

Interview

Perspectives and Observations on Teaching and Learning English in Difficult Circumstances

*Ravinarayan Chakrakodi and Mahananda Pathak in
Conversation with Dhir Jhingran*

Dr. Dhir Jhingran is the Founder Director of Language and Learning Foundation (LLF), a non-profit organisation focused on foundational literacy and numeracy skills and multilingual education programmes. LLF works closely with Indian state governments to bring reforms to the education system at length. He has worked in the primary education sector for 30+ years, within and outside the Indian Government. Within the government he has served in policy-making roles in the Ministry of Education at the national level and as Project Director of numerous large-scale programmes for universal primary education. He has also handled several other profiles, such as Senior Advisor to UNICEF, India; Advisor to the Ministry of Education, Nepal; Asia Regional Director and Chief Programme Officer with Room to Read. He is a member of the National Steering Committee for National Curriculum Frameworks. He has made significant contributions to the development and implementation of early-grade reading and multilingual education programmes in several countries. Dr. Dhir has authored three books on primary education and has contributed to journals.

Prof. Ravinarayan Chakrakodi (RC): We are delighted that you are here for the interview. The phrase ‘difficult circumstances’ dates back to Michael West in the 1960s, who refers to teaching contexts paralyzed with large classes, a dearth of basic resources, low proficient teachers, teachers with excessive workloads, etc. So, what is your idea of difficult circumstances as a person working with the governments on various capacity-building programmes?

Dr. Dhir Jhingran (DJ): Thank you. I am really happy to join this interview. For me, difficult circumstances mean the complex nature of classroom teaching. What has changed in recent times is the focus on learning and the accountability of the teacher for ensuring the learning of children through assessments of different kinds. It is not enough to teach the textbook or to be a good teacher. The issue of large class sizes raised by Dr. West is not that common in many government schools in India right now. A lot of the enrolment has shifted to private schools. However, multi-grade and multi-level teaching and learning is widespread. At the primary stage, the enrolments are now nearly universal, and this has given rise to a situation where children come from very diverse backgrounds, and their learning levels in a classroom are also quite different. So we talk about a multi-level learning situation in classrooms. Also, most children may not be school-ready in the sense that they may not have had great early childhood education experiences and therefore for a teacher to be teaching formally in school, it is a challenge. There is irregular attendance of children and highly inadequate pre-service teacher education, which does not prepare teachers for this kind of diversity and learning disparities available in Indian classrooms. So, the slightly modified form of difficult circumstances still exists even today.

Dr. Mahananda Pathak (MP): Do you think there is a need to understand the complexities of the issues involved in teaching and learning English in difficult situations, considering the huge number of children learning and teachers teaching the language in India?

DJ: Yes, I completely agree that this is a huge issue that has not received adequate attention. The teaching and learning of English in difficult situations definitely need more research. Studies should address the most difficult and pedagogically unacceptable situations where English is used as a (EMI) from children's early years, early childhood education, or grade one. We forget the fact that English is often the second language for the school, not for the children. So, the teaching and learning of English needs a thorough overhaul. It is difficult to do that without understanding current language teaching practices and the challenges in implementing a multilingual approach to teaching English. It also requires research evidence from different parts of India and across the globe.

RC: We are aware that you have worked in many different state and

national-level committees and have contributed significantly to the policy documents. Do these documents or language educational policies in India address some of the issues around teaching and learning English in difficult circumstances? If so, how?

DJ: Let's take the recent documents such as the National Education Policy 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for School Education 2023. They do not specifically talk about teaching and learning of English. NCF, for example, mentions children's L1, L2, and L3, where L1 is the home language or the most familiar language. It specifies that by the end of grade three, children should become independent readers and writers in L1; and similarly become independent readers and writers in both L2 and L1 by grade five. Furthermore, they should have a high degree of proficiency in a third language (L3) by the end of grade eight. As I said, in reality, both the government and private education systems have adopted English to be the official L2. More and more government schools are becoming English medium, this is not appropriate. In all other schools English is being taught from grade one. However, there needs to be a strong focus on multilingualism/multilingual approach to teaching and learning, i.e. building a strong foundation of a familiar language, which can provide the basis for learning other languages. So, NEP and NCFSE talk about unfamiliar languages and the sequence in which languages should be introduced. However, there needs to be more specific treatment about the teaching and learning of English in general and in difficult circumstances.

MP: As you have rightly pointed out, Indian classrooms are diverse and multilingual. Does the English-only approach work in Indian classrooms? How do you see bi/multilingual approach as a strategy for teaching English in difficult circumstances?

