

Promoting learner autonomy through translanguaging: A theoretical perspective

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Abstract

India is a multilingual and multicultural country. In this country, students come from diverse linguistic backgrounds with diverse resources. But, their linguistic resources often remain unutilized as minority students are imparted education in dominant languages only. Though various educational commissions and policies (NPE 2016, NCF 2005, POA 1992 etc.) recommended to impart education in mother tongue of the students, their recommendations are not implemented at grass root level. In this scenario, translanguaging can be promoted to address the issues of linguistic diversity in Indian classroom. Translanguaging is the strategy which can fulfil these needs. Using this strategy, a teacher can deliver his instruction in one language, can conduct task in indigenous languages and gives the students flexibility to switch from one language to other in a constructive way (Garcia, 2009) This theoretical study aims to find out how translanguaging can promote learner autonomy in a multilingual classroom.

Keywords: multilingualism, translanguaging, strategy, learner autonomy

Introduction

The classroom scenario in India has changed in the twenty first century. It has become heterogeneous with its diversified needs and challenges since a considerable number of students belong to different linguistics backgrounds. Therefore, the classroom interaction should be focused on paying attention to fulfill these diversified needs of the students. However, the traditional classroom system often accepts the monopoly of a single dominant language by denying the possibility of a multilingual classroom (Dua, 1990). Even in many cases, the classroom teachers deliver their lecture in the dominant language only. Therefore, it becomes a problem to the minority language speakers who attend the school with little knowledge of the dominant language (Cenoz & Gorter, 2011), and as a result they face much difficulty to comprehend and correlate the lessons with their personal lives. Education gradually becomes a burden to them and they start quitting the school (Feldman & Babu, 2011). In this context, if translanguaging can be adopted as a strategy to promote autonomy of the learners (Garcia, 2009), it will equip them with freedom to use various languages in a single classroom and provide them the opportunity to freely switch from one language to another. The learners will be able to correlate their learning experience with their personal lives, which in turn will enhance learner involvement and participation inside the classroom.

Translanguaging is said to be “an act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential. . . It is an important educational practice – to construct understandings, to make sense of the world and of the academic material, to mediate with others, to acquire other ways of languaging” (Garcia, 2009). Gutierrez et al. (2001) have termed translanguaging as a “systematic, strategic, affiliative, and sense-making process”. It is also found to be a very common phenomenon and the reality of our everyday life; though modern classroom teachers pay considerably little attention to it and most of the time they consider translanguaging to be unscientific or unnatural (Otheguy, 2015, Gazula et al, 2016). They fail to take into account that translanguaging is necessary for understanding the linguistic diversity of a classroom. It provides learners the space to put forth their ideology where they will be able to include their linguistic resources in the curriculum. It also breaks the traditional concept of language hierarchy and puts the language on linear space (Creese & Blackledge, 2015). The phenomenon of translanguaging presents the learners with opportunity to take active part in the classroom, to voice their views through debate, discussion and other decision

making processes. It creates a mutually cooperative classroom by giving space to every individual learner, since it lets them share a social space where they can bring together their personal history, experiences, beliefs, attitudes and ideology into the classroom. This strategy in turn helps the learners to make meaning from the classroom context, shape their experience through the classroom discourse and gain knowledge and understanding through the use of various languages in the classroom. In addition, it makes the learners autonomous by giving them the opportunity to think, reflect and construct their own knowledge in the classroom.

Learner autonomy rejects the traditional teacher-centric classroom boundaries and advocates a new discourse where learners take the learning process as a self-regulated and self-inductive activity, thus taking charge of their own learning experience (Holec, 1981); it allows them “to plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes” (Benson, 2003). Learner autonomy has been classified into four different perspectives, namely technical, psychological, socio-cultural, and political-critical (Benson, 1997; 2006). The socio cultural perspective emphasizes on the interaction of communication between learners and their environment, which generates a new discourse in the classroom.

Learner autonomy requires the learners to control their learning condition in numerous forms, like learners’ involvement, learners’ reflection and appropriate language use. They set up their learning goals or objectives, select their own learning content and evaluate the whole learning outcome all by themselves. This kind of classroom helps the students to interact with each other, take part into debate, discussion and decision making process. It makes the learning process more humanistic and goal oriented. Here, the teacher facilitates varieties of classroom activities which give the learners the opportunity to interact with their peers. It maximizes their learning capacity (Vygotskey, 1978) and gives them a two-fold chance of interaction – 1. in interpersonal level, 2. in intrapersonal level. The teacher also helps the learners to maximize the use of target language and initiate various modes of interactive discourse. He encourages the students to evaluate themselves from time to time and keep a record of these activities. Furthermore, the teacher helps the learners in setting up their learning targets and skillfully helps them to facilitate the learning activity. Here, he acts as a manager, an observer as well as an adviser for the learning discourse. The teacher thus plays a vital role in creating and monitoring learning groups and constructing a learning space for the students where the latter can accommodate themselves comfortably with a spontaneous mindset.

