

Teachers' Use of Multilingual Approaches in English Classrooms: A Study

Ujjwala Sadaphal

Abstract

Multilingualism is deep-rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of India. The National Education Policy, 2020 and National Curriculum Framework for School Education, 2023 advocate multilingualism. The multilingual approach offers instructional strategies that support and supplement the acquisition of the target language English, using other native languages. The research aimed to examine the multilingual approaches employed by teachers in English classrooms and the benefits and challenges of multilingualism in English classrooms. The study uses a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative and qualitative data were collected using questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The area covered is Nagpur, Chandarpur and Wardha districts of Maharashtra state in India. The sample size was limited to a total of 150 English teachers, 50 each from three districts. The findings indicated the multilingual approaches employed by teachers, multilingual pedagogy and strategies, benefits and challenges of multilingualism in English classrooms.

Keywords: Multilingual approach, English classrooms, teacher perspective

Introduction

Indian history and culture date back to the prehistoric age. Being one of the oldest surviving cultures, Indian culture is unique in itself. Indian ethos lies in its pluralism. It embraces unity in diversity. This diversity is expressed in all spheres of life, from food, clothing, and housing materials to languages and customs. A total of 22 languages are recognised by

the eighth schedule of the Indian Constitution. But Indians speak and communicate in many more voices. There are a variety of languages and dialects written and spoken in different states and regions. The Census of India (2011) noted 121 languages and 270 identifiable mother tongues. Thus, India is essentially multilingual. Multilingualism is deep-rooted in its socio-cultural fabric affecting various dimensions of life.

Acknowledging the multilingual heritage of India, the National Education Policy 2020 has emphasised learning multiple languages. The National Education Policy 2020 has recommended the mother tongue as a medium of instruction and stresses the need to learn native languages. It has pointed out the cognitive benefits of learning multiple languages. The language curriculum for school education is directed towards developing linguistic proficiency in three languages, including at least two languages native to India.

Multilingual Approach

The multilingual approach supports and welcomes the identity and culture of students by accepting their language in classrooms. This approach accepts that prior knowledge can be best expressed in the students' language and can be used for building new knowledge. The multilingual approach offers instructional strategies that support and supplement the acquisition of the target language English, using other native languages. It also facilitates the development of other languages along with the targeted language (Cherewka, 2023). It allows learners to have full access to their linguistic repertoire for attaining proficiency in English. It is based on the principles of teaching, namely from known to unknown, from simple to complex, and from context-specific to context-independent. The multilingual approach answers the question of when, why, and how teachers can use students' knowledge of their home languages to help them learn English.

Language learning goes hand in hand with learning linguistic heritage and culture reflected in various literary forms like stories, dramas, novels, poetry, etc. The school education aims at developing knowledge, capacities, values, and dispositions. Language plays a pivotal role in the development of all these four faculties. It is a medium of thinking and a tool for acquiring knowledge. It facilitates communication, analytical reasoning, and critical thinking. It also becomes a medium

for developing values and dispositions. This is very well recognised by the National Education Policy 2020. The aim of language education is not just oracy or literacy but to develop effective communication, discussion, writing skills, literary appreciation, and creative use of language. Language education is expected to instil multilingualism, sensitivity, and appreciation of diverse languages, cultures, and their expressions in varied forms. In light of this emphasis laid on multilingual policy perspectives, it becomes imperative to study the multilingual approaches employed in English classrooms.

The Review of Literature

The growing body of research in the area has shown that using students' mother tongue and their cultural backgrounds promotes English language learning. Earlier, knowledge of the native language is believed to be an obstacle to English language learning. For years, teachers were advised not to use other languages in English classes (Ollerhead, & Leech, 2019). The research has shown that learning a language is a time-consuming process and the time taken for learning and the level of language acquisition depends on many factors (Ray, 2021).

