

## The Role of Language in Sustainable Development: Multilingualism and Language literacy in India

### Rola języka w zrównoważonym rozwoju: wielojęzyczność i umiejętność czytania i pisania w Indiach

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#### **Abstract**

The paper, out of the three major domains of sustainable development, brings its focus on socio-cultural sustainability. As human contacts and negotiation are essential to serve the purposes of sustainable development worldwide, language as a shared means of communication is worth paying attention to. The central objective of the paper is to deliberate on the significance of language and literacy in sustainable development. Firstly, it introduces the notion of sustainable development and conceptualizes language within its frame. Then, it explores the link between language, literacy and development; and elucidates the role this plays in attaining sustainable development goals. The paper further highlights the debate between English and mother tongue/local languages specific to the literacy programmes in India. Conflicts in language selection for the medium of instruction, deciding on the place of mother tongue and global language, etc are some obvious issues in the multilingual and multicultural education scenario. Therefore, the paper calls for the need of adopting a multilingual approach in order to address the linguistic diversity in the multilingual educational contexts. Both English and local languages have been equally emphasized for attaining social sustainability at the local and global plane. Some implications are also suggested to be utilized in language/educational programmes.

**Key words:** language, literacy, multilingualism, sustainable development

#### **Streszczenie**

Niniejszy artykuł, spośród trzech głównych filarów zrównoważonego rozwoju, koncentruje się na zrównoważeniu społeczno-kulturowym. Ponieważ kontakty międzyludzkie i negocjacje są niezbędne, by służyć zrównoważonemu rozwojowi na całym świecie, warto zwrócić uwagę na język jako wspólny środek komunikacji. Głównym celem artykułu jest rozważenie znaczenia języka i umiejętności czytania i pisania o zrównoważonym rozwoju. Po pierwsze, wprowadza pojęcie zrównoważonego rozwoju i konceptualizuje język w jego ramach. Następnie bada związek między językiem, umiejętnością czytania i rozwoju oraz wyjaśnia rolę, jaką odgrywa w osiągnięciu celów zrównoważonego rozwoju. Artykuł dodatkowo omawia relację między językiem angielskim a językiem ojczystym / językami lokalnymi w kontekście programów alfabetyzacji w Indiach. Konflikty w wyborze języka jako środka nauczania, decydowania o miejscu języka ojczystego i języka globalnego itp. to pewne oczywiste problemy w scenariuszu edukacji wielojęzycznej i wielokulturowej. W związku z tym w artykule postuluje się przyjęcie podejścia wielojęzycznego w celu uwzględnienia różnorodności językowej wielojęzycznych klas. Podkreślono rolę zarówno języka angielskiego, jak i lokalnego, jako drogi do osiągnięcia równowagi społecznej na płaszczyźnie lokalnej i globalnej. Autorzy wskazują również, na niektóre rozwiązania, które można wykorzystać w programach językowych / edukacyjnych.

**Słowa kluczowe:** język, umiejętność czytania i pisania, wielojęzyczność, rozwój zrównoważony

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## 1. Introduction

Sustainable development broadly comprises the economic, environmental and social domains. However, it likely appears that more emphasis is laid on the economic and environmental growth while the social or rather socio-culture sphere that includes language and communication remains unnoticed. The United Nations World Summit (2005) calls for an equal degree of conceptualization, planning and implementation in all these areas, also known as the three pillars of Sustainable Development, for inclusive growth. Taking on the most referred definition, sustainable development is considered as the *development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs* (WCED, 1987). This standard definition has led people to consider sustainable development as broadly referring to intergenerational equity (Kates, Parris & Leiserowitz, 2005). The human contacts and mutual relations that flourish through language are essentials in reaching out to such development. Language as a tool of communication makes it possible for culturally heterogeneous communities or people all around the globe to negotiate over multiple issues and also to be tolerant and considerate for different opinions. The constitutive potentiality of language, in this way, facilitates social development, cultural evolution as well as sustainability.

Most recently, the United Nations Development Programme (2015) has come up with the policy guideline and funding scheme for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for the next fifteen years. It came into effect since January 2016 including a huge number of countries (including India) to achieve the goals by 2030. The SDGs have fashioned out from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which was established by the millennium summit of the UN in 2000 for 15 years (UN, 2015). The SDGs, though built on the earlier MDGs, have elongated and widened up its scope by targeting 17 different goals including education and social goals as an integral part of sustainable development. *Quality Education* as SDG 4 has been emphasized for the evolution and growth of humans. Walsh (2010) states that development at present has made a shift from economic to a more humanistic approach that focuses on every individual and the standard of life often refers to as *integral and sustainable human development*. Moreover, sustainable development with an emphasis on the humanistic perspective makes an attempt to balance the interest of different groups of people. Language does not only connect people across time and space but also directs them towards culture to become its consumers (Zygmunt, 2016). The way people think is determined by language; and as language behaviour is deeply rooted in culture, human behavioural outcomes are directly related to the socio-cultural sphere they exist in. Edward Sapir and

