

Transacting “Language Across the Curriculum”: Experiences From Universities in India

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ABSTRACT

The National Council for Teacher Education introduced a new curriculum framework for teacher education in India in the year 2015. Language Across the Curriculum (LAC) was a new compulsory course of study for all Bachelor of Education students. So far, language as a course of study in the teacher education programme was transacted as pedagogy of language, and neglected the role language played in academic learning and achievement across subject areas. LAC was introduced to herald constructive changes in the teaching learning process and enhance the quality of learning in schools. In this paper, I will explore the concept of Language Across the Curriculum and critically examine if the curricular content offered by universities across the country is in consonance with the LAC concept and the B. Ed. curriculum framework 2015.

Key Words: Language Across the Curriculum, language education, curriculum framework, syllabus

INTRODUCTION

The Language Across the Curriculum movement was started in London in 1966 by secondary English teachers who wanted to know how talk and discussion could be better used for language learning. According to Parker (1985):

The ideas about language and learning which form the intellectual basis for the ‘language across the curriculum’ (LAC) movement are drawn from new perspectives on human development and knowledge that have emerged in such fields as psychology, anthropology, philosophy, sociology,

and linguistics—perspectives which see knowledge as the product of a complex interaction between each person and what he or she observes or reads (p. 173).

As a tool for learning, language plays a major role in subject specific learning and teaching. “Language across the curriculum (LAC) relates to linking different forms and aspects of language education within the school, particularly emphasizing the role of language in all subject-matter learning” (Vollmer, n.d., p. 177). Language skills and competences needed for academic learning often do not develop by themselves. Teachers have to train the learners to use them successfully.

In all subject areas, the use of language involves the student in the formation of concepts, the exploration of symbols, the solving of problems, the organization of information, and interaction with his or her environment. Teachers need to recognize and reinforce the central role of language in this learning process (Fillion, 1979, p. 47).

Although the LAC movement was begun by English language teachers, soon other subject teachers joined the discourse, as Barnes et al. (1971) noted:

We found ourselves talking about ‘language in education’, or ‘language and learning’, and finally about language across the curriculum. We felt sure that language was a matter of concern for everyone, that if children were to make sense of their school experience, and in the process to become confident users of language, then we needed to engage in a much closer scrutiny of the way in which they encountered and used language throughout the school day (cited in Parker, 1985).

This view is supported by the belief held by Vygotsky about how children construct meaning. According to him, learning takes place in the context of the socio-cultural history of the child, which includes the child’s language. Explaining how children make meaning, Vygotsky (1994) said, “...one and the same objective situation may be interpreted, perceived, experienced or lived through by different children in different ways” (p. 354). He believed, learning takes place when children interact with people in their environment, and in school with teachers and peers. So when children are introduced to new content areas with different academic registers and new concepts, all teachers are expected to create an enabling environment so that they acquire learning skills that are appropriate to negotiate with the new cognitive demands presented to them.

Vygotsky’s theory of Zone of Proximal Development is of particular significance when we discuss the concept of LAC and learning achievement. According to

Vygotsky, children can perform many functions and activities independently and reach actual developmental level, however to perform certain other functions and activities children need assistance from someone. In school, if children receive assistance from teachers and peers, they can expect to reach the level of proximal development. If children are deprived of such assistance most of them would not reach the zone of proximal development.

As subject teachers joined the LAC movement with language teachers, slowly there emerged an alternative view of learning through language or language in education. This was very different from the confining view of learning language as L1/L2 and the insistence on accuracy of language use and the restrictive idea of language development as the development of communication skills. Some teachers and researchers felt the need to distinguish between the two sets of language skills—Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). In the language classroom BICS received attention, while CALP remained neglected in the content subject classrooms.

LAC acknowledges and emphasizes the role of language as a means for thinking and learning. The LAC perspective is that language education in school is not limited to the learning of specific language subjects (L1/L2), but extends to all subjects and activities in the school, across the curriculum. The LAC concept advocates for the development of language skills and competences to be integrated with subject specific learning and teaching.

