



## **The Language of Knowledge?: A Case Study of English-medium Teaching in Delhi University**

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### **Abstract**

How do we empower the learner to become an active creator of knowledge and to acquire and develop new skills? What are the barriers in this process? These are the key questions that this paper tries to seek answers to. It focuses on one crucial barrier—language—and the way it conditions the teaching-learning process. Specifically, the paper tries to illustrate ways in which a bias in favour of English medium poses serious problems for non-English medium students in accessing knowledge and adapting it to their needs. This paper also argues that at present a variety of ‘languages’ are ignored which can have a meaningful role in redefining education and enabling the minds of the youth. This paper includes a case study based on a sample survey of 55 students in Delhi University and its analysis and implications for teaching-learning practices.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, human capital, language, higher education, learning, cultural domination, vernacular, disconnect, three-language formula, cognitive growth

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### **Knowledge for whom?**

When we raise the issue of knowledge-building in this country to solve the pressing problems of our generation and also of the future, the question that arises immediately is: knowledge for whom? Knowledge is not only an individual quest; it is also a social quest. Here, rather than going into a philosophical discussion on what constitutes knowledge, we relate knowledge to an expansion of capabilities and capacities to understand the social and natural world and to respond to it. This is especially relevant at a time when society is experiencing change at a rapid rate and new ideas, technologies and challenges are emerging on various fronts. In this sense, knowledge is basic human capital that is vital for social

development.

This perspective foregrounds the active role of the learner in the acquisition, transmission and enrichment of knowledge. Educational practices in our country, however, all too often ignore the learning needs of a student who ends up as a passive recipient of information rather than an active creator of knowledge. How do we empower a learner to become an active creator of knowledge and to acquire and develop new skills? What are the barriers in this process? This paper is about one crucial barrier—language—and the way it conditions the teaching-learning process. Specifically, this paper tries to illustrate ways in which a bias in favour of English medium poses serious problems in accessing knowledge and adapting it to local needs. At present there are a variety of ‘languages’ which are ignored; these languages can have a meaningful role in redefining education and enabling the minds of the young.

It is widely perceived that today English is the language of knowledge most well suited to bringing the fruits of advancing frontiers in a globalizing world within the grasp of Indians. The National Knowledge Commission (NKC) notes in its report:

NKC has also recognised the significance of language, not only as a medium of instruction or a means of communication but also as a determinant of access. An understanding and command over the English language is a most important determinant of access to higher education, employment possibilities and social opportunities. School-leavers who are not adequately trained in English as a language are always at a handicap in the world of higher education. More often than not, teaching is in English. Even if it is not, in most subjects, books and journals are available only in English. And those who do not know English well enough find it exceedingly difficult to compete for a place in our premier educational institutions. This disadvantage is accentuated further in the world of work, not only in professional occupations but also in white-collar occupations overall. This reality is not lost on our people, who recognise that the English language is a critical determinant of access to, and opportunities for a better life. Available information suggests that middle-income or lower income households spend a large proportion of their modest income on sending their children to relatively expensive English medium schools. Such educational opportunities for children are a priority that is almost at par with health care for the family. But there are a very large number of people who simply do not have the resources for such investment. The outcome is exclusion. We believe that inclusion is possible through public provision (Government of India 2009: 27).

Recognizing the barrier posed in accessing knowledge due to lack of competency in English, the NKC proposed certain steps that need to be taken to ensure that students in India acquire that competency from school onwards:

Language learning cannot be separated from, and must be integrated with, content learning. Therefore, English should also be used to teach some non-language, content subjects, starting from Class III in school (Government of India 2009: 27).

In other words if the thirsty cannot come to the well, take the well to the thirsty!

However, the problem in this case lies in the fact that for a vast majority, English simply cannot be a language in which they can translate their thoughts and ideas. A learning which cannot connect with the lived experiences of a learner, the way one interprets the world, must always have weak foundations. On the other hand, there are examples of countries like Korea, Japan and China which have achieved tremendous progress without depending on English. In this paper, we argue that without diminishing the value of English, we can enable the minds of the young better if we communicate to them in the language they understand best.

