

Medium of Instruction debate: Mother tongue vs English

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Abstract

This study discusses arguments of educationists, policy makers and linguists for selecting a medium of instruction in education. Several education policies introduced in India post-independence have presented their valuable recommendations but these recommendations and their implementations could not bring the mother tongue vs English medium education debate to its conclusion. This paper discusses arguments in favour of mother tongue education as well as in favour of English medium education.

Keywords: *MOI, Medium of instruction, mother tongue, English medium education, language policy, MOI debate, Hindi medium school.*

Introduction :-

The question of selecting a language as MOI in schools always remains a matter of debate. Given the diverse cultural heritage of the country, the policy makers never suggested a single language but more than a language to study. However, for mode of instruction, students can't indulge with multiple languages at a time. Furthermore, it is not possible to adapt a single language for the whole nation. Hence, there is an obvious pattern in educational policies to shift from English to mother tongue education. For the first time, the Secondary Education Commission (1952-53) recommended the use of mother tongue/ regional language as medium of secondary education. University Education Commission (1948-49) recommended to teach three languages i.e. Regional language; federal language and English at higher secondary and university levels. Kothari Commission or Education Commission (1964-1966) analysed the issue and recommended three language formulas. Yet the debate for mode of instruction could not get a concluding remark in more than 60 years, even worsening decades after decades.

In defence of the English medium

Increasing number of English medium schools and parents' preference to select such schools go in favour of English as a mode of instruction. "The craze for English has become so great that it is virtually impossible to discard it. This is not only because a good number of advantages accrue from it, but equally because it has been associated with us for a long time" (Sundaram, 1976, p. 23). English worked as a link language for people from varied states speaking different languages. Gandhiji appreciated the language, "The rich English language will ever retain its natural place as the international speech of commerce and diplomacy" (Gandhi, 1965, p. 169). Not only within the country but also worldwide English has its unique place. In the words of Crystal, "English is now the language of international communication, the language of business, the language of science, and the language of the internet. It is the language that people from all over the world use to communicate with each other. If you want to participate in the global economy and culture, you need to be able to use English effectively" (Crystal, 2002, p. 15).

Shifting from English medium to regional language produces a number of problems for the learner. The foremost issue is with translation. In a limited time and with limited resources it will be tough enough to translate content in several regional languages.

The translation of books from English to the relevant regional languages is not only a time-consuming process, but also involves a lot of expenditure. There will be a lot of delay in supplying books in regional languages and in the meantime, some books may altogether become out of date and the students are the worst sufferers (Sundaram, 1976, p. 24).

It gets more challenging with higher education as it is like a doorway to the world and not limited to a particular region. “A campaign against English in the field of higher education can only be a campaign against higher education itself.” Dr. K. R. Srinivas Iyengar is quoted by Sundaram. (Sundaram, 1976, p. 20).

Next issue is with research work in universities. Research has a purpose of adding to the store of world’s knowledge, and the purpose is conveniently served through English. Loads of contents for study are easily available in English, a library language which is not the case with various regional languages. In the words of Sundaram (1976),

... Research is well-nigh impossible if we belittle the importance of English in higher education... There are a good number of professors in various universities whose mother tongue is different from the regional language, and if the latter becomes the medium, they will not find a place in their universities. It is no good to do away so many professors with rich experience and outstanding research work (p. 27).

Sundaram (1976) further said, “If the medium differs from one university to another, it is virtually impossible for students to move from one university to another” (p. 28). English as a link language serves the purpose. It is further than the geographical boundaries either within the country or outside the country.

On the issue of a common medium of instruction in our universities, the report of Kothari commission expresses,

We are inclined to think, on a balance of considerations, that this solution is not feasible. In practice, it will probably mean the indefinite continuance of English as the only medium of higher education, a development that we cannot support in the larger interests of the country (GOI, 1966, p. 20).

Being a link language and global language English is also considered a tool for national unity. “No Indian language can take its role in that capacity” (Sundaram, 1976, p. 29). It is never easy to understand and comprehend another's mother tongue, especially when a speaker of north Indian languages like Hindi, Punjabi, Bhojpuri etc. talks to a person who has a south Indian language like Tamil, Malayalam etc. as a mother tongue.

In defence of the mother tongue medium

Several challenges faced while learning by a mother tongue medium student, can’t diminish the value of learning through his/her own language. It may be well elucidated in fundamental principles of learning-

- 1- Learning takes place with maximum effectiveness when it is conducted through the language best understood by the learner.

2- Learning is effective in proportion to the learner's competency in the language in which the sources of learning are available.

3- Learning conducted through a particular language can be effective only to the extent to which the language is a competent instrument for the communication of the contents of learning" (Ramanathan, 1965, p. 82).

