LANGUAGE-ENGLISH

1. ABOUT LANGUAGE, LANGUAGE LEARNING AND MULTILINGUALITY

1.0 Introduction

This syllabus has primarily been conceptualised as a broad framework for teaching languages. We do hope that different states, districts and in some cases, maybe even some blocks, adopt and adapt this framework according to their local contexts, accommodating children with diverse abilities for their own area.

All human beings use language for a variety of purposes. Even children with most diverse abilities such as visually or hearing impaired use as complex and rich a system of communication as any 'normal child' does. It is therefore not at all surprising that most people think that they know many things **about** language. This is indeed unfortunate. Language is not only a means of communication; it is also a medium through which most of our knowledge is acquired; it is a system that to a great extent structures the reality around us for representing it in our minds; it is a marker of our identity in a variety of ways; and finally, it is closely associated with power in society. We should also remember that we use language not only to talk to others but also to ourselves, and that indeed is a very important function of language. How else shall we clarify our thoughts if we don't learn to talk to ourselves in the first instance?

We need language to understand different content areas such as History, Physics or Mathematics. Similarly, whether we see nature or society, we see it, to a large extent, in terms of our language. It is our language which tells us whether we see just *barf* or both 'ice' and 'snow' or above 20 words for a similar object as the Eskimos do. Any time a community wishes to fight for a separate state, it invariably brings in the issue of its language; many, in the case of India, would make serious efforts to have their language included in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. And as far as the relationship of language with power is concerned, we all know that when we insist on a certain kind of pronunciation or writing system as being 'correct' and 'pure' and 'standard', we are in effect saying that if you wish to gain power in society, this is what you must do.

Most children learn not just one but several languages before they come to school. The number of words a child knows before she comes to school is over 5000 or so. Multilingualism is thus constitutive of our identity. Even the so-called 'monolingual' in a remote village often controls a verbal repertoire that equips her to function adequately over a large number of communicative encounters. We should also note that several recent studies have effectively demonstrated the positive relationship of multilingualism with cognitive growth, social tolerance, divergent thinking and scholastic achievement.

From the point of view of the science of language, all languages including what we call 'dialects', 'tribal', 'mixed' or 'impure' languages are equal; languages thrive in each other's company even when each one has its own quality and genius. In a multilingual class, it is absolutely imperative that every child's language is respected and becomes a part of the teaching strategies.

1.1 Language Faculty

All children learn not only the basic systems and subsystems of their language but also how to use them appropriately (i.e. they acquire not only linguistic but also communicative competence) before they are three years old. It is eminently possible to engage in a meaningful conversation with a three-year-old on any subject that falls within her cognitive domain. It therefore seems obvious that in addition to the rich and caring exposure that they receive, normal children may be born with an innate language faculty as Chomsky has argued. Even though all languages have different words for different objects and different kinds of phrases and expressions etc., we note that all have categories like Nouns, Verbs and Adjectives or either a Subject-Verb-Object (like English) or a Subject-Object-Verb (like Hindi) word order or that they will have several rules that cut across languages (see 1.2). The awareness that there is an innate Language Faculty has two important pedagogical consequences: given adequate exposure, children will acquire new languages with ease; the focus in teaching should be more on content than grammar.

1.2 Language as a Rule-governed System

For linguists, who study the structure of language in a scientific way, the grammar of a language is a highly abstract system consisting of several subsystems. At the level of sounds, languages of the world are closely associated with rhythm and music in terms of their intonation patterns and pitch contours. For example, no Indian language or even English allows more than three consonantal sounds at the beginning of a word, and even when three are allowed the choices are highly restricted. The first consonant can only be 's', the second only 'p', 't' or 'k' and the third only 'y', 'r', 'l' or 'w' as in Hindi *strii* 'woman' or in English 'spring', 'street', 'squash', 'screw' etc. Language is similarly rule-governed at the levels of words, sentences and discourse. Some of these rules are located in our innate Language Faculty but most are socio-historically constituted and show a considerable amount of variation across time and space both at the individual and social levels. Such linguistic variability is always present in a classroom and a teacher should be aware of it and use it as constructively as possible.