Benjamin Lee Whorf highlight the prominence for language care and culture because the thought process that is shaped within society makes people sensitive towards human needs (as cited in Carroll, 1956). Language is a cultural construct and therefore like any other field of knowledge, linguistic skills also affect the quality of socio-cultural groups (as cited in Urry, 1995). Differences in thought and knowledge, as it is also perceived as a difference in culture, can be addressed through language negotiation and communication. For any kind of development to be accomplished, there is a requirement of a medium that could lead individuals, different communities or nations to fully participate in the various plans in order to bring positive results. Language mobilizes people and enables the exchange of ideas on a global platform in order to work together for the betterment of all. Language skills inculcate better communication that is requisite in the development of countless aspects of both the rural and the modern society ranging from economic issues to health and education. Language literacy can be considered as intercultural education, contributing sustainability to a greater extent. Taking the sustainable growth of every individual into consideration, language education seems to enable all as global participants (Pullen, 2015). In order to avoid linguistic and cultural clashes, language teaching courses should be planned in a way that these could make a contribution to sustainable development at varied socio-cultural planes. The paper presents arguments on the different roles of language in sustainable development and how language, literacy and development are interconnected. It particularly tries to communicate how linguistic and cultural equity in multilingual classrooms or educational plans are important in achieving sustainable development.

## 2. Language, Literacy and Development

There is an important link between language, literacy and development. These three aspects interconnect and affect each other in an implicit or explicit way. The relation of literacy to development is a commonly accepted association worldwide. The literacy rate is often correlated to the growth rate in economic, environmental and social development (e.g. see Papen, 2001). Though this paradigm of literacy and development is not contested, yet the main focus of literacy programmes is found in the development of functional skills, ignoring the efficacy of values and cultural awareness (Rassool, 1999). This narrows down the role of literacy to employability instead of extending people's freedom of choice. Muthwii (2007) calls it *restricted literacy* as it misbalances the empowerment and development of critical faculty among marginalized. However, other approaches to literacy identify its contribution to the expansion of people's critical thinking and personal freedom. The goal of literacy programmes, there-

fore, must not be limited to functional needs but should also include enhancement of life's standard by promoting social justice, political and cultural expansion, and economic prosperity (Ghebregzihi, 2003). Therefore, irrespective of different aspects in focus, literacy enlarges the overall development.

At the same time, it is also true that language as a medium to literacy has a greater part to play in the development picture. Language factors are directly related to the growth in educational achievements (Chumbow, 2005). These call for effective communication and critical thinking. Robinson (1996) finds that *wherever people are put at the centre of the development process, issues of language will always be close to the surface*. Djite' (2008) makes arguments in favour of language awareness as a key component for attaining sustainable development particularly in sectors like health and education, governance and economy etc. Language choice has, therefore, a strong influence on the numerous areas of development.

The most obvious platform for literacy is the educational institution, where the language choice can be seen influencing language sustainability. The official or the language of international benefits i.e., English in most cases has dominance in school settings ignoring mother tongue (MT) and other regional languages of learners creating linguistic imbalance. The assessments of educational outcomes mostly attribute low-quality education to issues like the competence of instructor, resources in schools; often ignoring language incompatibility between the course of the studies and learners. However, concerning the low quality in education, the Education for All 2008 Global Monitoring Report has pinpointed language issue as a critical factor in quality education (GMR, 2007). Moreover, literacy and language choice in learning environments are central components of sustainable development.

### 3. Language and Literacy Programmes: Roles in Sustainable Development

Social development being one of the major areas in sustainable development keeps people central in society or nation-building. Therefore, language as a vehicle of communication among people has significant development potentials. It provides a proper channel to express and share ideas that help to create mutual understanding. The development of effective communication and critical faculty is important to bring people around the world to function at socio-culture planes together. Mutually shared means of communication could assist in establishing discourse and negotiation on both the micro and macro levels. Language is an entrance to the global network of human contacts. Such a global interrelationship of people enables the exchange of knowledge and experience from different cultures and contexts. It helps people to develop a coopera-

tive attitude as well as tolerance for variance in behavior and culture that contribute more to sustainable development. Language is a powerful weapon man has for building and protecting the social sphere and therefore inevitable role in the world of sustainability (Pullen, 2015). This section deals with how language shapes the development in the field of education, what are the conflicts in language choice and how these problems could be addressed.

#### 3.1. Language Education conflicts in India: English and MT/regional languages

En route to social development, language education is crucial for enhancing people's communication skills to prepare them as active participants in discussion over various issues. According to Badjanova & Iliško (2015), focus on education is central to socio-cultural sustainable development. Therefore, language education programmes are essential for literacy and must be designed and developed to target universal as well as local sustainable goals. Besides, one of the key objectives of such courses should be elevating learner productivity and strengthening mental capacity. Chomsky (2007) calls creative language users as productive learners. In order to develop critical thinking in learners, the opportunity for maximum comprehension should be created in literacy programmes, which is possible through the sensible choice of language medium. Robinson (1996) pinpoints that it is often a language difference that causes development intervention among marginal and unprivileged groups.

