



SOCIOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS OF TAMILNADU

K. Velu* & Dr. M. Farook**

* Ph.D Scholar, Department of English, C. Abdul Hakeem College, Melvisharam,
Vellore, Tamilnadu

** Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, C. Abdul Hakeem College,
Melvisharam, Vellore, Tamilnadu

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Introduction:

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) – 2005 strongly advocates multilingualism in school education. This confers definite cognitive advantages. The NCF – 2005 provides the following guidelines for language education in schools:

- Language teaching needs to be multilingual not only in terms of the number of languages offered to children but also in terms of evolving strategies that would use the multilingual classroom as a resource.
- Home language(s) of children should be the medium of learning in schools.
- If a school does not have provision for teaching in the children's home language(s) at the higher levels, primary school education must still be covered through the home language(s). It is imperative that we honour the child's home language(s).

The post-colonial period witnessed an increasing emphasis on using mother tongue as the medium of instruction and UNESCO's (as cited in Agnihotri and Khanna, 1997, p.33) recommendation that psychologically, socially and educationally a child learns better and faster through their mother tongue, was quoted by many language planning authorities everywhere. As a matter of fact, after independence, our language teaching policy has consistently advocated the teaching of mother tongue at the primary school level. Our main stream education envisages mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The 'three language formula' advocated the teaching of a) mother tongue, b) one other modern Indian language, and c) one international language, mainly at the secondary school level. HRD minister Kapil Sibal restated the policy:

We need our children to learn mother tongue, Hindi and English – mother tongue for better understanding of the subjects at elementary stage. Hindi at secondary stage for integrating to national level and English at university level for connecting to the world (Indian Express, 14 September 2009, as cited in Graddol, 2010, p.83).

Background of the Study:

In the report on the Third All India Educational Survey published by NCERT, New Delhi (1981), one of the volumes is devoted to 'Languages and Media of Instruction in Indian Schools', which discusses the language education scene in India:

Although the Education Commission (1964-66) has suggested a new graduated three-language formula as a policy base for prescribing languages to be studied at the different stages of school education and (along with its three-language formula) have generally been accepted by the State Governments, the states and the union territories differ with each other in regard to the number of languages prescribed to be taught throughout school education, and the forms in which different languages are to be introduced. Similarly, while the Education Commission has suggested only mother tongues to be used as media of instruction at the school stage, different policies are being pursued in different states and union territories regarding the medium of instruction at different stages of school education. (p.32)

It is clear from the above discussion that there is lack of uniformity among states and union territories in terms of policy implementation regarding issues like introduction of languages at primary level and the medium of instruction at different stages of school education. The need is also realized to envisage objective criteria for the selection of language/s to be introduced at primary 7 level. It is necessary to examine the basis for the prescription of the study of various languages in schools and their use as media.

Rationale of the Study:

It has been observed that the conceptual framework of English language teaching adopted at our universities as well as at the ELTIs depends heavily on theories developed in the West – in a social context that is monolingual. As stated by Singh (2000) the source of our knowledge about second language teaching is almost entirely located in the monolingual, English-speaking world. The theorizing's of these writers emerge

from contexts very different from ours. Till recently, bilingualism was viewed in the West as an 'abnormal' phenomenon. However, increasing mobility on the one hand and developments in communication technology on the other are rapidly changing the scene.

Almost everyone in contemporary Indian society is a multilingual person in a broad sense. In our country, a monolingual person is a rare phenomenon. The existing theories of linguistic competence (of native speaker's competence) and of language acquisition (of one mother tongue) fail to account for a multilingual competence where a learner acquires more than one language in early childhood, and keeps using them for various purposes throughout his/her life. This varying degree of importance assigned to different languages in the curriculum is also addressed in the NCERT document (NCERT, 1981).

In the Western countries, the first language studied is the mother tongue of the child which is also the medium of instruction throughout his education. All other languages taught are of secondary importance for them. But in India this is not always the situation. Many a time the language taught as second or third language becomes ultimately the language of prime importance, for the child's mother tongue may not continue as medium of instruction in the higher classes. He may be required, therefore, to study some other language which is recognized as official and literary language. Although like any other foreign country, more than one language is being taught in schools, the purposes and situations of teaching are by no means identical. (p.37)

However, the survey does not focus on the sociolinguistic functions of various languages. Rather, the efforts devoted mainly to collection and analyses of data regarding the total number of schools and the languages being taught as a subject or as medium of instruction; languages discontinued as well as added; major first languages and second languages and rural urban divide of schools teaching various languages.

Statement of the Problem:

English Language Learner in Primary Schools of Tamilnadu: A Sociolinguistic Perspective.

Operational Definition of Terms:

Primary School: For the purpose of this study, the term Primary School would include the first three years of English in the concerned state.

Sociolinguistic Conditions: For the present study, these would include social factors like age, gender, SES (Socio-economic strata), parental education, perception towards language and language learning, self-efficacy towards languages; and linguistic factors like number of languages, extent of exposure and opportunities for use.

Bilingualism: The ability to use two languages.

Multilingualism: The ability to use more than two languages.

SLA: A term that refers both to the study of individuals and groups who are learning a language subsequent to learning their first one as young children, and to the process of learning that language.

Objectives:

- To create a sociolinguistic perspective in language learning in relation to variables like age, gender, parental education, SES, self-efficacy towards languages, extent of exposure and opportunities for use;
- To study the linguistic behaviours of the children at the entry point;
- To study the prevailing classroom environment;
- To study the societal perceptions about English language and learning;
- To identify the factors that have an influence on language learning;
- To construct a sociolinguistic perspective of English language learning prevailing in Tamilnadu.

Hypotheses:

- The learning condition for the learners whose parents use English at home are better as compared to those of whose parents do not use English at home.
- The urban learners have better exposure to English than the learners living in rural area.
- There is a significant difference between and among the various income group's exposure to English.
- There is a significant difference between urban and rural respondents' attitude to English as the medium of instruction.

Sociolinguistics:

A Historical Perspective Sociolinguistics is generally defined as the study of language in relation to society. The goal of sociolinguistics is to investigate language with respect to social structure and at the same time to investigate social structure with respect to language. With the growing interest in sociolinguistics, it is well accepted now that the social context of language learning is likely to exercise a powerful influence on language learning (Stewart, 1968; Burstall, 1974; Spolsky, 1974; Mackey, 1970).

Stern (2001) traces the development of sociolinguistics in terms of three major directions: a) the study of language in its social context, b) 'ethnography of speaking' which refers to study the language in terms of language use; c) the sociology of language, which refers to the study of speech communities. These three areas provide convenient headings for characterizing various directions in sociolinguistics.

Research Design:

The research was conducted using the survey method. Since it was a survey type research, it involved data collection on a large scale. Therefore, it was decided to collect information on selected variables with the help of questionnaires. For this purpose, three master tools were produced in English, and were subsequently translated into Tamil. These master tools were:

- A Questionnaire for the Learners,
- A Questionnaire for the Parents, and
- A Questionnaire for the Teachers

Conclusion:

It is evident that there is a great demand for the study of English at all levels. However, there is also dissatisfaction amongst people as well as educators regarding the declining standards of English partly because the demand is outstripped by supply of qualified teachers. Further, the proliferation of English 160 medium schools in towns and villages during the recent years is not only the result of requirement from the society but also a consequence of government's failure to provide adequate facilities for teaching of English in schools with mother tongue as medium of instruction. In this context, there is a need for curricular reforms that are learner-friendly and suitable to multilingual context.

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