

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER'S ROLE IN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE MAINTENANCE IN INDIA

Dr. Meenakshi Barad Sirigiri

Assistant Professor
Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Technology,
Hyderabad, India

Abstract

People the world over take for granted the languages spoken by them. But the fact is that at least 46% of the world's living languages, that is about 3,176 languages can be considered to be endangered. In India there are 1,652 different languages and 350 are major languages. Most of the languages belong to the Dravidian and Aryan families. It is estimated that about 250 languages have died over the last fifty years. A language disappears when all its speakers are dead or when they shift to speaking another language. This paper examines the need for language maintenance and attempts to spread awareness about language endangerment among teachers of English. Firstly it gives a brief overview of the history of language endangerment. After examining factors to assess the vitality and the degree of endangerment of a language it discusses the value of cultural and linguistic heritage in language maintenance. Finally it lays down some ways and methods by which English language teachers can strategically use L2 English to convey indigenous cultural values.

1. Introduction

Of the estimated 7,000 languages spoken in the world today, linguists say nearly half are in danger of extinction and likely to disappear in this century. Of these 7000 languages fewer than 300 cover 5.5 billion speakers. All the rest of the languages, 95% of them, are spoken by just 300 million people.

Approximately 85% of the almost 7,000 languages of the world are spoken in only 22 countries. Some of these countries are home to large numbers of different languages. In other words 5% of the people in the world speak 95% of the world's languages, which means that 95% of the cultural heterogeneity of the planet – 95% of the variations in ways of seeing the world – is vested with less than 5% of the people, and this problem worsens each year. But the question that can be asked is do we really need so many languages. Language diversity did not *cause* the evolutionary success of humans. However the knowledge generated by all those successfully adapting cultural groups over hundreds of years is stored in the languages now spoken around the world and it is this knowledge base that is under threat It is this knowledge that needs to be

rescued as a decline in this diversity could possibly put our planet and the survival of the human species at risk.

In this paper, I do not claim any definite conclusions, as even within each language group there is a great deal of variance. I would just like to present a preliminary analysis of language endangerment and suggest some ways by which teachers of English can help their students in saving some of these languages, which can be used as an agenda for further research in the area of language endangerment and second language teaching.

Language endangerment may be caused primarily by external forces such as military, economic, religious, cultural, or educational subjugation. It may also be caused by internal forces, such as a community's negative attitude towards its own language or by a general decline of group identity. Internal pressures always derive from external factors. Together, they halt the intergenerational transmission of linguistic and cultural traditions. Many minority communities associate their disadvantaged social and economic position with their ancestral culture and language. Speakers of minority languages abandon their languages and cultures, either because they do not wish to be discriminated or to enhance social mobility for themselves and their children.

The key point is that for the language to be maintained, it needs to be passed on to, and acquired by, each successive generation. Because language is tied not only to communication with family but to cultural identity as well, it is often parents who decide to teach their mother tongue to their children (Fishman, 1991). Over time, many minority languages experience language shift. As children participate in school related activities and are exposed to media in the majority language they become more assimilated into the dominant language and slowly lose pride in their native languages. Therefore a lot of attention is being paid these days to the importance of indigenous cultural issues and concepts including some integration into curricula.

Ethnic identity is sometimes defined by factors within language. By now, it is well documented that languages are vanishing at an alarming rate. This is happening all over the world. And it is not just languages with few speakers that are dying. Even languages with several thousands of speakers are at threat.

For example about 1618 languages are spoken in India. In such linguistically highly heterogeneous countries only few languages have significant numbers of speakers and very few languages are assigned an official status within these states. Large numbers of these languages which are not listed in the constitution and have no governmental support in any aspect, are threatened by extinction. As children from such groups grow, the influence of the dominant state culture is often strong, leading to not only language but also culture assimilation, as language is linked to culture.

