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## ENGLISH: THE LANGUAGE OF A MULTICULTURAL INDIAN CLASS

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### ABSTRACT

An Indian classroom is a replica of mini India having students of diverse groups like tribal, linguistic, cultural-religious, marginalized groups, disabled, immigrants under various ethnic or religious minorities and many more. That being the case it has been a challenge for a language teacher to preserve the pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities into the main stream society by promoting the spirit of multiculturalism amongst people of sundry gender, caste, class, community, language and religion. Language is an important device to bring unity in diversity, raise national feelings and patriotism among diverse folk. A typical Indian classroom is an outstanding case to feel the smell of multiculturalism inside it and language is the most befitting tool to preserve the culture and minimize the disparities among different cultural elements by disseminating national ideology among all. India having 122 major languages and 1599 other languages is no doubt a salad bowl of varieties of culture. Hence there is a need of research into the world language English, in a country like India, which might bind the divergent cultural assumptions and values, customary behaviors, patterns of thinking and dealing and communicative style. This paper discusses multiculturalism in India, pluralistic situations in Indian classroom and role of English language in preserving multiculturalism.

**Key words:** multiculturalism, culture, language, Indian, class, teaching.

### OBJECTIVES

The objective of this small study is to highlight the desiderata of English to indoctrinate culture in a pluralistic situation of an Indian classroom and to make the teachers take receipt of multicultural accomplishments and be serviceable in cross-cultural establishments.

#### 1. Introduction

Multiplicity and diversity are the essence of life and charm of the universe. India has elevated its beauty by possessing unity in diversity. Indian constitution assigns equal rights, privileges and duties to all people irrespective of gender, class, caste, community, language and religion and hence there prevails an ideal sight of safe coexistence in the country. Its rich culture, rich tradition, rich foods, rich physical beauty, rich resources have always attracted the people of other land converting it into a multicultural, multi religious,

multiracial, multi ethnic and multi linguistic land. This has gradually been accepted by every Indian to lead a life of sharing and caring in the ambience of multicultural society.

Preserving multiculturalism in a heritage rich country like India is one of the major issues now. The need of a safer and sounder environment inside the nation focuses on two things: preserving one's own culture and identity and honoring the culture of his neighbors as well. To communicate and transfer one's culture to other, language is a unique tool. In two extreme regions of the country no doubt the difference measures much than that of the closer periphery. Intermittently one area cries out for any taste for another area's cultural elements, as southern people hinder to use Hindi, instead they prefer English. Hence in order to establish a healthy communicative and cultural relationship among the Indians, the world language English can be gauged.

## **2. Concept Of Multiculturalism:-**

Despite the fact that the term "multiculturalism" is comparatively new, the ideas dealt with it are matured. Multiculturalism grew out of traction between cultural varieties and social linkage that has been a major issue in U.S. political and social framework since its establishment. The national concern about cultural discrepancies and their mutual coexistence has got a solemn significance. Having no concrete definition of this advanced word, it can be synonymously interpreted as a bowl of salad, a classroom of an elementary school, an orchestra or a shopping mall. The understanding of the cohesive attraction among different dynamics of a social set up may pilot the avoidance of cultural biases creating social unity and integrity. It is better to recognize the diversity and value them and not to be categorized under a limited and squeezed cultural matrix.

The concept of multiculturalism originated in the 1970s for the coexistence of different immigrants in failure of assimilation and homogenization in USA. The equal clamor of African-Americans, Latinos with other ethnic groups within a unified society generated the concept. Man being latest intelligent evolutionary being accepts the option of living peacefully and coherently with diversity as unity on this beautiful earth. India as a multicultural society has adopted numerous acts for the marginalized, minor religious and cultural sections on purpose of protecting each and every culture on the land in a bid to ensure unit national feeling and affiliation. The existence of multiple cultural traditions within a country usually considered groups like aboriginal and other foreign ethnic groups is what we call multiculturalism. It values the peaceful coexistence and mutual respect between different cultures inhabiting the same planet. The term multiculturalism is most often used in reference to western nation states like Canada, USA and Australia which have seemingly achieved a de facto single national identity during 18th or 19th century. It can be referred as a matter of economic interests, political power, demographic fact, a particular set of philosophical ideas or a specific orientation by government or institutions towards a diverse population. Now it has been a very common factor in almost all countries as the transitional flow of culture plays a major role in merging different culture and sharing thoughts, ideas and beliefs. Johansson (2022) quotes in his study of multiculturalism that 'Though the term multiculturalism is used to defend cultural pluralism and diversity, protecting a range of cultural and minority groups, it has also been regarded as an idea of departure from mono cultural nation state.'

Culture, as claimed by Mathew Arnold, is the study of perfection. In his periodical essay "Culture and Anarchy" he states that culture seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere to make all men live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light. We can generally say it is the way of life, especially the general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people at a particular time. In the opinion of C. Kluckhohn (1954) Culture consists in patterned ways of

thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values. Thus multiculturalism is cultural dynamics at a global level respecting each other's culture in a greater social unity. Thus a series of activities and world views that provide humans to perceive them as persons of worth is what we call culture. Moreover some aspects of human behavior such as language, social practices such as kinship, gender and marriage, expressive forms such as art, music, dance, rituals, customs and religion and technologies such as cooking, clothing, shelter, greeting found in all human societies are collectively known as culture.

