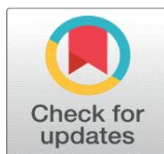
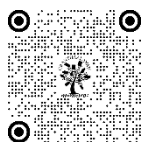


TEACHING ENGLISH IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

Teaching English in multilingual classrooms presents unique challenges and opportunities, particularly in the Indian context, where linguistic diversity is a defining characteristic. This paper explores the complexities of teaching English in classrooms where students come from varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Key challenges include managing multiple first languages, varying levels of English proficiency, cultural differences, and limited access to resources. The paper also examines the impact of mother tongue influence on learning English and the difficulty of fostering inclusivity in heterogeneous classrooms.

To address these challenges, effective strategies are proposed, such as leveraging translanguaging, promoting a multilingual approach, using context-based learning, and incorporating culturally relevant teaching materials. The importance of professional development for teachers, along with innovative pedagogical approaches such as task-based learning and collaborative techniques, is emphasized. By balancing linguistic inclusivity and proficiency, this study aims to highlight best practices for teaching English in multilingual classrooms. It highlights the role of a multilingual framework in enhancing language acquisition and fostering a more equitable and engaging learning environment in Indian schools.

Keywords: Multilingual Classrooms, English Education, Linguistic Diversity, Mother Tongue, Regional Languages, Teacher Training, Curriculum Design, Bilingual Education, Scaffolding, Collaborative Learning, Contextual Learning, Visual Aids, Language Anxiety, Functional English Etc

1. INTRODUCTION

India is a land of unparalleled linguistic diversity, home to 22 officially recognized languages under the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution and hundreds of regional and tribal languages spoken across its vast geography. This rich texture of languages reflects the nation's cultural heritage but also poses unique challenges in education, especially when it comes to teaching a language like English. As a global lingua franca, English plays a vital role in India, serving as a bridge across linguistic divides. It is widely regarded as a medium for academic success, professional growth, and social mobility. English proficiency often determines access to higher education and employment opportunities, making it a critical skill for millions of learners across the country.

However, the multilingual nature of Indian classrooms presents significant challenges for both teachers and students in the process of learning English. Students come with varied linguistic backgrounds, often bringing their mother tongues and regional dialects into the classroom. For many, English is a third or even fourth language, adding complexity to the teaching process. Against this backdrop, it becomes necessary to explore strategies that not only address these challenges but also bind the multilingual richness of classrooms as an asset rather than a barrier. This article probes into the dynamics of teaching English in multilingual classrooms in India, focusing on the hurdles faced by

teachers and learners and proposing practical, inclusive approaches to make English education more effective and equitable.

2. MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS IN INDIA

Indian classrooms are a microcosm of the country's linguistic diversity, reflecting its rich multilingual heritage. Students often come from varied linguistic backgrounds, bringing with them different mother tongues, dialects, and cultural experiences. This creates a dynamic but complex learning environment where languages such as Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Telugu, Marathi, and others interact. In many cases, students may speak a regional language at home, use a different language in social settings, and learn English as a second or third language in school (Mohanty, 2006; Mohanty, 2009). This multilingual nature of Indian classrooms can either be a challenge or an opportunity, depending on how it is managed by teachers and the education system.

The mother tongue or first language (L1) plays a crucial role in the cognitive and emotional development of children and serves as the foundation for learning additional languages, including English (Garcia & Wei, 2014). Research suggests that students who learn in their mother tongue during the early years of education develop better literacy skills and understanding, which subsequently helps them acquire proficiency in a second language like English (Krashen, 1982). The mother tongue acts as a bridge, enabling students to transfer linguistic and cognitive skills to the learning of English. However, the transition from L1 to English in Indian schools is often abrupt, leading to gaps in understanding and learning outcomes, particularly in rural and underprivileged areas where resources and teacher training are limited (Mohanty, 2009).

Regional languages serve as the medium of instruction in many state-run schools across India, ensuring accessibility and inclusivity for students. However, there is a growing trend of parents shifting their children to English-medium schools, driven by the perception that English education ensures better career opportunities and social mobility. This shift has led to a decline in the status of regional languages in education and has created additional challenges for students who are not proficient in English when they enter these schools. Striking a balance between maintaining the use of regional languages as mediums of instruction and introducing English in a phased, supportive manner is essential for equitable and effective education.