Language and culture have an inextricable and interdependent relationship. Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue that “language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other” (p. 235). The relationship between language and culture is made meaningful in language learning as “the person who learns language without learning culture risks becoming a fluent fool” (Bennett, Bennett & Allen, p.237)

The general attitude is that Indians love their culture and would ideally wish to keep the language alive in their own families. But that does not seem easy as it requires far too much time and energy. Although most speakers of minority languages claim to know their native language at the oral level, the majority of the concepts would be difficult to express in their native language as most native language including the seemingly robust and healthy languages like

Telugu or Kannada lack the technical vocabulary needed to express scientific modern concepts. Today, English remains the language usually spoken in many urban Indian homes and the lingua franca for social communication with speakers of other regional languages. The major concern is that there is a general opinion that English cannot be neglected in favor of either the national language Hindi or any of the state languages. The main reason for this is that English is not seen as the language of colonization but as the language of international commerce. Some people regard it as opportunity for social mobility and seem to believe that it bears little threat to cultural identity. However over time it seems to have become the primary language for several Indians.

2. Language and Culture Maintenance

Researchers have studied issues such as language maintenance, language shift, language loss, language attrition, language decay, and on a societal level, language death, from a variety of perspectives. Endangered languages are not necessarily languages with few speakers. Even though small communities are more vulnerable to external threats, the size of a group does not always matter. The viability of a language is determined first and foremost by the general attitude of its speakers towards their heritage culture, of which their language may be considered the most important component. In this respect, the intergenerational transmission of the language is the most important feature of language vitality.

The home is often a key element in language maintenance because both consciously and unconsciously it creates an environment that will most times impair language maintenance. Parents often fear that if children use the native language at home they are likely to do poorly in academics at school. So they speak and encourage English language usage in their children. As children grow up there is again peer pressure and most adolescents feel the need to follow the culture of society at large which is very western. And unless the language is maintained at home it cannot be used elsewhere. With diversity, and inter-caste and inter-community marriages it is easy to see the certainty of lesser and lesser intergenerational transmission. Within a couple of generations the language is likely to die.

3. Method

As English language teachers have been involved in the teaching of the English language to their students, little attention has been laid to what happens to the native languages of the learners. Intentionally or not, one of the distinguishing features of educational institutions is their universalistic orientation rather than a particularistic orientation. And as they reflect the culture and social organization of the dominant society, they naturally perpetuate its values, beliefs etc. As cultural assimilation is not desired, alternative goals must be adequately articulated so as to be able to assess the extent to which schools may or may not be able to contribute to their attainment. One such alternative goal that has received widespread attention is that of cultural pluralism.

Learning is a continuous process and learners learn in different ways and at different paces. Learners bring their own orientations to the culture learning process. An educational approach that recognizes the multifaceted and dynamic nature of a continually evolving society must allow for the varied cultural expressions of ethnic and religious beliefs and practices within the broader framework of each society. Cultural pluralism is aimed at stressing on the ways and customs of the minority community and culture just as assimilation refers to appropriating to the dominant culture. Some individuals and some groups wish to stress the minority culture, while

others are oriented toward the dominant culture, with still others desiring the ‘best of both worlds’

4. Preserving and revitalizing language and culture

Over the past two decades there are a lot of efforts being put in by both linguists and speakers of endangered languages. Linguists are recording texts by the last speakers of languages across the world. Worthy of mention in the Indian context is the work of Anvita Abbi a senior linguist with Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, who studied and recorded Boa’s language and songs. Boa Sr. was an Indian Great Andamanese elder and was the last survivor who remembered any Bo, a great Andamanese language.

It would be unfair for members of communities to use excuses for language endangerment, as it is primarily their fault. In most cases the other language is not imposed upon them. It is very important for the community members themselves to have a strong desire to pass on the language. They should have a strong sense of loyalty to both their language and culture. Only then can there be intergenerational transmission.

The major languages of the world have great literary traditions. But most of the indigenous languages with few speakers have no literary tradition. In today’s world, no books means language death. Linguists are helping indigenous peoples from communities with endangered languages to write dictionaries and grammar books which can give school children who are participating in bilingual education programs basic tools for learning their languages. Native speakers of endangered languages also are obtaining degrees in linguistics and joining the effort to document those languages.

