

Workshop on 'Language & Learning' (06-08 October, 2016)

Concept Note

Language, it is often reiterated, is constitutive of our identities, playing a distinctive role in the discourse of mass-media, advertising, gender marking, politeness behavior, class formation, political activity and, most importantly - in education. Our focus in this workshop will thus be on the cognitive and communicative skills facilitated by language amongst school children in particular. This is because of the now widely accepted 'Language Bio-program' hypothesis proposed by Lenneberg which suggests a 'language window' that is open from birth to 53 to puberty. Although this window never entirely closes, children most effortlessly acquire one or more languages between the ages of 1-14 years. There is also convincing evidence that this is probably the period best suited to equip an individual with mental capabilities to last a lifetime.

, language is central to our existence. It is inconceivable that we could ever manage to pose important questions to ourselves about our societies, cultures and systems of knowledge, our past histories, our present quandaries and our complex futures, without language. Educators and thinkers from Rabindranath Tagore to Paulo Freire and Noam Chomsky have long regarded language as a mental pivot, a primary medium for the transmission of knowledge, the articulation of innovative ideas and critical thinking. Education, indeed, is ideally supposed to begin with such linguistically driven processes of questioning as well as with continuous attempts to answer and rearticulate certain basic questions in every age, across the entire fields of the sciences and the arts.

The irony, however, seems to be that this fundamental tool for shaping the 'self', namely language, about which there has been a very sophisticated tradition of thinking from Panini onwards on the Indian subcontinent, has been greatly neglected in the contemporary Indian educational scenario. This is especially surprising given our rich heritage of languages and scripts, the historic formation of 'linguistic states' after Independence, the vigorous debates in the Constituent Assembly on the 'official language(s)' of India, the key Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution devoted to a listing of India's languages, the devising of the 'three-language formula' in the 60s and so forth.

is it that such a potent inheritance of thinking about language has come to be forgotten or, at the very least, become far too chaotic and Babel-like to be clearly articulated in presentday India? Such a lack of clarity in the ways in which we conceive of the relationship between language and learning could in fact profoundly affect the very foundations of our school and university education across the country. Further, in the rapidly transmuting scenario of an India that possesses a uniquely youthful demographic in an otherwise aging global world, the qualities of mind that we wish our young citizens to have and their access to a hopeful future seem inextricably bound up with 'the language question'. It is this context that makes the subject of this workshop quite urgent.

, it is widely admitted that the quality of education in our schools is extremely variable with some children who have highly privileged language access and others who may be said to suffer from severe language deprivation or what one might even call debilitating forms of 'language malnutrition'. In addition, the twin problems of rote learning and punitive exams harshly judged by grades and grades alone, without any space for debate and questioning, are so familiar that even to raise them comprises a rote objection. As Tagore strikingly put it long:

From our very childhood... we are made to lose our world to find a bagful of information instead. We rob the child of his earth to teach him geography, of language to teach him 54 grammar...Children's minds are sensitive to the influences of the world...This sensitive receptivity allows them, without any strain, to master language, which is the most complex and difficult instrument of expression, full of indefinable ideas and abstract symbols... In childhood we learn our lessons with the aid of both body and mind, with all the senses active and eager.

The workshop sought to reexamine, in the rapidly mutating context of 21st century India, some of the 'body and mind' educational anxieties so sharply expressed over a century ago by Rabindranath Tagore.

It is said that global modernity and post-modernity in the time since Tagore wrote has been marked by 'the linguistic turn' in academia during which a variety of perspectives on language learning were developed. Scholars like Chomsky believe, for example, that language rules are 'innate' i.e. they are already present in the human mind before it is exposed to society. Still others believe that the 'general cognitive abilities' that account for other kinds of learning also account for language. A large number of thinkers subscribe to the view that language is essentially socially embedded and that all learning takes place through social interactions. Some regard language simply as a pairing of a lexicon and syntax but all agree that the phenomenon of language is both complex and the most crucial attribute of our humanness. This workshop examined some of these theoretical viewpoints in order to make a fresh analysis of the current lacunae in our approaches to education.

More than thirty years ago, Shirley Brice-Heath, an educational anthropologist, predicted in a famous paper that in the decades ahead the functional knowledge about language that has come from linguistics will be like certain principles of mathematics, physics, and biology; basic knowledge for other disciplines as well as for practical domains such as teacher training, legal and medical education, and computer software production... Language increasingly will be a natural part of the research domain of fields ranging from computer science to industrial sociology'.

It is hard to disagree today with such a prediction. The approach to studying a complex phenomenon like language can only be multidisciplinary in nature. This workshop will bring together linguists, scientists and other academicians with professional teachers and practitioners in the field of language teaching. It will not only aim to create awareness about the nature of language and explain its deep relationship to learning in the widest sense but will also seek to recommend sets of practical and implementable measures that will strengthen the hands of all those who wield a pen – even if that 'pen' is increasingly likely to be a computer – to tell new stories.

Workshop on 'Language and Learning' was organised at IAS during 06-08 October 2016. Professor Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, HauzKhas, New Delhi and Dr. Rajesh Kumar, Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Madras, Chennai were the Conveners of the workshop. The welcome address was given by Professor Vijaya Shankar Varma, National Fellow, IAS. Professor Rukmini Bhaya Nair, Convener of the workshop delivered the inaugural Address.

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