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English and the Tibetan Tongue

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Abstract

The linguistic landscape of India is remarkable in the richness of its variety. A minuscule part of the linguistic mosaic of India is formed by the Tibetans, who arrived in India as refugees and settled in various parts of India. The Tibetan children studying in primary classes have the Tibetan medium of instruction. English is taught as a second language in these classes. This paper attempts to address English language teaching within this unusual combination of diversity in India's linguistic landscape.

The linguistic landscape of India is remarkable in the richness of its variety. India is unique not only in that a large number of languages are spoken here but also in terms of the variety of language families that are represented in those languages. There is no other country in the world in which languages from five different language families can be found, namely, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Andamanese. The number of languages spoken/written in India is more than 1600.¹

A minuscule part of the linguistic mosaic of India is formed by the Tibetans, who arrived in India as refugees and settled in various parts of

India. As the number of refugees grew, so did the size of the settlements. One of the issues the refugees faced was the education of their children. Following a dialogue between His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and the then Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Central Tibetan School Administration (CTSA) was established under the Ministry of Human Resource Development. The CTSA works for the education of Tibetan children living in India.² In the CTSA schools, the primary classes (Classes I-V) have the Tibetan medium of instruction, and give admission only to Tibetan children. English is taught as a subject in these classes. This paper attempts to address

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English language teaching within this unusual combination of diversity in India's linguistic landscape.

In 1961, the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) was established by the Government of India, as an apex organisation to assist and advise the Central and State governments, with the objective of working on qualitative improvement in school education. As one of the objectives of NCERT, several programmes are organised throughout the country, especially in rural and interior areas, to reach out to teachers and learners. Since its inception, NCERT has also brought out curriculum frameworks and syllabi for school education as well as textbooks in all school subjects from Classes I-XII. It was felt that, post-textbook development, their actual use in the teaching-learning process needs to be studied: in other words how curriculum, syllabi and textbooks developed at the macro-level percolate to schools at micro-level. One way to achieve this goal was by making provision in academic planning for continuous visit, study and interaction with schools across the country, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas. NCERT faculty were, therefore, deputed to various schools for three months in different time-slots. I was associated with the Central School for Tibetans at *Chhota Shimla*, Himachal Pradesh from 1 July to 30 September 2012.

My brief was to teach a few chapters of the English Core course in Classes XI and XII, and to interact with students, teachers and parents. However I decided to take classes at the primary, upper primary and secondary stages as well, in order to understand the students better.

Two aspects of the classroom situation at the Central School for Tibetans deserve attention—the social and the linguistic. As mentioned earlier, the primary classes comprise Tibetan children and use the Tibetan language. It may be mentioned here that the general perception about the Tibetan children in the primary classes is that they know little or no English. Almost all of them live in the residential hostels in the campus itself. Some of the children are orphans, some have parents staying as far away as Arunachal Pradesh, some have foreign nationals sponsoring them, and some have relatives living in the nearby settlements. Most of them are first generation learners. All this means that they get little support in doing their homework, especially that of English.

The linguistic aspect was rather more complex. The students speak Tibetan with their compatriots, seniors and teachers. Since they are not permitted to go outside the campus as a rule, they are hardly exposed to Hindi/local language. They are very hesitant to use English. My mother tongue was Kannada, theirs was Tibetan; I planned to tell them a story

in English. My intention was not to 'teach' them language, but rather expose them to some meaningful linguistic input in English. I pointed out to things and asked what they were called in English. The answers 'fan', 'light bulb', 'window', 'door', 'chair' etc., were written on the blackboard. I motivated the children by saying that these are English words, and so already they know a lot of English. Although I was told that the students can follow some Hindi, I did not want to bring in Hindi, which in this context, in my opinion, would have been an additional unnecessary burden. It was in this background that I tried the experiment of telling Class III a story, almost wholly in English. I learnt the Tibetan equivalent of six key words, and took printouts of computer animated pictures of the same key words, given below:

The story selected was a simple one, about a tiny mouse who sees a girl wearing a beautiful red cap. He too wants to have a cap. He takes his tiny wallet and goes first to a cloth shop, then to a shop that sells sequins, and finally to a tailor to get a cloth cap with sequins stitched on it. While waiting for the cap to be stitched, he wanders into the king's palace and falls asleep on a sofa. The king becomes terrified on seeing the mouse and so on. I narrated the story in simple English along with gestures and pictures. To my great satisfaction, the kids understood the story. My joy increased when the children of Class IV demanded that they be told the story too.

