Trilingualism: An Asset or a Liability?

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Abstract

This paper looks at Trilingualism from different perspectives. After giving the background of the traditional belief in the superiority of monolingualism, this paper examines the validity of these notions in the light of research carried out in different parts of the world. The argument, supporting tri-multilingualism, is followed by the conclusion that as opposed to popular belief prevalent in the West in 1960s and in Pakistan now, trilingualism should be seen as a blessing rather than a curse. Instead of depriving our children of their rich linguistic heritage the parents and teachers should make the right language choices for them.

Introduction

As opposed to bilingualism studies, trilingualism studies have come to the fore only recently (Genesee, 2003). These studies approach the subject of trilingualism from an educational (Cenoz & Genesee, 1998), developmental (Quay, 2001), psycholinguistic (Cenoz et al., 2001), and sociolinguistic angle (Hoffman & Ytsma, 2003). Among other factors, this surge in interest can be attributed to 'the recognition that contrary to earlier views, simultaneous acquisition of two, or more, languages is not uncommon' (Genesee, 2003). In the absence of any valid statistics, Tucker (1998) speculates that the number of children who grow up as bilinguals is equal to or even higher than those who are raised as monolinguals. It has also been claimed that, 'Monolingual speech communities are rare and monolingual countries are even rarer' (Spolsky, 1998: 51).

A blanket term multilingualism is often used in sociolinguistic research into language contact (Hofman & Ytsma, 2003). Many other studies treat trilingualism under the umbrella term bilingualism (e.g. Dewaele, 2003). Trilingualism is said to refer to those socio-cultural linguistic contexts which involve the use of at least three discrete languages and the speakers who find themselves in these situations are referred to as trilinguals (Hofman & Ytsma, 2003). For this paper I take trilingulism as the ability of the speakers to use at least three languages actively, one of which is their mother tongue (i.e. the language of origin).

Clyne (1997) states that apart from particular regional or national tendencies, there has always been a constant tension between the forces of monolingualism and multilingualism. Globally, there are waves of more positive and more negative policies towards multilingualism. The period immediately before the World War I and between the wars was mainly negative due to the influence of xenophobia and monoculturalism.

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The monolingual approach is essentially Eurocentric and is in direct opposition to the social reality. It attempts to impose a single lens on the world where bi-or multilingualism is a norm in the many countries (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Multilingualism: A Blessing or a Curse

The belief in the superiority of monolingualism can be traced back to the Christian religious beliefs about languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). The Christian and Islamic beliefs about the origin and diversity of languages greatly vary. The myths in Bible make Adam invent language himself, 'And Adam gave names to all cattle, and to the fowl of the air, and to every beast of the field' (Genesis 2: 20). Whereas, according to the Holy Quran, Allah taught the names of animals, plants, etc., to Adam. 'He taught Adam the names of all things' (2: 31). Bible states that there was only one language at least until the flood and then after the tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 4-9) there were divisions of land and language. The Bible sees the diversity of languages as a curse, a punishment for people's pride. People's quarrels have been seen as causing diversity in languages. In other words, it could be the punishment for quarrelling. Conversely, the Holy Quran sees diversity as positive and 'has established language variation as one of the great signs of Allah on earth' (Abdussalam, 1998: 59). This stands equally for linguistic and ethnic/racial diversity, 'Among His other signs are the creation of heaven and earth and the diversity of your tongues and colours. Surely there are signs in this for all mankind (Holy Quran 30:22).

Most researchers in the West, until the middle of the seventeenth century, conducted their languages-related studies with the Bible stories in the background (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). A multilingual speaker is still seen by many, even in present times, as an exception. It is interesting to note that Chomsky's 'ideal speaker' (1965: 2) is monolingual. This has been called 'the ideology of monolingual reductionism/ stupidity/naivety' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: 238). It has been argued that this ideology legitimises and rationalises the reduction of languages (ibid). Bi- or multilingualism is still seen as harmful to the mental growth of a child and learning many languages, a burden, 'Maintaining two extra languages seems too cumbersome a task' (Paulston, 1994: 33).

West (1958: 96) described bilingualism as an 'inevitable disadvantage' at both the individual and societal level. He further stated that lack of literary tradition in the home language can lead to people becoming 'emotionally warped or sterilized'. When the 'substandard child' is made to learn at school through the medium of a different language than the home language, their studies are 'a dead loss'. Phillipson (1994) states that this study conveys false information and that such approach is psycholinguistically naïve. It draws its principles from a linguistic dogma, namely that each language is a system of internally consistent contrasts and relations, and the two-code theory which implied that learners were operating two distinct systems that needed to be kept separate, and the best way to eliminate interference and errors was to learn monolingually. This view of the relationship between mother tongue i.e. L1 and second or foreign language,

