Chapter 8. English language learning as a Trojan horse? Examining early childhood teachers' views of teaching young children in an English-medium NGO in India

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Abstract

Research shows that English fluency in India mobilises access to socio-economic and cultural capital. Unequal access to education in India renders the work of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) to be essential to providing basic education for all. Disadvantaged Indian children are sometimes taught English (rather than their Mother Tongue) on the assumption that early English learning will improve later life chances. Drawing on data from early childhood teachers working in an NGO for children living in slum communities, we use a postcolonial lens to explore how NGOs can critically engage with English language privilege whilst supporting children to have improved opportunities and outcomes – such that English language learning is more than a Trojan horse (i.e., a "gift" that does more harm than good), perpetuating existing inequalities.

Keywords: English-medium, Postcolonialism, Language politics, Double divide, Early childhood, India.

1. Introduction

Before we begin, we (the authors) would like to acknowledge, first and foremost, that we write this chapter from a standpoint that is grounded in early childhood education, care, and development (ECECD) – that is, the multidisciplinary area of research, policy and practice that is concerned with the lives of children from conception to the age of eight. Researchers have emphasised the significance of individual, relational, environmental and experiential factors in the early years – highlighting how positive and negative experiences during this time (e.g., toxic stress, racism, poverty, and more recently, COVID-19) can have wide-ranging and lifelong impacts on a child's development and flourishing (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child 2021). Researchers have also demonstrated that initiatives in the early years can improve the immediate and long-term outcomes of children, families, and communities – particularly those who experience disadvantage. For example, the Nobel Laureate economist James J. Heckman and his colleagues have shown how investment in the early years leads to the highest returns – as "every dollar spent on high-quality, birth-to-five

programmes for disadvantaged children delivers 13% per annum return on investment" (Heckman 2017, para 1). Partly because of some of this research, the earliest years of life are now often positioned as an ideal breeding ground for actualising peace, justice, and prosperity goals – such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In working towards these goals, several aid agencies and development organisations have focused their efforts on early intervention and investment in ECECD in vulnerable or disadvantaged communities in low and middle-income (LAMI) contexts – such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and India (World Bank 2021). At times, such interventions have included teaching young children English.

Some research suggests that there is a "sharply-defined critical period for language acquisition" in childhood (Hartshorne et al. 2018, 1) which makes it easier for children (as compared to adults) to learn an additional language. Others have indicated that there is no clear cut-off for second language acquisition (Genesee 2015), challenging the logic of the critical period hypothesis for second language learning (Birdsong and Molis 2001; Marinova-Todd et al. 2000), and suggesting that learning a second language earlier does not necessarily mean learning it more effectively (Marinova-Todd et al. 2000). Nevertheless, the assumption that language learning should take place as early as possible remains pervasive. These discourses have significant implications for development workers in the context of education. For example, early English language learning for children whose first language is not English is a unique site for investment and intervention by some Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) in India, with researchers arguing that English language learning might be a way in which to meet certain SDGs (e.g., goal 10 – reducing inequality) (Sharma 2020).

Whilst some programmes focus on teaching young children using English-medium education (rather than Mother Tongue), recent research indicates that "models of education which ignore the mother tongue in the early years can be unproductive, ineffective and have a negative effect on children's learning. Mother-tongue education at least in [the] early years can enable teachers to teach, and learners to learn more effectively" (Nishanthi 2020, 77). This sentiment is echoed widely in the research, with evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa (UNICEF 2016, 8) demonstrating that:

> Using the mother tongue in the classroom enhances classroom participation, decreases attrition, and increases the likelihood of family and community engagement in the child's learning. Research also shows that using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction enhances the child's cognitive learning process, and that learner-centred learning has to be carried out in a language the child speaks in order to be effective.

Yet the symbolic power of English and its ties to social and cultural capital, cannot be underestimated. Importantly, our intention throughout this chapter is not to dichotomise and essentialise English-medium education and local/national language medium education in terms of economic gain. Indeed, we acknowledge that there are also elite Hindi-medium institutions and that many bureaucrats and professionals are educated in local and national languages. However, as the focus of some NGOs (including the one reported on in this chapter) remains on teaching young children English (which is not children's mother tongue), our focus throughout this chapter has remained on the forwarding of English-medium education for young children. In doing so, in the context of this chapter, we draw on the analogy of the Trojan horse to explore how English, a remnant 'gift' of colonisation, has subversively contributed to social and economic inequities. Specifically, we explore key discourses of neoliberalism and colonisation that have strategically 'tricked' education-based NGOs into willingly pursuing early English language learning programmes, even as such practices contribute to the solidifying of socio-economic inequities, language hierarchies, and arguably, the degradation of local languages (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson 1996). To begin, in the subsequent section, we provide a brief overview of the linguistic context of India, before outlining the two key arguments that we will discuss in this chapter.

2. Indian Linguistic Context

India has 22 official languages (including English) and a population of 1.366 billion. There are 463 established languages in India (451 living and 12 extinct). Of the living languages, '423 are indigenous, and 28 are non-indigenous… 61 are institutional, 118 are developing, 132 are vigorous, 124 are in trouble, and 16 are dying' (Eberhard et al. 2021). Multilingualism is a key feature of the Indian linguistic context – with children experiencing early multilingual socialisation, therefore making multilingualism a 'first language' for many (Mohanty 2010). However, as Mohanty and Panda troublingly point out 'nearly 80% of Indian languages are endangered. India is a multilingual country in which many languages coexist… but at the same time, many languages are also treated with neglect, discrimination and deprivation' (2017, 226), leading to what Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (1996) refer to as linguicide or linguistic genocide. The pervasive use of English in high-status contexts further positions it as the language of privilege and globalisation. Scholars therefore point out that although India is a linguistically diverse context in which the majority of its people communicate using 'two or more languages in different domains of their daily life' (Mohanty 2010, 133), English remains the 'language of power and privilege' (Skutnabb-Kangas et al.

