

THE CONUNDRUM OF THE MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION: THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE STAKEHOLDERS

Manisha Kumari, Assistant Professor, AIBAS, Amity University, Noida, Uttar Pradesh

Dr. Mitanjali Sahoo, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Teacher Education, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya

Abstract

This research paper studied the perspectives of the stakeholders (teachers, students, and parents) regarding the use of regional language as the medium of instruction in the Indian higher education through qualitative research. Formal and informal interview and focus group discussion was used to collect data from sixty (60) participants (20 students, 20 teachers, and 20 parents). The findings reveal that English language is the most preferred medium of instruction at the higher education level.

Keywords:

Higher education, regional language, medium of instruction, perception of stakeholders

Introduction

Language is an innate gift to mankind through which they can express themselves. It is a tool which differentiates human beings from other creatures. Language plays a vital role in learning, as Meganathan (2019), has put forth in his book “Language Across the Curriculum” that both language and learning are interlaced together. Therefore, language is the instrument of learning (Meganathan, 2022). Language defines a population, a culture, or a community. India being a pluricultural and plurilingual country is home to 22 scheduled and 99 non-scheduled languages according to the 2011 census (Language Atlas, census, 2011, GoI). As per the Linguistic Diversity Index published by UNESCO in 2009, India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world (Lightfoot et al., 2021). The 2011 census reports that there are 270 identifiable mother tongues in India (NDTV, July 2018). The mother tongue according to the census 2011 is a language spoken by more than 10,000 people. The mother tongue has always been a matter of social and political debate in Indian society due to social, emotional and political reasons. The debate over the mother tongue dates back to colonial times when Lord Macaulay’s English medium education policy was opposed by a section of Indian nationalists who were in favour of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Though there is a tried and tested language policy for the school education system, the higher education system lacks a strong and linguistically-inclusive language policy. Groff (2016), highlighted that Indian higher education policies have been greatly influenced and inspired by the colonial history of the country. English is the dominant language in higher education. New Education Policy 2020 recommends that regional languages should be used as the medium of instruction in higher education based on the argument that it would reduce dropout rates due to language barriers and help students in better comprehension (GoI, 2020). This paper examines the perspectives of various stakeholders regarding regional language as the medium of instruction in higher education. The paper also discusses the practical solution for the medium of instruction in a linguistically diverse and complex nation like India.

The Conundrum of the Medium of Instruction

T.B. Macaulay’s ‘*Minute*’ (February 02, 1835) which advocated for English as the medium of instruction denouncing the Indian languages and literature and mother tongue-based education in British India (Ramanathan, 2007) is perhaps one of the landmarks of the linguistic controversy in India. Ghosh (1995), explains that Sir T.B. Macaulay is the one who officially introduced English education in India. Ramanathan (2007), further reports that there always has been a dispute or debate over the media of instruction in the Indian school education system and beyond. As years passed by, this debate over the language or the medium of instruction has grown intense. Meganathan (2022), further explains that the language policy in India is the product of the political and social controversy over the mother

tongue or the regional language medium of instruction. Language planning is not an easy task in India because of the underlying complexities and politics. This paper deals with the medium of instruction in Indian higher education where a well-framed and planned language policy is completely absent and the new recommendations (as per NEP 2020) to use regional language as the medium of instruction have complicated the matter to a new height.

Research Question

RQ. What are the perceptions of teachers, students, and parents regarding the use of regional language as the medium of instruction at the higher education level?

Methodology

This study follows qualitative method to investigate the perception of various stakeholders on the use of regional language as the medium of instruction in higher education.

Sampling

The snowball sampling method was chosen to select the samples from the population. All the students studying in general degree courses (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and professional degree courses like engineering, medical and management studies affiliated to colleges under the University of Calcutta, their parents and all the teachers teaching in colleges affiliated with the University of Calcutta constitute the population of this study. Using the snowball sampling technique, 20 samples each from the three stakeholders i.e., students, parents and teachers were selected to collect data. All the samples belonged to the Hooghly district of West Bengal.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected through formal and informal interviews and focus group discussions. Interview schedules for all three stakeholders were prepared and evaluated by experts from the field of language. After that, the researcher interviewed the stakeholders in a face-to-face mode based on the items given in the interview schedule. Then a focus group discussion was held with the students in order to study their perception regarding the use of regional language as the medium of instruction in higher education. The collected data was analyzed through discourse analysis by systematically organizing and analyzing the data.

Findings

Perception of Teachers

During the interview session when asked about the medium of instruction in higher education, most of the teachers were opposed to the idea of having regional language as the medium of instruction in higher education. They said that for a country like India, it is impossible to have everyone's linguistic demands fulfilled because every classroom in India, right from pre-primary to higher education level is multilingual. The teachers opined that the present policy regarding the medium of instruction in higher education is not an ideal one but still seems to be an ideal one in view of the linguistic divide in India. The majority of the teachers agreed that students coming from vernacular/ mother tongue or regional medium face a lot of language problems when they have to study everything in English but their problems won't be solved by changing the medium of instruction. The majority of the participant teachers suggested using regional language as a support to the English language.