## **Review of literature**

The issue of language and access to knowledge in ways that have contemporary resonance

can be seen as early as 1813 when the East India Company decided to spend Rs 1 lakh for supporting education in India. It sparked a debate among Orientalists and Anglicists about the kind of knowledge that should be imparted to Indians. This debate involved two kinds of dilemma: a) whether knowledge should be indigenous or Western in content, and b) should the medium of instruction be English or a vernacular. The Macaulayan resolution on both these sets of alternatives created a framework whereby not only was Western knowledge given preference over indigenous knowledge, but also English was chosen as the medium of instruction. This essentially meant that it became the language of power and status. It became part of the civilizing mission ideology of the colonial apparatus. In his famous “Minute” of 1835 Macaulay noted:

All parties seem to be agreed on one point, that the dialects commonly spoken among the natives ...of India, contain neither literary nor scientific information, and are, moreover, so poor and rude that, until they are enriched from some other quarter, it will not be easy to translate any valuable work into them (<http://www.mssu.edu/projectsouthasia/history/primarydocs/education/Macaulay001.htm>).

Similarly, the Wood’s “Despatch” of 1854 that lay down the British policy on education stated:

We must emphatically declare that the education which we desire to see extended in India is that which has for its object the diffusion of the improved arts, services, philosophy, and literature of Europe, in short, European knowledge (cited in Aggarwal 2009: 15).

According to Jyotindra Das Gupta (1970: 44), “in both education and law courts, language became a marker of two separate levels of social operation—the upper level reserved for English, the lower for the vernaculars.” By the end of the nineteenth century, a serious quest had emerged among Indians to find alternatives to British claims of cultural superiority. This is evident in movements such as the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical Society, the dynamic figure of Swami Vivekanand and the emergence of a ‘swadeshi’ ideology. Bhartendu Harishchandra, as Vasudha Dalmia (2002), has shown in her work *The Nationalisation of Hindu Tradition*, greatly emphasized “*nij bhasha*” or one’s mother-tongue to awaken the minds and hearts of the people and to progress. Unfortunately, however, language also became implicated in forging of cultural identities and boundaries that created tensions and conflicts. Several scholars including Christopher King, Alok Rai and Paul Brass have shown how the Hindi-Urdu controversy contributed to the sharpening of communal boundaries (King 1989; Rai 2000; Brass 2005).

Gandhi and Tagore both were profoundly creative and innovative thinkers who made a tremendous contribution towards the issue of language and spread of knowledge. Both developed a strong critique of the colonial system of education which is reflected in writings such as *Swadesh Samaj* written by Tagore in 1905 and *Hind Swaraj* written by Gandhi in 1909 (Acharya 1997: 601–10). Both related knowledge to development of the mind and character and emphasized that this cannot be achieved by imposing concepts and ideas from without, in an alien idiom. As Gandhi wrote later in his *Young India* in 1921:

The foreign medium has caused brain fag, put an undue strain upon nerves of our children, made them crammers and imitators, unfitted them for original work and thought, and disabled them for filtrating their learning to the family or the masses. The foreign medium has made our children practically foreigners in their own land. It is the greatest tragedy of the existing system. The foreign medium has prevented the growth of our vernaculars. If I had the powers of a despot, I would today stop the tuition of our boys and girls through a foreign medium, and require all the teachers and professors on pain of dismissal to introduce the change forthwith. I would not wait for the preparation of text-books. They will follow the change. It is an evil that needs a

summary remedy ([http://www.mkgandhi.org/towrds\\_edu/chap14.htm](http://www.mkgandhi.org/towrds_edu/chap14.htm)).

