# Multilingualism: A Half-hearted Practice

Tanuja Rana[*]

*Student, School of Education, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, India*
*Corresponding author: ranatanuja.33@gmail.com

*Abstract*: **Multilingualism is the use of more than one language by an individual or a community thereby creating an environment where every person feels secure and accepted and no one is left behind on account of his/her linguistic background. Schools should be the platform for children where they can express themselves freely in any language, where no language is violable, standards are not supposed to be maintained and where purity isn't the goal. Creating such an environment for teaching and learning should be the aim of Education to make our children socially sensitive and cognitively insightful.**

**This study explores the practice of multilingualism in three different types of schools of Delhi. It investigates the disparities amongst various languages. Further, it attempts to understand teachers' perspectives and their challenges towards the practice of multilingualism. It compares the data from three schools to show how at different levels and in different settings, multilingualism is present.**

*Keywords*: **Home language, Language curriculum, Multilingualism.**

## 1. Introduction

Language is a social practice. It does not only express identity but also constructs them. We live in a country which is rich in terms of language because of its diversity in region, religion, caste and culture. That is why identity is central to the diverse social, historical, and cultural contexts in which language learning takes place; it deals with how speakers negotiate or resist various positions offered by their contexts. Multilingualism hence is a key to break down language barriers as it creates a space for an individual to speak his/her language in a non-cognitive loaded condition. As the concept suggests, there is more than one language, but a question arises here; are all these languages given equal status around the globe? If not, then which languages have been designated superior than others and on what basis have they been prioritized? Who is responsible for this unequal attribution? Language difference is influencing the school education as well and multilingualism needs to interfere in between as languages associated with power are exploiting other languages spoken by the underprivileged. For example, English being a global language

has perpetuated a gulf which seems to be increasing day by day with the modernization and westernization. We know that schools are major targets of globalization and have a tendency to promote the differences among languages in terms of ranking associated with power.

Through this study an attempt is being made to bring forward teachers' voices and explore through their perspectives the sense of superiority bestowed upon the language which school owns and wants to transmit to its students.

## 2. Objectives

To explore the practice of multilingualism in schools, following attempts have been made:
1. Observing the presence of multilingualism in schools.
2. Exploring the disparities amongst different languages in schools.
3. Understanding teachers' perspectives and challenges towards the practice of multilingualism.

## 3. Methodology

This study has been conducted in a comparative manner between three different types of schools. It is descriptive and qualitative in nature so as to build a deeper understanding of the perspective of teachers towards the usage of languages in their schools and the acceptance of various languages in the school premises. Furthermore, in order to gain an insight into the experiences of these teachers a Non-Participant Observation along with Semi- Structured Interviews and extensive Field Notes have been used as tools.

## 4. Tools

Following tools have been used for the research.
1. Semi -structured Interview.
2. Non-Participant Observation.

## 5. Sampling

To achieve the objectives, the Purposive Sampling technique

Table 1
Findings

| Criteria | S1 | S2 | S3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Variety of languages present in school | Hindi, English, Bhojpuri, Bihari, Haryanvi, Rajasthani, Punjabi | English, Hindi, French | English, Hindi, Punjabi |
| Exposure of various languages provided by schools | Hindi, English | English, Hindi | English, Hindi, Punjabi |
| Comfort of students in speaking languages | Hindi | English, Hindi | English, Hindi |
| Students teacher interaction | Use only Hindi to interact | Only English | English, Hindi |

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is used. Participants from three different types of schools were used to compare the data. The sample schools are cited as S1, S2 and S3 to maintain the confidentiality towards protecting the identity of the respondents and schools.

*A. Teachers' attitude towards using home language in School*

All these three schools were discouraging the use of home languages in the school premises, though their reasons were slightly different from each other's. In S1, Teachers' attitude was such that they have the responsibility of civilizing the children who come from rural backgrounds and speak savage languages. One of the teachers during interview said that "अलग अलग क्षेत्रों से आते हैं बच्चे पर हम यहाँ इन्हें हिंदी सिखाते हैं, कई बार बोलने में ये बोल जाते हैं अपनी भाषा, फिर हम इन को सुधरवाते हैं" the underlined word here shows that teachers have this notion in their minds that the native languages of children are somewhat backward and they need to "correct" them which implies that they don't accept this language. hence, consider it as improper and underdeveloped.

In S2 teachers had an attitude of helplessness, that being language teachers in an international school obliges them to carry forward only global language as it is predominant in the market and this is what they have been hired for, so they don't see the scope of welcoming each and every native language of children in the classroom. One of the teachers shared her experience and said "I can't allow children to use different languages in my class, children can use their home languages at their homes but since this is an English-speaking school, I can't help it."