Mother tongue is not only a medium of communication but a cultural organisation. It is the basis of the social, emotional, and intellectual expressions of the speakers. Mother tongue facilitates students to identify and organise their experiences and environment (Shobha, 2019). Generally, people are attached to their mother tongue and find affinity with persons who accept or speak their language. The mother tongue also influences second and third language acquisition. The research has shown that the learning of English is influenced by prior knowledge, socio-emotional experiences, and prior languages learned by students.

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education, 2023 (NCF-SE) has provided a curriculum framework for language education at the school level. It is an important component of the National Education Policy, 2020. It recognises that language learning is an important aspect and advocates multilingualism. Another important policy recommendation regarding language education is recognising and classifying three languages to be studied at the school level denoted as R1, R2 and R3 languages. The R1- language is the language of first literacy learnt as the mother tongue or the language prevalent in the

neighbourhood. The policy advocates language R1 as a medium of instruction till literacy is attained in another language. The policy perspective implies that multilingual approaches need to be adopted for teaching and learning R2 and R3 languages.

The review of the literature was carried out to understand teachers' perceptions and practices of the multilingual approach in English classrooms. Bosch et al. (2024) indicated that teachers were positive towards multilingualism in Greece as compared to teachers in Italy and Netherlands and teachers who have received training on multilingualism had a positive effect on their attitudes. Osidak et al. (2024) studied teachers' multilingual beliefs and practices and concluded that there exists a complex and uneven relationship between teachers' multilingual beliefs and practices in English classrooms with the majority of teachers having favourable perceptions of multilingualism. But they lack the required expertise for use in teaching. There is a clear discrepancy in their perception and practices. In a study by Vikøy and Haukås (2023), Norwegian teachers' beliefs were studied. Norwegian teachers found it challenging to improve minority students' Norwegian skills. And they rarely encourage students' multilingualism as a resource in the classroom. The finding of Bruner and Carlsen (2023) shows that English teachers' multilingual beliefs and practices vary within national contexts and are deeply rooted in established norms of schools. Though teachers have positive beliefs about multilingualism, very little is reflected in their practice.

The Rationale for the Study

The review of the related literature has shown that most of the studies are carried out in various countries, especially European countries and very few studies were conducted in the Indian context which indicates a research gap. So, it is important to assess the Indian context. In the Indian context, linguistic diversity is a crucial aspect of language education, especially when it comes to English language teaching. Hence teachers must be aware of the linguistic diversities in their classrooms which is studied in the present research. This awareness requires teachers to search for suitable strategies and pedagogies for creating inclusive and effective learning environments. The review has pointed out that a multilingual approach is the most suitable approach in such a scenario. It is interesting to find out how teachers employ multilingual approaches

in English classrooms. And to study teachers' perceptions of the most effective multilingual pedagogy and strategies in the classrooms.

This study is focussed on exploring the multilingual approaches employed, benefits and challenges of multilingualism in English classrooms. As language diversity can be used to enhance English language proficiency, cultural competence and learning experiences, it is essential to get an insight into strategies and methods for integrating multilingual approaches in English classrooms and their benefits for students.

The review indicated that teachers' multilingual beliefs vary within a national context. Breaking down barriers between language subjects can be achieved through teachers' use of more than one language in class. So it is essential to know the teachers' perspective on the multilingual approach. The information regarding the benefits and challenges of employing multilingual approaches in the classroom will go a long way in devising a suitable curriculum, and vertical and horizontal alignment of learning goals and educational policies.

Purpose of the Study

The research aimed to examine multilingual approaches employed by teachers in English classrooms.

The research questions related to the Quantitative Component of the study are:

- 1) Are teachers aware of the linguistic diversity in English classrooms?
- 2) Whether teachers value multilingualism in English classrooms?
- 3) How do teachers employ multilingual approaches in English classrooms?

The research questions for the Qualitative Component are:

- 4) Which multilingual pedagogy and strategies are effective in English classrooms?
- 5) What are the benefits of employing multilingual approaches in English classrooms?
- 6) What are the challenges of multilingualism in English classrooms?