DJ: Right now, children are at a huge disadvantage if they study through an unfamiliar language and not just English. About 30 per cent of children in India study through a language that they need help understanding and they face a huge learning disadvantage. Of course, the most disadvantaged are those who are in an EMI situation, especially in deprived contexts. However, I do think there is an increasing recognition of the need for a multilingual approach to teaching content in different subjects as well as unfamiliar languages. For example, the MultiLiLa Project, led by the University of Cambridge

and the British Council, studied teaching and learning in grades four and five in disadvantaged pockets of Delhi, Patna, and Hyderabad. It was found that teachers resort to using children's languages extensively. Even when the medium of instruction is English, the children also tend to use their more familiar languages. The study showed that children who used their familiar languages performed better than children who studied in an English-only environment. The question is how can such a multilingual approach to teaching English or other subjects can be understood well and implemented at scale. How can teachers use translanguaging practices in a more purposive manner? As I said, many teachers actually either translate or use children's more familiar languages to explain things. But how can such mixed language be used more purposively and systematically, as part of their lesson plans is a big issue. For example, when there is a task that requires higher-order comprehension or children to express their opinions, then a familiar language must be used. It's important to do storytelling and other oral language work in two or more languages, using familiar languages to provide scaffolded input that is comprehensible. Furthermore, there are mindset issues that need to be addressed. Languages should not be taught or learnt in watertight compartments. So, when you are using English, it is fine and good to use the stronger languages of children more strategically.

RC: There are various mainstream ELT research studies, which address many different issues in English language teaching and learning. So, are there any mainstream ELT research studies that address issues related to teachers, learners, curriculum, etc., in low-resource classrooms, sir? Are there any instances of concrete bottom-up initiatives for appropriate methodology for teaching English in challenging situations or difficult circumstances?

DJ: Right. I am not fully aware of all the research that happened in the country, but as mentioned earlier, the MultiLiLa Project was done in low-resource classrooms to understand how familiar and unfamiliar languages are being used inside primary classrooms. They did that in grades four and five, and they have come up with recommendations of how children's familiar languages must find a place in teaching and learning and how mixed language use, whether it is Telugu or Hindi in those towns and cities, can promote better learning of English and other subjects. So there is some research, but I wouldn't say there is enough.

As far as initiatives are concerned, I have come across a few resource organizations and a few NGOs who are working to improve the teaching and learning of English in difficult circumstances. Some of these rightly advocate for English to be only taught as a subject formally from or after grade three. However, I do believe that a much more concerted approach is required throughout the country to explore the strategies of teaching English as a second or third language. Another area is to explore how a teacher works with two or more languages. How does she use children's languages in the classroom to support the learning of English? How can a structured lesson plan be used to support that? Teachers' English language proficiency too needs attention.

MP: What, according to you, are some of the concerns or problems of teacher training, teacher education, and doing research in difficult circumstances? What are some of your suggestions or solutions to overcome these challenges?

DJ: When we meet teachers, those who have joined in the last five to seven years, they seem to be surprised by the diverse situations and the disparity that they find in classrooms. The diversity could be children belonging to various linguistic groups, children from print-poor environments, children who are irregular in classes, and children without prior preschool experience. The teachers haven't been prepared in the pre-service teacher education program, as I mentioned earlier, about this kind of diversity and disparity in classrooms. Pre-service teacher education must prepare teachers for such different contexts throughout the state or in a district. Right now, what I find is that because teachers are coming through an aptitude based teacher eligibility test, many of them are from urban, semi-urban backgrounds and the better off kind of social groups. Hence, they do not have first-hand knowledge of these kinds of classroom contexts. In in-service teacher education, is implemented in a sort of cascade manner where something is decided at the state level and then trainers are trained at the district level and then block and then they train teachers. As a result, the spirit of what is to be transacted is often lost when it reaches the teachers. So, I think we have got to find a solution for this kind of cascade implementation of in-service teacher education in the form of a continuous professional development programme. We should also ensure that there is a better dialogue and consultation with teachers on an ongoing basis. Our in-service teacher education programmes are crowded with a lot of information about

methodology, guidance, strategies for content transaction, and activities around literacy and numeracy. But there's not enough about how you work in real classrooms which are diverse and where there is a great risk of exclusion of children. We need to focus on what to do when children have not seen print and when they are not familiar with the language that's being used in the curriculum/textbooks. We also need to explore the kind of oral language strategies that help such children to acquire another language.

RC: Please tell us about your work and the work your organization is doing to improve the quality of teaching and learning, especially, about the reading pedagogy for early graders.

DJ: Language and Learning Foundation was established in 2015 and our focus is on improving equitable foundational learning at scale. The word 'equitable' is very important so that all children learn and we work through the education system to transform teaching and learning practices across several classrooms. For us, there are a few crucial beliefs. One, that teachers are central to any change that can happen; two, that we will work with the education system and try and strengthen it; three, we will work at scale because the issue of learning and the low learning levels is so huge that we must work at scale and the fourth that is crucial to our work is the inclusion of children's home or most familiar languages, and that is the basis.

Research evidence across the world says reading has two big strands: the first is word recognition which focuses on phonological awareness, decoding, and being able to decode with a high degree of automaticity over time, and the second one is language comprehension which includes vocabulary, verbal reasoning, to be able to understand sentence structures, etc. Our focus has been to ensure that both these strands find emphasis in the early-grade reading classrooms, i.e. literacy classrooms.

MP: It is a great pleasure talking to you, Sir. Thank you very much for your time and the insightful interview.

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