

Multilingualism and the Language Classroom

R. Meganathan

Abstract

This paper attempts to present the different dimensions of multilingualism and multilingual education in diverse Indian contexts. Mother tongue-based multilingualism as the overarching philosophy and goal to 'bring in' the languages of learners into the classroom and accommodating at least three languages (which includes English) is explored in the current contexts. An illustrative activity using 'think aloud protocol' conducted with Class IX learners and experienced teachers informs the natural characteristics of authentic multilingualism in Indian classrooms. Intervention at the policy planning level to classroom pedagogical processes is needed to achieve the holistic multilingualism where languages are taught-learnt in tandem across the stages, particularly during the formative years of learning. Search for a 'multilingual pedagogy' to make use of the languages of learners along with the common language of the classroom and English language appears imminent.

Keywords: Multilingualism, multilingual education, language pedagogy, mother tongue-based multilingualism, three language formula, translanguaging, english language, language hierarchy, language mapping

Multilingualism and its Dimensions

Multilingualism has been and is the buzz word since the 1990s in educational discourses and practices across the globe in varied perspectives even though the understanding of its dimensions is still evolving. This is because multilingualism as a social construct and an educational

policy and practice is highly diverse. Western multilingualism, it can be assumed, is mostly due to colonial effect, as a consequence of the world wars, particularly World War II and migration in the present times. It is more of an urban and professional multilingualism while Indian multilingualism is societal multilingualism i.e., people know/speak more than one language in society for they acquire the languages in social contexts. As Cenoz and Gorter (2013) observes, 'Multilingualism is at the same time an individual and a social phenomenon. It can be considered as an ability of an individual or it can refer to the use of languages in society' (p. 5). The dictionary definition of multilingualism is 'Multilingualism is the presence or use of more than one language in a society for social, cultural, professional and academic functions' (Li, 2008; European Commission, 2007). India's linguistic diversity places the educational landscape highly diversified in terms of language-in-education planning and policy, curriculum and resources, and pedagogical processes. Multilingualism in school education may be perceived in four dimensions: (i) *Multilingualism as the overarching philosophy for school education*, (ii) *Multilingualism as policy*, (iii) *Multilingualism as pedagogy* and (iv) *Multilingualism as resource*.

Multilingualism as the Overarching Philosophy for School Education:

This informs about the centrality of language(s) in learning and the intertwining nature of language and learning. Language is the medium of understanding and learning. Multilingualism also promotes multiculturalism, recognizing the linguistic and cultural diversity of the society and the country.

Multilingualism as a Policy: This addresses the following questions:

(a) How many languages in school? (b) Number of languages to be learnt/studied during the different stages of school education. (c) How can *mother tongue-based multilingualism* be realised in the classroom? Mother tongue-based multilingualism is that all children begin their school education in their mother tongue and move on to add many (at least two) more languages by the time they complete their secondary school—three-language formula as an 'ideal' and 'convenient' strategy for promoting mother tongue(s)/regional language in school education along with the official language, i.e. Hindi and the associate official language, i.e. English.

Multilingualism as Pedagogy: How to make use of the languages of

learners in processes of teaching-learning of languages and content subjects? (Strategies like code switching, code mixing, code meshing (Canagaraja, 2013), Bilingualism, Translanguaging (Garcia, 2009; García and Li, 2015).

Multilingualism as a Resource: Language plays a role in the cognitive development of children and the development of attitudes and values, socialisation and so on. Children make use of the language/knowledge as a resource (say, previous knowledge or abilities, mother tongue/first language) to learn new knowledge/language. Learners use their language repertoire (underlying linguistic abilities in general as also the abilities of the already known language) to learn other aspects of the same language or a new language. Another process is skill transfer from one language/first language to second and other languages. Cummins (2009) lists five types of transfers across languages: transfer of (a) Conceptual Elements/Understanding, (b) Metacognitive and Metalinguistic Strategies, (c) Pragmatic Aspects of Language Use, (d) Specific Linguistic Elements, and (e) Phonological Awareness. This is learning languages through languages/linguistic skills one possesses. When children know/learn more languages their attitudinal development, value development and socialization get enriched. This enables learners to become multi-skilled, emotionally balanced and helps learning the content subjects, language switching and mixed-language-classroom transactions in any classroom setting to be viewed as necessary pedagogic strategies because it supports transfer of knowledge and skills across languages.