Method

Mixed methods research allows deeper exploration of the research

questions as it uses both quantitative and qualitative data. In case, the research problem is complex and cannot be solved by using either a qualitative or quantitative approach, mixed methods research is the most suitable option for the researcher. The nature of the present research problem needs both quantitative and qualitative data to answer research questions and to arrive at logical conclusions. Hence the present study employed a mixed-methods approach.

Initially, a comprehensive review of the literature was done to study existing research on multilingual approaches and their applicability in the Indian context. Secondary sources like books, journals, e-resources, and online material were used for this purpose. This facilitated the understanding of the theoretical foundations and practical implications of multilingual approaches in English language teaching. Further, primary sources of data collection were used. The quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were employed. Questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The questionnaire was used to obtain quantitative data. It aimed to study teachers' awareness, perspectives, and practice of multilingual approaches in English classrooms. Qualitative data is obtained from semi-structured interviews. In semi-structured interviews teachers were asked about their experiences of using the multilingual approach in class, the benefits of using it and the challenges faced by them while using multilingualism in English classrooms.

The area of study was limited to Nagpur, Chandarpur and Wardha districts of Maharashtra state in India. All the teachers teaching English subjects at the school level from the region constituted the population for the study. The purposive sampling technique was used for the study. The sample size was limited to a total of 150 English teachers, 50 each from three districts. The sample selected was divided into sub-groups based on gender, area, the type of school, and their years of experience. They are classified as teachers from government-aided schools and private schools. The criterion for experience in years is teachers with experience of less than 5 years, between 6 to 15 years and more than 15 years.

The data collected from the questionnaire was tabulated and analysed using frequencies and percentages. The data from semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings are discussed and recommendations are given.

Findings and Discussion

Findings of the study are as follows:

Teachers Awareness of the Linguistic Diversity in English Classrooms

The quantitative analysis indicates that teachers are aware of the linguistic background of students. This awareness level is higher in teachers from government-aided schools and experience of more than 6 years. Recognising the multilingual nature of the class is the first step to a multicultural approach. Teachers have reported that their students speak native languages like Gondi, Halbi, Kolami, Kohali, Zadi, Halbi, Madia, Varhadi, Sindhi, and Hindi.

Valuing Multilingualism in English Classrooms

It is also found that teachers value multilingualism in their classrooms. This is indicated by their responses. 130 (86.67%) teachers are listening to the voices of students, 102 (68%) teachers are respecting their language, 110 (73.33%) teachers have an appreciation of native culture, 133 (88.67%) teachers affirmed that they are learning local languages or becoming multilingual themselves.

Employing Multilingual Approaches in English Classrooms

The findings from quantitative data regarding the ways of employing multilingual approaches in English classrooms by teachers are discussed below.

- The total number of teachers employing multilingual approaches while teaching grammar is 132 (88%). Out of 132 teachers, 88 (66.67%) use it for explaining grammar points, 29 (21.97%) use it for comparing the structure, 11 (8.33%) use it for pointing out the similarities and 4 (3.03%) use it for giving cue words.
- Teachers employing multilingual approaches for vocabulary development are 140 (93.33%). Teachers employing multilingual approaches for giving synonyms or antonyms are 78 (55.71%) for explaining differences in word meanings 28 (20%) for teaching abstract words 15 (10.74%) and for pronunciation 19 (13.57%).
- Multilingual approaches to classroom management are employed by a total of 142 (94.67%) teachers. It is employed for giving instructions by 66 (46.48%) teachers, for giving prompts by 6

(4.22%) teachers, during group activity by 52 (36.61%) teachers and for maintaining discipline by 18 (12.67%) teachers.