2.1. CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

Teaching English in multilingual classrooms in India presents a complex set of challenges that stem from the inherent linguistic diversity of the country. (Cummins 2000) One of the primary difficulties is catering to students with different mother tongues. In a single classroom, students may speak a variety of regional languages or dialects, creating significant hurdles for teachers who must address their diverse linguistic needs. This diversity often leads to a lack of common ground, making it harder for teachers to create a consistent and inclusive learning environment where all students can effectively involve with English.

Another significant challenge is the limited availability of bilingual or multilingual teaching materials. Many Indian schools, particularly in rural areas, lack access to resources that can help bridge the gap between students' mother tongues and English. Textbooks and teaching aids are often designed with a monolingual approach, disregarding the multilingual realities of the classroom. As a result, students who are not proficient in English struggle to grasp concepts, leading to learning gaps and reduced motivation.

Teacher training is another critical issue. Many teachers in India are not adequately prepared to handle the complexities of multilingual classrooms. Most teacher training programs focus on traditional, monolingual teaching methods and fail to equip teachers with strategies for addressing the linguistic diversity of their students. Without proper training, teachers may resort to rote learning or a "one-kind-fits-all" approach, which is often ineffective in multilingual settings.

Classroom management becomes particularly challenging in such environments, as students often have different levels of proficiency in English. While some may have basic conversational skills, others may lack any exposure to the language. Balancing these varied levels requires personalized attention and differentiated instruction, which is difficult to achieve in large, overcrowded classrooms, a common feature in many Indian schools.

Finally, language anxiety is a significant barrier to learning English in multilingual classrooms. Students often feel shy or anxious about using English, especially when they are surrounded by peers who may have a stronger command of the language. This anxiety can lead to reduced participation and confidence, further hindering their ability to develop English proficiency. Moreover, the fear of making mistakes or being ridiculed discourages many students from actively engaging in language learning activities.

2.2. EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

Effective strategies for teaching English in multilingual classrooms in India focus on leveraging the linguistic diversity of students as an asset while addressing their unique challenges. One such approach is the use of the mother tongue or first language (L1) as a bridge to learning English. By allowing students to connect English concepts with their native language, teachers can enhance comprehension and retention. For instance, explaining complex ideas in the mother tongue before changing to English helps students grasp meanings more effectively, building a solid foundation for language acquisition. Research has consistently shown that mother tongue-based education in the early years aids in cognitive development and facilitates second-language learning.

Collaborative learning is another powerful strategy. In multilingual classrooms, students with varying linguistic abilities can work together in pairs or small groups, fostering peer support and cooperative problem-solving. (NCERT 2005) For example, a student with stronger English skills can help a peer by explaining concepts in their shared mother tongue, creating a sense of mutual learning and reducing language anxiety. This not only improves academic outcomes but also promotes social cohesion and confidence among learners.

Contextual learning is equally crucial. Using culturally relevant examples, stories, and scenarios that resonate with students' lived experiences makes English more relatable and engaging. For instance, incorporating local festivals, traditions, or everyday situations into lessons enables students to connect English vocabulary and grammar with familiar contexts, enhancing both interest and understanding.

Visual aids and technology can significantly enhance teaching effectiveness. Tools such as videos, pictures, infographics, and educational apps provide multisensory inputs that make learning interactive and enjoyable. These resources cater to varied learning styles and help bridge language gaps, particularly for visual or auditory learners. For example, language-learning apps like Duolingo or Kahoot can gamify the process, encouraging students to practice English in an enjoyable, low-pressure environment.