In post-independent India, the “three-language” formula came to be outlined as a solution for retaining the advantages of English without compromising the stature of Hindi and regional languages. It emerged as a strategy and policy after years of debate that had earlier echoed prominently in the Constituent Assembly. Following these debates and its own discussions, the Central Advisory Board on Education (CABE), the oldest advisory body on education in India, devised the “three-language” formula in its 23<sup>rd</sup> meeting held in 1956 ([https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Z413%20EDB%20Section04\\_0.pdf](https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/sites/teacheng/files/Z413%20EDB%20Section04_0.pdf)) According to this formula, at the middle and high school stages a set of three languages was to be taught that included the native or mother language, a regional language for Hindi-speaking areas and Hindi for non-Hindi speaking areas, and English or a modern European language.

The All India Council for Education recommended the adoption of the three language formula in September 1956. This recommendation was taken up in 1961 by a conference of chief ministers and given a concrete shape. This formula sought to resolve a complicated political problem that had arisen over the issue of language where the non-Hindi speaking states were reluctant to promote Hindi unilaterally. The 1968 National Policy on Education made this formula the cornerstone of the educational system as far as the medium of language for instruction at various levels was concerned. The 1968 policy states:

- The First language to be studied must be the mother tongue or the regional language.
- The Second language:
  - In Hindi-speaking States the second language will be some other modern Indian language or English, and
  - In non-Hindi-speaking States, the second language will be Hindi or English.
- The Third language:
  - In Hindi-speaking States, the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language, and
  - In non-Hindi-speaking States, the third language will be English or a modern Indian language not studied as the second language.

However, since education is a state subject it was left to the states to implement this formula as they considered best. The political leadership in the states could not rise above partisan interests and failed to implement this policy. The Hindi-speaking states chose to include Sanskrit as the third language rather than a modern Indian language whereas the non-Hindi speaking states ignored Hindi. According to the Seventh All India School Education Survey 2002, in only 32 per cent of the schools was Hindi taught as the second language. For example, in Karnataka, the second language offered is Kannada or English and in Tamil Nadu the second language is only Tamil.

*The National Curriculum Framework for School Education: A Discussion Document* released on 1 January 2000, while reviewing the three language formula, states: “In a number of states/organizations/ boards, however, the spirit of the formula has not been followed and the mother tongue of the people has been denied the status of the first language ... because of the changed socio-economic scenario, the difference between the second and the third languages has dwindled.” The NCERT position paper observes:

But this formula has been observed more in the breach than in the observance. The Hindi-speaking States operate largely with Hindi, English, and Sanskrit, whereas the non-Hindi-speaking States, particularly Tamil Nadu, operate through a two-language formula, that is, Tamil and English. Still, many States such as Orissa, West Bengal, and Maharashtra among others implemented the formula (NCERT 2006: 13).

Proper implementation of three language formula would have enabled students to move from one level of linguistic competence to the second and third levels in a graded manner building on foundations developed at each level. India’s linguistic diversity would then have

become an asset rather than a hindrance in transmitting knowledge and creativity. This, however, has hardly happened.

In the *Position Paper of the National Focus Group on the Teaching of Indian Languages* developed by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), the low proficiency in language of most school-leaving students was explicitly recognized:

Most children leave schools with dismal levels of language proficiency in reading comprehension and writing skills, even in their own native languages. In addition to a variety of socio-political reasons that adversely impinge upon our educational system in general, some reasons that are primarily responsible for these low levels of proficiency include: lack of any understanding about the nature and structure of language and the processes of language teaching-learning, particularly in multilingual contexts; acute failure on the part of educational planners to appreciate the role of language across the curriculum in contributing towards the construction of knowledge; not paying enough attention to the fact that a variety of biases, including caste, race, and gender, get encoded in language; inability to appreciate the fact that language consists of much more than just poems, essays, and stories; unwillingness to accept the role of languages of the home and neighbourhood in cognitive growth and failure to notice that cognitively advanced language proficiency tends to get transferred across languages. It is becoming increasingly clear that linguistic diversity is as important for our survival as biodiversity (NCERT 2006: 4).