The National Council for Teacher Education (NCTE) introduced new regulations in the year 2014 that overhauled and restructured teacher education programmes in India. The new regulations were followed by a new curricular framework for teacher education in the year 2015. The universities offering teacher education programmes were required to redesign the syllabus in consonance with the new curriculum framework. The 2015 curriculum framework brought in new perspectives in teacher education. For the B. Ed. programme, broadly it had three interrelated curricular areas: Perspectives in education; Curriculum and pedagogic studies; and Engagement with the field. Thus, the new curriculum framework meant the B. Ed. programme had new courses and dimensions added to it. In the second category of curricular areas, curriculum and pedagogic studies, a new course was introduced—Language across the curriculum. The LAC course was made compulsory for all B. Ed. students.

School education in India follows the three language formula, which means children learn three languages as subjects during their schooling. One of the three languages the children learn in school is also the medium of instruction. So far

the school curriculum considered language education as the teaching-learning of language as a subject which was the responsibility of the language teachers, and ignored the language dimension in all other subjects. This ignored the fact that broadly speaking, language is one of the most important tools for academic learning.

Before 2015, the emphasis of teacher education curriculum was on teaching language as a subject and the central role language played in academic learning and achievement was completely neglected. The new curriculum framework recognized the importance of language as a thinking and learning tool and addressed this gap:

In India, language and literacy are generally seen as the concern of only the language teachers. However, no matter what the subject, teaching cannot take place in a language-free environment. Assumptions about the language and literacy background of students influence classroom interactions, pedagogical decisions and the nature of students' learning (NCTE, 2015, p. 11).

It has now been over three years since the new B. Ed. curriculum framework has been in place and the universities were expected to design the syllabus based on it. The LAC was also a new concept in the teacher education programme in the country and was expected to herald constructive changes in the teaching learning process and enhance the quality of learning in schools. Therefore, it would be interesting to find out how the concept of LAC was conceived and negotiated by the syllabus designers and reflected in the syllabus.

I will now explore the concept of Language Across the Curriculum and critically examine if the curricular content offered in teacher education programmes in universities across the country is in consonance with the LAC concept and the B. Ed. curriculum framework introduced by the NCTE 2015.

CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK: BACHELOR OF EDUCATION

The NCTE (2015) introduced Language Across the Curriculum course in the B.Ed. programme under three broad areas. In one area of study, the focus was on, “understanding the language background of students, as first or second language users of the language used in teaching the subject” (p. 12). Here the aim was to develop sensitivity in student teachers about the language diversity existing in the classrooms. In order to develop sensitivity towards language diversity, the student teachers were required to have a theoretical understanding of multilingualism, the interplay and intersection between home language and school language,

power dynamics of “standard” and “dialects”, and deficit and discontinuity theories. In the second area of study, the objective was to, “understand the nature of classroom discourse and develop strategies for using oral language in the classroom in a manner that promotes learning in the subject area” (p. 12). This was aimed at developing an understanding of the nature of classroom discourse, teacher control in classroom discourse, types of questions asked by the teacher, use of oral language in the classroom, and using discussion and questioning as tools for learning. The third objective of the course was to, “understand the nature of reading comprehension in the content areas (informational reading). Writing in specific content areas with familiarity of different registers” (p. 12). Here the emphasis was on the importance of reading comprehension and writing in content areas using appropriate academic registers for learning achievement. This required that the B. Ed. students be given an opportunity to familiarize themselves with the nature of different types of texts (expository text versus narrative texts, transactional versus reflective texts) and text structures. They had to develop an understanding of schema theory, and be able to develop reading strategies such as note-making and summarizing for learners in content areas. Developing an understanding of writing in content areas required the student teachers to get acquainted with different academic registers, process writing, and be able to help learners to make reading-writing connections and analyze their writing to make sense of their cognition.

THE LAC SYLLABUS IN UNIVERSITIES

What has been presented so far is a summary of the curriculum framework provided by the NCTE regarding the LAC course. The universities were expected to develop the LAC syllabus based on this framework. In order to assess whether the curriculum framework and the LAC syllabus of the universities were in consonance, the researcher collected the syllabus of the LAC course from the websites of five universities from five different regions of the country. These universities had been offering Bachelor of Education programmes for more than five decades. The researcher further carried out a discourse analysis of these syllabi content and matched it against the main points as presented in the curriculum framework. The following table shows the content parity of the curriculum framework and the syllabus of different universities. The universities are represented by the alphabets A, B, C, D, and E in the table.