2009, 325). As several writers note, problematising the power and privilege afforded to English in postcolonial contexts such as India is necessary (Annamalai 2005; Mohanty and Panda 2017; Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009).

Challenging the power and privilege of the English language in India at the grassroots level is fraught with difficulty, partly because of the reported benefits that English proficiency brings. Research shows that there may be some correlation between an individual's English fluency and their economic prosperity (Azam et al. 2013; Chakraborty and Bakshi 2016). This has implications for children from vulnerable, disadvantaged and marginalised backgrounds, as local charities and NGOs – such as the one reported on in this chapter – have sought to invest in ECECD programmes that support young children to gain linguistic capital through English language learning. However, several scholars discuss how programmes such as these, although well-intentioned, require deeper exploration, problematising, and re-thinking (Mohanty 2017; Mohanty and Panda 2017; Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009).

In this chapter, we discuss some of the arguments and counterarguments for the implementation of English-medium NGO-run education programmes in the early years, drawing on a case study of a group of Early Childhood Teachers (hereafter referred to as teachers) working with children living in slum communities in Mumbai, India. We approach this chapter from the perspective of the teachers, who are often caught 'between a rock and hard place', trying to implement policy, working to improve outcomes for children, delivering high quality learning, and ensuring that they meet the needs and desires of children, families/caregivers, funders, advisors/board members, and their own leaders and managers. Exploring their experiences in an NGO delivering an English-medium early education programme, we unpack (and problematise) the following arguments raised by teachers:

1. Teaching children English as early as possible is necessary for future success.
2. English-medium instruction for young children is important.

To explore these arguments, in the next section, we adopt a postcolonial and critical pedagogy lens to provide an overview of the origins and impacts of the English language in India.

3. Postcolonial Politics of the English Language in India

Re-meeting history in the present moment is necessary for understanding the nuances of power and privilege at play (Mac Naughton 2005). There are many potential rabbit holes

which we might go down in attempting to explain the postcolonial politics of the English language in India. Indeed, the diverse and rhizomatic nature of India's social, cultural, historical, economic, political, and religious and caste systems could all be examined extensively for their relationship to English privilege. However, it is not within the scope of this chapter to explore the numerous and varied theories, causes and correlations of postcolonial language politics in India, as has been done elsewhere (Annamalai 2001; Mishra 2000). Whilst many factors have impacted on the privileging of English in India over time, two key roots of English privilege emerge from 'colonial modernity and capitalism' (Mishra 2000, 384). In the interests of brevity, we focus on aspects of these two well-documented themes for understanding English-language privilege in India.

Learning English during the period of colonisation served a particular socio-political and ideological agenda that sought to reaffirm colonial dominance and superiority (Mishra, 2000). Several strategies were adopted to meet these aims. For example, the Anglicist position, officially adopted into policy in 1835, involved the actualising of Thomas Macaulay and John Stuart Mill's Filtration Theory (Annamalai 2005; Mishra 2000), whereby English-medium education would be given to the leisure-class (elite groups of the population), through whom it would filter down to the masses. This strategy, in turn, created a new elite or rather, sub-elite (below the English), who became the so-called 'noble savages' or, in Macaulay's words, 'a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect' (as cited in Mishra 2000, 388). The positional power afforded to this group ensured that they were well-placed to work for the colonial government (therefore, forwarding the colonial agenda), whilst acting as intermediaries that could provide access to resources, exhort labour, and source materials that would ensure the continued growth of the industrial economy (of the colonisers) (Annamalai 2005).

Arguably, through this colonisation of the mind, a breed of sub-oppressors (sub-elite) were created, who, having adopted the mentality of the oppressors, in turn, acted in the interests of their own rulers to perpetuate the othering and oppression of those 'below' them (Freire 1970). English language learning appears to have played a seminal role in further widening the socio-economic divides between the sub-oppressors and oppressed, by ensuring the socio-economic privileging of this sub-elite (Stein 1998). For example, limiting the number of Indians who had access to English learning meant 'demand for jobs in the government would be under control and, consequently, social unrest arising out of being unable to get white-collar jobs after English education would be kept in check' (Annamalai 2005, 22).

Educating a chosen few meant that the ‘cost of providing universal education was accepted to be primarily the responsibility of the government of the independent country’ (Annamalai 2005, 22). Stein (1998) offers a similar argument, suggesting that there was a clear focus on profit over people – which meant that there was little investment or interest in ~~me~~ public entities such as schools for the masses. Notably, limiting access to education was not only a colonial practice but also a way of maintaining caste-based privilege, as schools developed by Christian missionaries to educate the masses were seen as upsetting the social balance of the existing caste-system (Kumar 2005). Freire (1973) suggests that such a system served the interests of the oppressors (colonial and Indian) by (re)producing slavocratic hierarchies that dehumanised and domesticated the oppressed into internalising the status quo. That is, the lack of mass education ensured that people would learn their place as uneducated workers (including as slaves), in society (and then remain in that place), accepting inequities as a *natural* tragedy of their birth; rather than an *unnatural* tragedy created by broader socio-political decisions about where and how to allocate resources. Thus, it could be argued that although a colonial logic underpinned the desire to ensure (some) Indians would become ‘more English than Hindus’ (McCully, as cited in Annamalai 2005, 22), social and colonial practices also ensured the widening of inequalities in hierarchical power relations that already existed (such as those related to class, caste, gender, dis/ability, etc.).