The choice of language in literacy programmes or second language education in multilingual countries like India is a major issue. Multilingualism has always been an integral part of Indian multicultural society. The People's Linguistic Survey of India identifies more than 66 different scripts and 780 languages in its survey (Singh, 2013). There are 1369 rationalised and 1474 unclassified mother tongues as mentioned in the Census of India (2011). This vast linguistic diversity raises conflicts in making language choices for literacy programmes especially for the selection of the medium of instruction. During the colonial period, the dispute was between classical Indian languages and English. After independence, the medium of instruction has become a political issue. The National Policy on Education (NPE, 1968,1986) has recommended adopting Three Language Formula that suggests the inclusion of Hindi, English and modern Indian languages (the regional language as an alternative for modern Indian language in case of non-Hindi speaking states) in order to address the language issue in classrooms. However, its implementation has been failed in many Indian states. Instead, the vogue of English has increased as a medium of instruction in place of Indian languages. National Curriculum Framework (2005) suggests the implementation of a renewed approach in the Three Language Formula

along with the stress on the advantages of learners' MT in learning. The dispute does not seem to be only between the selection of English and Indian languages but also in making choice over multiple Indian languages/MTs. There are linguistically heterogeneous students with different MTs in the same classroom. It raises many questions such as which MT among so many should be picked out, whether the teacher aware of all languages students bring into the classroom, how to create an equal linguistic opportunity for each learner. Such language conflict often leads to identity issues especially among marginalized. It is of paramount significance to promote linguistic equality to sustain the culture and identity of different social or language groups. Therefore, there should be a holistic approach that addresses linguistics issues in such a diverse setting.

### 3.2. *Harnessing Multilingualism in Education*

This section argues for the egalitarian approach to education for cultural and language sustenance in a multilingual context. Available literature in the area shows the agreement for only one of the languages between the official/global language particularly English (e.g., Brown, 2001; Bygate, 2001; Candlin, 1989; Howatt, 1984) and the local/regional language(s) (e.g., Aggor & Siabi-Mensah, 2003; Hagerberg, 2002; Trudell, 2009) in language/literacy programmes. Nevertheless, learners' mother tongue and a global language both carry their own significance in learning. Therefore, there requires an integration of the local language(s) with the global language in literacy programmes. The carefully planned policies of language are extremely desirable (Adegbiya, 2003). The paper calls out for the re-assessment of the place of MT and global language in the language literacy courses. It suggests that the multilingual approach can offer pronounced benefits to sustainability in multilingual literacy contexts. It does not empower any single language but all languages learners know; English for global benefits like wider opportunities and awareness as well as regional languages for social sustainability including cultural equity and acknowledgement of the individual's identity.

The mother tongue helps in shaping the intellectual and psychological faculty of learners. Instruction in mother tongue at the initial school stage creates a strong 'bridge' for learners for the transfer of literacy skills from previously known languages to a new language and encourage the learning of second/additional language and academic achievements (see e.g., Thomas & Collier, 2002). The sustainability of MTs and local languages could make learning more comprehensible for its capacity to connect the new learning from the previous ones. MT has cognitive worth as it helps the child to conceptualize and deeply sensitize the subject matter. At the same time, the paper also emphasizes the place of English in

pedagogy for practical utility in attaining social, economic and environmental needs. According to Candlin (1989), English seems to be most feasible in terms of availability of resources for educational purposes such as materials, teachers and professionals for course planning. It also has the capabilities to meet the demands of science and technology. This language establishes a wider range of communication within and outside of a country. Moreover, the absence of any of it may lead to educational imbalance; neglecting English could seize awareness at a global scale while local language ignorance could affect the cognitive faculty of learners. Utilization of English ensures sharing of and access to knowledge and information globally while the use of local languages is essential to bring relevance in learning by connecting to learners' identity, culture and emotion. The rigid attitude towards local languages might overlook the benefits of English, and vice versa. The study, therefore, calls for a more balanced and feasible approach for language choice. Every individual learner is equally important in a classroom and therefore should be served equally. In order to achieve equality in linguistic and cultural identity, tolerance and understanding among ethnic groups, language planning in education should be carefully designed. It could be addressed by tapping to socio-cultural materials that are able to represent diverse ethnic groups, training teachers to address multilingual classrooms and appointing bi/multilingual teachers etc. This could not only foster a wider awareness of culture among learners of different groups but also a healthy environment for learning language skills. The language planning should aim for global achievements along with the sustainability of the essence and ease lied in local culture and language.

### 4. Conclusion

The paper discusses sustainable development in terms of the enhancement of social, cultural and linguistic standards through literacy programmes. Languages shaped and deepened in the socio-culture environs remarkably contribute to sustenance playing the transmitters of human knowledge from one to the other generation and across space. A call to the careful selection of language(s) in educational settings has the efficacy to supply for socio-cultural balance and justice among learners. In multilingual contexts, the language disputes in pedagogy could be addressed by the strategic inclusion of learners' MTs, other regional languages and English. Embracing a global multilingual approach could be a sensible step to bring linguistic and cultural equity and therefore sustainable development resultantly.

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