This historical background underlines the fact that the issue of language in education in India figured prominently in strategies for building an educational system that addresses the unique needs and challenges that the Indian context represents.

In the next section we build certain hypotheses about how language conditions the teaching-learning experience in Delhi University.

## Teaching practices in Delhi University

### Hypotheses

1. The pedagogical practices that have been in vogue in Delhi University have an in-built bias in favour of English which is a barrier for Hindi medium students.
2. Resolving the issue of the language barrier is more than an issue of creating textbooks and calls for new orientation towards knowledge and teaching-learning practices.

### Investigation methodology

Due to paucity of time in carrying out more elaborate research, we relied on the questionnaire method and conducted a pilot study to elicit student responses to questions that probed their own evaluation of the difficulties that they faced under the present system. The questions which were developed are given in the appendix.

### Major findings

1. A majority of Hindi medium students affirmed that they felt disadvantaged by pursuing education in Hindi medium.
2. Most of them felt that there was not enough learning material in Hindi to consolidate their understanding.
3. Almost all Hindi medium students affirmed that they had the motivation to read beyond the classroom and draw upon other sources of knowledge.
4. Most of the Hindi medium students' parents were also from Hindi medium backgrounds, had incomes less than Rs 2 lakh per annum, and had

- themselves been educated in government schools.
5. The respondents had not read more than ten books in their undergraduate course. Most had read less.
  6. A significant percentage of the students said that they clarified their doubts through books or from their friends, implying that they did not take their doubts to the teacher.
  7. A greater percentage of students in Hindi were more confident in expressing their understanding in their own words as compared to English medium students who were less sure of their communication abilities.
  8. Most of the respondents in Hindi had attended seminars and presented papers during the course of their study.
  9. A significant proportion of Hindi medium students had difficulties in accessing English medium sources.
  10. Most of the English medium students were not doing all the prescribed readings for a topic as given in the syllabus.
  11. Reading magazines and journals was not a popular activity amongst most of the students.

### **Analysis and results**

This survey highlights some pressing concerns that show the ineffectiveness of the teaching-learning process under present pedagogical practices. The silver lining, however, is the fact that there is motivation and aspiration to learn, but this motivation is lost in the system as it exists currently. It is evident that Hindi medium students are themselves aware that they are at a disadvantage as compared with English medium students in accessing knowledge. A glance at the prescribed readings for most of the courses shows the negligible presence of learning sources in the non-English medium. Most of these 'textbooks' are translations under the auspices of the Directorate of Hindi Medium Implementation. A significant number of students from the Hindi medium considered these translations 'difficult' to comprehend on account of their Sankritized vocabulary and idiom.

On the other hand, even the English medium students were not very confident of their abilities as far as expressing their understanding in their own words was concerned. In other words, the communication skills of even the English medium students were not very high. This gave rise to the practice of rote learning and a tendency to copy and paste paragraphs from books and readymade 'notes'. Innovation and cognitive development is thus considerably lost in this kind of a situation.

It is also evident that there is much to be desired as far as the reading habits of students are concerned. Most of the respondents were found wanting in the culture of reading even for the basic prescribed texts. It is contended that this lack of culture of reading reflects not only linguistic difficulties but also a disconnect between teaching and learning that arises from a number of factors. The students do not feel motivated enough to engage with the subject that is being taught. This is more so in the social sciences and humanities streams. Elements of 'doing' and 'hands on' knowledge are missing in the syllabi which appear distant and abstract.

The role of a teacher in solving students' problems and his or her own ability to deal with the deficiencies displayed by students seems to be circumscribed. A significant percentage of the students did not take their difficulties to their teachers to clarify their doubts with him/her. A teacher's communication abilities and his/her ability to gauge the pressing difficulties of the students is an issue here.