L2 has been rendered psycholinguistically inadequate as a result of psychological, psycholinguistic, and educational research. The significance of cognitive development in L1 for effective L2 learning and the interdependence of proficiency in each language has been proved significant in the light of research (Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukomaa, 1976; Toukomaa and Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977; Cummins, 1979; 1984). It has also been proved that failure to provide educational conditions for the development of cognitive-academic in L1 as well as initial literacy in the L1 may invalidate efforts to build up such skill in L2. If a multilingual child performs badly in a test it 'is a result of neglect of one of the languages, normally their mother tongue, a generally badly planned and/or implemented education, and biased research, *not* their bilingualism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000: 243). It has been proved through research that high level bi- or multilinguals as a group, compared to the group of monolinguals, are statistically more likely to perform better on tests measuring the following:

- several aspects of general intelligence
- cognitive flexibility
- divergent thinking
- various aspects of creativity
- sensitivity to and capacity to interpret feedback and non verbal cues, and meanings
- metalinguistics and possibly metacultural awareness
- efficiency in learning further, additional languages
  (ibid)

It is believed that the advocacy of the desirability of monolingualism also helps in propagating and perhaps legitimising some so called key tenets of ESL/EFL in the education of dominated countries (Phillipson, 1992). These are:

- English is best taught monolingually
- the earlier English is introduced, the better the results
- the more English is taught the better results
- if other languages are used much, standards of English will drop

Labelling these tenets 'fallacies' Phillipson, in a detailed analysis, proves them to be scientifically false. The monolingual fallacy has already been discussed; now we come to the others. If the children receive maximum exposure to good mother tongue teaching and high quality little exposure to L2, their performance has been shown similar or even better than that of those children who have received maximum exposure to English (Ramirez et al. 1991). Edward Williams (1998) in two large-scale empirical studies tested about 1,500 students in Zambia and Malawi in grades 1-7. In Zambia children were taught through the medium of English, and local language as a subject from grade 1 (called submersion education), whereas, in Malawi, they were taught through local languages, in most cases with their mother tongues, and English as a subject during the first 4 years. From grade 5 onwards, children in Malawi also study through the medium of English. The test results showed that the results of Zambian

students, who had all their schooling in English, were no better than those of the Malawi children who had only studied English as a subject. In fact the Malawi children did slightly better than the Zambian students. In the Canadian Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996 Report it has been stated, 'Submersion strategies which neither respect the child's first language nor help them gain fluency in the second language may result in the impaired fluency in both languages (quoted in Martin, 2000: 3). Research has shown that if the teaching of the other language is subtractive, it yields negative results; however, if it is additive then the results can reverse.

Trilingualism: A Liability?

During my doctoral research carried out in Multan (Asif, 2005a)on Siraiki language I discovered that the heads and teachers of the urban schools, especially the elite English medium schools, catering for the children of middle and higher social classes still believe in the so called key tenets of ESL/EFL (Phillipson, 1992). These schools encourage their students to be bilingual only in Urdu and English. Bilingualism or trilingualism is tolerated as long as one of the languages is not any regional language of Pakistan and in this case Siraiki, which is the mother tongue or home language of the majority of the children studying there. The parents are 'advised' by the schoolteachers to raise their children as monolinguals in English and if they cannot speak exclusively in English with them then they should use Urdu with dense code-switching from English with their children at home. The Head of a school commented that for teaching the 'right' language to the children, the teachers of pre-nursery and nursery have to 'train' both the parents and the children, 'I tell the parents that if they really realize the importance of English then they must speak this language with them and if they can't then they must code switch to English often', she added. Several researchers have reported similar practices in their research. Cummins (1984) in the Canadian and US educational context illustrates the mistaken advice given to parents by schools such as abandoning the home language or providing extra tuition in the dominant language. In Greece, teachers frequently advise the parents of bilingual children to speak only Greek with their children at home (Cummins, 2003). Beardsmore (2003) believes that the assumption held by the teachers that the elimination of the first language as quickly as possible will help promote the learning of the second language is erroneous. Bruck (1984) seconds this opinion with respect to her research on immersion programmes in Canada.

A vast majority of urban parents, under the influence of such an advice by the educationists, are depriving their children from becoming trilinguals. Such parents are appreciated by the teachers who are not transmitting their language to their children (Asif, 2005b). A teacher teaching nursery class in an elite English medium school in Multan reported that almost all of her students, with a few exceptions, come with a full knowledge of Urdu because, 'Parents are becoming well aware, they don't teach them [their children] Siraiki…they know it can become very difficult, a problem for our school system'. In other words, the Siraiki children who by any chance do not leave Siraiki outside their school gates are perceived as 'a problem'. The school authorities can

encourage the parents to transmit Siraiki, Urdu and English simultaneously but what they are encouraging is subtractive bilingualism. The same teacher later labelled those parents as 'uneducated' who 'despite' the advice of the school authorities encourage their children to speak in Siraiki at home. 'Some uneducated, some uneducated ones…again and again, again and again we tell them not to speak Siraiki to their children…I am not Siraiki and can't understand it so I feel stressed if a child speaks some Siraiki word'. The children, thus, are made to dispense with their mother tongue. This 'rejection of the experience of other languages, meaning the exclusion of the child's most intense existential experience… [is the] direct influence of linguicist educational policies [which] cause cultural dislocation among children' (Phillipson, 1992: 189).