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingualism as Additive Bilingualism

As discussed above, mother tongue-based multilingualism is the launching pad for additive multilingualism beginning with the mother tongue/home language/first language/the language in which the child has been socialized and move on to add more languages, at least two more languages under the three-language formula. Therefore, mother tongue-based multilingualism (MTBMLE) is additive multilingualism and three language formula is the strategy to achieve the goal of mother tongue-based multilingualism (Meganathan, 2011; NCERT, 2006a). The National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986 and the curriculum frameworks—1975, 1988, 2000, 2005 and 2023 recommend the implementation of the formula in its true spirit. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 liberates the formula to accommodate all Indian languages for it takes into

consideration 'the Constitutional provision, aspiration of the people, regions and the Union, and the need to promote multilingualism as well as promote national unity'. And the Policy goes on to recommend, 'The three languages learned by children will be the choices of the states, regions, and of course the students themselves, so long as at least two of the three languages are native to India.' (p.14). However, not all children study their mother tongue/home language/the language in which they have been socialized in school neither is their language the medium of instruction in school, particularly in the contexts of tribal and minor languages.

Multilingual Education and the English Language

English language has found its place, over the last three decades or so, as the common second language in school education across the states. This place as the second language has 'happened' as a process of rationalization in the school curriculum, instrumental motivation and for upward mobility. English is the second language for majority of learners as the language is introduced from Class I in all the states and union territories (Meganathan, 2011; and 2015) in formal schooling. It is also a language in pre-school as part of the Foundational Stage in *anganwadis* and (private) nursery schools. However, it is not the second language for quite a section of learners whose mother tongue/first language is tribal or minor languages. In case of tribal, minor language learners the state language is equal to first language or the second language and English language becomes the third language. The complementary and supplementary role of English (NCERT, 2005; 2006) is an illustration of additive multilingualism in every Indian school education situation—be it tribal, minor language situations, urban, rural, English medium or non-English medium situations. What does English language do amongst languages in multilingual education? As the position paper of the national focus group on teaching of English developed as part of the National Curriculum Framework 2005 observes that the 'aims of English language is the creation of multilinguals' Further, 'English does not stand alone. It needs to find its place along with other Indian languages i. *in regional-medium schools*: how can children's other languages strengthen English teaching/learning? ii. *in English-medium schools*: how can other Indian languages be valorized, reducing the perceived hegemony of English?' (NCERT, 2006, pp. 3-4). The developments in language-in-

school education since the National Curriculum Framework 2005 reveal that number of languages included in school education has increased as multilingual education gains momentum at the state level while English as the medium of instruction is on the rise. It would be fitting to say that multilingual pedagogies, i.e. pedagogical processes for multilingual education is evolving to use more than one language for teaching-learning of languages and content subjects. This premise (of multilingual pedagogies) is an imperative to understand that multilingualism and multilingual pedagogies are not teaching languages in isolation, separately which is 'isolated multilingualism'. In majority of Indian situations, teachers practice 'isolated multilingualism' in the name of multilingual education. The elusive question is, 'how do we teach or enable the learner to learn/use more than one language concurrently'? In other words, how can the teaching-learning of languages be done in tandem?

