UNIT 2: CHALLENGES FOR TEACHING MOTHER TONGUE IN A MULTILINGUAL SETTING

UNIT STRUCTURE

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2.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to-

- discuss the factors that pose a challenge for teaching the mother tongue in a multilingual setting
- analyse the pedagogic issues (relating to materials and teachers) which pose challenges in teaching a mother tongue
- explain how the language attitude of members of a speaker community can also affect the teaching of a mother tongue
- discuss the challenges implied by the policy status in India with regard to mother tongue teaching.

2.2 INTRODUCTION

In Unit 1 we discussed the characteristics that define a regional language and a mother tongue. We examined the constitutional provisions
that exist for promoting regional languages and the mother tongue. Finally we also discussed the need and relevance of mother tongue teaching for the students in schools. Unit 2 will deal with the challenges that one might come across while planning and teaching mother tongues in schools of Assam. This unit will shed light on various important aspects of mother tongue teaching in multilingual classes. Such classes are a characteristic of the multilingual Indian society. The unit will then focus on issues like the attitude of the speakers of a community towards their mother tongue, the lack of resource materials and persons, lack of government support etc. Discussion on these topics will give you a fair idea of the challenges relating to this campaign and will also provide you with an opportunity to think of possible ways to face these challenges successfully.

2.3 USING STUDENTS’ MOTHER TONGUE IN THE MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOM

The importance and benefit of using the student’s mother tongue in the classroom has been already discussed to some extent in the previous unit. Research findings from all over the world have confirmed the view that the learner’s mother tongue is the best medium of instruction for young learners. The mother tongue of a student can be an important means for establishing an effective communication between the student and the teacher. This, in turn, can considerably help such learners to acquire both basic literacy skills and also complex educational concepts with a comparative ease than the ones who are taught through a second or the dominant language. Such deliberations and findings all over the world have resulted in a concerted effort at the international level to make arrangement for providing at least the primary education through the mother tongue of the young learners. Towards this end, a number of agreements have been signed and working framework has been formulated at the global level. Such initiatives have been led especially by the UNESCO. In this regard, different nations have taken up this task of providing education through the mother tongue of the young learners in their respective countries. But implementing this kind of education is not an easy task for multilingual
countries like India. India is characterised by an abundance of different languages and cultures used by its citizens who belong to a wide variety of social and ethnic classes. Almost all the classrooms in schools in India reflect this linguistic and cultural diversity.

Let’s think about the students in your classroom. Have you ever thought about the language background that your students have come from? What is the home language of each student in your classroom? How many of your students speak a language in their homes which is different from the language used as the medium of instruction in the school? Answers to this set of questions will help you get a good idea of the multilingual nature of your classroom.

**ACTIVITY 2.1**

Think about your classroom and your students.

- make a list of students and their mother tongues which are different from the medium of instruction in the schools.
- based on your practical experience, make a brief note on the kind of difficulty, if any, that they face during classroom transaction in the school language.

Now in such a situation, imparting education through the home language of your students surely presents a grave challenge to you and other teachers. It is important to have a clear idea of the nature of this challenge in order to promote the use of the students’ mother tongue in the schools. In the following sections, we will discuss some of these pertinent issues which are part of this challenge.

Let us take you to a real situation in Assam. In a particular school in Udalguri district, there is a school in which a large majority of the students are from the Bihari community. They speak Bhojpuri as their mother tongue, while the teachers are speakers of the Assamese language or Bodo language. Once the students are at school, they have to learn everything in Assamese, because Assamese is the medium of instruction in their school. The teachers have a hard time making the students understand ideas in Assamese, because neither the teachers nor the students are comfortable
Can you imagine the difficult situation faced by the students here? In your view, what measures can we take to help these students? In the present classroom situation, one way is to use the mother tongue wherever it is necessary to explain a concept. Otherwise, there is probably no provision within the classroom to help those students. If we think about an ideal situation, the problem probably arises right at the beginning. Ideally, no other language should be imposed upon the students before they are literate in their own mother tongue. Unit 1 gave you enough reasons in support of this view. However, in the real world, there are many practical problems in starting education through the mother tongue. As teachers, even if you are willing to teach literacy skills to your students in their mother tongues - be it Singpho, Tangsa, Tai Phake, Boro, you are likely to face certain challenges. Some of these are discussed below.

**2.3.1 Pedagogic Materials in the Students’ Mother Tongue**

You all have probably experienced how difficult it is to teach in the class without the academic resources. Can you imagine teaching students without any textbook or any plan on what to teach throughout the year? One of the most important components in the classroom transaction is the availability and extensive use of written materials. Use of age-appropriate graded learning materials or books are crucial for imparting education to the young children in the classroom. For developing mother tongue literacy, these written materials can be of different types such as Pre-readers, Primers, Story books, books on Mathematics, Science, Environmental studies, Social Studies etc.