Post-independence, political leaders sought to replace English with a national language, and Hindi was chosen as the official language of India – alongside English, which was allowed to remain an associate official language for a transitional period of 15 years from the initiation of the Indian Constitution in 1950 (Sharma 2020). However, the end of this transitional period saw disagreements between States and Union Territories, which consequently led the Indian government to maintain English as an official language for administrative and governance purposes (Sharma 2020). This policy contributed to the creation of a ‘double divide’ (Mohanty and Panda 2017). As Mohanty and Panda explain, the double divide involves, firstly, the English-Vernacular divide ‘between English and the dominant Indian languages’ (2017, 541), and secondly, the Vernacular-Other divide, ‘between the major Indian languages and the ITM [Indigenous and Tribal Minority] languages’ (2017, 541). This double divide is significant and troubling because researchers suggest that it has further solidified existing language hierarchies and increased the inequalities already experienced by linguistic minorities and marginalised groups (Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009).

4. Education Systems and the 'Double Divide'

This double divide also continues to be perpetuated through India's education system, with English remaining the most pervasive language of instruction (Annamalai 2005). This is further complicated by the fact that English is the major medium of instruction at university level (Mohanty 2010). The use of English in higher-education has a backwash effect on earlier schooling, perpetuating a desire for English language learning across the system (Meganathan 2011). Annamalai echoes this argument, contending that 'the students with English medium at the lower level are advantaged at the higher level and this pushes the English medium down to lower classes, even to pre-school, by demand from parents' (2005, 24). This, in turn, can be seen to extend to programmes run by NGOs that seek to provide English-medium education in order to level the playing field for young, disadvantaged children, thus inadvertently perpetuating the colonised experience.

The three-tiered language system was introduced by the government of India in 1968 in order to remove language inequities whilst promoting efficient multilingualism and national unity through education (Annamalai, 2005). Essentially, the three-tiered system advocates for children to learn 'two or more languages other than their first language' (Pai 2005, 1801). The implementation of the three-language formula varies across states to allow for linguistic diversity. For example, in Maharashtra (where the research reported on in this chapter took place), for children who are learners in English-medium settings, 'Hindi is treated as a second language, and Marathi the third… English is the third language to all other students, and Hindi is the second [language] for Marathi medium students, and Marathi [is the second language] for Hindi medium students' (Pai 2005, 1801). Notably, several scholars have critiqued the implementation of this formula in India, with Pai suggesting that 'unfortunately the three-language formula has not been successful, mainly because these languages do not follow second language teaching methodology' (2005, 1801). Similarly, Mohanty has commented that 'a true form of multilingual education is yet to emerge in India' (2006, 273).

The newly introduced Indian National Education Policy (NEP) (2020) (Government of India 2020), which replaces the 1986 National Policy on Education, reflects recent research which emphasises the importance of teaching children in their Home Language/Mother Tongue[1] or Regional Language 'where possible' until Class V (age 11) and preferably beyond. However,

[1] We acknowledge that there are contesting arguments for the use of the term 'Mother Tongue' in multilingual societies. Throughout this chapter, we use the term 'Mother Tongue' as this is the phrasing used throughout the National Education Policy (2020) in India.

social commentators have already begun to question what this means for English-medium schools, and news reports indicate that there will be 'no switch in instruction medium from English to regional languages in NEP '20' (Vishnoi 2020). As the NEP offers only guidelines for states and educational institutions to implement, the policy to practice gap requires closer examination. Similarly, as the boundaries of what constitutes learning in the Mother Tongue 'where possible' are vague, questions about the enforceability and effectiveness of the policy also remain. However, the emphasis on Mother Tongue as the medium of instruction has several potential implications for the power and privilege afforded to English, since the policy advocates for teachers to 'use a bilingual approach... with students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction' (NEP, Government of India 2020, 13). Although the policy moves away from an English-only focus in low-fee-paying (LFP) schools (Kalyanpur 2020), it emphasises the importance of high quality language learning for all languages across government and non-government sectors (Government of India 2020), and that young children, from preschool onwards, are supported to develop multilingual proficiency and fluency (Kalyanpur 2020). Recently, during an address on the one-year implementation of the NEP, the prime minister launched several initiatives, including *Vidya Pravesh,* a play-based module for all first graders, including in regional and remote India (Modi 2021). It is worth noting that this an emerging space. The National Curriculum Framework which is set to soon accompany the NEP will outline strategies for promoting Indian languages (Gohain 2020).

Despite these new policy developments, some writers have concluded that it is impossible to reverse the tide of English privilege, since 'with globalisation, English is now so well entrenched in India as a language of power, economy, and privilege that any reversal of this position seems very unlikely' (Mohanty and Panda 2017, 541). This raises questions, not only for NGOs and charity-run ECECD programmes that aim to equip children with English literacy skills, but also for the broad nature of pedagogical approaches used for teaching English as an additional language in India.