Multilingualism in the Classroom

A language learning activity conducted among the learners of class IX in a low resourced English medium school and also with experienced teachers in Delhi reveals interesting features of the processes of language use (and learning) as adopted by young learners as well as teachers. The same activity was conducted with learners in the classroom and teachers in a training session separately. The activity conducted is known as 'think aloud protocol' processes. Learners are given a non-verbal or verbal input and they, in groups of four or in pairs, have to speak out whatever they think as they do/solve the task. The first set of tasks is the identification of six differences between two pictures, which look the same. This is a common weekly feature in newspapers and magazines in India. The second task is solving a riddle. Learners worked in pair for the second task. The riddle had to be solved by speaking out the thinking process (and language processing) one undergoes as the riddle is solved (The tasks are given at the end of the paper.) The learners/teachers were given the rubrics beforehand so as to work in pairs and the task had to be done by taking turns. They could use any language for speaking out. Three trainers went around and observed the activity. The following were observed:

<i>Sl. No.</i>	<i>Participants Actions</i>	<i>Language(s) Performance</i>
1.	Students started noticing the differences and were not speaking out. Teachers were noticing the differences and were speaking out as they noticed the differences.	Learners: No verbal language performed. Teachers: Performed language, spoke out soon after noticing the first difference.
2.	On the instructions of the trainers/ teacher, the participants took two minutes to 'read' the pictures and the text of the riddle and began to speak out.	Learners spoke in Hindi, English, Punjabi, Tamil, Bhojpuri and Haryanvi. Teachers spoke in Hindi, English, Punjabi, Tamil, Bhojpuri, Rajasthani and Haryanvi.
3.	Task repetition: When the task was repeated and both the participants were asked to speak out in one language only.	Both students and teachers found it difficult to speak (spontaneously) in only one language as they tend to code switch, code mix, rather code meshing.
4.	Task repetition in individual groups: Participants from select pairs were randomly asked to speak out to the whole class.	One of the pairs had to speak. Code switching and code mixing happened with ease.

The performance of learners and teachers in the multilingual tasks above with non-verbal input reveals many a phenomenon of Indian language classrooms. Languages were used freely as per the participants' linguistic repertoire. This goes on to support what Bialystok (2013) and Bialystok et al. (2012) in their assertion observe that 'the cognitive advantages of multilinguals are associated with simultaneous mental activation of multiple languages in the minds of multilinguals even as they attend to a target language and their experience of switching between languages'. It was also noticed what Cummins postulates the 'common underlying proficiency' (CUP) across all languages, facilitating positive transfer across languages (Cummins, 1981, 1984 & 2009). This is because the mother tongue/first language is well developed for effective control over cognitive-academic mental operations, or to the level of what Cummins describes as cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP). As Baker (2006) argues, language attributes are not separated in the cognitive

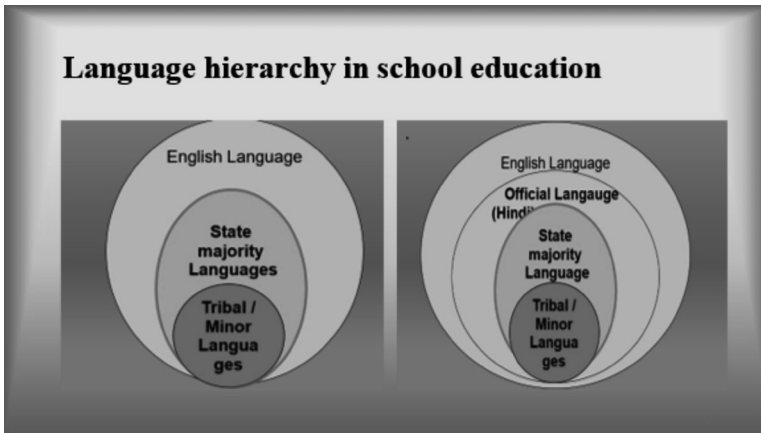
system, but transfer readily and interactively. (Cummins's BICS and CALP and the Iceberg are well known and I don't feel the need to explain here.) This was also underscored by Vygotsky (1962) when he suggested that with acquisition of language children's thinking becomes 'verbal'; language progressively takes over thought processes.