- There are 138 (92%) teachers who employ multilingual approaches to content delivery. Teachers employing it for explanation are 101 (73.19%), for developing an aesthetic sense, 7 (5.07%), for encouraging imagination, 11 (8.33%) and for evoking prior knowledge, 19 (14.39%).
- Out of 150 teachers, a total of 116 (77.33%) teachers use multilingual approaches to motivating students. Thirty-five (30.17%) teachers are employing it for building confidence, 31 (26.72%) teachers are employing it for affirmations, 22 (18.97%) teachers are employing it for positive feedback and 28 (24.14%) teachers are employing it for arousing curiosity.
- The study also found that 105 (70%) teachers promote multilingual communication in classrooms. Out of 105 teachers, 75 (71.43%) teachers are using it during question-answers, 10 (9.5%) teachers are using it during paired or group tasks, 15 (14.29%) teachers are using it for focussed translation activities, and 5 (4.76%) teachers are using it for illustrations and narration.

Teachers from government-aided schools and private schools are found to be employing a multilingual approach to grammar, vocabulary development, classroom management and content delivery. However, 78% of government-aided school teachers and only 66% of private school teachers are employing multilingual approaches for motivating students and promoting multilingual communication. These findings indicate that there is a gap in beliefs and practices as also found by Bruner and Carlsen (2023) and Osidak, et al. (2024).

Effective Multilingual Pedagogy and Strategies in English Classrooms

The most effective multilingual pedagogy and strategies as reported by teachers are as follows

- Using common English words
- Developing a multilingual dictionary
- Using association techniques or associating words with situations and materials
- Story-based teaching

- Dramatisation technique
- Multilingual games

Benefits of Employing Multilingual Approaches in English Classrooms

The themes and patterns that emerged from qualitative data analysis are reported here. Thematic analysis was carried out following 6 steps: familiarisation, initial code, supporting data for codes, identifying themes, reviewing and finally reporting themes. Themes have been identified from similar issues and ideas expressed by participants.

The teachers have reported the following benefits of employing multilingual approaches in English classrooms:

- Teachers with more than 15 years of experience in government-aided schools have emphasised translation techniques for teaching English. One of them said, “mulanchy bhashet sangitala tar te aikatat” (Students listen if told in their language.)
- Multilingual approaches in English classrooms facilitated teaching to students speaking different mother tongues like Gondi, Halbi, Kolami, Kohali, Zadi, Halbi, Madia, Varhadi, Sindhi, and Hindi. A teacher reported “mulana jasta sangave lagat nahi, chatakan samajate” (students understand quickly and don’t need narration).
- Employing multilingual approaches in content delivery had a positive impact on students’ English language proficiency. A teacher reported that for content delivery of “Grandpa tells a story,” she encouraged imagination by using story-based teaching. She used “ek budha male pahun mhanla, ae, pori tu kava aali?” (When an old man saw me, he said, “O lady! When did you come?”). The teacher further reported that students started adding content to the story in Varhadi and afterwards constructed the story in English.
- The use of parallel texts by giving synonyms or antonyms proved beneficial in improving students’ vocabulary.
- Promoting multilingual communication in classrooms has enhanced students’ capacity to comprehend and relate to the content. It has also developed their communication skill.
- Integrating multilingual approaches in English teaching promotes understanding of different cultures and respect for cultural differences. One of the teachers reported that initially students

were laughing if someone used Zadi words like “kaun” (Why) or “khalata” (Below) but now they have started accepting this shift.

- The teachers could understand students’ perspectives, their culture, and their social environments by communicating with them in their dialect.
- When a teacher uses students’ prior knowledge and experiences in their mother tongue then, the English teaching-learning process becomes interesting for students. This has promoted the transfer of concepts and skills from the mother tongue to English. The findings are in line with the findings of Shobha (2019) who concludes that the mother tongue facilitates students to identify and organise their experiences and environment.
- Multilingual approaches have helped teachers in building relationships with students and widening social networks.
- Multilingual ways of reading, writing, and speaking have provided meaningful learning opportunities to students. The teachers have used students’ cultural resources to improve English learning. This finding is supported by the finding of Cherewka (2023) who noted that using other native languages facilitates the development of other languages along with the targeted English language

The teachers have reported the benefits of multilingual approaches in English classrooms. It facilitated teaching to students speaking different mother tongues, improving English language proficiency, vocabulary, capacity to comprehend, and communication skills, respect for different cultures, the transfer of concepts and skills, building relationships and widening social networks. These findings are similar to the findings of Abdullayev (2023) and Ollerhead and Leech (2019).