5. 'Banking approach' pedagogical practices for English language learning in India

When English is taught in a decontextualised, standardised, and abstract manner (e.g., C is for Cat), it perpetuates the exclusion of marginalised groups as it imposes a curriculum that neither reflects nor recognises the knowledge, experiences, cultures, or values of the learner. Often children and teachers in India have little or no exposure to English in their communities, but are expected to learn and teach the syllabus content through English

(Kalyanpur 2020). Freire (1970) argues that a focus on building 'technical skills' perpetuates the use of traditionalist English-teaching methods also known as 'banking approaches' – that is, where practices of rote learning, uncritical acceptance and the regurgitation of facts is considered effective pedagogy. However, the teaching of only technical skills in the early years has long been disputed on pedagogical and developmental grounds (Fielding and Moss 2012). India's new NEP (2020) and the more recently launched *Vidya Pravesh* programme (Modi 2021) emphasise the importance of play-based and activity-based learning. Despite this, the current push down of banking education approaches (e.g., rote learning and repetition) into ECECD spaces remains a prominent issue in the Indian context (Palkhiwala in preparation).

Sriprakash et al. discuss how banking education approaches to pedagogy act as a means for training children to behave according to the rules of the 'rigid competitive structures of schooling' (2020, 332). Bénéï indicates that in the Indian context, pedagogical best practice is seen as one where discipline, order and control prevails – with children 'sitting at their tables and doing their homework without a word, no noise' (2005, 144). Mishra reaffirms this, noting 'the system of forming syllabi at the central level, the lecture method as a primary means of conducting classes, and the exam and certification system based on rote-learning – all colonial practices – continue to this day' (2000, 402). This also appears to be true of early years contexts, where teachers use rote methods of teaching, such as demonstrating how to write the letters of the alphabet on the chalk board at the front of the class, before children are required to practice this new skill on their slates or in their own workbooks (Palkhiwala in preparation). In the context of the NGO reported on in this paper, this pedagogical approach was used to teach all subjects, including expressive arts, where the teacher was observed demonstrating a drawing, then asking the children to draw the same picture, after which the child was graded on their ability to replicate the picture.

These banking education practices are further exacerbated by increased standardised testing and teacher responsibilisation (McLeod 2017). Responsibilisation reflects a mindset where, for example, individual teachers are tasked with the sole responsibility of supporting disadvantaged students to pass standardised tests through teaching in education systems that exclude, dehumanise, and further marginalise them. Then, where children do not achieve in standardised tests or 'succeed' through these education systems, public discourses blame teachers for learners' so-called inadequacies (Peters 2017). Teachers working in NGOs with disadvantaged learners face additional pressures as discourses of teacher responsibilisation

imply that these educators are responsible for uplifting children from situations of poverty. Thus, rather than being supported, trained, or provided with adequate resources, teachers and NGOs are often blamed when learners fail, reject, (or rather, are rejected by) education systems that dehumanise and marginalise them.

To begin to explore possibilities for addressing these grand challenges, listening to the experiences and perspectives of educators in NGOs becomes paramount. Thus, in the subsequent section we provide an overview of the English-medium ECECD setting reported on in this chapter before exploring some of the perspectives of teachers in this setting.

6. The Case Study: An English-medium *Balwadi*

The research reported on in this chapter forms part of a dataset from a doctoral research study by one of the authors of this chapter (Palkhiwala in preparation). The broader research adopted a single case study methodology informed by a postcolonial lens and yoga philosophy to investigate the views and experiences of eleven early childhood teachers'[2] experiences and understandings of pedagogy and reflective practice in an English-medium *Balwadi* (early childhood setting run for disadvantaged children)[3]. This section provides an overview of this research context. Pseudonyms are used throughout the chapter to refer to all participants.

The *Balwadi* was run by an NGO catering for children and families/caregivers primarily living in slum communities in one part of Mumbai, India[4]. Data collection occurred over a period of seven months, and involved non-participant observations, semi-structured interviews, wall charts and focus groups. A noteworthy limitation of the current study was that the data collection was itself conducted primarily in English – with questions translated from English, thus drawing largely on educational concepts and ideas framed from Euro-centric rather than Indo-centric traditions of thought and affording greater participation to the English-speaking teachers. Within a postcolonial lens, Battiste (2014) questions the sole reliance of the colonial language to conduct research. However, the use of English was problematised throughout the data collection process – with participants being encouraged to

[2] The term 'teacher' was used by the participants to refer to themselves and is thus used throughout the doctoral study and this chapter. Most teachers held a certification in Education, such as a six-month course offered by the Balwadi. However only the head teacher held a bachelor's degree in Education. Furthermore, the term 'educator' is not part of the Indian lingua franca and is therefore not used in this chapter.
[3] This study was underpinned by a framework using the yogic concept of Swadhyaha (self-study) to explore culturally relevant reflective practice in one early childhood context in India. More detailed information on the development and use of this framework can be found in Palkhiwala (in preparation).
[4] It is worth noting that as NGOs are often initiated to meet the local needs of a particular community (or communities), their service provision and approaches to educational instruction are often significantly varied.

contribute in any language they felt comfortable in across all data collection tools, in an attempt to disrupt the hierarchy of language (Cannella and Viruru 2004). The researcher spoke a basic level of Hindi herself. However, it was the diversity of languages spoken amongst the teachers which enabled them to use any language they felt comfortable using, with another teacher being able to translate this into English for the purposes of data collection. For example, in the focus groups, a combination of English, Hindi, and Marathi was spoken by participants, and then translated and clarified for meaning during the focus group itself. Four of the eleven teachers were able to seamlessly transition between English, Hindi, and Marathi. Participants also shared Indo-centric concepts and views of education through language (e.g., through referencing Indian yogic practices such as *Om* chanting, *Asanas* and *Tratak*[5]) – thus reflecting culturally situated practices and understandings. Moreover, where participants did communicate in languages other than English, every effort was made to translate meanings into English in a way that reflected the authenticity of participants' intended meanings. Participants also reviewed their data, to ensure transparency and accuracy of shared meaning-making. Notably, data collection occurred prior to the introduction of the New Education Policy (NEP) (2020) – however, as the NEP is relatively new, it is likely that pedagogical practices reported on here remain reflective of current practices.