Many research studies in Indian contexts support the benefit of multilingual abilities of learners as a resource and needs to be adopted in the pedagogical process (Agnihotri, 2009; 2014; Mohanty, 2010 & 2013; Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013; Mohanty & Panda, 2015). The evaluative study of Multilingual Education (MLE) in the state of Odisha conducted by NCERT also reveals that the 'MLE programme has a positive impact on students' achievement in language and Mathematics conducted in tribal languages. The significant achievement found in the oral, written and total tests in language and Maths by children of MLE schools is better in comparison to that of non-MLE school children' (NCERT, 2011). A recent study by Lightfoot, Balasubramanian, Tsimplici, Mukhopadhyay & Traffers-Daller (2022) conducted in two different multilingual situations—Hyderabad and New Delhi—brings out the realities of multilingual education in India for it records how teaching practices and language use might interact for the promotion of multilingual learning. This calls for further explorations of classroom pedagogy. There has been a recognition of multilingualism and multilingual education at the policy and curriculum level. Yet the creation of materials, resources and a pedagogy for multilingual education, be it Translanguaging which might like to declare that 'there is no one language as mother tongue' and 'multilingual tongue' is the mother tongue of learners in many a multilingual situations across the world, particularly in India, has not advanced. The need for an eclectic pedagogy which makes use of the languages of learners as the common language of the classroom and the English language for its supplementary and complementary role is a tall order. The following measures may be suggested for achieving multilingual learning at the classroom level.

- 1. Teacher Developed Multilingual Pedagogy:** The teacher is central to the planning of the teaching-learning in the classroom. The teacher's critical language awareness for understanding the language situations in the multilingual milieu of the country and the region along with the knowledge of language pedagogy is essential for a multilingual classroom. The various dimensions

of multilingualism as discussed in the beginning is central/ integral to the critical language awareness as this paves the way for understanding the power equation in language education as shown below. The language hierarchy, as manifested currently could be captured in two different contexts—one with the state majority language (like Maharashtra—Marathi, Tamil Nadu—Tamil, West Bengal—Bangla) and the other is the states with no majority language or many tribal, minor languages (like the north eastern states and states like Jharkhand or select regions in some states). This warrants on the part of the teacher to plan strategies and pedagogical processes for promoting the languages of learners in the classroom. Engagement with more than one language concurrently and exercising the linguistic faculty of learners by providing opportunities to use languages for various purposes would be the kind of pedagogy one expects as part of the multilingual teaching.

Figure 1: Language Hierarchy in Two Indian Contexts



2. **Language Mapping:** Let us agree that ‘making use of the languages of learners’ along with common language of the classroom and the English language is multilingual pedagogy. This pedagogy needs to be understood at different levels from curriculum development to classroom teaching. Teachers and schools need to know about the languages learners speak in their homes, where and with whom they speak the languages. In other words, there is a need to understand the language profiles of learners along with their

socio-economic profiles. Language mapping of the classroom is a requirement for planning the multilingual classroom, resources, pedagogy and assessment. Teachers with the support of parents map the language use through a survey of their learners. 'Who uses, which language(s), with whom, for what purposes and at which places?' is the information which would help in planning for multilingual education and its processes. States like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh have conducted language mapping surveys while planning their curriculum in the recent years.

3. **Doing Away with Medium of Instruction:** With multilingual education and a translanguaging pedagogy as the overarching curriculum and processes for language education in school, the very idea of one language medium would become redundant. It is time that the notion of medium of instruction is diffused and decide the language in which/through which the content subjects will be taught. There are illustrations of such practices in the centrally administered systems, viz. Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS) and Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti (NVS) where some content subjects are taught in English and some are taught in Hindi or in the state language. This reveals the problem in the assumptions by curriculum implementers and teachers on enabling learners to understand and acquire concepts. Social Science is taught in Indian language medium and Science and Mathematics are taught in English medium. This may not be the ideal way of understanding the language needs of learners for understanding and applying concepts. However, teaching in one language as medium would not be conducive for promoting multilingual education in schools. Let teachers and learners use languages as they feel comfortable to interact, understand and argue (for the whole discourse of the classroom) in the classroom. This is essential during the foundational years of learning in tribal and minor language situations. This would also reduce the hegemony of one language medium education.
4. **English Language, its Role and Place in Multilingual Education:** As discussed earlier, English language is the common second language across the country in school education and a language from Class I and even before. The multilingual education programmes and experiments in states like Odisha have proven