The dismissal of languages other than English in such schools will deprive our children of their unique identity and their cultural heritage. This irrevocable loss will result in the cultural dislocation of our coming generations as, 'Each language reflects a unique world-view and culture complex, …each language is a means of expression of the intangible cultural heritage of people…an irreplaceable unit in our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view' (Wurm, 2001: 13).

Why should we support Tri- Multilingualism?

The decades of 1960s and 1970s witnessed essentially positive waves towards multilingualism, reflecting a quest for human rights and social equity. In the US, e.g. a shift to more accepting policies started in the 1960's and in Australia in the early 1970's (see, e.g. Kloss, 1977; Fishman, 1985; Clyne, 1991). In Pakistan, however, neither the language policies (Asif, 2005a) nor the attitudes of people support positive tri-multilingualism. Trlingualism or multilingualism may be enforced, supported, accepted, tolerated or rejected due to language policies or the attitudes of the community. These also influence the status given to one or more than one language in a society. In countries where language policies promote multilingualism, it may be the result of social, cultural, political or economic factors (Clyne, 1997).

There are several reasons for striving for multilingualism. It is believed that multilingualism enhances creativity (Stutnabb-Kangas, 2003). Wurm (2001) states that high-level multilinguals as a group do better than corresponding monolinguals on tests measuring several aspects of intelligence, creativity, divergent thinking, cognitive flexibility, etc.

Wurm (2001) claims that bi- and multilinguals, by virtue of having greater volume of memory which is the result of mastering two or more than two different language systems with different grammars, vocabularies, idiomatic expressions and sound structures, tend to have quicker thinking capacity, and more alert and more flexible minds. His advice is, 'multilingulism from very early childhood onwards, to be maintained past the age of six years, is the most advantageous quality any person can possess' (ibid: 15).

Wurm (ibid: 22) while describing the 'intellectual and emotional advantages of bi- or multilingualism and biculturalism' claims the following:

1) They have access to a far greater volume of information and knowledge than monolinguals, possess a larger stock of knowledge (both linguistic and general) in their minds, grasp different semantic associations better, and have more flexible minds by virtue of being used to switching languages and thought patterns.

2) They are less rigid in their attitudes and have a tendency to be more tolerant than monolinguals (i.e. they are less hostile and suspicious); they are more likely to regard manifestations of other cultures by individuals as acceptable and respectable.

3) Their thought patterns and world-view are better balanced due to their familiarity with different, often somewhat contradictory concepts results in better balanced thought patterns and world-view. Compared to monolinguals, they possess a greater ability to learn concepts, ideas and things that are entirely new, to fit into novel situations without trauma. Their understanding of different facets of a problem is also superior.

Conclusion

It is believed that language acts are acts of identity (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) and 'language constitutes one of the most defining attributes of the individual. Language thus represents and mediates the crucial element of identity' (Aronin & Laoire, 2003: 11). Our language policies, attitudes and practices towards the mother tongues besides damaging the identity of our children are harming their cognitive abilities, ' if the sociocultural context is such that the mother tongue is devalued in the child's environment, his cognitive development may be delayed in comparison with a monolingual peer's'(Hamers & Blanc, 1989: 77)

In the light of the argument presented in this paper, the parents should be enabled to make the right choice for their children and the school teachers should help them in making their children multilinguals without demeaning their mother tongues. The parents should be made aware of the long term consequences of the language choices that they make for their children. Quite often the school authorities put forward this excuse that their language policies are made in the light of the desires of the parents. Pattanayak (1991: 60), however, rightly questions, 'Do the parents really know…of the theories about the acquisition of language by the child? Do they know how language relates to learning? …do they even know what is meant by *good, fair, satisfactory* entries in the child's mark card with reference to his/her language proficiency?'. He blames the social system in which English language taught in elite English medium schools serves as a necessary pass word to enter the higher echelons of power; 'The individual parents, in their anxiety for their children to participate in the spoil-sharing arrangements of the

elitist education, come in conflict with its social purpose. They are blinded to the …damage done to the children in this process' (ibid).

We will have to dispense with the notion that tri-or multilingualism is harmful to a child. Having to learn many languages is not a burden and it does not confuse or prevent the child from learning any language properly. New languages should not be taught subtractively i.e. at the cost of other languages, but additively, in addition to their own languages. To achieve this goal, 'Scholars and policy makers need to promote a multilingual context in which nobody pays a heavy price and all have access to social mobility and linguistic choices and preferences' (Olshtain & Nissim-Amitai, 2003:49). In schools and at home we must strive to achieve this goal and aim to promote multilingualism in our children who should be, 'able to function in two (or more) languages … at the same level as the native speakers and who… [are] able to identify positively with both (or all) language groups (and cultures) or parts of them' (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1984: 90)

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