The setting had ten classrooms that catered for children according to their age group – with separate classes for two-year-olds (playgroup), three-year-olds (nursery), four-year-olds (Junior KG[6]) and five-year-olds (Senior KG). On initial conversation with the teachers as to what led them to work at this *Balwadi*, most of them spoke about being of service to God and helping children escape poverty. Teachers did not necessarily hold formal qualifications in early childhood pedagogy, bilingual/multilingual education, or additional language teaching, and most were not from middle class backgrounds.

Although teachers were expected to teach in English, teachers in the lower stages (playgroup and nursery) spoke in Hindi and Marathi. Notably, the teachers' comfort and proficiency with English dictated the classes they were allowed to teach, with English-speakers assigned to the upper stages (Junior KG and Senior KG). The teachers noted that without English proficiency, they were held back from teaching the older (more prestigious) age groups. It

[5] *Asanas* refer to body postures and a meditative pose. *Om*, a sound recited during meditation or prayer, is believed to hold spiritual significance as it encapsulates the vibrations of the universe. *Tratak* refers to a visual meditative practice (e.g., candle gazing).

[6] KG is used as the short form for kindergarten in this context.

was also observed that positional power was tied to English proficiency, as the English-speaking teachers were observed to be more actively involved in pedagogical decision-making, which was in turn, expected to be implemented by teachers in the lower classes. For example, the senior KG teacher and the principal would decide the monthly syllabus for each classroom, and every month teachers in each grade were informed which letters of the alphabet they would teach. Significantly, the syllabus in this setting was written by the head teacher who had a degree in education and was reviewed by the school principal. This syllabus was not guided by national policy or additional language learning principles, but rather by rote learning practices. Notably, there was little to no support for the teachers, head teacher or principal to access training on learning English as an additional language.

In accordance with national policy, teachers were aware that the State language (Marathi) was now mandated to be taught in schools. However, in this setting, there was a definitive push to teach children English as early as possible so that they could compete in the education market. As a result, English language instruction focused heavily English literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, the English alphabet was taught out of context and attached to words that may not be familiar to the children. Notably, due to the migration of families from various villages, many children in the setting did not speak Hindi, Marathi, or English, but rather rural dialects, or other languages such as Urdu. Thus, since children's first languages were made up of various regional dialects, there was no common first language in the setting.

Hindi and Marathi were the most common languages but still not understood by all children (i.e., those from a village outside of the state of Maharashtra). The teachers used Hindi and Marathi to explain and bridge the gap between children's knowledge and the new word in English. For example, the teacher would say 'A is for apple' in English, and then repeat the word apple in Hindi and Marathi in an attempt at making this connection for the child. Notably, it is highly unlikely that learners from this English-medium *Balwadi* would move to (public or private) English-medium schools. With some support from charities and NGOs or through affirmative action reservations for disadvantaged students, some learners may be taught in English-medium primary schools, however, most young learners would transition into free Hindi-medium or Marathi-medium public government schools. Nonetheless, as we explore below, teachers emphasised the importance of young children learning English.

7. Teachers' perspectives of English language learning in the early years

The complexity of language choice emerged as a prominent theme throughout this study. From the earliest observations, it was evident that although it was an English-medium setting,

teachers in the playgroup and nursery instructed primarily in Hindi and Marathi using some key English phrases (e.g., sit down, stand up, come here), whereas teachers in Lower KG and Senior KG encouraged the children in their class to use English. During group discussions, teachers explored the reasons behind their language choice and use in the classrooms. For example, playgroup and nursery teachers explained that they used Hindi and Marathi because children were more comfortable with these languages. Similarly, Deepa (Junior KG teacher) acknowledged that children were developing their English use, and it was for this reason that she interspersed Hindi and Marathi into her classroom instruction, noting 'English is a language which they've started to learn so that's why we use their languages to help them understand.' Despite this view, in the ensuing discussion, Deepa later reiterated the importance of English-medium instruction, later clarifying:

> They have come to learn English only, this is an English medium school. So they have to learn English no. So why teach in the other languages. It is only for their entertainment we use Hindi and Marathi… they know that language already so they are very happy when we sing the songs in their language.

Similarly, Ankita (Senior KG teacher) described some of the external pressures that teachers experienced, noting that the families/caregivers of the children expected teachers to equip children with English language skills:

> But while taking admission, *na*, parents are asking first only '*Ye* English medium school hey *na*? English *me paradthey na*?' [This is an English medium school, isn't it? They will study in English, won't they?] Their first question is that… So English is compulsory. Though it is a Maharashtrian state but Marathi is the local language, compulsory it is now. But English also is very, very important.

There was widespread agreement with Ankita's sentiment throughout the group discussion. Some teachers expressed the belief that if English was not taught early (i.e., in prior-to-school settings), this would mean that children would be 'robbed' of the opportunity to improve their life chances. At times, teachers indicated that this was because English provided a 'currency' that was key to children (particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds) being able to enter (and make it through) the educational system – thus enabling them to access opportunities for social mobility. For example, Harshita (Junior KG teacher), explained why

English was a necessary skill that children would need to succeed, citing globalising, socio-economic and technological forces as key reasons for English language learning:

> English is the language of computers actually… We are living in the era of computers that is why we have to speak and we have to learn in English so our children have to learn English.
>
> It was primarily the English-speaking teachers who advocated for the use and importance of English. Whilst there was a level of agreement amongst the eleven teachers, some ideas were challenged by the playgroup and nursery teachers, who were themselves less confident English-speakers. For example, Indira (Nursery teacher) and Neha (Playgroup teacher) challenged Harshita's argument, raising the following counterpoints:

> No, Hindi and Marathi also comes on the computer. For your job you need Hindi and Marathi, don't you, you can't do without them. You need to know them first. So you need Hindi and Marathi first then after that you can learn English (Indira)
>
> When you know Marathi the meaning of some words in English are also better. You should know some words in Marathi so that [you know] your words in English, otherwise you say '*elle peela, uska aaka'* [indicating poorly spoken words] (Neha).