In S3 as well, discouragement for home languages was seen though teachers were supportive here as they were giving children space to use their own language and then slowly get comfortable with English Language but here by the words 'own language' teachers meant Hindi language only as they told me that they don't usually have children who speak languages other than Hindi in school. So, they help students to switch from Hindi to English by providing them proper space, time and exposure as one of the teachers said "I mostly discourage the use of home language but I sometimes allow them to speak home language if they are facing too much difficulty in using English."

*B. Teacher's struggles*

On interacting with teachers, several issues emerged out of their experiences that they shared, these issues act as obstacles in the practice of multilingualism. In S1 school teachers shared the problems regarding unavailability of textbooks in different languages and their incapability to understand children's native languages as they shared their point of views "अलग अलग भाषा के हिसाब से हम अलग अलग किताबें तो नहीं ला सकते ना अब", "हम उनकी भाषा जानते भी नहीं हैं तो उसमें पढ़ा कैसे पाएंगे" from these two sentences one can see the helplessness of teachers of not knowing different languages and not having enough resources to supplement their understanding and practice of multilingualism. Also, I saw little hope of willingness from teachers' side as well to have multilingualism in school. Whereas teachers from school S2 showed an attitude of giving up on the situation as being an international school they have to teach and continue in English only. Except the three languages offered by the school there is no place for any other language as one of the teachers stopped the discussion by quoting "School demands English".

Now the third school S3 raised two major issues of today's modern era. One of the teachers quoted that "Even if we want to provide space for home languages, ultimately we need to prepare children for global means". From this statement I can see that there is a pressure on schools for preparing children for global languages. The other teacher added that "there are expectations of parents for teaching English and being a private school, we are compelled to cater to their wishes." This conversation and responses from the private school teachers indicate a complete wish-cycle between parents, schools and children. Due to today's increasing demand of English language, parents want to send their children to English-speaking schools and private schools are competing with each other for being excellent and English language is one of the means to attract parents. Education almost feels like a marketing business now. And with that objective in mind schools are becoming global, international and English speaking. Hence, the pressure is on teachers and students to create an atmosphere conducive to English language in the school. One of the teachers added here that "now even parents don't want their children to be taught in their home languages". That's how this wish-cycle is working in the sector of Education and nobody needs home language in this particular setting. Do these settings really need multilingualism?

## 6. Reflection

- *Presence of bilingualism in place of multilingualism:* In these three schools only two languages were dominant among Hindi, English, French/Punjabi. Not much scope for other languages could be witnessed in official means.
- *Hidden curriculum:*
  a) *Hierarchy among languages:* a hierarchy is present amongst the languages. English being the most spoken language is at the top of this hierarchy. It is also a symbol of high status for some teachers. Hindi being the most commonly spoken language in North India scores second position in this list, which is still seen to be accepted in the school premises. On the other hand, any native language scored lowest position here somewhat due to notions of teachers. It is also considered as the language of backward sections or savages.
  b) *Promotion of school's ideology:* If we take the example of S3 then since this school was founded by a Sikh Family, therefore 'Punjabi language' is being directly imposed on students as a third

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language.

- *Children's inferiority complex towards their own native language:* Children were initially hesitating to talk about their native languages. One of the reasons might be a stranger intruding their space but the other reason that was visible on their faces was that language is something personal and they were shy to share about it. Later on, once they got comfortable, few children shared that they hesitate to speak about their language because no one understands them here, some people make faces after hearing them or complain to the teachers. All these factors contributed in building that inferiority complex regarding their native language in them.

- *Teachers were not equipped with resources or strategies for supporting multilingualism:* Few teachers were willing to make their classroom situation a better one with respect to multilingualism but they showed their helplessness in terms of resources, training, tricks, strategies etc. Even if they want to do something for it, they could not because of the lack of support from school or higher bodies.

## 7. Conclusion

This study pushes one to think deeply about the language hierarchy and the power play in the society. Children today are discouraged by the schools that use their native languages. They are made to believe that their native language is inferior to the languages spoken at school.

Document NCF,2005 suggests that "Multilingualism must be used as a resource, classroom strategy and a goal by a creative language teacher. This is not only the best use of a resource readily available, but also a way of ensuring that every child feels secure and accepted, and that no one is left behind on account of his/her linguistic background". (p. 36) However on looking into Indian school system, we can ascertain that it almost seems like an improbable goal. The statement referred here is well thought and guided with ideal intentions but on ground level the experiences of children with schools tell a different story. So, for us it is almost an illusion because the concept is there according to the guidelines and constitution but it's nowhere in practice. Or we can say Multilingualism is a half-hearted practice in Indian schools.

## 8. Implications

This study is quite meaningful and helpful in understanding the status of practicality of multilingualism in schools. It will help in further preparation of the curriculum, syllabi, textbooks and classroom transaction planning. It will play a significant role for educators, linguists and our policy makers in planning, designing and executing educational programs for the inclusion of various language speakers. Also, it puts forward the challenges faced by the teachers and their perspectives for effective practice of multilingualism.

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