

English Language Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Strategies for Inclusive Learning

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Abstract

India is a linguistically diverse country with a contemporary education system featuring multilingual classrooms. Teachers of English language face special challenges in such classrooms, which are learner inhibition, linguistic interference, and the level of competence of learners. However, if the appropriate pedagogy is selected, multilingual classes can provide opportunities for inclusive learning. This paper discusses efficient ways of English Language Teaching (ELT) that can be used to improve inclusive learning in multilingual classrooms. This qualitative and conceptual study is based on the previous literature available on inclusive learning in ELT classes and teachers' experiences of how inclusive strategies in class may enhance ELT. It reported the effectiveness of collaborative activities and the use of TBL, culture-based teaching, and code switching in the classroom classes as an effort to accommodate linguistic diversity in English Language classes. The study argues that multilingualism must be accepted as an opportunity or a teaching resource to enhance inclusive learning and not as a barrier to learning English. Finally, the paper points to the need for teachers' training to make their pedagogies in line with the aims of inclusive education.

Keywords: Translanguaging, Multilingualism, Inclusive Education, Code Switching, English Language Teaching, Multilingual Classroom

Introduction

Indian classrooms are diverse because all Indian languages are multilingual, with hundreds of regional and 22 official languages. Classrooms in the urban and semi-urban regions are predominantly heterogeneous (mixed) and involve students from various L1 (first language) and cultural backgrounds, as well as varying levels of English language proficiency. This sociocultural difference creates multiple pedagogical challenges and provides opportunities to enhance inclusivity in English Language Teaching (ELT). With these environments in place, the English classroom can be a space where learners experience life as it is through academic content, social contexts, and global connections. English classrooms thus become living labs where students experiment with their language use in real life. However, the diversity of languages in the classroom can be seen as an obstacle or an asset for inclusive learning. This paper focuses on how a multilingual classroom can be a place for English language learning and the inclusive practices of teachers as they make classroom activities engaging and effective.

Review of Literature

In Indian classrooms, there is a linguistic landscape comprising more than hundred regional and indigenous languages as well as 22 scheduled languages. This is an important characteristic of the educational scenario, as multilingual teaching takes place. Recent studies in the field of English pedagogy have given great importance to multilingualism because the reality of Indian classrooms can be misrepresented by any one language pedagogies. The literature review section of this paper summarizes the results of previous studies.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is an authentic source that defines the multilingual culture of India. It refers to the need for multilingualism in classrooms for improved interaction, cultural identity, and cognitive development. According to Nivedita (2025), the NEP 2020 has emphasized teaching in the mother tongue or regional language until grade 5 or, preferably, grade 8, as conceptual learning and comprehension are better at an early age. The study highlights the fact that multilingualism is a strength and not a problem in teaching. It also asserts that balanced bilingual education will benefit India in the context of honoring its own languages and catering to globalization.

According to Agnihotri (2010), classrooms in India are not monolithic but diverse. Agnihotri asserts that “the concept of multilinguality not only encompasses linguistic forms, but also encompasses cultural practices and identity” and thus, “is a cognitive and social asset that is indispensable for improving the teaching-learning environment in India.” He says that it is not good to consider English as a competitor to Indian languages; it is better to see English growing together with Indian languages, not at their cost. Multilingual pedagogy is about justice, equality, and democratic engagement, an affirmation of each child’s linguistic heritage.

Saurabh Anand (2020) conveys how multilingualism is experienced in everyday life and informal education. Anand spoke about his childhood in Delhi and how he learned to read and speak Hindi, English, Urdu, and vernacular languages at home, school, and in the community. This demonstrates the natural learning process by which children acquire multilingual rules. He brings these two lessons for

classroom teaching to the attention of teachers, which he learned from his personal experience. He mentions that learners come to the classroom with extensive verbal collections even before formal education begins. He also mentioned that informal training takes place quite often in the community, as well as in informal, non-structured situations. This discovery also validates the notion that, instead of replacing students’ first language or native tongue, teachers may find opportunities to capitalize on the existing baseline.