1.3 Speech and Writing

The fundamental difference between speech and writing is that written language is consciously monitored and frozen in time; we can return to it whenever we want. Spoken language is far more transient in nature and changes far more rapidly than the written language. One should not, therefore, be surprised to notice discrepancies between the spoken and written languages. There is no intrinsic relationship between speech and script; no sacrosanct connection between spoken English and the Roman script or between spoken Sanskrit or Hindi language and the Devanagari

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script. In fact, all the languages of the world, with minor modifications, can be written in one script, just as any single language can be written in all the scripts of the world. Such awareness about the relationship between speech and script has important pedagogical implications. Teachers who become aware of this phenomenon often change their attitudes to errors and begin to develop innovative teaching methods.

1.4 Language, Literature and Aesthetics

There are several functions of language which have been paid lip service by language education planners. Apart from having the quality of unfolding the world, language has many fictional elements. Poetry, prose and drama are potent sources not only of refining our literary sensibility but also of enriching our aesthetic life, enhancing our synaesthetic abilities and enormously improving our linguistic abilities, particularly reading comprehension and written articulation. Literature also includes jokes, irony, fantasy, story, parody and parable which pervade our everyday discourse.

At Tagore's Santiniketan, it was common practice that students would read a play with Tagore, translate it into Bangla, prepare to stage it, set up the stage and finally reach the play to the members of the community in all its glory. As Marx pointed out, a language education policy cannot afford to ignore the fictional, narrative, metaphysical or rhetorical elements of language and treat it only as a useful vehicle or tool for achieving some worldly gains. Human beings not only appreciate beauty but also often systematically codify laws that govern aesthetic dimensions. A considered appreciation of the aesthetic aspects of language would inevitably lead to a preference for linguistic vitality and creativity and help us to eliminate our obsession with purity and correctness. Such processes would ensure space for dialogue and negotiation rather than monologue and aggression. This would also hopefully lead to a respect for minor and endangered languages that is legitimately due to them. No community wishes to let its 'voice' die.

1.5 Language and Society

Even though children appear to be born with an innate language faculty, individual languages are acquired in specific socio-cultural and political contexts. Every child learns what to say, to whom and where. As Labov has shown, languages are inherently variable, and different styles tend to be used in different contexts by different age groups . The variability in human linguistic behaviour is not thus randomly distributed but links systems of language, communication, thought and knowledge. As Aurorin points out, 'language cannot exist and develop outside society. Development of language is ultimately stimulated by our cultural heritage and the needs of social development, but we would not overlook the reverse dependence either. Human society cannot do without language as the most important, most perfect and universal means of communication, formation of thought and accumulation and transmission of expression.' It is equally important to realize that languages are not 'discrete objects out there', almost frozen in time and space, both physical and mental. They are actually constantly changing, fluid systems of behaviour which human beings acquire and change to define themselves and the world around them. Very often languages

are treated as entities and people form strong stereotypes about them. We need to be aware of both these aspects of language.

1.6 Language and Identity

An individual creates the patterns of her behaviour in terms of the group(s) she wishes to identify with, acquiring in the process communicative competence that enables her to move along a continuum varying from formal to informal language. More often than not we find identities to be in conflict with one another. The question of identity becomes particularly relevant in the case of minorities and there is a great need to be sensitive to their languages and cultures in the interest of national and global peace and harmony.

If language facilitates identification rather than mere discovery of some existing identity, it turns out to be something more than a marker of identity, maintenance and a repository of memories and symbols. It could be a springboard which could launch you into the as yet unfathomed depth of multiple possibilities.

1.7 Language and Power

In spite of the fact that all languages as abstract systems or subsystems are equal, the complex ways in which socio-historical and political forces interact with language, some languages become more prestigious than others and become associated with socio-political power. It is generally the language used by the elite that acquires power in society and becomes the standard language. All the grammars, dictionaries and various reference materials will invariably address this 'standard' language. From the point of view of science of language there is no difference between what is variously called standard language, pure language, dialect, variety, etc. A language is often defined as a dialect with an army and navy. More than anything else it is the socio-political and the economic considerations that make people decide the national, official, associate official languages to be used in education, administration, judiciary, mass media, etc. In principle, it is eminently possible to do anything in any language, including advanced research in humanities, social sciences and sciences. It should thus become obvious that languages of the underprivileged will never get empowered unless we provide support structures that would ensure their use in a variety of contexts.