As these snippets indicate, teachers held differing views of the roles of languages. Though there was a consensus that English was necessary for children, some teachers (particularly those who primarily used Marathi and Hindi and were therefore given lower status in the hierarchy of teaching) felt that Marathi and Hindi were important to learn before English, thus reflecting the importance of English not being taught at the cost of local languages (we discuss multilingual possibilities for learning English later on in the chapter).

Reflecting on the pedagogical practices used in the setting, observations and focus groups revealed several practices of technical skill-teaching, and what could be called 'teaching to the test' approaches that reflect a prescribed and narrow syllabus. For example, as a discussion with Ankita (Senior KG teacher) revealed:

Sanobia: Okay, and the syllabus, how do you decide what to put in the syllabus every month? How do you decide what to do because like this month I saw certain standing line letters?

Ankita: Because there are 24, 26 alphabets are there no, so each month four, four for nursery.

Sanobia: But is it just ABCD EFGH?

Ankita: Yes but not starting from ABCD only. We are starting with the standing and sleeping line words. Easy ones. I F H T L. We are starting with that and at last the A will come.

Sanobia: Oh okay, and do you think the children and the teachers understand why you have selected those?

Ankita: *Ya*, *ya* I told them and parents also we told them because before some are asking why you are not starting with A. So I explained to them, I told them see that children have just started learning, so standing and sleeping lines are easy so we are starting with those alphabets.

Concurrently, teachers revealed a lack of professional autonomy, indicating that they were sometimes dissuaded from using more play-based learning approaches. For example, Deepa (Junior KG teacher) suggested letting children play in the rain, using puppets, or showing children the balloon seller in the local complex – however, these were considered impractical approaches for teaching children, and were therefore not implemented. For several complex reasons, it is evident that there is a culture of compliance and a clear hierarchy of teachers in this setting (Palkhiwala in preparation), which meant that there was a high level of obedience to authority. This positional power resulted in an understanding that knowledge and instructions are transferred in a top-down manner (from the perceived 'more knowledgeable' to the 'less knowledgeable'). This complicated dynamic has implications for teachers who feel the need to obey managers, and yet who also hold ultimate responsibility for children's outcomes. The lack of access to research and support for engaging with Multilingual Education (MLE) for teachers is particularly problematic in a context where teachers are restricted from engaging in creative pedagogical practices and must instead focus on technical skills for language learning, partly due to pressures faced from leaders, families/caregivers and donors.

Whilst additional data from the broader study explores the nuances of language in relation to pedagogy and reflection in this setting, this chapter focuses on this sub-set of the data, covering two key themes emerging from teachers' perspectives which we unpack in subsequent sections:

1. Teaching children English as early as possible is necessary for future success.
2. English-medium instruction for young children is important.

8. English as an antidote? Teaching children English as early as possible is necessary for future success.

Some research indicates that in India, English fluency increases the 'hourly wages of men by 34%, which is as much as the return to completing secondary school and half as much as the return to completing a Bachelor's degree' (Azam et al. 2013, 1). Drawing on an analysis of public schools in West Bengal, Chakraborty and Bakshi (2016, 1) similarly report that a '10% lower probability of learning English in primary schools leads to a decline in weekly wages by 8%. On average, this implies 26% lower wages for cohorts exposed to the policy change' (that abolished English in public primary schools). However, some research also shows that it is difficult to separate the benefits of English language learning from other socioeconomic variables such as 'gender, sector, class and location' (Erling, 2014, p. 3). Erling (2014) also notes that 'the benefits of education may not be equalising, particularly in India. Moreover, large numbers of school children in South Asia are not experiencing education at levels that will allow them to benefit economically. Therefore, without provision of quality education and without targeting the long-embedded inequalities in terms of gender, caste, etc., education is not likely to provide disadvantaged individuals with the resources that they need to catch up' (p. 3). Despite this, some NGOs and teachers aim to support children with learning English in the early years in an attempt to address inequalities of gender, caste, and class.

However, as noted earlier, there is clear evidence pointing to the importance of local language instruction (UNICEF 2016). Despite this, English language learning ECECD programmes appear to play in to discourses that position English language learning as an almost clinical and financial 'cure' for social inequities – where a large 'dosage' of English language learning acts as a form of early intervention (or investment) that ought to 'immunise' or enable children to pass through an unequal, fragmented and exclusionary education system, unscathed. Most teachers in this study emphasised the importance of young

children learning English listening and speaking as early as possible, believing this would be the best ‘antidote’ to enable children to access future educational opportunities.

