

# Multilinguality in Academic Institutes in India

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## **Introduction**

India is a land of many languages. According to the 2001 census, there are twenty-two official languages in India, and more than one thousand six hundred regional dialects along with their varieties. In the villages, most children go to government schools for their primary and secondary education. In the government schools, the syllabus, examination, debates, speeches, official formalities, etc., are conducted in the local, regional or official language. English may be one of the subjects, but it is not the language of the functional domains in most cases. Soon after the completion of formal secondary education, some students get into institutes of higher education such as the IITs, NITs, IIITs, IIMs, AIIMS, or other medical or engineering colleges and universities. When these students come to such institutions, everything feels alien to them. Almost overnight, the language of all their functional domains becomes English. English, which until now was restricted to being one of the subjects, becomes the medium of instruction. Discussions, speeches, debates, assignments, examinations, official formalities are all conducted in English. The drastic change in language from mother tongue to other tongue (English) becomes an impediment for the students, and not just in terms of their education. This change makes students suffer academically as well as psychologically. Achievements and knowledge are lost in questions of language that require serious attention in academics.

We know that every child is fluent in her first language (Chomsky, 1965). A child grows up with her/his first language, and brings it to school. However, when the child reaches a higher educational institution, she/he has to switch to English. A natural question arises at this point; why are higher educational institutions restricted to English? If India is a land of multilingualism, then the medium of instruction in academic institutes should also be multilingual. This paper examines the Indian scenario of education that offers a monolingual solution to a multilingual situation. The paper discusses multilinguality and the acquisition of English language in higher academic institutes with particular reference to IIT Patna.

## **Multilingualism in India**

India is a land of multiple religions and socio-cultural environments. In fact, most children in India are multilingual. Multilingualism in India is a way of life so taken for granted, that we possibly cannot imagine another way of living socially. Not only do people speak different languages within and outside their homes because of social divisions, they also speak different versions of the same language across situations and with different social players. Chomsky (1986) argues that a child is born with the innate quality of acquiring/learning language. He further suggested that one of the requirements for such an acquisition was input from the society that was fuzzy in nature and inadequate in quantity. It is reasonable to assume

from this hypothesis, that the output of the acquisition may also result in a 'fuzzy' multilingualism. It is critical to note here that the acquired language is highly organized and rule-governed at all levels. Chomsky had described the concept of an ideal native speaker/hearer. However, an ideal speaker/hearer does not exist. The language in the real world cannot be defined as 'a language'. A person acquires and speaks many languages simultaneously. We take our language capacity to be monolingual, and consider multilingualism as an ability alien to humans. On the one hand we are programmed to learn our first language naturally and we have to make an effort to learn any other language, and on the other hand popular discourse in education that questions the learning ability of children in a non-native/foreign language drives us to consider humans as essentially monolingual. We all possess the capacity (Language Acquisition Device and Universal Grammar) to acquire and decipher different languages. However, this does not mean that we have direct access to languages. External input of the specific language is needed to learn it; however, we learn and comprehend much more than the input and this comes from a natural ability for languages. As Jackendoff (1993) puts it, "... language acquisition has to go far beyond just memorizing and reshuffling inputs one has heard. Much of the organization has to come from inside the brain" (p.101-111). The flexibility, with which a child picks up different languages spoken in the neighborhood, somehow seems to get lost, or wane as the child grows older. Why can't this adaptability in children to different languages be used as strength in teaching?

According to Chomsky (1965), linguistic theory should concern itself primarily with the investigation of a speaker's competence. He described competence as speaker's/hearer's knowledge of her language. Chomsky's ideal speaker/hearer was someone who lived in a

completely homogenous speech community, had perfect command over its language, and was not affected by any grammatical irrelevant factors, such as limitation of memory, distraction, shift of attention or error (momentary or characteristic), in making practical use of her knowledge. By this definition of Chomsky, a multilingual speaker was considered to be a *non-ideal* speaker. However, people live in heterogeneous speech communities where they have an equally fluent command over many languages. Chomsky further talked about LAD (language acquisition device) according to which the acquisition of language takes place innately. But this acquisition device is not restricted to one language. A child gets exposed to a multilingual environment and has the capability to acquire many languages at the same time. The whole language acquisition process is designed to be multilingual; multilinguality is natural. The ideal speaker/hearer of Chomsky's idea of language was simply a machine for the scientific treatment of language. However, when we look at society today, the scenario looks very different, i.e., 'language' can only be defined as multilingualism (Agnihotri, 2007, 2009).