1.8 Language and Gender

The issue of gender concerns not half but the whole of humanity. Over a period of time, language has coded in its texture a large number of elements that perpetuate gender stereotypes. It is not just that many scholars, including some distinguished linguists, have described female speech as 'trivial' and 'a string of pearls' signifying nothing, but a substantial part of the lexicon and syntactic expressions encode gender-bias. Detailed analysis of male-female conversation has also revealed how men use a variety of conversational strategies to assert their point of view.

The received notions of what it means to be 'masculine' or 'feminine' are constantly reconstructed in our behaviour and are, sometimes unwittingly perhaps, transmitted through our textbooks. In fact, the damage done by the 'gender construction of knowledge' is becoming

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increasingly obvious. Language, including illustrations and other visual aids, plays a central role in the formation of such knowledge and we need to pay immediate attention to this aspect of language. It is extremely important that textbook writers and teachers begin to appreciate that the passive and deferential roles generally assigned to women are socio-culturally constructed and need to be destroyed as quickly as possible. Voices of women in all their glory need to find a prominent place in our textbooks and teaching strategies.

1.9 Objectives of Language Teaching

Since most children arrive in school with full-blown linguistic systems, the teaching of languages must have very specific objectives in the school curriculum. One of the major objectives of language teaching is to equip learners with the ability to read and write with understanding and to make them autonomous learners. Our effort is to sustain and enhance the degree of bilingualism and metalinguistic awareness that children have. We would also like to equip learners with such politeness strategies and powers of persuasion that they are able to negotiate all communicative encounters with tolerance and dignity.

Although there is a variety of teaching methods and materials, the language teaching classroom has remained one of the most boring and unchallenging sites of education, dominated largely by behaviourism and didacticism. In the case of languages children already know we rarely see any progress; in the case of a second language such as English, most children hardly acquire even the basic proficiency levels after 6-10 years of exposure and in the case of classical or foreign languages the total programme consists of memorization of some select texts and noun and verb paradigms. There is no dearth of empirical studies that support these observations. It is imperative that we analyse and understand our specific contexts, identify relevant objectives and develop suitable methods, materials and teacher-training modules accordingly.

For a very long time now, we have been talking in terms of LSRW skills as the objectives of languages teaching (in more recent times we have started talking about communicative skills, accent neutralization and voice training, etc. in an equally disastrous way). This exclusive focus on discrete skills has had fairly adverse consequences. We now plead for a more holistic perspective on language proficiency. After all, when we are *Speaking*, we are also simultaneously *Listening* and when we are *Writing*, we are also *Reading* in a variety of ways. And then there are many situations (e.g. friends reading a play together and taking notes for its production) in which all the skills in conjunction with a variety of other cognitive abilities are used together. We also need to appreciate the fact that the same text may have several different readings and different children may articulate their responses to a text in different voices. These are legitimate voices, even when they are far away from the 'accepted norm' and should be respected.

Cummins and Swain in their book *Bilingualism in Education* (Longman, London, 1986) have made a very fundamental distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitively Advanced Language Proficiency (CALP). The language ability that is associated with BICS largely involves the skills to perform effectively in situations that are rich in context

and undemanding at the level of cognition. The language of here and now and that of peer group interaction belongs to the domain of BICS.

It would appear that BICS level abilities have to be acquired almost afresh in every language, though in multilingual societies such as that of India they do get far more easily acquired through natural acquisition processes. CALP level abilities are needed to perform effectively in contextually poor and cognitively demanding situations. It would generally be acquired in tutored language settings. For example, when a secondary or semi-secondary student is asked to write an essay on a topic he is not familiar with, or read a newspaper editorial to critique it he may have to invoke her CALP level abilities. These abilities often tend to get transferred from one language to another. We strongly believe that all children should leave school with CALP in at least three languages; they should of course know a couple of others at least at the level of BICS.