### **3. Preserving Multiculturalism**

Preservation of each and every culture in a multicultural society has immense significance because here not only the uniqueness of the individual culture is protected but also the contribution to the global cultural diversities becomes prominent. Wallace (2001) emphasizes the need of multicultural education in the mainstream course work for pre-service teachers to be able to understand the experiences and developmental needs of culturally diverse students. It is otherwise called as the salad bowl or cultural mosaic. As every piece of the vegetables garnishes the salad, every culture is an ornamental appendage for the national culture.

Multicultural ideologies and policies vary widely ranging from the advocacy of equal respect to the various cultures in the society to the policies of promoting the maintenance of cultural diversity in which people of various ethnic and religious groups are addressed by the authorities as defined by the group to which they belong. As a consequence one element of one culture leads to the invention or propagation of another which we call stimulus diffusion. Hence preserving multiculturalism is essential to maintain distinctiveness of multiple cultures in other issues of social integration, racial segregation and cultural assimilation.

### **4. Multiculturalism In India**

The culture of India has been recognized by its extensive history, distinctive geography and diverse statistics of population. Indian languages, religions, dances, music, architecture and customs differ from place to place within the country, but nevertheless possess a commonality. It is often labeled as an amalgamation of several cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent and has been influenced by a history that is several millennia old. Right through the history of India, Indian culture has been inordinately influenced by religions. They have been extremely revered with much of Indian philosophy, literature, art, architecture and music. The particular concerns such as the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, architecture, administration and writing system from India to other parts of Asia through the silk road by the travellers and maritime traders during the early centuries of the common era shows its ancient depth. The concept of Indian culture is very complex and complicated as Indian citizens are divided into various ethnic, religious, castes, linguistic and regional groups. The previously prevalent Indian caste system describes the social stratification and social restrictions in the Indian sub-continent in which social classes are defined by thousands of endogamous hereditary groups often termed as jatis or castes and religious groups such as Hindus (80.5%), Muslims (13.4%), Christians (2.3%), Sikh (2.1%), Buddhists, Jain, Bahai, Jew and Parsi live together. According to Amartya Sen, the India born Nobel Laureate in economics, the culture of modern India is a complex blend of its historical traditions, influences from the effects of colonialism over centuries and current western culture both collaterally and dialectically.

Moreover, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the oldest preserved and well-known epics of India, have been adopted as the epics of south-east Asian countries like Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia shows the enriched ancient culture of India. The sanskrit phrase vasudhaiva kutumbakam found in Hindu text Maha Upanishad connotes 'the world is a family'. The concerned verse of maha upanishad says,

'One is a relative, the other stranger,

Say the small minded.

The entire world is a family,

Live the magnanimous.

Be detached,

Be magnanimous, lift up your mind, enjoy

The fruit of Brahmnic freedom.' (Maha Upanishad 6.71-75)

### **5. Pluralistic Situation In Indian Classroom**

The classroom is a censorious social stage where the lives of individuals are molded and motivated through ideal attitudes and values, which are included in both the syllabus and the teaching learning process. Wallace (2001) emphasizes the need of multicultural education in the mainstream course work for pre-service teachers to be able to understand the experiences and developmental needs of culturally diverse students.

Indian constitution typically supports multilingual education, which offer certain privileges to minority and/or immigrant groups, cultural pluralism and diversity of traditions and customs. One of the crucial principles of democratic pluralism is that group specific rights and policies should stand together with general civic and political rights of participation and inclusion. As a result the typical scenario of linguistic and cultural diversity in an Indian classroom is a reality that many teachers, educators, trainers, researchers face it both as a challenge and an opportunity. Acknowledgement in the context of multicultural education is not just for facets of a group's actual culture but also for the history of group subordination and its entire experience. To exchange their valuable feelings, traditions, expressions between each other in the classroom they need a common suitable language in which they are comfortable.

Multicultural education aims at providing equal opportunities for students from diverse racial, ethnic, social and cultural groups. One of its primary goals is to help all the students acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to arrange and interact with people from diverse groups in order to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good. Each language plays a role in preserving culture and a language of large acceptance plays an important role preserving multiculturalism. The wide acceptance of English by Indian students was experienced by the writer in a CCRT (Centre for Cultural Resources and Training) class during presentation of respective state culture and heritage. Despite Hindi being national language, it was English to be widely accepted by all for the purpose. Another typical scenario, say for instance, in the schools of ST and SC department, where children of different tribal districts such as Phulabani, Gajapati, Mayurbhanj, Kandhamala, Koraput, Kalahandi of the state Odisha, express their personal penchants for the second language English so highly, contrasting their native languages like khond, kui, Gond, Mundari etc. They find no difference between the two strange languages; standard Odia and English, and thus show equal interest for both. Also some students are in the opinion of availing the scope of job opportunities and special dignity as English speaker in the

locality through the learning of the language. Furthermore, in almost all the national level orientation programs, the common mode of exchanging thoughts and ideas on different cultures, social traditions, rituals, beliefs, wedding styles, different social functions, social status etc. English comes to the forefront.