Think about your own classroom. There are a number of books that you use to teach necessary skills and to communicate various contents to the students. Each of these books has been produced bearing in mind certain learning objectives that the learners need to achieve. In other words, each of these books helps in advancing the objectives of the curriculum. Similarly, for teaching
a mother tongue, the different types of books are produced and used in the classroom keeping some definite objectives in mind. For example, a pre reader is used in order to give the young learners an idea about the shapes and corresponding sounds that are represented by those shapes in the language. It increases their cognitive skills of identifying and relating symbols and sounds in their language. Once this set of skills is developed, the primer is used to help the learners learn all the symbols in the alphabet of their language in a more efficient way. In the same way, story books or picture books are used to develop their skills of comprehension, analysis and other abstract and complex skills.

Hopefully, you can now realize that the materials mentioned above are not available for you for use in the classroom. The lack of teaching-learning materials in the concerned mother tongues proves to be one of the serious challenges in using students’ mother tongue in the classroom. It is very important to have appropriate reading materials for an effective classroom teaching. If we think of the different languages which are used as mother tongue by the young learners at their respective homes and society, there are no books or other types of reading materials to be used in the classroom.

Barring the recognised and official languages, most of the other minority languages are underdeveloped in terms of the availability of written materials. In rare cases, some of these languages possess some written materials mostly in the form of religious texts, historical narratives etc which are not always suitable for the use of young children in the teaching-learning process.

Another obstacle in this context is that most of these languages do not even have a written form. Generation after generation, these languages have been used orally. As a result, it becomes more challenging to bring out any written materials in those languages. In such cases it needs a concerted effort by different stakeholders to devise a writing system for that language. Later, that writing system can be used to produce appropriate
materials for use in the classroom.

So these challenges relating to the scarcity of pedagogic materials in the mother tongue of the learners make it difficult to help the children use and develop their mother tongue in the classroom. However, in Unit 3, we will discuss some possible ways through which this challenge can be handled.

**LET US KNOW**

**UNESCO:** United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

**Pedagogic material:** Pedagogic material refers to all type resources that help in teaching learning process. For example any kind of books such as a primer, a story book, a song book, a picture chart etc. which are used in a classroom a transaction can be considered as pedagogic materials.

**Graded learning materials:** Graded learning materials refer to the resources used in teaching learning process which are structured according to the learning objectives that are set and the age group of the learners. For example the content and design of a text book for the Grade -I students will be different from that of the Grade-III students.

**CHECK YOUR PROGRESS**

Fill in the blanks

**Q 1:** i) Use of age appropriate ......................... materials or books are crucial for imparting education to the young children in the classroom.

ii) It is very important to have appropriate reading materials for an ......................... teaching.

**Q 2:** What are the different types of written materials that can be used for classroom teaching?

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2.3.2 Teachers' Proficiency in Students' Mother Tongue

To understand the challenges posed by the shortage of teachers with proficiency in students' mother tongue, you can go back to the example of the situation explained in Section 2.3. Such a situation occurs in many schools of our country. This is especially true for the North eastern region, because the classrooms here represent the true multilingual characteristic of the nation. Most of these classrooms represent a mix of students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In this context, the issue of using the students' mother tongue in the classroom is faced with the serious challenge due to the shortage of teachers with proficiency in those various under-represented languages. For example, imagine a classroom where 20 of a total number of 30 students use a mother tongue language which is different from the language of instruction which is generally the dominant or the state language. In this classroom those 20 students will not get any opportunity to use their mother tongue during classroom transactions. The teachers also cannot make learning easier for this section of students through their mother tongue, because the appointed teachers in these schools, in most cases, do not speak or understand the languages of these students. As a result, explaining or teaching those students through their mother tongue becomes a daunting task.

2.3.3 Community Attitude Towards the Mother Tongue

If you want to teach the mother tongue of students, it is very important to involve the community members who are speakers of the language. This is because the resources (raw materials) of the language lie with the community. Involving the parents and other members of the minority language community in the classroom transaction can encourage and help the students to learn their mother tongue in the classroom. (We will discuss strategies to involve parents and other members of the language community in this
However, the community's attitude towards their own language plays a crucial role. Involving the community will be possible only if the members of the community understand the value of their mother tongue. In many cases, it is seen that the community members are unable to understand the value of their mother tongue.