Need and Significance of the Study

Kothari Commission (1964 – 1966) has discussed about implementing ‘three language formula’ in the country’s education curriculum. But, Mohanty (1990) said that this concept has mostly been abused rather than being utilized properly. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) has addressed to the issue and opined in favor of promoting multilingualism in classroom. It has admitted that the government should provide adequate facilities to impart education in vernacular languages, but talked significantly less about the procedure of practical classroom implementation. Even a report on Multilingual Education Orissa (2011) by NCERT has felt the urgency of multilingual education to bring quality and equality in the education system. It used multilingualism as a tool to uplift the socio economic status of the deprived class and talked of incorporating multilingual curriculum in the school system. D. P. Pattanayak (1984) once said in multilingual countries like India speaking in more than one or two languages is a common fact in daily life and restriction to this choice is unnatural. He also stated that a single language dominance is uneconomic as well as absurd. Rama Kant Agnihotri (2010) once talked about the need of multilingualism in Indian schools and said that multilingualism should be the center of a classroom discourse. Our modern classroom should adopt an approach to deal effectively with the diverse linguistic resources that are already present in the classroom. Article 350A of the Indian Constitution has given an emphasis on providing adequate facilities of mother tongue instructions in the primary stages of schooling. Indian classrooms are heterogeneous in nature and different language speakers assemble in a single classroom, and hence implementing multilingualism in Indian scenario is the dire need of this century and translanguaging is one effective strategy to deal with these multilingual pupils in the classroom.

Literature Review

Translanguaging has the potential to transform the multicultural education system positively. It optimizes the use of students’ native language in the classroom and strengthens the process of socialization. It allows space for learners to go beyond the boundaries of a fixed linguistic system and destroys the traditional language hierarchy by creating an equitable society and classroom (Garcia & Kleyn, 2016). Garcia & Sylvan (2016) opined that translanguaging is an effective strategy which helps the students and teachers to build the sense of learning in a constructive way. They describe it as a medium to bring heterogeneity in the classroom by creating a sense of collaboration among students and giving them opportunity to integrate the content with their own language, thus

promoting experiential learning among them. Moreover, translanguaging imparts broader thinking and knowledge among students and engages them into complex discursive practices that enable the learners to develop a standard academic way of language use. Creese and Blackledge (2015) stated that translanguaging creates a sense of identity among the speakers, especially in a linguistic complex society. This strategy refutes the conventional fixed territory of language by conceiving it as a fluid process; hence igniting the process of socialization as it helps in negotiating the identity among its speakers. Garcia & Wei (2014) opined that translanguaging creates a socio-educational process in the classroom where students construct their own language and identity by combining different modes and media across different social contexts. It brings criticality and creativity among its users by eliminating boundaries, norms and rules of the traditional language framework and creates a new system where language emerges from social interactions. Furthermore, it uses different linguistics, political and social phenomena critically to question or problematize the existing situation through reasoned responses. Heuge (2015) identified translanguaging as a potential tool to encourage multilingualism in classroom that can also be used to bridge the epistemological gaps in the curriculum. Martinez et al. (2015) in their study on elementary students of Southern California have explored how translanguaging can be helpful in moving fluidly from one language to another. Though the process of translanguaging is complex in a classroom situation, it represents the actual reality of a multilingual classroom as it breaks the traditional notions of linguistic barrier and provides space to the learners to communicate freely in the classroom in different languages. It is a powerful strategy which helps the teachers to deliver his instruction in a productive and generative way. The aforesaid authors also attempted to prove it a legitimate discourse in the classroom situation.

Palmer et al. (2014) too discourage the act of language separation. In their study on a public school in Texas, they have suggested translanguaging as an important instructional strategy to use various linguistic resources in the classroom. It gives the students space to discuss the sensitive and important issues in the classroom. As students speak in various languages, minority languages also get space in the classroom discourse. It helps the minority students to create a sense of belonging in the classroom, which makes them more productive. It also helps the teachers to draw on various skills in the classroom, which enriches the academic learning. Wei (2010) in his research on three Chinese youth in Britain have explored that translanguaging gives an individual the opportunity of cultural translation among various traditions. It provides them with a space for creativity and criticality. It gives an individual a social space where multilingual speakers can incorporate various dimensions

of languages by combining personal history and experiences together. It enables an individual to combine different linguistic structure; helps him to go beyond a traditional concept of language boundary and gives a transformative power which makes an individual's experience come alive.