In the context of multilingualism, this study offers an empirical and practical approach to the subject (Padwad 2023). The study differentiates between “classroom multilingualism” and “operative multilingualism.” Even in a multilingual classroom, the study indicates that only a few of the languages become ‘operative’ as a result of teacher-student interaction. Some languages can be used by teachers for scaffolding, summaries, and explanations. The study thus shows how teachers strategically use multilingual resources in classrooms to make the teaching-learning process effective.

According to Coleman (2017), multilingualism is embedded in a sociopolitical context. The study supports the importance of multilingual cultures, as languages in India are complementary and not hierarchical resources. Multilingualism is highlighted as essential to understanding democratic engagement in this study. The findings refer to the marginalization of minority languages in the context of an overemphasis on English medium instruction. It also notes that improved academic outcomes and heightened creativity and cognitive flexibility are more closely linked to mother tongue-based or multilingual education. Thus, these studies focus on the potential of multilingualism to promote social justice, inclusiveness, and empowerment.

Rai (2021) brings multilingualism to literature education. She observes a tendency for ‘dominant-language’ books to be used in Indian literature courses. The study suggests that multilingual pedagogy is beneficial in improving students’ literary interpretation skills and moving them from the known to the unknown via their mother tongue. Her paper urges for a multilingual pedagogy founded on the notion of learner schemata, from known to unknown, and through the use of the learners’ mother tongue, as

a method for developing literary interpretation skills. The study concluded that literature classrooms can become inclusive if students' language is considered an intellectual resource. Multilingual classrooms promote participation, critical thinking, and cultural dignity. This perspective is expanded to include language learning and democratic classroom culture.

Rahima et al. (2025) examined how inclusive education is implemented in English classrooms, with a study conducted with special focus on students with special educational needs. The study indicates that teachers try to be fair to such children and provide additional support when necessary. This study discusses the problems that exist in the study, such as social interaction problems, differences in language, and ADHD. To successfully accommodate various learners in inclusive English language classrooms, the study emphasizes the significance of teacher preparation and supportive classroom techniques.

Bouzid and Javier (2024) argue that translanguaging is one of the most significant pedagogical approaches for inclusive language teaching in multilingual contexts. This study concentrates on the aspects of translanguaging that allow students to employ all their language skills in English learning. This can help develop understanding skills and contribute to successful interactions in class. According to the study, multilingual pedagogy is useful for reducing linguistic disparities. Translanguaging undermines the traditional monolingual classroom and fosters an inclusive learning environment that embraces the diversity of linguistic identity, its recognition, and its utilization as a learning resource.

The literature review shows that many studies have focused on the difficulties English teachers face in multilingual classrooms. Anderson (2022) narrows his discussion to the secondary English language teachers' work as they attempt to respond to an institutional expectation that matches the language diversity within a multilingual classroom. The research revealed that teachers routinely use translanguaging strategies to support students' understanding, but many teachers struggle to balance curriculum requirements with students' varying linguistic capabilities. Seenivasan (2025) notes

structural issues with teaching English in India, such as time duration, packed classroom, inadequate teacher training and preparation and an excessive dependence on students' native tongue.

Many studies have identified the potential of multilingual classrooms for creative pedagogy and inclusive learning. Mukhopadhyay et al. (2023) describe the implementation of the translanguaging approach in Indian multilingual classrooms, where students are allowed to use their home language to comprehend English language texts, to enhance their vocabulary and understanding. This study concentrates on the process of making classroom engagement more inclusive and relevant through the conscious utilization of students' language resources. Similarly, Rauteda (2022) discussed teachers' conceptions of translanguaging in multilingual ELT classrooms. Multilingual practices enhance academic achievement, student engagement, and identity building. Therefore, when used strategically and flexibly by teachers, linguistic diversity can be an effective resource for teaching.