Curriculum Framework	Syllabus				
	A	B	C	D	E
Deficit theory	√	√			
Discontinuity theory	√				
Multilingualism	√	√	√	√	√
Home language versus school language					
Power dynamics of 'standard' versus 'dialects'				√	√
Classroom discourse	√	√		√	
Oral language in classroom	√	√		√	
Discussion as tool for learning		√		√	
Nature of questioning in classroom	√	√		√	
Teacher control in discourse					
Expository texts versus narrative texts	√	√		√	
Transactional texts versus reflective texts	√	√		√	
Text structures	√			√	
Schema theory	√	√		√	
Examining content area books				√	
Reading strategies		√			
Making reading-writing connections				√	
Process writing					
Analyzing child writing to understand their conception					
Writing using academic registers				√	

It was observed that the syllabi of Universities C and E were far removed from the essence of the discourse presented in the curriculum framework of the NCTE. The theory component of the NCTE was not given any significance by C, D, and E, while B incorporated only one theory component. Multilingualism found place in all five syllabi. Home language versus school language discourse was missing in all five syllabi. The syllabus makers did not seem to give cognizance to

researches which argued that the language of learning is different from everyday language. Researches have also pointed towards the difficulty experienced in learning by the learners coming from the margins and working class due to the deficit in the language they bring along to school when confronted with school language in which they are expected to negotiate cognition. In the same context, only two universities deemed it fit to engage the students in a discourse with the underlying power dynamics involved in the notions of "standard" language and "dialects". Teacher control in classroom discourse was omitted by all five universities, although it is established that teachers play crucial role in determining and maintaining the pattern of discourse in the classroom that promotes learning. However, University A had a teaching point "teacher's role in promoting discipline" in its syllabus, although the school system was expected to discard behaviourism-centred teacher control and discipline in the teaching-learning process and instead exercise teacher control based on constructivist orientation since many decades. The syllabus designers seemed to have negotiated and constructed the meaning of "teacher control" presented in the curriculum framework as "teacher's role in promoting discipline". It is clear that there are gaps between the LAC curriculum framework implemented by these universities and the NCTE discourse. When a new concept is introduced such shortcomings are unacceptable as they can lead to misinterpretation or diverging interpretation by people who are expected to implement it.

When we further move down the table, we see that many of the points from the curriculum framework were missing in the syllabus of Universities A, B, and D, which had incorporated some of the points appearing at the top. Universities C and E, which hugely ignored the NCTE curriculum framework, had teaching content such as developing skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing (LSRW) and barriers to developing LSRW, which come under BICS prominent in the syllabus. All five universities had made an effort to develop a new syllabus for the LAC course. While A, B and D tried to negotiate with the curriculum framework to some extent, C and E kept clear off the curriculum framework. Neither the curriculum framework put forward by the NCTE, nor the syllabi of the five universities reveal the role of the subject teachers in LAC or if they have a role at all, whereas the concept of language across the curriculum acknowledges and emphasizes the role and participation of subject teachers in it.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

There is a series of discourses at different levels in the university before a syllabus is finalized. For the syllabus designers, the NCTE curriculum framework provided

the base for the discourse. In some cases, the NCTE sent teams of experts to universities to engage with the teacher educators who were developing the syllabus. What is important is how the syllabus designers negotiated with the discourse presented to them by the curriculum framework and the team of experts.

The syllabi displayed on the websites of the universities do not reveal who participated in the discourse and designing of the syllabus, whether language teachers or a team of language and subject teachers. The table indicates that there is a gap, and in two cases a wide gap in the conceptual understanding of the curriculum framework discourse and the concept of language across the curriculum. What are the reasons for these gaps; are they deliberately designed that way or do the curriculum designers and the syllabus designers differ in their agency of meaning making? The gap we are discussing here is at the level of the written document. We do not know if the gap widens or closes during the classroom transaction. The syllabus does not tell us about who all are engaged in transacting the LAC course; the language teachers or a team of language and subject teachers.

When teacher education is revamped, it is with the purpose of improving the quality of school education. A micro analysis of the part curriculum indicates that the curriculum framework and the syllabi of the universities across the country are not in consonance. If such wide ranging disparity exists at the level of written documents developed by experts, can we expect what is transacted in the teacher education classrooms would reflect the essence of the revamped curriculum? If we want to improve the quality of school education through teacher education, we need to do more than providing a new curriculum; because a new curriculum perspective by NCTE may not be translated into various curricular activities across the universities by default.

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