UNIT 14 MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION

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14.1 INTRODUCTION

At the center of teaching-learning activities is language. No teaching activity can be performed without the use of language. If you carefully examine, you will notice that language, communication and education are interrelated processes. Language and communication are integral components of educational transaction. To transact the prescribed curriculum the teacher has to devise various activities so that the content can be transferred and then other activities are devised with the help of students so that the content transacted is thoroughly understood by the children. The level of knowledge of the teacher in the language and the mastery in the use of the language is bound to influence the quality of teaching. Teachers try to explain the content of the lessons in their own words first and then take up other activities. In an effort to explain the contents teachers explain or paraphrase the chapters in a number of ways in our own words. To do this well, we need a good vocabulary and understanding of grammar. Sometimes, when teachers lack in vocabulary and grammar our students identify the mistakes and do not hold high opinion of teachers.

14.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- understanding the role of society in language development of children;
- understanding language as a social system; and
- decide on selection of a language for teaching in classroom.

14.3 LANGUAGE AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

For those who have studied and understood the relevance of language it is not just a medium of communication but the most treasured symbol system of the community, which speaks it. Every single fact of the flora and fauna of the area, beliefs and rituals of the people, facts of historical events and the minutest details of festivals and of the people speaking the language are saved in their language. These facts are not just of academic interest but have important implication on the success and failure of the speakers and so has important bearing on educational planning.
If we look at the curriculum of pre-primary and primary classes it will be apparent that the emphasis is on developing language in children so that they can independently read and understand the texts prescribed in the curriculum or as independent reading. It is important to mention that normally we believe that like all other subjects prescribed in the school curriculum, language is yet another subject; which is a misunderstanding. Language is a skill, which provides the tool to negotiate all other texts. To be precise, children can read and learn textbooks of all other subjects only after they have learnt the language in which textbooks are written. Children who succeed in acquiring better linguistic skills are able to decipher the message from all other texts better than those whose language skills in the medium of instruction and textbooks are not so well developed.

14.4 LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Children start naming objects and defining concepts around them ever since their birth. By the time they come to school they have a fairly developed language. Through language children understand both the objects and the concepts or ideas. We know through research that children could speak quite a lot when asked to explain concepts like mother land, honesty, sacrifice but when equivalent words in different contexts appeared in the text books they offered different explanations. We take the expression used for new entrants as 'clean state' literally when we admit children to pre-primary or primary classes. They are not quite ignorant. It needs to be realized that by the age of 3 or 5 years when children go to Kindergarten or class 1 they would have spent 13,000 to 22,000 hours either listening to other speakers or radio/TV broadcasts or interacting with others. This process becomes very rewarding if children have grandparents or elders at home who can tell stories or answer their queries about the objects and the processes they see around. Some children at the age of five or even before can construct beautiful stories with imaginary characters or present commentaries on things and events around them.

14.5 LANGUAGE AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Having discussed the importance of mother tongue in communication and the role of language in education, let us discuss the use of minor languages for pre-primary and primary education. As mentioned above major time and emphasis in the first few years of schooling is devoted to developing language skills but we ignore the fact that the child has already been provided thousands of hours of language lessons by the mother, father, grand parents, siblings peers and so on before coming to the school. One of the objectives of education is to bring the best out of children through the process of education. Every child is born with certain individual features and if these features are identified and properly nurtured the child will grow without tension and perform one’s best. It is human nature to always tell others and not hear them. Our teachers also do the same with the children. Normally teachers devote no more than 5 to 10 percent of the time to hearing the children’s ideas, ambitions, desires so that they can be put to assignments which interest them and more than that give them an opportunity to show their best. From the first day of the child in school, teachers start lecturing and enforcing their views, that too in a language which children have little competence. Our classrooms are brilliant examples of one-way communication; monologues. However, educationists have oft repeated – education is a process of dialogue. Howsoever young the learner, the process of education should be maximum dialogue and discussion so that teachers are aware of the cognition children have developed and accordingly build their world-view. This cannot happen if teachers constantly keep talking in a language other than the mother tongue.
As most of the times in India we teach children in a language other than their mother tongue we not only fail to utilize the language they have acquired since their birth but also place a new world depicted in the books to be comprehended and then reproduced in their oral or written discourses. Children are doubly deprived – one by not making use of the mother tongue and second by asking them to construct a world (described in text books) which is not their own. Children’s first few years in school are devoted to the understanding of the language (and through it the socio-cultural understanding) they have learnt since their birth. The only logical thing can be to teach children in their first language whether it is one of the languages of the VIIIth Schedule of our Constitution or not. We will have to take up teaching in the mother tongue and develop capability of all languages to be used as language of instruction we want all citizens equal opportunity to compete. It is at present an unequal competition.