However, even after a long study on inclusive education, translanguaging, and multilingualism in ELT, there are a number of gaps that have not been answered concerning the integration of the above in actual multilingual classrooms. Although previous research has explored teachers' views on multilingualism and revealed some of the challenges of implementing inclusive approaches, few studies have examined the potential of multilingual strategies to be systematically used to support language development and inclusive participation in English classrooms. Furthermore, the majority of the available research concentrates on policy viewpoints or theoretical debates on multilingual teaching. Thus, this study aims to close this gap by investigating how multilingualism may be used as a pedagogical tool to promote an inclusive and effective English language learning environment. This study also examines the different strategies English teachers may use to overcome the challenges faced in multilingual classes.

Research Methodology

The current study is a qualitative and conceptual research design to explore inclusive educational

practices in multilingual English language classes. It does not collect primary empirical data, but critically reviews and analyzes existing theoretical work, research, and practitioner practice around inclusive ELT and multilingualism in a systematic way. It is often employed in applied linguistics research to draw practical conclusions from the gathered information and to develop teaching plans and policies based on these. The study draws upon the findings of previous studies to develop a theoretically grounded understanding of inclusive English language teaching in multilingual classrooms in India. This conceptual and qualitative study is mainly concerned with multilingual English Language classrooms in the context of Indian education. The results and teaching recommendations shared in this paper are drawn from existing literature, theory, and documented classroom practice and not from primary empirical research. Hence, the effectiveness of these strategies can differ in different areas of the country due to the diversity of languages, for example, institutional support, teacher preparedness, class size, and learners' language proficiency. This study focuses primarily on the school and higher education contexts in multilingual settings. and may not be indicative of monolingual or technologically mediated learning environments. More empirical studies in various educational contexts would support the validation of the suggested strategies and widen their applicability..

Findings and Discussion

Collaborative Activities as Inclusive Pedagogy

The basis of collaborative learning is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning, where the idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a gap between what can be achieved by a learner independently and what can be achieved in collaboration with a more skilled partner, such as a peer or adult. This concept is used in collaborative activities in linguistically diverse ELT classes by pairing students with complementary linguistic and cognitive abilities. Students who have higher subject matter knowledge present their knowledge in terms of the topic which is helpful to the group, irrespective of their English proficiency; students with higher English proficiency act as scaffolds to

their peers. Gibbons (2002) stated that small-group cooperative activities create a context for interaction that allows students to make sense of what they hear, test their language hypotheses, and get immediate and contextualized feedback from their classmates, which makes the classroom favorable for language development. Most importantly, students are less likely to experience the same sense of hesitation and anxiety that they normally experience when acting in front of an audience in a second language when working in small peer groups. Collaborative activities are not new to Indian Classrooms. The educational sector has exploited the advantages of a multilingual society by using group work in which students must communicate in a cross-cultural context. They can be invited to share their own traditions, regions, religions, festivals, etc., in English, developing their communicative skills in English.

Multilingual classrooms have already been found by many researchers to have opened up opportunities for creative teaching-learning approaches and for inclusive learning, albeit with some difficulties. Based on some research, if students are allowed to understand the required texts in English in their own language, they have improved reading skills and expanded their vocabulary. If teachers use resources properly, such translanguaging techniques can be very inclusive. The results reveal that for all learners to be equally involved in the classroom for better learning, teachers need to consider the various multilingual pedagogies that make use of language diversity in the classroom. It is assumed that multilingualism in India is a natural part of learners' everyday communication. Learners can be using more than one language without this being a formal language in their everyday life. However, the 'English only' classroom practices alienate them from the diversity they are naturally into. Knowing the students background and using diversity as a resource, English learning can be more effective in Indian classrooms.

