in Indian education.

BILINGUAL TEXTBOOKS TO ENHANCE CRITICAL EDUCATION PRACTICES

As an education system which relies heavily on textbooks, it is imperative in the Indian education scene to produce bilingual textbooks as a means of effective implementation of bilingual education policies. Such policies, together with bilingual teaching material will contribute towards the establishment of critical pedagogic practices.

BENEFITS OF BILINGUAL TEXTBOOKS

Bilingual textbooks enable learners to manoeuvre their own learning with a greater degree of self-motivation. In addition, such teaching material will also allow parents to participate in their child’s learning, thereby demystifying their ward’s education. Many parents find the English medium teaching material their children use both daunting and unfamiliar. Bilingual textbooks can act as a tool to link learners, parents and teachers, thereby resulting in a healthy learning network.

QUESTIONS AND UNCERTAINTIES

With a broad range of Indian languages to choose from, bilingual textbooks can be designed specifically on a case-by-case model. For example, bilingual textbooks in Telugu-English, Tamil-English, Kannada-English and Malayalam-English could be made for Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Kerala respectively. Similar efforts need to be made to design bilingual teaching material in those languages which are not the standard languages of a region. This will help maintain the language equilibrium among Indian languages and mitigate language tensions.

CREATING COLLABORATIVE LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS

The prospect of bilingual education presents significant implications for language policy and planning, teacher training and critical education. While it is for government administrators and officials involved in high-level language policy making and planning to facilitate the effective implementation of bilingual education, most policy makers and researchers express doubts about

the practicality and feasibility of the preparation and use of bilingual material. To ensure seamless application of bilingual programs, it is important to prepare “bilingual teaching teams” (Purdon & Palmer, 2017, p. 297), by collaborating between the subject-teachers and teachers of Indian languages. These teams must have teacher training as one of their core objectives as the teachers will not only be instrumental in creating awareness among learners about bilingual approaches but will also be responsible for introducing bilingual textbooks. These learner-awareness programs can be conducted effectively with the use of CRA model. Also using the CRA model, teachers can develop critical questioning skills in learners pertaining to their language. Learners must also be encouraged to ask questions about the origin and history of their languages. Critical questioning tools must be employed to motivate them to enquire whether their own languages are equal to English in various respects. Such enquiries will create awareness in learners about the language imbalance in Indian society and will make them active partners in rebuilding bilingual culture in Indian education. Further, the CRA model will act as a foundation for critical language education for both teachers and learners to critically reconstruct their individual language histories. This will be the first step towards inducing learners to draw from their own language backgrounds.

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