Check Your Progress 1
1) How should children be taught in early years?

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2) Which language should be used for teaching to young children?

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14.6 LANGUAGE AND THINKING

Has it ever occurred to you that our language might be influencing our thought process? This question becomes important because we need to organize our lectures and we organize our lecturers in a particular language. If language influences our thought then perhaps we need to take care of our language. From the sections above you must have understood that there is a very strong relationship between language, society and individual upbringing or exposure to different languages. American linguists Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf have worked extensively on this area and it is known as Shapir-Whorf hypothesis. This will help us understand our teaching in relation to our language.

We will try to understand the concept through an example. Languages have words to express the actions (or activities), objects and customs where the language is being used. If an object or custom does not exist in a particular area, the language being used may not have words for such things. For example Inuit has many words to express the state of snow because Eskimos live in snow-covered areas all through the year. Languages spoken in other areas may have just a couple of words for snow. Cambridge Learners Dictionary has only a couple of related words for snow and a few related words for ice. If an English speaker lands in Arctic region of Siberia she/he would divide the various states of snow through these few words. Similarly for a Hindi speaker from Rajasthan may have a number of words for hot weather but an English speaker may have only a couple of words in English to express all the various states of hot weather. Don’t you think English language has not only influenced the thinking of the English speaker but also in some sense predetermined the thinking process.

You would have made out that one language may have various expressions for a particular concept but the same concept may not be differentiated from another concept for which
there may be another word. However, when we learn a different language we need to consciously develop vocabulary for the purposes we would be using the language. Our students from families not using a standard form of language or a different language may face such handicaps in the classroom communication. Similarly, we the teachers may also be handicapped by our mother tongue.

14.7 LANGUAGE DEFICIT

In the last two or three decades the importance of education has been highlighted. It has been emphasized that education is important not only for individual growth but as an indispensable tool for development. Throughout the world efforts in reaching education to all has been emphasized. We find that a number of initiatives have been taken in the developed countries since the World War-II and in the developing world since the Jomtien Conference on ‘Education for All’ held in 1990. Most of these efforts begin with primary education either for children or adults, and that too language teaching. Language is the primary tool to access knowledge and information. You may also be involved in some of these literacy programs. Besides, if your students come from rural background you would be able to understand this phenomenon very easily.

Basil Bernstein, a British Sociologist and teacher studied the role of language in relation to social class and education. In the post-war period there developed an understanding in Britain that individual ability and not class should be the basis of education. Bernstein studied the role of language in educational achievement of participants from different backgrounds. Through his research Bernstein concluded that learners from less-privileged sections also use a form of language, which is not very developed. He named their language as restricted code whereas learners from well off sections use a more developed form of language. He named their language elaborated code. In formal schools the language used for teaching and examination is the elaborated code. You would realize that the language of learners from well off families is the same as that of the school. They do not have to make much efforts to develop the language used in the classroom and also examination whereas learners from less privileged families have to make double efforts. Less privileged children use a standard form of language in the classroom whereas a dialect or less developed (from the perspective of education) form of language at home. They have to make much more effort to maintain good proficiency in the language used for education. The phenomenon can be understood through an experiment that was conducted earlier. Speech of some children from a school in Delhi and a school in Chennai were recorded and played to trainee teachers. After hearing the speech, the teachers were asked to describe the speakers. The teachers were totally wrong. The speakers they identified as North Indian, Hindi speakers upper middle class were children from South India, studying in a well reputed Delhi school and the children they identified as South India were North Indian children studying in a school in Chennai.

Two things are clear from the experiment that our place of living and education gives us our linguistic identity and that we are identified and sometimes get credit or discredit because of our social identify rather than actual qualities because of the perceivers biases. In brief, we wish to explain that as teachers we must try and overcome such biases.