Storytelling as a Pedagogy for Inclusivity

According to UNESCO's inclusiveness guidelines (2005), confidence, comprehension, and critical thinking can be improved in a student's social quotient along with multilingualism practice

in classrooms. Inclusive education is about ensuring equal participation of all learners by eliminating barriers between learners and the education process. English language classrooms may attempt to become familiar with the diversity of students' backgrounds and then plan teaching while adopting diversified teaching techniques to provide multiple teaching methods. The study found that the storytelling strategy is effective in language classrooms to overcome students' language inhibition. The hesitation to participate in discussions may be due to the fear of mispronunciation, being cautious about the grammar errors likely to be committed, and the resultant ridicule by fellow students. The learner's social background stories can be inclusive and help lower these inhibitions. In this method, as a mixed group, students discuss story ideas in their native language, and then narrate it together in English. The incorporation of cultural stories enables learners to develop an identity within the classroom, feel proud of their culture, and make language learning a comfortable journey.

Task Based Language Teaching for Inclusivity

The task-based approach to language teaching emphasizes real-life and meaningful tasks. Importance is given here to meaning rather than grammatical form. These real-life scenarios, compiled by teachers, motivate students to be active in the classroom. Completion of the task is the priority in TBLT, and this is done with peer engagement, thus enhancing real-life communication. These three phases of the approach (pre-, during, and post-task) can be integrated by teachers with the instruction that the outcome has to be in English, using multilingual methods for discussion, collaboration, or planning. Learning is a process and not an end product. Therefore, in a few discussions, the freedom of the students to use their language should be encouraged so as for the students to come out of the fear of using the English language. Inclusive activities can include planning a community event, producing a brochure in a variety of languages, or interviewing a variety of languages and summarizing them in English.

Code Switching for Inclusivity

The use of more than one language in classroom

activities to support bilingual/multilingual classrooms. Traditional views of the second language classroom do not promote code switching English, but code switching can be an effective language tool if used strategically, as form is not a primary consideration with purpose. According to Sakaria and Priyana (2018), code-switching can be an effective tool to lower affective filters in the class, resulting in enhanced comprehension. This helps in better comprehension, as complex instructions can be simplified. Key vocabulary can be translated, with the learner's previous vocabulary connected to the translated vocabulary, to assist the learner in making corresponding connections with English words. If done judiciously, code-switching will aid in learning and will not be a hindrance.

Recommendations

To integrate multilingualism into pedagogy, teachers need training in the multilingualism pedagogical paradigm related to culturally enhanced pedagogy. Workshops may be conducted to familiarize teachers with TBLT and assessments for inclusive pedagogy. Including peer observation in the curriculum can help teachers receive constructive feedback for improving their instruction. Institutions should share the required funds and enthusiasm for the respective training and for building learning communities or groups of teachers. There may be flexibility in the assessment process at the policy level in the use of multilingualism in English classes. Consider creating textbooks and materials that contain information and instructions on the use of multilingual activities in classes. The balance of multiple languages and English as an additional language in India can be achieved using translanguaging and/or the multilanguage approach in the classroom. Teachers (s) can use the learners L1 as scaffolding for the task, and the task might also provide opportunities, if needed, for multilingualism.

Conclusion

English classrooms in India are highly multilingual, with students from diverse multilingual backgrounds. While multilingualism might bring some difficulties in education, it can be regarded as a valuable asset that can improve the effectiveness

of English Language Teaching (ELT). A shift from monolingualism to multilingualism in the teaching and learning process can provide opportunities for teachers to turn linguistic diversity into an educational resource. Collaborative learning, task-based activities, storytelling, culture, and strategic code-switching are a few ways that can be used to develop LSRW skills in a multilingual manner. If properly designed and effectively executed, such practices can be used to reverse classroom fear of English and develop pride in the native language and cultural identity.

In addition, the effective implementation of multilingual pedagogy in ELT will require the concerted action of educational practitioners, institutions, and policymakers who need to equip teachers with sufficient training and appropriate learning materials for inclusivity and equitable learning opportunities. Future studies should also examine the long-term effects of the multilingual pedagogical approach on language proficiency, classroom involvement, and academic achievement in each context. Comparative research into multilingual teaching strategies in rural and urban classrooms and explorations of teachers' perceptions and problems in multilingual teaching practices would also contribute significantly to the development of inclusive ELT practices.

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