that English language finds its place along with the tribal, minor language and state majority language. This synchronizes with the aims of English language education advocated by the position paper on teaching of English (NCERT, 2006b). English language curriculum and educators need to understand this development and address the needs of other languages for realising a holistic multilingual education.

Thus, multilingualism as the overarching philosophy and multilingual education as policy, resource and pedagogy have been evolving in their various dimensions. Innovative pedagogical processes as designed by the (informed) teacher could further the objectives of skill acquisitions and harmonious language development in the learner.

References

- Agnihotri, R.K. (2009). Multilinguality and a new world order. In A.K. Mohanty, M. Panda, R. Phillipson, & T. Skutnabb-Kangas (Eds.), *Multilingual education for social justice: Globalising the local*. Orient BlackSwan, 268-277.
- Agnihotri, R.K. (2014). Multilinguality, education and harmony. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 11(3), 364-379.
- Baker, C. (2006). Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Bialystok, E. (2013). Impact of bilingualism on language and literacy development. In T.K. Bhatia and W.C. Ritchie (Eds.), *Handbook of bilingualism and multilingualism* (2nd edn). Wiley-Blackwell, 624-648.
- Bialystok, E., Craik, F.I.M., & Luk, G. (2012). Bilingualism: Consequences for mind and brain. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 16(4), 240-250.
- Canagarajah, S. (2013). *Translingual practice: Global Englishes and cosmopolitan relations*. Routledge.
- Cenoz, J., & Gorter, D. (2013) Towards a plurilingual approach in English language teaching: Softening the boundaries between languages. *Tesol Quarterly*, 47(3), September 2013.
- Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success of language minority students. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), *Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework*. California State University, 3-49.
- Cummins, J. (1984). *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy*. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Cummins, J. (2009). Fundamental psychological and sociological principles underlying educational success for linguistic minority students. In A.K. Mohanty, M. Panda, R. Phillipson, and T. Skutnabb-Kangas (Eds.),