Scaffolding techniques are essential in transitioning students from their first language to English. This involves a gradual and structured approach, starting with bilingual teaching methods, such as providing translations or using code-switching, and then progressively increasing the use of English in lessons. (UNESCO 2008, UNESCO 2018) Scaffolding ensures that students do not feel overwhelmed and allows them to build confidence at their own pace. Thus, prioritizing communication over grammar-heavy instruction is vital. Teachers should focus on functional English skills, such as listening and speaking, to equip students for real-life interactions. Activities like role-playing, group discussions, and storytelling help students use English in practical scenarios, fostering fluency and confidence. Over time, grammar and writing skills can be integrated in a way that complements, rather than dominates, the learning process.

2.3. EXPERIMENT IN AN ENGLISH CLASSROOM FOR GRADE V (BY THE RESEARCHER & AUTHOR)

In a Grade V English classroom, an experiment was conducted to explore the impact of using the students' mother tongue, Telugu, as a scaffold for learning English vocabulary. The teaching approach focused on introducing English words alongside their Telugu equivalents, ensuring the children could draw parallels between the two languages. This method aimed to enhance their understanding and retention of English words by leveraging their familiarity with Telugu.

Initially, the students were introduced to ten commonly used Telugu words, such as పుస్తకం (book) and పాఠశాల (school), along with their English translations. The researcher explained each word using visual aids, real-life objects, and contextual sentences in Telugu and English. Students were encouraged to repeat the words, form sentences, and relate them to their daily lives. At the beginning of the experiment, many students displayed hesitation and a lack of confidence in constructing English sentences. They often took to Telugu phrases, unsure of how to translate them into

English. However, the incorporation of their native language as a bridge to English learning made the process less intimidating.

The following are some of the words used in the language teaching process.

Telugu Word	English Translation
పుస్తకం	Book
స్నానం	Bath
కోతి	Monkey
ఇల్లు	House
పాఠశాల	School
పదం	Word
సూర్యుడు	Sun
పక్షి	Bird
పుస్తకాలు	Books
రాత్రి	Night

As the sessions progressed, the students became more comfortable and responsive. They actively participated in activities like sentence formation and role-playing, showing noticeable improvement in their ability to use the English words in context. By the end of the experiment, their confidence had grown significantly, demonstrating that integrating their mother tongue into the learning process helped them overcome initial barriers and facilitated their progress in acquiring English proficiency. All students were able to use the words in sentences correctly, indicating that using Telugu as a support language positively impacts their ability to grasp and use English vocabulary effectively. For example:

Telugu Word: కుటుంబం (Family) → Sentence: "My family is very supportive."

Telugu Word: పండుగ (Festival) → Sentence: "We celebrate the festival together every year."

This analysis demonstrates that using the mother tongue to teach English vocabulary helps students understand and correctly use English words in sentences, showing a positive impact on English proficiency.

3. ROLE OF TEACHERS AND POLICY MAKERS

Teachers and policymakers play a critical role in addressing the complexities of teaching English in multilingual classrooms in India. Teacher training programs focused on multilingual education are essential for equipping teachers with the skills and strategies needed to manage linguistically diverse classrooms. Such training should emphasize bilingual teaching methods, the use of students' mother tongues as scaffolding tools, and techniques for creating inclusive environments where all languages are respected. Teachers need to be prepared to use translanguaging strategies, which allow students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire to make sense of English, and to foster collaboration among students from different language backgrounds. Without adequate training, many teachers default to monolingual methods that fail to involve students effectively, particularly those with limited English proficiency.

Curriculum design is another critical area requiring attention from policymakers. A well-designed curriculum should be inclusive of regional and first languages, integrating them into the teaching of English rather than marginalizing them. For instance, multilingual textbooks that include examples, exercises, and stories in both English and regional languages can help students make connections between their existing knowledge and the new language. Additionally, the curriculum should focus on gradual, contextualized transitions from the mother tongue to English, allowing students to build confidence and competence without feeling alienated. Inclusive curricula also ensure that

students from diverse linguistic backgrounds feel represented and valued, which positively impacts their involvement and learning outcomes.

Policy-level initiatives like India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 have recognized the importance of multilingualism in education. The NEP 2020 advocates for the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction, particularly in primary education, while also emphasizing the importance of English as a global link language. It highlights the need to balance the preservation of India's linguistic heritage with the demand for English proficiency in a globalized world. The policy also calls for the creation of teaching and learning resources in multiple languages and the development of teacher training programs to support multilingual education. By encouraging a multilingual approach, the NEP aims to leverage India's linguistic diversity as a strength rather than a challenge, fostering equitable and effective education for all.