### **Implications and recommendations**

1. To enable students and for redefining education so as to truly empower students and make them active agents in creating knowledge for change, it is important to deepen awareness about ways in which language conditions the teaching-learning process. This has two basic aspects: a) linguistic: ways in which language structures the cognitive process and acts as a channel for transmission of knowledge, and b) social: ways in which education addresses the social and cultural environment of a student in which language functions and operates. For example, for many students the language of knowledge is far removed from the language they experience and readily understand.
2. There is an inadequate feedback mechanism and information on how students assess and evaluate the teaching-learning process. This lacuna is a disabling element in designing curriculum and orienting the process from the point of view of students. There is an urgent need to institute a mechanism whereby such information and assessment can be made available.
3. The contemporary approach to meeting the needs of a majority of the learners, who are non-English medium learners, is both out-dated and inadequate. Refresher and orientation courses for teachers do not address the real issues that emerge out of classroom experience. There is a serious need for 'knowledge labs', or institutional arrangements where teachers can continuously upgrade their abilities and become better equipped to deal with the needs of the students. Such 'knowledge labs' can help in the continuous development of a whole gamut of learning, resource facilities for which are practically non-existent at present.
4. The approach to developing textbooks for students also needs to change. There needs to be greater seriousness towards this task. The learning material produced by the Directorate of Hindi Education is completely devoid of any visual references and is written in a manner which makes reading dull and insipid. There are many topics which have been introduced in the university for which students do not have readily available textbooks.
5. Serious thought needs to be given towards making dynamic the functioning of the Department of Modern Indian Languages and Literatures in the university. To give an example, students in the social sciences are hardly aware of intellectual traditions that connect with different disciplines in Gujarati, Tamil, Assamese and other regional languages. A language also represents a whole cultural tradition that embodies intellectual, artistic and other creative endeavours. There is less than adequate exposure to such endeavours at present.
6. Successful models of transition from English-based learning to nativized learning in other countries can be valuable in dealing with similar problems in the Indian context. One of the most successful case studies is that of Malaysia (Puteh 2012).

### **Limitations and future research possibilities**

This paper is based on a sample survey that included 55 students of Delhi University. The findings are subject to the limitations of the small sample size of the data. The authors of this paper have been teaching in Delhi University for a considerable period of time and many of these findings are also corroborated by their own experiences.

A vast literature exists on education and pedagogical practices. The present literature review represents the historical context that frames the debate on language and knowledge. There is a need to factor in studies on educational psychology, linguistics and other

disciplines for a more comprehensive study. This also points towards a comprehensive collaborative inter-disciplinary research that can probe different aspects of the issues raised in this paper.

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## Appendix

### *A note on the sample for the questionnaire*

The survey on which this paper is based was conducted in Ram Lal Anand College. This college was founded in 1964 and was taken over by Delhi University in 1973. It has courses in all the three streams: science, arts and commerce, providing a range of 12 courses. A co-educational college, has about 1,350 students on its rolls.

The sample size consisted of 55 students—37 boys and 18 girls. A majority of the students (39 or 71 per cent) had Hindi as their medium of instruction. Such a sample was deliberately chosen since our main focus was on understanding the learning difficulties of Hindi medium students. The students were chosen from all the three streams so as to get a broader picture of the learning patterns with respect to language.

The limitation of just relying on one college to get an insight into teaching-learning practices in Delhi University as a whole is obvious. However, further studies can be undertaken to see how far the situation in other colleges or even other universities is comparable to the one in Ram Lal Anand College.