This phenomenon is known as ‘deficit theory’. There has been criticism of this theory but it has great strengths. You would be able to differentiate between learners and adopt different strategies for various learners in your class. Besides, understanding of this phenomenon would help us understand our own linguistic capabilities and handicaps and overcome those weaknesses.
Check Your Progress 2

3) Identify children with different mother tongues and ask them to read a passage of English. Identify the difference in pronunciation of various sounds, of children from different language backgrounds.

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4) Identify children from different language backgrounds and ask them to write a passage on a given topic and identify the variation in vocabulary of children from different linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds.

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14.8 LANGUAGE AND DISCRIMINATION

India like a number of Asian and African countries is linguistic goldmine. A large number of languages are spoken and also creative pieces are produced. There are also a large number of languages which have rich oral literature but in the absence of a script they do not have literature in print. The fact remains that all languages as far as a system is concerned are equal but their speakers are not equal when it comes to getting privileges. Some language speakers are more privileged than others.

It is often mentioned that language is key to success in education. Various researches also prove that learners with better competence in language get better placed in academic ranking as well as get better placement and also rise faster in professional life. It is important to study and report which are the crucial factors that lead to better language competence.

In bilingual and multilingual settings, the dynamics of language acquisition are quite different from monolingual situations. Children who speak, at home, a language other than the language of classroom communication are often found to lag behind in academic achievement. To put in other words children who speak the same language at home in which they are taught are often found to be in a privileged position and very often fair better in academics. We need to study once again how a level playing field can be created for different groups. As this has been realized and mentioned for quite some time we have made various experiments with varied results which need to be reported and replicated.

14.9 LANGUAGE PLANNING

Every nation plans its language development, besides other methods through curriculum planning. In India school based language planning is done through the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) developed every ten years. The most recent NCF of India was published in the year 2005. Text books for a few classes have already been developed. Another very important related issue is of training of teachers in language. Whenever training of teachers is considered, the group that gets the attention is of language teachers and more often primary school language teachers. We talk of language across curriculum but rarely consider training teachers of other subjects in language. Language development in children cannot and should not be considered the responsibility of language teachers only. We would be happy to consider research papers on any aspect of language planning in general and especially language planning and teacher education for school education. Comparative studies and empirical studies would be of special interest and would be welcome.
Another major issue in education is of providing education to children/speakers of non-scheduled and tribal languages. Perhaps no more than fifty per cent of the elementary school age children speak the Scheduled languages. In spite of the best efforts we have only been able to develop material in the Scheduled languages. It may be concluded that we as a nation have predetermined half our children to fail. Alternatives need to be thought. Isolated private initiatives have been made. We would like to invite ideas to undo this imbalance and also reports of experiments made in India or abroad. The Government has also proposed providing education in tribal languages during the XI Plan.

There also exist situations where languages with large number of speakers and a long tradition of literature exist but are not included in the list of Scheduled languages or language of education, like Maithili, Magahi and Bhojpuri (spoken in Bihar) because a sister language, in this case Hindi, has obtained a privileged position. Languages are mutually intelligible but the pull of the mother tongue phenomenon put speakers of these languages in a deficient position because the speakers of Received Pronunciation (RP) of Hindi would not consider the Hindi of Maithili, Magahi and Bhojpuri speakers of acceptable standard. This is not the only case but similar other situations exist. We also need to report them and also suggest measures.

These are some of the views which may lead to linguistic deprivation for some and privileges for others.

14.10 LET’S SUM UP

Even tough language appears to be just a tool of communication but in the sphere of teaching-learning it plays a crucial role. In educational communication the participants are put on a scale of most successful to least successful so it is a question of their lives. The chances of success or failure, is in a way pre-decided as soon as the language of instruction is selected. Some learners are automatically favoured by the choice of one language over the other, and similarly some are discriminated against by the same choice.

Every language provides to its speakers a set of ‘codes’ which are developed in a particular context of the society and the group which speaks that language. It must be clear that languages develop a vocabulary for the purposes they are used. Some languages are not used for teaching-learning purposes so they do not possess the vocabulary required to be used as medium of communication in classrooms. Even though this is a practical problem in choosing a language as medium of instruction but learners are nowhere responsible for this handicap of the language they may be using.

Most of the times in selecting a language for classroom interaction usefulness and popularity of the language are taken into consideration which may be practical but this decision has its implications on the learners. It is expected that after going through this unit you would have understood the relation between medium of instruction in classroom, chances of success or failure of students and similar other issue.

14.11 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