There are many factors that are responsible for a multilingual society. A few obvious reasons are the necessity and co-existence of multiculturalism. Communication is essential for any society. When people move from one place to another, they need a local language. Multilingualism includes interdependence between speakers of two or more languages. In India, it is generally found in states where the natives do not share the predominant language, e.g., Santhali is spoken in Jharkhand, where the predominant language is Hindi. People who have an interest in a foreign language may also be multilingual. Sometimes people may find it necessary to acquire a second language for practical purposes, such as business, information and entertainment. In countries such as India, multilingualism also stems from education; we

teach children different languages such as Sanskrit, Hindi, and English at school. Residents in border areas between two countries or states with different languages are naturally multilingual. In the Indian context, people may also learn different languages for religious purposes. Thus, we can say that multilingualism is an outcome of various direct or indirect factors.

### **The IIT Patna study**

To substantiate the discussion so far, we conducted a pilot study at IIT Patna. This case study highlights the multilingual scenario of higher education with the dominance of English among the Indian languages. The study revealed that there is a mismatch between the languages spoken by the students, and the languages used for teaching in the institution. In fact, the study of multilingualism in IIT Patna is closely related to multilingualism in India. There are about twenty languages spoken across IIT Patna; these include Hindi, Rajasthani, Marathi, Punjabi, Telugu, Kannada, English, Assamese, Manipuri, Sanskrit, Bengali, Haryanavi, Bhojपुरी, Tamil, Malayalam, Braj, Maithili, Gujarati, Urdu, and Magahi. Almost every student at the institute is multilingual. There is no student who speaks just one language, or a 'pure' language. The knowledge of these languages is either through acquisition, as first language; through contact with speakers of the language; or through formal learning. The percentage of students who speak two languages, three languages, and four languages is 37 per cent, 54 per cent and 9 per cent respectively. English is included in every student's language profile and is most frequently used by the students. An analysis of the data collected for this research suggests that students interact between themselves and with outsiders in many different languages as per the functional domains.

Although multilingualism has always been appreciated in the society, English seems to command a higher status. However, the dominance of English as a medium of instruction at IIT Patna results in students dropping out from the course, and performing poorly. Students living in a linguistically rich environment with the knowledge of so many languages are systemically forced to go through a situation that brings down their performance. Ironically, the same students are allowed to enter these very higher institutes of education even if they do not speak English as the entrance examinations are available in Hindi. However, when it comes to education, students do not have an option of education in anything other than English.

### **Conclusion**

In schools, students speaking different first languages come together to study where they interact with each other without any difficulties. Yet, they are assumed to have problems if the medium of instruction is multilingual. This is the beginning of the neglect of multilinguality. In this era of globalization, English is not just the language of the world, but also dominates all Indian languages in terms of status and technical information. However, multilingualism is not a threat or an alternative to English; it is simply a solution to education. It is high time the educators recognize the need for multilinguality as a resource (Agnihotri, 2007).

Despite such strong motivating factors for learning multiple languages, our educational institutes continue to exist in a monolingual world. One needs to ask a significant question: Is multilingualism a barrier for education or an asset? In a time of domination of English and linguistic genocide (prohibition of the use of language of the groups in everyday conversation and school), even the theoretical recognition that multilingualism is an inevitable aspect of human social fabric and accepting

it as an asset, is half the battle won (Agnihotri, 2009). This thought itself has potential for a radical change in the world order, by turning it into a more sensitive, just and equitable society. Accepting multilingualism will imply forgoing the populist rigid notion of ‘a language’ and recognizing that all languages are equally rule-governed, rich and complex at the level of sounds, words and sentences. It will also free us from the shackles of linguistic stereotypes such as distinction between language and dialects. There appears to be a general belief that languages are pure, and dialects are their crude, unscientific versions. There was yet another belief that knowing many languages hampers cognitive development. Hence, we can say that Chomsky’s idea of ‘a language’ is helpful only for theoretical machinery, whereas language in society, i.e. multilingualism, is considered as a practical skill.

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