*Questions used in the sample survey:*

1. What is your medium of instruction?  
आपकी शिक्षा का भाषाई माध्यम क्या है? \_\_\_\_\_
2. In which subject and course you are admitted to?  
आप कौन से विषय अथवा पाठ्यक्रम में नामांकित हैं? \_\_\_\_\_

If Hindi:

1. What was your school background: Government/private/convent  
आपकी शिक्षा किस प्रकार के संस्थान में हुई? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the annual income of your parents?  
आपके माता पिता का वार्षिक आय कितना है? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you feel you are disadvantaged in Hindi medium?  
क्या आपको लगता है की हिंदी माध्यम को अपनाने से दिक्कत का सामना करना पड़ता है ?
4. Do you feel there is enough material to help you build your understanding?  
क्या आपको लगता है की अपनी समझ विकसित करने के लिए आपके पास हिंदी में पर्याप्त सामग्री है? \_\_\_\_\_
5. What is the reason for you opting for Hindi as the medium?  
हिंदी माध्यम अपनाने के पीछे क्या मुख्य कारण था ? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you feel the Hindi language of the Hindi medium books is easy to understand?  
क्या आपको हिंदी माध्यम पुस्तक समझने में आसानी होती है? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you feel motivated to read beyond classroom? Is language a barrier?  
क्या आप कक्षा के पढाई करने के लिए प्रेरित महसूस करते हैं ? क्या भाषा इसमें बाधक रही है ? \_\_\_\_\_
8. How difficult it is for you to read English medium textbooks?  
क्या अंग्रेजी माध्यम की पाठ्य पुस्तकों को पढ़ने में आपको समस्या आती है? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Did your parents study in Hindi or English medium?  
आपके माता पिता की पढाई किस माध्यम में हुई - हिंदी या अंग्रेजी? \_\_\_\_\_
10. Have you attended any seminar or talk in Hindi?  
क्या आपने हिंदी में संचालित किसी कार्यक्रम या परिचर्चा में भाग लिया है ? \_\_\_\_\_
11. Have you ever presented any paper in Hindi?  
क्या आपने कभी हिंदी भाषा में कोई पेपर प्रस्तुत किया है ? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Which language do you use to discuss with friends?  
दोस्तों के साथ बातचीत में आ पकिस भाषा का प्रयोग करते हैं? \_\_\_\_\_
13. Do you read any magazine? Please name the magazines?  
क्या आप किसी पत्रिका को नियमित रूप से पढ़ते हैं? कौन सी पत्रिका? \_\_\_\_\_
14. How do you clear your doubts?  
आप अपनी शंकाओं का निवारण कैसे करते हैं? \_\_\_\_\_
15. How confident are you in expressing in your language both orally and written?

- आप अपनी भाषा के प्रयोग (मौखिक एवं लिखित) में कितना सहज महसूस करते हैं? \_\_\_\_\_
16. How many books have you read in the last three years? And what prompted you to read them?  
पिछले तीन वर्षों में आपने कितनी पुस्तकों का अध्ययन किया ? और किन कारणों से ? \_\_\_\_\_

#### If English

1. What was your school background? \_\_\_\_\_
2. What is the annual income of your parents? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you do all the prescribed readings for a topic? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Are you able to write answers in your own words? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Have you presented any paper or given a presentation? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Do you read any magazine/journal? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Do you interact with Hindi medium students? \_\_\_\_\_
8. What is the language of your discussions/conversations? \_\_\_\_\_
9. Do you ask questions in your class to clear doubts? \_\_\_\_\_
10. How confident are you in expressing your thoughts in your language both orally and written?

#### Science students

1. What is your medium of instruction?  
आपकी शिक्षा का माध्यम क्या है? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Do you read any journal?  
क्या आप अपनी भाषा में किसी पत्रिका का नियमित पठन करते हैं? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you feel there is a paucity of books in Hindi?  
क्या आपको लगता है कि हिंदी माध्यम की किताबों की कमी है? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Do you feel you are able to understand the concepts in Hindi?  
क्या आपको हिंदी में धारणाओं को समझने में समस्या होती है? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Are you able to collect data in Hindi and do mathematical operations?  
क्या आपको हिंदी में डेटा इकट्ठा करने में और गणना में समस्या होती है? \_\_\_\_\_