## **6. Role Of English Language Preserving Multiculturalism**

### **6.1 Cultural function of a language**

Language, as a medium of interaction, has been passed down for centuries as legacy. In multicultural societies, it is often the dominant language that represents a country in front of others and become the means of interaction with minority cultures. These different cultures however, keep their heritage intact and converse with one another through their own language. It is through these minorities that cultures are built, hence they place significance in multiculturalism. Culture determines the individual process he comes up with the information and on the other hand meanings of particular words depend on the historical relation that is ascribed to the object being described. Thus language is the carrier, reflector and modifier of a culture. Language is a vital means of transmitting culture and a common source of confusion, even among members of the same culture (Stavenhagen, 1990). We are regarded as more learned and wise because of our acquisition of different languages and the interest of vernacular writers to excel in their own languages. The excellence in own languages is undoubtedly the explosion of talent, but for the dissemination of Indian ethos and culture to the entire world, there is a need of common world language.

### **6.2 English as a world language**

A global language acts as a lingua franca, a common language that enables people from diverse backgrounds and ethnicities to communicate on a more or less equitable basis. Its worldwide reach is much greater than anything achieved historically by Latin or French, and there has never been a language as widely spoken as English. Many would reasonably claim that in the fields of business, academics, science, computing, education, transportation politics and entertainment, English is already established as the de facto lingua franca. The British imperial and industrial power that sent English around the globe has left many countries with the language thoroughly institutionalized in their courts, parliaments, civil service, schools and higher education establishment as a legacy. Other than this English is a very flexible language having simpler grammar than any other languages, relatively simpler in terms of spelling and pronunciation. Its cosmopolitan character (from its adoption of thousands of words from other languages with which it came into contact) and the absence of coding for social differences unlike many other languages, collectively make it a global language.

### **6.3 English as a language in India**

Linguistically the two main language families in India are Indo-Aryan and Dravidian, apart from this Sino-Tibetan and Austro-Asiatic languages are also found in some parts of the country. The Rig Vedic Sanskrit is one of the oldest attestations of any Indo-Aryan language and one of the Indo-European language families. The scholars of 18th century were struck by the far reaching similarity of Sanskrit, both in grammar and vocabulary, to the classical languages of Europe. Intensive scientific studies that followed have established that Sanskrit and many Indian derivative languages belong to the family which includes English, German, and French, Italian, Spanish, Celtic, Greek, Baltic, Armenian, Persian, Tocharian and other Indo-European languages. The resemblance of the language along with the colonial establishment made the language familiar with the Indians. However now the country officially follows a three language policy System: Hindi- official federal language, English- federal states of associate/subsidiary official language, and own

state official language. In school curricula also there is provision of tri-party language system; such as first language- mother tongue, second language- English and third language – Hindi/Sanskrit.

### **7. English as a language in multicultural class**

In a class of diversities, students, failing to converse in their home language, prefer one common language having profuse scope and exposure, to speed up the learning process. Comparing common issues in their own different places using a standard language makes learning more comprehensible. Because of heterogeneity in colorful styles of living, students wish to exchange those interestingly.

The English language classroom provides a clear multicultural context for learning. Teachers get a scope to balance the similarities and differences among various religious, ethnic and cultural groups through a common language. An ideal teacher examines his own prejudices, biases and inclinations on culture in order to keep the students' perceptions unaffected on their own culture, he has to self-evaluate himself as an influential multicultural educator and broad minded culture loving model.

Language is a common means of fusing and transmitting culture among different members. Few activities like fancy dress (wearing costumes of different culture), cultural dance program, folk literature translations, traditional food fair, religious storytelling, and quiz on history and heritage etc. are the best activities to be conducted in the English class to promote multiculturalism.

Teaching effectively in a multicultural classroom needs culturally responsive strategies and content to provide equal opportunities for scholastic excellence and individual growth of all students. Teachers are in a need to grow an awareness of their own cultural outlook, beliefs and behaviors and to be aware that their own cultural frame of reference is not the universal and right one.

### **8. Conclusion**

This paper is based on a small study focusing on the need of teaching culture through English in culturally diverse settings in a country like India. It provides the teachers a constructive proposition to work persuasively with culturally diverse students. Understanding of multiculturalism promotes it.

English, the language of cultural, social and political elite in India is seen offering a significant advantage to be used in a multicultural and multilingual class. India ranks 22 out of 72 countries, in the 2016 English proficiency index published by Education First indicating a moderate proficiency. In 2015, the supreme court of India declared that English is the only court language. Eventually we analyze the view of English language among many Indians has been pictured as a language of common growth, prosperity, unity instead of being viewed a colonial language. Hence it is envisaged that, English, the language of Indian government, national press and social elite can be treated as a bridge among different cultures and languages in the country.

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