

Protecting linguistic identity or promoting social mobility? The position of English in India's schools

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Introduction

This brief note discusses the two seemingly intransigent approaches to the role of English in the Indian education system, which shape the 'instrumentality vs. identity' debate in language policy research. While the 'instrumentality' approach argues for English-medium instruction for all, the 'identity' approach argues that English-medium instruction leads to cultural alienation of school-children and proposes mother tongue based multilingual education as the alternative.

English as an 'agent of decolonisation'?

The position of English in the Indian linguistic situation has always been problematic because of its colonial association, especially in the context of Macaulay's (1835) education policy that planned to 'form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, – a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect'. Such an ideological stance has led Phillipson (1992) to describe the British language policy during colonial rule as 'linguicism'. However, recent developments in language policy research, represented by scholars such as Vaish (2005) and Weber (2014), have brought forth counter-arguments to the linguicism narrative by portraying English as a 'language of decolonisation'. Vaish (2005) disagrees with sociolinguists who posit that English endangers local languages and perpetuates inequality, and argues that English is 'an agent of decolonisation' that enables the urban poor to access the global economy.

Multilingual education and varied 'mother tongues'

Mother tongue based multilingual education which has been promoted by scholars such as Mohanty (2009) as the alternative to English-medium education is not an easy task to achieve because of two main problems. First, there is a large amount of linguistic variation in India which makes it difficult to define what a 'mother tongue' constitutes. If we take the case of Hindi, we observe that the form of Hindi taught in schools as the standard may differ to smaller or a greater extent from its other varieties such as Bhojpuri, Chhatisgarhi, Garhwali, Kangri, Marwari, or Magahi. The Census of India (2001) lists as many as 49 'languages' or 'mother

tongues’ which are grouped as varieties of Hindi. Moreover, there may be a great variation even within these local varieties of Hindi. For example, the form of Magahi spoken in Patna is not same as the form spoken in the Nalanda district of Bihar. Such variation poses a huge challenge for policymakers because they have to decide which ‘mother tongues’ will be taught in schools, and such decisions could lead to political controversies. Second, the ideology of standardisation causes an impediment to educational attainment of the speakers of marginalised varieties. Khubchandani (2003: 245) posits that the acquisition of standardised languages (such as Hindi, Urdu, Panjabi, Marathi, Tamil) is ‘more like learning a second language’ for speakers of marginalised varieties and claims further that ‘this tyranny has a telling effect on mass literacy programmes’. For example, Barooah et al. (2015: 150) note that ‘in Orissa, tribal pupils who spoke their own dialect were handicapped by the fact that they were taught in Odiya, the state’s official language and medium of instruction’.

Social justice as the key objective

There is no doubt that English-medium education can help some learners achieve social mobility. However, to describe it as an agent of decolonisation is a misplaced claim because decolonisation concerns not only the economy, but also the intellectual and emotional spheres, and as Skutnabb-Kangas et al. (2009) argue, English-medium education could alienate learners from their culture. Second, English is not the only barrier in the Indian education system. Languages such as Hindi or Oriya which are dominant at the regional level can also impede educational attainment. The standard language ideology could be a threat to a large number of varieties generally described as the ‘dialects’ of a certain language. Mother tongue based multilingual education seems to a viable solution, but the huge linguistic variation makes it difficult to define what a ‘mother tongue’ is. The main challenge for the policymakers is to devise policies that are more inclusive because the greater goal of educational policies is to achieve social justice. As Khubchandani (2003: 251) proposes, ‘when dealing with plural societies, we would do well to realize the risks involved in *uniform* solutions’, as ‘the overall guiding spirit should be to create a language environment which meets the demands of social justice, bearing in mind the specific needs of minority cultures’.

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