As per the first principle, one learns best in one's own language, the mother tongue. The principle sets the ground to modify the medium from English to regional language. "If effective learning is to be ensured, and there is no doubt that this is the foremost pedagogic goal – the medium of instruction, from the point of view of the psychology of learning, must be the mother tongue in the case of the vast majority of students" (Sundaram, 1976, p. 39).

The second principle of learning given by Ramanathan is further investigated by Sundaram (1976) for English medium instruction, "It states that the learner should possess a good command over the language of learning. But it is abundantly clear that the students have a poor competency in English" (p. 39). Hence, the second principle itself provides an argument against English medium education.

Coming to the third principle which demands language of learning to be an effective tool for communication. Here, we need to understand the difference between the source of learning and the instrument of learning. Sundaram presented the example of Sanskrit language, "Sanskrit contains great treasure of knowledge and hence a good source of learning. But Sanskrit was never an instrument of learning that is a medium through which knowledge can be communicated" (Sundaram, 1976, p. 40).

A foreign language medium of learning lacks originality in thinking. Whereas learning through the regional language provides a chance to best express his/her emotions and thoughts. As an educationist remarks, "No education is effective unless the student, at some stage, emerges from the need for instruction into a capacity for self- instruction and discovery"(John, 1969, p. 35). For learning in a foreign language, students pay a cost about what R. S. Trivedi, Principal of Ripon College, Calcutta talked in 1917, "There has been a cost, a cost as regards culture, a cost as regards respect for self and reverence for others, a cost as regards the nobility and dignity of life"(Trivedi, 1917, as cited in Sundaram, 1976, p. 43).

Ramanujan through his essay 'The Mother tongue' explained how language is not just a way to communicate but to identify oneself with one's culture, region, class and language. "The mother tongue is not just a vehicle of communication; it is also a storehouse of culture and values. It is the language in which we first learn to think and to feel. It is the language in which we first experience the world around us. It is the language in which we first develop our sense of identity" (Ramanujan, 1991, p. 11). The students fail to understand or appreciate their own literature and culture unless they are educated in their mother tongue. Although we are already facing the dearth of varied books and sources in regional language, this strategy will increase the drought. Some of the educationists also see the English medium of instruction as an originator of the gulf between classes and masses. As said by Humayun Kabir,

The increasing pre- occupation with English tended to create a gulf between the newly educated classes and the rest of the people; who had received modern education were often alienated from their ancient traditions and at times became frankly contemptuous of it. This

weakened the strength of the social fabric and showed itself in various undesirable stresses within the Indian community. The gulf between town and village is only one manifestation of this tendency towards fragmentation” (Kabir, 1945, p. 125-126).

A mother tongue may create interest among students in classes. While a less familiar language becomes a factor for dropouts. “The use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction has been shown to improve learning outcomes in a number of studies. Children who are taught in their mother tongue tend to score higher on standardized tests, they are more likely to stay in school, and they are more likely to succeed in later life” (Mohanty, 2007, p. 127). The similar opinion was earlier presented by Pattanayak when he calls the mother tongue as language of heart. “The mother tongue is the language of the heart. It is the language that we feel most comfortable with. It is the language that we can use to express ourselves most fully. It is the language that we can use to learn most effectively” (Pattanayak, 1990, p. 10)

Constitutional provisions like Article 343, Article 350, Article 29 and Article 30 provide a safeguard to Indian languages. But mere constituting provisions and laws can't be sufficient in this regard, if the challenges of mother tongue medium instruction are not addressed. The dearth of availability of study material in regional languages is one of the major challenges which need to be addressed and resolved. Production of books and articles may create an attraction for the language among scholars. An increased number of scholars in regional languages increases the chance of producing content in regional languages, vice versa.

Conclusion

On one hand we approve “Children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those for whom school starts with a new language” (Daniel, September, 2003, Para. 2). Likewise, education commissions and their policies pleaded for providing Education in mother tongue, precisely at primary level. On the other hand, we can't repudiate reports of the various surveys which establish an increase of private schools following English as their mode of instruction. As per the report of National University for Education Planning and Administration (NUEPA), a maximum of Indian parents prefer to educate their children in English medium schools. During 2003-06 enrolment in English medium schools has increased up to 74% while in the case of Hindi medium schools it was up to 24% only. This rise in students' enrolment at English medium schools was mainly in southern states (Saxena, 2009, pp. 39-40). Some children may find it easier to learn in a language that is not their mother tongue, especially if they are exposed to it from an early age. The availability of mother tongue schools is limited in some parts of India. The arguments in favour of the English medium of instruction as well as arguments in favour of the mother tongue may help us to have a better understanding of the issue. Some additional points one needs to consider like the quality of the teaching in the school following any of the modes of instruction while preferring a school.

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