Developing learner autonomy in a classroom is a substantial challenge for teachers since it requires various skills of thought, reflection and analysis. The students are motivated to learn intentionally and intrinsically by engaging themselves with the content and the process of learning. Hence, it helps them to bring out the creativity to develop their metalinguistic, metacognitive and cognitive strategy as it initiates independent interaction in the classroom. (Little, 2004). Bensen (2011) in his paper has admitted that autonomy is multidimensional and takes various forms in separate dimensions. He mentioned three perspectives of autonomous learning – implications of sociocultural autonomy, teacher autonomy and new technology. While talking about sociocultural autonomy, he has made a shift towards socially acceptable ways of language use, thinking, learning and teaching. It gives emphasis on the idea that autonomy is a social construct; hence, we learn languages when we interact with each other in a meaningful way. Negari and Donyadery (2013) in their study have found out a significant correlation among learner's autonomous belief, self-efficacy and language performances. This belief in self-efficacy plays a pivotal role in learners' functioning in the classroom and they are found to accomplish their tasks in an innovative way. The aforementioned authors have also found out that autonomous learners are mostly self-efficient and they possess the capabilities to perform better in different challenging situations.

Research Gaps

Previous literatures have discussed several issues on translanguaging and autonomous learning. But very few literatures have attempted to discuss on the issues how translanguaging enhances the learning ability of the students by enabling learner autonomy in the classroom. The present paper attempts to discuss how translanguaging allows learners with the autonomy to switch 'between, among and across' languages and help an individual become an independent learner.

Translanguaging as a Strategy to Build Learner Autonomy

In the Indian classroom scenario, translanguaging is a legitimate discursive practice (Gracia 2009, Creese & Ledge 2010) as it addresses the heterogeneity of the multilingual classroom. It gives the learners opportunity "to move freely within, between and among languages" (Shohamy 2013). The following is an example of translanguaging in Oriya, India:

T (Teacher): (Showing the picture side of the flash card)

Keteta ambaachhi?

“How many mangoes are there?”

S1 (Student 1): Aboy

“One”

T: (the teacher did not mention the Oriya name for one, that is, eka,

But went on to show the flash card for three) Ethireketetaambaachikahila?

“How many mangoes are there?”

S2: Yagi

“Three” (in Saora)

T: (Showing another flash card with picture of five mangoes)

Ethira keteta acchi kahia?

“Say, how many are there in this card?”

Ss: (Children started counting in Saora)

Unji

“Five” (in Saora, in Chorus).

(Adopted from Mohanty et al. 2010)

It is a general norm of interaction in the Indian context and is also very necessary in order to understand the linguistic diversity in a multilingual classroom. In the translanguaging process, languages break the traditional boundary of the classroom as learners draw resources from various other languages by removing linguistic barriers. They often make use of the dominant (widely spoken)

language to develop the weaker languages and promote a multilingual identity through negotiation of meanings in the classroom. They share information and discuss content in various languages and at the same time they get the chance to participate actively in the classroom, to voice their views and raise questions independently. It also gives them the opportunity to shape experience, gain understanding and knowledge through the use of various languages. Furthermore, it makes them creative as well as critical since it provides them with a space to think, imagine, and develop their ideas independently. The process of translanguaging thus enhances the learners' cognitive skills and eventually they engage themselves in mutually respectful ways to learn from each other.

In a translanguaging process, one language is used to reinforce the other in order to better understand the activities among different languages (Garcia 2009, Lewis, Jones and Baker 2012). In this respect when students navigate between and among various dialects and the structure of language systems, they feel a sense of belongingness in the classroom. This strategy helps them to activate their prior knowledge so that they can bring together different dimensions of personal history, experience and environment into the classroom. It also gives them the chance to value and exercise their own ideas and as a result bridges the gaps among different linguistic systems by creating a new social space for students in the classroom. In this way, translanguaging shapes a new experience and creates an understanding among different languages; it provides a new platform to students where they share and discuss ideas in various languages. Gradually they learn to accommodate and assimilate new information in their minds, produce knowledge which is rich in its nature. Furthermore, translanguaging provides a new context to invent a new ideology, negotiate and reconstruct it in the classroom and creates an opportunity of metalinguistic scaffolding by going beyond the traditional classroom framework. It creates a situation where social, political and cultural contexts are merged together, generating a new discourse in the classroom. On the other hand, it also creates an opportunity of socialization among the students involved.

Conclusion

Translanguaging engages students in complex discursive practices within a multilingual classroom which enable the learners to develop standard academic ways of learning and language use. It capacitates them to make sense of the multilingual classroom and provides the students opportunity to implement their ideas and actions which in turn helps them in developing literacy among themselves. When students from various linguistic backgrounds are engaged into a various classroom activity,

they overcome the norms of the traditional classroom system and take into account various linguistic and semiotic resources into a single classroom discourse. It creates a space for broader thinking and knowledge-building among the learners by making them autonomous, and also has the potential to resolve dynamic tensions among languages for nurturing a space for various languages in a single classroom. Hence, the prevalent multilingual education framework should include translanguaging as a strategy to strengthen the education system in India.

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