One teacher who taught at the postgraduate level completely opposed the idea of using regional language as the medium of instruction in higher education, she said that language is only being politicised for the vote bank. She remarked, 'this policy is not pro-development. All the good teaching materials are available in the English language, even if they are translated with precision, they won't have that aura as the original text has'. She further commented that '*English is no more a foreign language in India. It has played a great role in transforming India into one of the fastest growing economies of the world*'. And indeed, she is correct.

Another teacher who taught in a reputed engineering college emphasized that if regional language is the medium of instruction in higher education, then how will a teacher from Bengal teach in a college in Chennai? He objected to the whole idea of shifting the English language medium of instruction to a regional medium of instruction, he further emphasized that it would further divide the country and strengthen the linguistic divide.

Therefore, it can be safely concluded that teachers teaching at the higher education level strongly oppose the idea of regional language as the medium of instruction.

Perception of Students

It is very important to study the perceptions of students because they are the ones whose voices really matter in educational policy planning and framing. Out of 20 students who were interviewed informally and participated in focus group discussion, 7 were such who have done their schooling from the regional/ mother tongue/ vernacular medium of instruction (4 from Hindi medium and 3 from Bengali medium). 13 students attended English medium school. When asked about their preferred medium of instruction in higher education, 7 students who studied in regional/ mother tongue/ vernacular medium of instruction, confessed that they are more comfortable in their mother tongue as the medium of instruction. It takes a lot of time to comprehend English textbooks, they feel demotivated when the teacher teaches in English. These students had English as their second language in school. They stressed the fact that though English makes them uncomfortable, they desire to acquire proficiency in the language because every government competitive exam has questions in the English language, they find it difficult to understand instructions or fill up exam forms online because they all are in English. One postgraduate student remarked that even after 3 attempts he failed to qualify for the Staff Selection Exam because he doesn't understand the questions in English and the Hindi version has very difficult terms which are incomprehensible to him. Another fourth-semester postgraduate student confessed that her sister has qualified for National Eligibility Exam (NET) conducted by UGC in her first attempt but she fails to qualify for Junior Research Fellowship (JRF) even after several attempts because of the language issue. They said that the English language has better prospects when it comes to employment, so regional language as the medium of instruction is not a very good idea. The other 13 students who had English medium schooling, also rejected the idea of studying in the regional medium of instruction. The common question posed by the students was, *'how will a student from north or east cope in a college in south India where he/she would be taught in Kannada, Tamil or Malayalam?'* They said that it would deprive a student of quality education, and language would become a hindrance.

One student from the B.Ed course informed that during a placement drive in their college, only those students were selected who had excellent communication skill in English. She herself felt dubious about her placement in a good school because of her poor English language skills.

Perception of Parents

The parents seemed to have a mixed reaction on the issue of regional language as the medium of instruction in higher education. Some parents said that it is indeed a good move because it would give them the opportunity to be a part of their children's education while some parents shared the same opinions as the teachers. One parent called the whole idea as 'politically motivated propaganda' to even deprive this generation of elite jobs offered by reputed multi-national companies. Majority of the parents seemed to unwelcome the idea. They suggested that in universities and colleges, English should be the official medium of instruction and the regional language should be used only to explain such concepts which students fail to understand in English. Parents even stressed that teachers should teach more in English and motivate students to communicate in English because 'poor English language skills affect the chances of getting a good job'.

Discussion

From the above findings, it can be inferred that the issue of employment is a cause of concern for all the stakeholders. In India, English language is aspired by many since it is considered as the language

of the 'workplace'. People are under the impression that the skill of English language is essential for better career prospects. Teachers, students and parents- each of the participants backed the English medium instruction at higher education level. There are two main reasons concerning their choice --- firstly, because of the plurilingual nature of Indian society having varied mother tongues and secondly, because of the status and acceptance of English language globally.

This paper focuses on the use of regional language as the medium of instruction in higher education, so the discussion would be mainly focused on the higher education system and medium of instruction. The document puts forth that to provide quality higher education, with equity and inclusion, higher education institutions would seek to promote education in regional languages or Indian languages (NEP 2020, GoI). Now, this seems very vague and ideational provision because India speaks in many languages and the language offered as the medium of instruction in a particular institution may not match that of the students. At the higher education level, generally, students from different states with varied linguistic repertoires choose to study in an institution away from their homes. Like, the Indian Institute of Technology located in Kharagpur, West Bengal is a premier institution in India where students from every part of the country study in the same classroom. If the institution starts teaching in Bengali (the mother tongue or local language or regional language of Bengal), the medium of instruction (MOI) will become a barrier for students from other states. The faculty members of the institution who belong to other parts of the country wouldn't have command over the Bengali language. Moreover, learning a new language depends on the readiness of the teachers, some may consider it an extra burden.

A Viable Approach to Deal with The Language Conundrum

To achieve the objectives of language education as proposed in NEP 2020, a practical and feasible approach should be followed. This paper suggests a series of steps which are easy and doable.