On the whole, high-quality English-medium schooling appears to remain a privilege of middle or upper classes – since access to high-quality English-medium education is almost exclusively reserved for those attending higher-fee-paying schools (Kalyanpur 2020). Conversely, quality education (public, private, English-medium or otherwise) still remains inequitable and inaccessible for the most marginalised groups and the lowest income earners (Woodhead et al. 2013). As Mohanty explains, there are four ‘tiers’ to the language hierarchy in India’s education system, with the ‘the privileged social class educated in high-cost English-medium schools’ (2006, 277) at the top, followed by ‘the less privileged social class educated in low-cost English-medium schools’ (277), then ‘the under-privileged class educated in the regional language (also the mother tongue) medium schools’ (277), to finally, the ‘least privileged stratum, who are forced to be schooled in the medium of a regional language other than their home language’ (277). One of the issues with this system is that the fractured nature of provision leads to the increasing ‘ghettoization’ of public schools (Woodhead et al. 2013). That is, the mixed nature of public-private provision – partly justified by the discourse of ‘consumer choice’ – ensures that public education systems remain under-funded and under-resourced (Hill and Kumar 2012). Such a system not only ensures that schooling reinforces traditional socio-economic inequities and cultural divisions (Woodhead et al. 2013), it also perpetuates the ‘double divide’ through unequal access to linguistic capital.

When reduced to a pragmatic question, this could understandably lead to teachers and NGOs believing that *access* to high quality English education is the problem, and that surely providing such access through NGOs is a viable solution. However, even where children from socio-economically disadvantaged and lower-caste backgrounds are able to access English-medium education, this remains problematic, as Kalyanpur explains, ‘government-mandated reservation of 25 percent seats in private schools for children from socio-economically marginalized communities to ensure access of education resulted in many children… [being] subjected to overt discrimination by teachers who viewed them as 'slow learners” or “unteachable”’ (301). This leads Kalyanpur to conclude that ‘few LFP students obtain in actuality the improved quality of life to which they aspire’ (2020, 302).

Similarly, from a critical perspective, one of the key reasons why the ‘English as a cure’ mentality is problematic is because children – rather than inequitable, piecemeal education

systems and approaches – are positioned as the ones in need of 'fixing' (Darder et al. 2009; McLaren 2003). Meanwhile, education systems (riddled as they are with problems) continue to be updated under neoliberal paradigms that perpetuate inequities (Kalyanpur 2020). As noted above, this leads us to ask if this development model of 'dosing' younger and younger learners with higher and higher amounts of English is the antidote to inequality in a system that is designed to be unequal, or, if English language learning is simply another Trojan horse that raises false hopes for future success, in turn leading learners to believe that they are somehow deficit if they do not 'make it through' the system (Kalyanpur 2020).

9. English-medium instruction for young children is important

Whilst several scholars reaffirm that learning in the Mother Tongue supports children's linguistic rights (Mohanty 2017; UNICEF 2016), Sharma argues that 'only focusing on the linguistic rights of minorities and trying to elevate the status of their languages, will not, necessarily or automatically, raise their socioeconomic status' (2020, 2). Following this line of thought, Vaish (2005) concludes that 'in the twenty-first century when India is fast globalizing and urbanising, English is a language of decolonisation' (189). Sharma (2020) affirms this view, indicating that English-medium instruction has the potential to enable children to overcome socio-economic deprivation. This, in turn, has the potential to lead to marginalised and disadvantaged groups 'talking back' to, and transforming, situations of oppression by drawing on their own lived experiences (hooks 1989).

However, as hooks points out, 'language is also a place of struggle' (1989, 28). Others have highlighted how the Indian system of education (including NGOs that 'feed into' the system) impose colonial and modernist ideas that condition individuals into a mindset of economism (that is, collapsing the social, political, cultural into the economic) (Fielding and Moss 2012; Neusiedl 2021). In this way, broader education systems continue to perpetuate singular (Western) schools of thought where the purpose of education is about economic livelihoods, or what Jain (2021) has called deadlihoods (since current education systems continue to lead to the unsustainable destruction of the planet's resources). Thus, the privileging of English-medium instruction over local languages and approaches removes the possibility for alternative schools of thought that emphasise culturally situated (in this case, Indo-centric) ways of thinking, being and doing.

In opposition to these ideas and reaffirming the perceived power and privilege afforded to English, the teachers in this study emphasised the importance of children engaging in English-medium instruction, suggesting, like Sharma (2020), that this was crucial to improve

a child's life chances for social mobility and economic prosperity. Teachers rationalised this sentiment by suggesting that English was a universal language as it was the 'language of computers' and was therefore necessary for children to understand in order for them to 'get a good job' further down the line. Such views reflect not only concern for children's future earning capacity, but also broader economic concerns, as English proficiency is considered to increase the country's capacity for competing in global markets (Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009). This has led Phillipson (2009) to question the role of English as a lingua franca or indeed, a *lingua frankensteinia* in perpetuating 'linguistic neo-imperialism' and, arguably, the swallowing of alternative ways of thinking, being and doing. Such a perspective is evidenced in this study as some teachers suggested that the use of Hindi and Marathi was simply 'for children's entertainment', implying that the learning of Hindi and Marathi was not useful in supporting children in a globalised market economy.

Vaish echoes elements of these teachers' assertions, suggesting that 'opposing globalisation unconditionally' would be counterproductive since 'the real issue is the equitable distribution of globalisation's benefits' (2005, 202), and that therefore, not teaching learners English reproduces the status quo and results in gate-keeping that limits access to social or cultural capital. Such views have implications for the continued push down of English language learning for children at younger and younger ages and stages of learning and development. Vaish (2005) goes on to suggest that in India, the way in which English is taught, only adds to (rather than diminishing) Indigenous languages and further enables social mobility. In contrast, Jhingran, also writing from the Indian context, indicates that 'when children are forced to study through a language they cannot fully understand… they face a serious learning disadvantage that can stunt their cognitive development and adversely affect their self-esteem and self-confidence for life' (2009, 263).