As teachers of English in India, providing a safe, supportive and non-judgmental environment to learners will encourage learners from all language groups to grow in confidence and build a positive image about their language and identity which would in turn go a long way in saving our native languages.

When a language is lost, a part of culture is lost as well. Languages are an important source for the reconstruction of cultural history as language is related to culture. The loss of a language entails the loss of cultural heritage and every culture represents a unique way of life. The loss of cultural diversity is therefore a loss of experience and knowledge of an alternative way of life. The documentation of language also helps in the study of traditions, especially oral traditions.

Cultural sustainability, the ability to keep a specific culture “alive” when that culture is in danger of extinction due to assimilation into dominant cultures, is important to teachers, especially those who teach the English language to students in a multilingual country like India. So how can English language teachers integrate indigenous culture into their teaching?

This can be done by integrating tasks which would spread awareness about native cultures among their learners.

Sample Cultural sustainability tasks

Task 1

Students attempt to answer these questions:

- How is a person’s social standing determined and shown in your culture?
- How important is ancestry in your culture?

Task 2

- Speakers of native languages can be asked to gather oral narratives in their language and translate them into English.
- Students can be asked to investigate and determine the cultural values encoded in such narratives such as arranged marriages, food, patriarchy, the concept of dowry, gender equality etc.

Task 3

Ask students to write their own creative stories in English based on components of contemporary culture in their community.

- What are the major celebrations in your community?
- What are the typical weekend recreation activities for youngsters/middle aged people?

Task 4

- Sing a folk song of your community. Translate the lyrics of the song in English.
- Translate the proverbs in your language into English.

Task 5

What are the religious and social conventions of your community on

- Dasara
- Diwali
- Ugadi
- Sankranthi
- Christmas
- Ramazan
- Marriage
- Cradle ceremony
- Menarche
- Death

5. Conclusion

One of the most important components of a culture is its language. With language, people not only expeditiously communicate; they also express their values, beliefs, and world views. When a language becomes extinct, a part of the cultural patrimony of humanity is lost. Using these lessons will expose students to various cultures in India. Though no specific communities have been targeted as examples in this paper, the primary concepts—storytelling, songs, gender roles, birth, marriage, food etc. are fairly universal in most cultures. Teachers can also adapt these lessons to make them better relate to local indigenous culture(s). Despite the loss or future loss of an indigenous language, the “roots” of that indigenous culture can be preserved through the learning of another language, such as English through engaging in narration and translation of the traditional and contemporary practices and customs of the various linguistic groups that our country is rich in. Thus the linguistic and cultural elements can be nourished and revived.

It is as much the English language teacher’s task to foster an atmosphere of respect for the native languages and cultures of their students as it is to teach English because the gains accrued by this are twofold. Maintaining another language helps in the cognitive development of

our students as well. While validating their linguistic and cultural identities this kind of consciousness and awareness raising can also ease the transition to fluent English users.

Languages need communities in order to live. So, only a community can save an endangered language. This point is fundamental: the saving of a language demands commitment, a shared sense of responsibility, a clear sense of direction, and a wide range of special skills. Many languages need management to survive.

WorkCited

- Bennett, Bennett & Allen, Developing intercultural competence in the language classroom, in *Culture as the core: Perspectives in second language learning*. USA: Information Age Publishing. (2003)
- Fishman, J.A, *Reversing Language Shift, Theoretical and Empirical Foundations of Assistance to Threatened Languages*, Multilingual Matters, Clevedon. (1991)
<https://www.ethnologue.com/>
- Language Vitality and Endangerment* UNESCO, 1968 [1953] (2004)
- Mitchell and Myles, *Second language learning theories* (2nd ed.) London: Arnold. (2004)
www.unesco.org/culture/ich/doc/src/00120-EN.pdf, UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages, (2003)