The common belief among the community people is that educating their children through the dominant language, and above all, through the English medium, actually benefits their children in terms of getting a job or economic security and attaining high social status. Therefore, for most of them, their own mother tongue is seen as not at all helpful for the benefit of their children. This attitude raises questions about the level of awareness regarding the benefit of educating children through their mother tongue among the parents belonging to the minority language community. In such circumstances it is difficult to persuade community members to assist with the use of their respective mother tongue in the local schools. As the parents understanding is that the learning of their mother tongue will bring no substantial benefit to their children's education, they do not see any point in wasting time in teaching it to their children. In this context, it is very important to bring up idea of the mother tongue as a bridge, as shown in Fig.1 below.

Fig: 1 Mother tongue bridge
This picture shows two bridges with some children. What do you understand from this picture?

**ACTIVITY 2.2**

On the basis of your understanding from reading the current and previous sections, closely observe the picture and think about what it is trying to convey. Write down a brief paragraph of your understanding of this picture. Next, compare it with what is written in the section below.

The first bridge where 'Foreign Language' is written on the left, is very weak and narrow. This represents the most common situation regarding education in our country. Here the students from different language communities start their education through a language which is not their mother tongue. This results in the 'double disadvantage' mentioned in 1.5.1 which subsequently leaves the learners with a very weak bridge for overcoming the educational and academic challenges for life-long learning. As a result, as depicted in the picture, many students fails to cross the river and fall...
down. This actually symbolically refers to those students who fail to perform satisfactorily in the classroom and subsequently most of them drop out of school.

The other bridge in the picture is strong and you can see students/children happily crossing the river. This bridge symbolises the situation where the students are provided with the opportunity to start their education through their mother tongue first. This helps them acquire the basic literacy skills comfortably and also to understand different educational concepts better. As a result, these students feel happy, and they are able to participate in the teaching-learning activities of the classroom. More importantly, this method of teaching through their mother tongue results in an effective development of their cognitive skills. This development is much needed for them to understand complex educational concepts in various subjects like Science, Mathematics, Environmental Science and then to analyse such concepts and produce new knowledge from their existing knowledge. The parents of these children need to understand the significance of this picture. There should be conscious effort made to drive home the significance of the mother tongue teaching for their children at least in the initial years of their education.

2.3.4 Implementation of Language Policy for Promotion of Minority Languages

You might feel that policy issues are not relevant for you as teachers because you have to deal with the practical issues of classroom transaction only. However, it is important for you to be well-informed about some policy issues regarding mother tongue teaching, because it does have an influence on classroom transaction in an indirect manner. Therefore let us take a quick look at a few excerpts from policy documents to understand the viewpoints of the policy makers.

India being a multilingual country, there are provisions in
the constitution that explicitly provide for instruction in the mother
tongue at the primary stage to the children of linguistic minority
groups. Article 350 A of the Indian constitution states that ‘it shall be
the endeavour of every State and of every local authority within the
State to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue
at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic
minority groups’.

Other policies have been formulated and revised from time
to time with guidelines reiterating this constitutional stand on this
matter. For example, the Programme of Action, 1992 based on the
National Policy on Education, 1986 also highlights the need of mother
tongue education for the linguistic minority groups. It reiterates ‘...the
need to provide education through the mother tongue, which may
be different from a modern Indian language included in the VIII
Schedule, is recognised on academic grounds. The Constitution of
India recognises, in respect of linguistic minorities, the desirability
of providing instruction through the mother tongue for first five years
of education (Article 350-A).’

But at the same time, it also expresses concern over some
of the practical challenges that may come in this context:
‘...Every effort is, therefore, required to implement this obligation,
although a number of difficulties are likely to be encountered:
administrative and financial feasibility of providing instructional
facilities through a variety of mother tongues, difficulty to use some
tribal languages as media of education etc...’

The National Curriculum Framework, 2005 also argues for
‘...an emphasis on the recognition of children’s mother tongues,
including tribal languages, as the best medium of instruction.’

It goes on to say that ‘...multilingual proficiency... is possible
only if learning builds on a sound language pedagogy in the mother
tongue.’(ibid.:vii)

The above excerpts make it obvious for us that in India, there
is strong policy support for the teaching of the mother tongues of
children. But in spite of such support, the issue of education in the mother tongue in the primary stage has remained only a desired thing but not a reality. As a result, challenges in terms of infrastructural inadequacies, shortage of manpower and lack of a cohesive method for producing teaching-learning materials in the respective languages of the children have remained largely unattended till now. There have been sporadic efforts under some of the government schemes to bring out teaching-learning materials for some of the concerned languages. But such schemes have included mostly the languages which are included into the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution. There are far larger numbers of languages with fewer numbers of speakers outside the purview of the Eighth Schedule, which have failed to receive any benefits of these government schemes.

**LET US KNOW**

**National Policy on Education (NPE) 1986**: National Policy on Education is a policy which was formulated by the government of India to promote education amongst the people of India. It was first promulgated in the year 1968 by the government of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and in 1986 by the government of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi. This policy was modified by the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narashimha Rao.