Since the linguistic aspect of this particular classroom situation was rather intriguing. I tried to examine which particular theory it would fit into. The situation here was not that of



Girl



Mouse



Beads/Sequins



King



Tailor



Maid

mutual intelligibility. Mutual intelligibility is a relationship between languages in which speakers of different but related languages can readily understand each other without intentional study or special effort. In cases where the persons can understand two languages, the relationship may be asymmetric, with speakers of one understanding more of the other than speakers of the other understand of the first. When it is relatively symmetric, it is characterised as mutual. Mutual intelligibility exists in different degrees among many related or geographically proximate languages of the world, often in the context of a dialect continuum. In this case, it is not even mutual intelligibility. English and Tibetan do not belong to the same group of languages, and consequently, wide differences in grammar and pronunciation.

The Tibetan children could be called receptive bilinguals, which refer to those who have the ability to understand a second language, but do not speak it. Receptive bilinguals may rapidly achieve oral fluency when placed in situations where they are provided “exposure to meaningful linguistic input in the second language. Known as language immersion, it is a method of teaching a second language, in which the learners’ second language (L2) is the medium of classroom instruction. This plays an important role in the development of language in immigrant children.”

Through this method, learners

study school subjects, such as mathematics and science in their L2. The main purpose of this method is to foster bilingualism, in other words, to develop learners’ communicative competence or language proficiency. This theory of course, did not fit this particular situation, because immersion for the Tibetan students was not ‘total’.

Immersion programmes vary from one region/country to another because of language conflict, historical antecedents, language policy or public opinion. Moreover, immersion programmes take on different forms based on class time spent in L2, participation by native speaking L1 students, learner age, school subjects taught in L2, and even the L2 itself as an additional and separate subject. For the Tibetan students at the primary stage, Tibetan and English were the two languages taught as subjects at the primary level, with English being as L2. Even here, however, the “immersion” was limited: theoretically the teachers were supposed to use only English in these classes, but it was observed that they frequently took recourse to Hindi. (Instructions such as ‘sit down’, ‘open the book’, ‘start writing’ and so on were given in Hindi; the meanings of some words in the English textbook were explained using Hindi). Further, it is reiterated that Hindi was not the mother tongue of the learners. They are literate in their first language (Tibetan) but they also needed continuous support to maintain that literacy. Obviously,

Tibetan was not used outside the school campus, so the support was in the form of Tibetan folk lore, songs and dances, etc. after school hours.

Thus, one can distinguish between two kinds of receptive bilingual in terms of nature of exposure to the second language. One, where he/she experiences total immersion, as in the case of immigrants, who are usually living in a country where the target language is the exclusive language spoken. Where the uninterrupted, immediate and exclusive practice of the new language reinforces and deepens the attained knowledge. The second type of receptive bilingual is one who chooses to study a second language at school or some other educational institution. If the learner faced any difficulty in understanding certain words or concepts, the teacher (after exhausting other possibilities) would use the something that is familiar to both the teacher and the taught. In the present case, without the possibility to actively translate, due to a complete lack of any first language opportunity, the new language is almost independently learned — with direct concept-to-language usage that can become more natural than word structures learned as a subject.

Much has been written about the cognitive advantages to bilingualism

and multi-lingualism. Multi-lingualism is the act of using multiple languages, either by an individual speaker or by a community of speakers. Multi-lingualism is becoming a social phenomenon governed by the needs of globalisation and cultural openness. People who are highly proficient in two or more languages are reported to have enhanced executive function and are better at some aspects of languages learning compared to monolinguals. The Tibetan children exhibited a high level of confidence in speaking Hindi while buying sweets and cold drinks, talking to the Indian children and teachers, and in using a Hindi word when they could not immediately think of the English one.

Being in the mainstream, one tends to forget the tributaries and little rivulets. The primary classroom of a small school in a mofussil town such as the CTS in *Chhota Shimla* may present a situation that may be quite different from the general perception of a classroom in mainstream India. The linguistic theories discussed in this paper are not exhaustive, and there may be a theory that covers the peculiar nature of the linguistic aspects presented here. Nevertheless, it provides fresh insights into how cultural context and personal experience mediate meaning.

Footnotes

1. *National Curriculum Framework-2005*, p.36. NCERT. New Delhi.
2. The other group of schools established for the Tibetan refugees is the Tibetan Children's Villages (TCVs). This, however, does not come under MHRD.