**Thought experiment**

BY A N J U M A LT A F 2020-11-15

SOMETIMES an extreme example is useful to make a point. I am going to rely on one to argue about the language of instruction in early childhood.  
  
Imagine a girl in a village in Baltistan where no one speaks any other language than Shina. Now imagine someone deciding that Chinese ought to be the medium of instrucdon there becauseitis thelanguage of the future. In order to rule out extraneous considerations, imagine the most competent Chinese instructor deployed there with the best texts in the Chinese language. The girl would receive the best education in Chinese and be tested in it.  
  
Reflect on this scenario and decide whether there would be any difference in the girl`s ability to learn about herself and her world based on two dif ferent mediums of instruction Shina and Chinese. This stylised scenario is so blatant that everyone, not just specialists in early childhood education, would conclude that the girl`s learning ability would be impaired by education in an alien language that no one else in her village speaks. This conclusion has been validated by rigorous studies over the years.  
  
How does the conclusion change if the medium of instruction is English instead of Chinese, everything else remaining the same? Granted that English is relatively more familiar than Chinese, but what matters from an educational perspective is the following: Is the ecosystem of English anywhere as dense or rich as Shina in that village in Baltistan? If not, there would still be some sacrifice of learning if English is employed for instruction in early childhood.  
  
Policymakers must consider the following: What is the trade-off that justifies this sacrifice? And why should this cost be borne if the girl can be taught English from, say, Class 5 onward? What is the overwhelming argument for teaching in English from Class 1? Without an answer to this question, supported by evidence, the choice of English as the medium of instruction is not just arbitrary, it is callous and cruel.  
  
In fact, educationists would vouch for the claim that the girl would pick up English better once her learning ability is developed utilising her facility with her home language. A child for whom education is a joyful experience learns everything, not just languages, better. A child who dreads school becomes a candidate for dropping out.  
  
Readers should watch a short clip courtesy of retired justice Jawwad Khawaja that highlights the loss of dignity a child undergoes when made to learn without understanding. The loss extends to diminished connections with the social world and the people in it, cultural alienation, and severance from the most accessible indigenoussources of wisdom and knowledge. Consider the disastrous consequences for the nation when these losses are extrapolated over the entire population.  
  
These thoughts recurred to me on reading reviews of Ludwig Wittgenstein`s Word Book prepared for elementary schoolchildren.  
  
Wittgenstein, considered the greatest philosopher of the 20th century on aspects of language, wrote two books deemed major turning points in analytical philosophy. To him is attributed the quote: `The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.  
  
After publishing the first book in 1921 when he was only 32, Wittgenstein announced he had solved all problems in philosophy and nothing more needed to be said on the matter. He moved to a remote village in Austria to become an elementary school teacher.  
  
What has been written about his teaching is relevant to our discussion. Wittgenstein `engaged his students in a sort of `projectbased learning` that wouldn`t be out of place in the best elementary classrooms today ...In the last years of teaching, he worked with his students to produce what is technically his second published book Wörterbuch für Volksschulen, a German spelling dictionary for elementary schools ... tailor-ing his reference guide to the world his students knew and the language they already spoke.` (A note from his diary: `The improvement of spelling was astonishing.`) `Inside this dictionary, meant for his ...  
  
students, Wittgenstein places emphasis on the pedagogical need for regional usages, dialect, and colloquial expressions over the standard German they`d rarely encounter in the village.  
  
`The contents of the dictionary ... yield a fascinating view of the words that Wittgenstein deemed central to the forms of life and language-games in which his students were immersed.` He captured `the specificity of the rural Austrian dialect` as well as `words that pertained to cultural practices that were part of their community and with which they would have been well acquainted ... to initiate his students into their `language-using community`` and into `the responsibility this carries`.  
  
All this from the world`s leading philosopher of language should be cause for reflection and much humility.  The writer is a former dean of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Lums.