- a. Policymakers should focus on strengthening the Indian language resources through knowledge production (Niranjana, 2013).
- b. Focus on proper implementation of the three-language formula in every Indian state because if a learner is proficient in three languages, he/she would qualify as multilingual and would also be able to access teaching-learning materials of three languages. If three languages are taught properly in the school itself, it would be helpful in higher education and language shouldn't be a barrier if a learner is proficient in three languages. The students will always have the freedom to choose the medium of instruction or the teaching materials in whichever language they are comfortable.
- c. The English language cannot be ignored since it is a global language, and proficiency in English is highly required for social mobility, economic growth and transnational communications. The English language acts as the global link language. Vaish (2005) proposed that English in India is a tool of decolonization which helped the linguistically marginalized and the urban poor to gain access to the global economy. Azam, Chin, and Prakash (2013) reported that there is a positive correlation between English language skills and growth in hourly wages in India. Brooker (2018) documented that there is a clear increase in global demand for English language education due to economic, political, cultural and social benefits. There is a strong relationship between language and power. English is a global language and has the most number of speakers throughout the world. It is not just the language of Europe but the language of the world. It gained more importance in the world with the United States rise as a world leader and the political, economic and cultural influence of the United States in the world (Salomone, 2022). Therefore, India needs to work strategically and strengthen its economy. This will help in improving the local people's attitude towards the Indian language.
- d. A simpler and smarter approach to the conundrum of the medium of instruction in Indian higher education is the translanguaging approach. Mahapatra and Anderson (2022), based their 'Languages for learning' framework on the pedagogic principles of translanguaging. They asserted that their framework based on translanguaging would seek to provide equity and access to education in academically non-dominant languages. It has the potential to challenge the hegemony of dominant languages like English (Garcia & Leiva, 2014; Riviera & Mazak, 2017; Rodgríguez et al. 2021).

With the internationalization of higher education, it is quite natural that there would be a paradigm shift in language policies worldwide. In a research study based on Puerto Rican higher education language policies, Carroll & Mazak (2017), argued that translanguaging gradually makes its place as a natural byproduct of the internationalization of higher education.

Translanguaging is not a new approach or concept, in multilingual societies like India, it has always been present and takes place naturally in the case of multilingual students (Canagarajah, 2011). To define it precisely, translanguaging is an approach where more than one language is used to communicate ideas, concepts and information. It gives equal status to both, or all the languages used in the process of communication. García (2009), defines it as an act of bilinguals where they use all their linguistic repertoires to improve their communication potential. In India, translanguaging has been present ubiquitously at every level of the education system by default but it hasn't been acknowledged officially. Caruso (2018), highlighted the benefits of the translanguaging approach in the teaching-learning process—

- Students can deeply comprehend the content.
- Helps to promote the development of second/third/or foreign languages.
- Bridge the linguistic gap between home and school.
- It also supports the multilingual identities of the students (Celic & Seltzer, 2011)
- Access and equity in higher education (Carroll, 2017; Yilmaz, 2019).
- Hegemonic linguistic practices are discouraged (Wang, 2022).

Considering the multiple benefits of translanguaging as a pedagogical approach, and its presence at all levels of the Indian education system (from school education to higher education) by default, steps should be taken to include it in language policy and planning. Learning materials or resources should be created in multilingual forms and the teaching communities should be encouraged to legitimize the practice of translanguaging through changes in policy and planning, and incorporation of this multimodal pedagogical approach (Seals & Olsen- Reeder, 2020).

Conclusion

The findings of this qualitative study are indicative of people's aspirations and practical choices towards the medium instruction in higher education. This paper has attempted to study stakeholders (teachers, parents, and students) perceptions towards the use of regional languages as the medium of instruction in the higher education system. In conclusion, the medium of instruction in higher education in India is a multifaceted issue with significant implications for educational access, equity, and quality. This research has tried to explore the cultural, linguistic, and economical factors influencing the choice of medium of instruction at the higher education level. The paper also examined the challenges faced by students, teachers, and parents in navigating a diverse linguistic landscape while striving to uphold educational standards and promote inclusive learning environments.

Our findings underscore the need for a nuanced approach that balances the preservation of linguistic diversity with the imperative of ensuring equitable access to quality job-oriented education for all students. This necessitates thoughtful policy interventions that prioritize linguistic inclusivity without undermining the importance and significance of English language, student needs, and societal aspirations. Moreover, fostering multilingualism through translanguaging and promoting the thoughtful integration of regional languages in higher education can contribute to a more inclusive and culturally responsive educational system.

As India continues to evolve as a global knowledge economy, addressing the complexities surrounding the medium of instruction is paramount for fostering innovation, social mobility, employability, and national development. Moving forward, collaborative efforts among stakeholders—government agencies, educational institutions, language experts, and communities—are essential for devising sustainable solutions that empower students to thrive in a rapidly changing world. By embracing linguistic diversity (but without undermining the role of English language) as a strength rather than a barrier, India can chart a course towards educational excellence, social equity and economic development in the coming years.

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