**Programme of Action 1992**: Programme of Action (PoA, 1992) is an elaborate planning of the strategies through which the NPE 1986 will be implemented. The PoA is meant to provide an indication of the nature of actions which will be needed in order to implement the directions of the policy. This programme of action was prepared by 23 task forces which were constituted and each of them was assigned particular topics covered by the National Policy on Education, 1986.

**National Curriculum Framework, 2005**: National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005 is one of the four National Curriculum

**LET US KNOW**

- The Census of India 2001 recorded 1652 mother tongues across India.
- In 2001 census, these mother tongues were grouped into 122 languages. As a result there are mother tongues which are totally different from each other but are grouped together under the label of one language.
- 27 languages have been listed under Hindi.
- Out of these 122 languages only 26 are used as the medium of instruction at the primary stage. Among these, there are only 6 non scheduled languages out of the 100 non scheduled languages which were recorded in the census of 2001 with more than 10000 speakers.
- The 2001 Census also recorded 57 languages in India with more than one million speakers.
- Under this census, 234 mother tongues were reported having more than 10,000 speakers.

### 2.3.5 Training and Orientation for Teachers

Let us suppose that unlike the situation presented at the beginning of Section 2.3, the teachers and students have a common mother tongue. Even then the teachers need special training and orientation for using the mother tongue of the learners in the classroom alongside the school language. Such training and orientation programme should be aimed at equipping the teachers with the skills to use effective strategies in order to make learning enjoyable for the learners from different language backgrounds. However, you have probably noticed from your experience that the
teachers are rarely exposed to such training with specific aims. Lack of this kind of training and orientation programme adds to the difficulty of the teachers who teach in those classrooms. Don’t you think that this happens because of the failure to use a rich resource (i.e. mother tongues of students) that is there at the disposal of both you teachers and student?

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 3: When was the National Policy on Education first promulgated?

Q 4: The Programme of Action is related to which national policy on education?

Q 5: How many mother tongues have been recorded in the Census 2001?

2.4 LET US SUM UP

- One of the most important components in the classroom transaction is the availability and extensive use of written materials.
- Use of age appropriate graded learning materials or books is crucial for imparting education to the young children in the classroom.
- Lack of teaching learning materials in the respective mother tongues proves to be one of the serious challenges in using students' mother tongue in the classroom.
- One of the obstacles in teaching in mother tongue in the case of minority languages is that most of these languages still need a writing system.
- Shortage of teachers for using the mother tongue of the non-scheduled
languages is one of the major impediments in this regard.

- Community attitude to the mother tongue plays an important role in the use of the mother tongue in the classroom.
- The common belief among the parents is that educating their children through the regional language and above all, through the English medium, actually benefits their children in terms of getting a job or economic security and getting a high social status.
- The lack of appropriate policy implementation regarding mother tongue teaching is a serious challenge in this context.
- The use of the learner's mother tongue in the teaching-learning process has been strongly advocated in the Article 350 A of Indian constitution and also in other policy documents such as Programme of Action 1992 under National Policy on Education 1986 and National Curriculum Framework, 2005 etc.

### 2.5 FURTHER READING


### 2.6 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Ans to Q No 1:**

i) graded learning

ii) effective classroom
Ans to Q No 2: Pre-readers, Primers, Story books etc.
Ans to Q No 3: 1968.
Ans to Q No 5: The total number of mother tongues recorded in the Census of 2001 is 1652.

2.7 MODEL QUESTIONS

A. Very Short Questions
Q 1: In which article of Indian Constitution has a provision for linguistic minority group?
Q 2: How many languages have been listed under Hindi?
Q 3: How many languages have been recorded in India in the census 2001 with more than one million speakers?

B. Short questions (Answer in about 100-150 words)
Q 1: 'Almost all the classrooms in schools in India reflect this linguistic and cultural diversity.' Elaborate this sentence with examples from your own classroom context.
Q 2: Briefly discuss how the lack of pedagogic material affects the use of children's mother tongue in a multilingual classroom.
Q 3: List the main challenges in using learners' mother tongue in classroom transaction in a multilingual classroom as discussed in this unit.
Q 4: Briefly state your views based on your personal experience about the attitude of the language communities toward their own mother tongue.
Q 5: Write a short paragraph in your own words on the picture of the Mother tongue bridge shown in Figure 1.

C. Long questions (Answer in about 300-500 words)
Q 1: List and elaborate on the various challenges in using mother tongue of the learners in a multilingual classroom.
Q 2: How is the gap between the constitutional provisions and policy
implementation affecting the use of learners’ mother tongue in the multilingual classrooms?