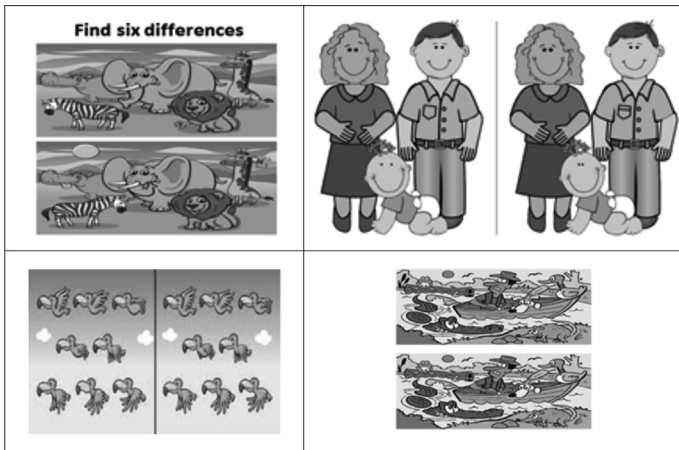
- Multilingual education for social justice: Globalising the local*. Orient BlackSwan, 21-35.
- European Commission (2007). Final report: High level group on multilingualism, Luxembourg: European Communities. Retrieved from <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news/high-level-group-multilingualism-final-report>
- García, O. (2009). *Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- García, O., & Li, Wei (2015). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education* (1st ed.). Palgrave Pivot. doi:10.1057/9781137385765. ISBN 9781137385765.
- Government of India (2023). National curriculum framework for school education. New Delhi. <https://www.education.gov.in/national-curriculum-framework-school-education>
- Government of India (2020). National Education Policy. New Delhi. Retrieved from https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English
- Government of India (1986) National Policy on Education -1986. New Delhi.
- Li, W. (2008). Research perspective on bilingualism and multilingualism. In W. Li & M. Moyer (Eds.) *The Blackwell Handbook of Research methods on bilingualism and multilingualism* (pp. 3-17). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.
- Lightfoot, A., Balasubramanian, A., Tsimpli, I., Mukhopadhyay, L. & Treffers-Daller, J. (2022). Measuring the multilingual reality: lessons from classrooms in Delhi and Hyderabad. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, Vol. 25, No. 6, 2208–2228 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050>.
- Meganathan, R. (2015). English language education situation in India: Pedagogical perspectives. *Journal of English as an International Language*, Vol. 10, Issue 1, pp. 48-66.
- Meganathan, R. (2011) Language policy in education and the role of English in India: From library language to language of empowerment. In Hywel Coleman (Ed.), *Dreams and realities: Developing countries and the English language*. British Council. ISBN 978-086355-659-3
- Mohanty, A.K. (2010). Language, inequality and marginalisation: Implications of the double divide in Indian multilingualism. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 205, 131-154.
- Mohanty, A.K. (2013). *Multilingual education in multiple language classrooms in Odisha (A strategy note)*. Care India.
- Mohanty, A. and Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2013). MLE as an economic equaliser in India and Nepal: Mother tongue-based multilingual education fights poverty through capability development and identity support. In K. Henrard (Ed.) *The interrelation between the right to identity of minorities and their socio-economic participation*. Studies in International Minority and Group Rights (Vol. 2). Brill/Martinus Nijhoff.

- Mohanty, A. and Panda, M. (2015). Language-in-education policy and practice in India: Experiments on multilingual education for tribal children. In A. Yiakoumetti (Ed.), *Multilingualism and language in education: Sociolinguistic and pedagogical perspectives from Commonwealth countries* (pp. 49-66). Cambridge University Press.
- NCERT. (2011). *Programme evaluation report: Multilingual education programme in Orissa*. NCERT and SSA–Technical Cooperation Fund.
- NCERT. (2005). *National curriculum framework*.
- NCERT. (2006a). *Position paper of the national focus group on teaching of Indian languages*.
- NCERT. (2006b) *National focus group position paper on teaching of English*.
- NCERT. (2000). *National curriculum framework for school education*.
- NCERT. (1988). *National curriculum for elementary and secondary education: A framework*. NCERT
- NCERT. (1975). *A curriculum for ten-year school: A framework*. NCERT.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1962). *Thought and language*. MIT Press.

Annexure 1

Think Aloud Protocol Activity 1

In groups of four find the six differences between the two pictures. Please speak out as you think.



Source: Pictures taken from sources which are copyright free and free to use for non-commercial purposes.

Think Aloud Protocol Activity 2

Here is a riddle. In pairs read out the riddle and solve the same. Speak out as you think.

She-Goat, Wolf and Cabbage



Source: Picture taken from Creative Commons <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>

A farmer is returning from the market, where he bought a she-goat, a cabbage and a wolf (what a crazy market!). On the way home he has to cross a river. His boat is small and won't accommodate more than one of his purchases. He cannot leave the she-goat alone with the cabbage (because the she-goat would eat it), nor can he leave the she-goat alone with the wolf (because the she-goat would be eaten). How can the farmer get everything on the other side of the river intact? Solve the puzzle.

Ramanujam Meganathan is Professor of English (Language Education) in the Department of Education in Languages, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi. He is interested in language and learning, teacher professional development, English language education, curriculum and materials development.

rama_meganathan@yahoo.com