Some of our objectives would include:

(a) *The competence to understand what she hears*: A learner must be able to employ various non-verbal clues coming from the speaker for understanding what has been said. She should also be skilled at listening and understanding in a non-linear fashion by making connections and drawing inferences. It is also important to appreciate that the sounds that are fundamental to the growth of children are not just individual language sounds; connected real-life speech with all its hesitation, pauses and silences is most important. Then there is a whole world of sounds out there; not just of the fan or the bus but also of the table and the sitar.

(b) *Ability to read with comprehension, and not merely decode*: She should develop the habit of reading in a non-linear manner using various syntactic, semantic and graphophonemic cues. She must be able to construct meaning by drawing inferences and relating the text with her previous knowledge. She must also develop the confidence of reading the text with a critical eye and posing questions while reading. The ultimate test of reading ability is a critical appreciation of an unseen text that is at least one stage above the cognitive level of the reader.

(c) *Effortless expression*: She should be able to employ her communicative skills in a variety of situations. Her repertoire must have a range of styles to choose from. She must be able to engage in a discussion in a logical, analytical and creative manner. All this will inevitably involve all kinds of LSRW at the same time.

(d) *Coherent writing*: Writing is not a mechanical skill; it involves a rich control on grammar, vocabulary, content, punctuation as well as abilities to organise thoughts coherently often using a variety of cohesive devices such as linkers and lexical repetitions through synonymy, etc. A learner should develop the confidence to express her thoughts effortlessly and in an organised manner. The student must be encouraged and trained to choose her own topic, organise her ideas and write with a sense of audience. This is possible only if her writings are seen as a process and not as a product. She should be able to use writing for a variety of purposes and in a variety of situations ranging from informal to very formal.

(e) *Control over different registers*: Language is never used in a uniform fashion. It has innumerable varieties, shades and colours which surface in different domains and in different situations.

These variations, known as registers, should form part of a student's repertoire. Besides the register of school subjects, a student must be able to understand and use the variety of language being used in other domains such as music, sports, films, gardening, construction work, cookery, etc.

(f) *Scientific study of language*: In a language class, the teaching approaches adopted and the tasks undertaken should be such that they lead a child to go through the whole scientific process of collecting data, observing the data, classifying it according to its similarities and differences, making hypotheses, etc. Thus, linguistic tools can and must play a significant role in developing a child's cognitive abilities. This would be much better than teaching normative rules of grammar. Moreover, this approach is particularly effective in multilingual classrooms.

(g) *Creativity*: In a language classroom, a student should get ample space to develop her imagination and creativity. Classroom ethos and teacher-student relationship build confidence in the latter to use her creativity in text transaction and activities uninhibitedly.

(h) *Sensitivity*: Language classrooms can be an excellent reference point for familiarising students with our rich culture, heritage and aspects of our contemporary life. Language classroom and texts have a lot of scope to make students sensitive towards surroundings, people and the nation.

1.10 Some Pedagogical Proposals

Contemporary research on language acquisition has put the learner at the centre of language learning. It suggests that a learner will be able to effortlessly construct the grammar of a language if she is provided with comprehensible input in anxiety-free situations. As Krashen in his book *The Input Hypothesis* (Pergamon Press, Oxford, 1985) has suggested, input is likely to become intake only if the affective filter is low, i.e. the attitudes are positive and motivation is strong. There is no doubt that in some cases where even English becomes a foreign language it may help to some extent to invoke the conscious reflection of the learner on grammatical values. Krashen has shown how children tend to improve their own output when they are given sufficient freedom and time to edit what they have written. The emphasis on relatively ordered stages of cognitive growth has encouraged language teachers to look at errors as stages in the process of learning rather than as pathologies to be eradicated. One major implication of putting the learner at the centre of the teaching-learning enterprise is to treat their mother tongues with respect and as substantial cognitive resources. The stigma that is often associated with the use of the mother tongues in both public and private schools needs to be condemned and a constructive use of the mother tongues in the classrooms should be encouraged. A constructive use of children's mother tongues in the classroom does not simply mean using the interlingual translation extensively; it means that the whole language teaching pedagogy is located in multilinguality. Languages and cultures of children become powerful resources for the acquisition of the target language. There is a translinguistic perspective to poetry, drama, short story, novel and grammar. Some practical suggestions to this effect are given in the detailed syllabus of each language.