In this highly fragmented system, English-language learning appears to be a question of either-or – that is, where children *either* learn in English *or* in their Mother Tongue or Regional language (Mohanty, 2010). Sharma (2020) questions why there is a need for such either-or thinking when policy documents reflect the rhetoric of multilingualism. However, there appears to be a significant gap between rhetoric and reality, since:

> There is very limited teacher education for the early years on India, with the few teachers who do attain a degree entering elite private institutions. Due to the limited teacher training and ongoing professional development, teachers are also not

> supported in the implementation of multilingualism in their classrooms, but are rather expected to teach through trial and error. Bilingual or multilingual education is thought of only as a system in which multiple languages form part of the curriculum (Mohanty 2010, 77).

This is particularly relevant when thinking about the role of NGOs running early language programmes, as children (aged 2-9) appear to develop multilingual functioning through incremental processes of multilingual socialisation (Mohanty 2010).

Recent research on Multilingual Education (MLE) programmes in India highlight the possibilities for 'true multilingualism' as an avenue for inclusion for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the Indian context (Das 2021). For example, Mohanty discusses the benefits of MLE programmes in India, citing outcomes such as: 'positive effects on classroom achievement, school attendance and participation, and teacher and community attitudes' (2019, 247). However, as information on MLE in India is not widespread, this leads most NGOs and teachers to teach in English whilst reverting to limited and natural approaches to supplement communication, such as gestures and body language in order to bridge linguistic divides. Thus, there is a need for greater teacher education and training for educators in NGOs, ECECD settings and schools for true multilingualism, particularly given the forthcoming implementation of the new National Education Policy.

10. Revisiting the two key arguments

There are many complexities underpinning the arguments and counterarguments we have raised above. Teachers in NGOs working are often positioned in difficult situations whilst attempting to actualise broader goals (such as supporting equitable outcomes and opportunities for children). Examining the two central arguments made by teachers (that early English language learning and English-medium instruction are necessary for future success), and repositioning them as answerable questions, we might ask:

1. Do we need to teach English as early as possible to ensure future success?
2. Do teachers need to teach in English-medium instruction for young children?

Our (over)simplified answer to both of these questions is no. Above and beyond ideological and symbolic arguments, Sonntag explains: 'whether dissemination of English language skills can overcome exclusion, in India as well as elsewhere, is debated by language policy

experts' (2016, 478). Whilst some writers argue for the further constraint of English language learning, others highlight the need for genuinely multilingual approaches to English language acquisition through education systems and policies (Skutnabb-Kangas et al. 2009). NGOs, as 'third sector' organisations working both within and outside education systems, are particularly well-placed to engage with researchers and in experimental programmes that support MLE (Mohanty 2019).

Whilst research demonstrates that there is a correlation between English language proficiency and economic prosperity, research has also demonstrated the importance and value of Mother Tongue instruction (UNICEF 2016). Additionally, further research is needed to see if ECECD programmes run by NGOs result in socio-economic benefits in the long-term. Therefore, the question of whether early English-medium instruction affords future success for those who only receive early level English-medium instruction prior to school through an NGO, and how this 'success' is defined, remains pertinent. This is a complex question for teachers who are working in the 'here and now' as awaiting the results of such research seems at best, impractical, and at worst, unethical. However, a key consideration may be for NGOs to support teachers to access current research (including work written in English), resources and training on how to teach English as an additional language, and to limit academic gate-keeping (Vaish 2005) such that teachers and NGOs are not forced to make uninformed decisions about best practices, in terms of pedagogy and medium of instruction.

Finally, some scholars have advocated for the importance of learning English, emphasising technical aspects of language acquisition as being beneficial to the development of skills such as code-breaking, translating and copying (Vaish 2005). However, other critical and postcolonial writers have argued that such approaches lead to the dehumanisation, domestification and massification of learners – particularly for oppressed groups (Freire 1970). This leads us to question the validity of arguments that such an approach to teaching English can enable English to be a language of decolonisation. We recognise that the situation of education is rarely uniform, and that 'bottom-up' alternatives to 'top-down' banking approaches exist in seeming abundance. However, in settings where teachers are forced to operate within cultures of compliance and hierarchy that pre-determine the need for technical learning of English, and which simultaneously perpetuate responsibilisation, the ethical and political 'ends' of English as a language of decolonisation appear to be somewhat at odds with the 'means' of English language learning.

11. Conclusion

India is a linguistically diverse context, in which many children develop multilingual functioning, however, there is also a clear hierarchy with English playing a particularly prominent (and some have argued, problematic) role in this linguistic pecking order (Mohanty and Panda 2017). In this chapter we have explored the colonial and capitalist origins of postcolonial politics of the English language in the Indian context. In doing so, we have unpacked arguments that the education system in India perpetuates a 'double divide' where English continues to be privileged. We subsequently shared the perspectives of teachers in an ECECD programme focused on developing the 'linguistic capital' of children, before exploring and problematising two central arguments: 1) teaching children English as early as possible is necessary, and 2) English-medium instruction for young children is important. In exploring the points and counterpoints for teaching English through ECECD programmes run by NGOs we have questioned, not only *if* English is the 'antidote' to social inequity, but also if *how* NGOs and education systems are currently teaching English to meet broader goals, such as the SDGs, and what this means for teachers who are caught 'between a rock and hard place' between policy, practice, and the demands of stakeholders with whom they work. We advocate for greater access to research and information on MLE for NGOs and teachers in order to support the inclusion and flourishing of young children from disadvantaged communities, such as children from slum communities.

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