3.1. SUCCESS STORIES OR CASE STUDIES

India has seen several success stories and case studies that demonstrate the effective implementation of strategies for multilingual classrooms, showcasing how linguistic diversity can be harnessed as a strength in education. One such example is the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources (RIVER) in Andhra Pradesh, which has pioneered the use of multilingual and multigrade teaching practices. The RIVER program developed flexible learning materials that incorporate multiple languages, enabling students from diverse linguistic backgrounds to learn English alongside their mother tongue. These materials use stories, folk tales, and cultural contexts familiar to the students, making the learning process engaging and accessible. The program also trains teachers to manage multilingual classrooms effectively, using peer learning and group work as key strategies (Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources).

In rural Jharkhand, the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) for tribal students have integrated multilingual education into their curriculum to address the challenges faced by children whose mother tongues are tribal languages like Santhali or Ho. These schools use a three-language formula, where the student's mother tongue is used as the medium of instruction in the early years, gradually transitioning to Hindi and English. This phased approach ensures that students have a strong foundation in their first language, enabling smoother transitions to additional languages. Teachers in these schools are trained in bilingual teaching methods, and the curriculum includes culturally relevant materials that reflect the students' indigenous heritage (Pradhan, 2019).

Urban schools, such as those participating in the Teach For India (TFI) initiative, have also adopted innovative teaching practices in multilingual classrooms. TFI fellows working in low-income schools in cities like Mumbai and Delhi have used technology, such as mobile apps and interactive whiteboards, to bridge linguistic gaps and make English learning interactive. One notable example is the use of WhatsApp groups for language practice, where students receive daily assignments and interact with their teachers and peers in English. This not only builds their language skills but also enhances their confidence in using English in everyday contexts (Teach For India, 2020).

The Lok Jumbish program in Rajasthan is another noteworthy example. Designed to improve primary education in rural areas, this initiative has focused on multilingual education by producing teaching materials in regional languages and dialects alongside Hindi and English. Teachers are trained to use local cultural references and folk art in their teaching, creating an inclusive environment that respects and celebrates linguistic diversity.

These success stories highlight that effective multilingual education requires culturally sensitive curricula, teacher training, and innovative teaching methods tailored to the needs of the students. They demonstrate that, with the right strategies, multilingual classrooms can become spaces where students develop not only proficiency in English but also pride in their linguistic and cultural identities.

4. CONCLUSION

The multilingual nature of Indian classrooms, while challenging, offers a unique opportunity to enrich the process of teaching and learning English. The linguistic diversity of students, if approached strategically, can serve as an asset rather than a barrier. The effective use of mother tongues as a bridge to learning English, collaborative and contextual learning practices, and the integration of visual aids and technology have proven to be powerful tools in addressing these

challenges. Additionally, scaffolding techniques and a focus on communication rather than grammar-heavy approaches provide a more inclusive and engaging framework for English education.

Teacher training programs designed for multilingual classrooms are crucial for equipping teachers with the skills to navigate diverse linguistic environments. Similarly, an inclusive curriculum design that values and integrates regional and first languages ensures that students feel represented and supported. Policymakers, through initiatives like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, have laid the groundwork for a multilingual approach that recognizes the importance of mother tongue instruction alongside the global significance of English. Successful programs like the Rishi Valley Institute for Educational Resources, the Eklavya Model Residential Schools, and the Lok Jumbish project exemplify how innovative strategies can overcome the challenges of multilingual education and create positive learning outcomes.

Teachers, policymakers, and communities must collaborate and invest in multilingual education to ensure that students across India receive equitable and effective English instruction. This requires a commitment to developing teacher capacity, creating culturally relevant teaching materials, and fostering an environment where linguistic diversity is celebrated. By working together, we can transform multilingual classrooms into spaces where all students have the opportunity to succeed, not only in learning English but also in preserving their linguistic heritage and cultural identity.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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