Challenges of Multilingualism in English Classrooms

Teachers have reported the following challenges.

- In the case of the districts covered under the study, students come from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Many students speak Gondi, Halbi, Kolami, Kohali, Zadi, Halbi, Madia, Varhadi, Sindhi, and Hindi languages. Students speak one language at home and another in school. It is often the case that the language of instruction is different from their home language and students are learning that language too.

- English is sparingly spoken in most parts of rural and semi-urban areas of the districts. In such a situation, learning the English language becomes difficult for students
- If teachers use a monolingual approach, students fail to comprehend and lose interest in learning
- Students and parents have labelled English as the most 'feared' subject. This poses a great challenge to English teachers.
- Difficulty in teaching pronunciation to students with linguistic diversity. Every language has a set of sounds and modulating sounds outside that set becomes a challenge for teachers and students. For example, the sound of 'a' as in the word 'apple' is pronounced as 'e' sound as in 'elephant' by students.
- Teachers are not trained to incorporate multilingual approaches in lesson planning or classroom transactions. Teachers with teaching experience of less than 5 years from both government-aided and private schools have reported that they are facing more challenges. They have reported that they are not trained adequately. They have expressed a need for training for using multilingual approaches in English classrooms.
- The availability of suitable materials that can be used in the classes also poses a great challenge.

These findings are similar to that of Bosch et al. (2024) who indicated that teachers receiving training on multilingualism had a positive effect on their attitudes. Osidak et al. (2024) reported a complex and uneven relationship between teachers' multilingual beliefs and practices and they lack the required expertise for use in teaching.

Conclusions

The teachers are aware of the linguistic background of students. They value multilingualism in English classrooms. The most effective multilingual pedagogy according to them uses common English words, a multilingual dictionary, association techniques or associating words with situations and materials, story-based teaching, dramatisation techniques and multilingual games. The teachers employ multilingual approaches in English classrooms while teaching grammar, developing vocabulary, classroom management, content delivery, motivating

students and communicating in classrooms. Teachers observed that using a multilingual approach is beneficial for English teaching. At the same time, teachers expressed the need for training in using a multilingual approach. They also want the availability of suitable material that can be used in the classes.

Recommendations

Teachers have reported challenges of multilingualism in English classrooms. Teachers can overcome these challenges by using multilingual approaches for promoting thinking and communication. Learning local languages and becoming multilingual is recommended for the teachers. They also need to be trained to incorporate multilingual approaches in lesson planning or classroom transactions. Multilingual material can be made available to them. Teachers require an open mindset and innovative outlook to employ multilingual approaches in English classrooms. Teachers' training and professional development programmes can focus on these areas. Intensive training for teachers is essential for effectively using multilingual approaches and bridge the gap between perception and practice.

References

- Abdullayev, A. (2023). Unlocking language diversity: Multilingual approaches to teaching Kazakh. *American Journal of Philological Sciences*, 03(07), 43-46. doi: <https://doi.org/10.37547/ajps/Volume03Issue07-08>
- Bosch, J.E., Olioumtsevit, K., Santarelli, S.A.A., Faloppa, F., Foppolo, F., & Papadopoulou, D. (2024). How do teachers view multilingualism in education? Evidence from Greece, Italy and The Netherlands. *Language and Education*, 1-20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2024.2380073>
- Burner, T., & Carlsen, C. (2023). Teachers' multilingual beliefs and practices in English classrooms: A scoping review. June 26, 2023. <https://bera-journals.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/rev3.3407>
- Census of India (2011). Language atlas—India paper 1 of 2018. *Language India, states and union territories* (Table C-16) (May 9, 2022). <https://censusindia.gov.in/>...>CentralDataCatalog>
- Cherewka, A. (2023). Using multilingual approaches to support English language acquisition. The Literacy Information and Communication System (LINCS). United States Department of Education. <https://lincs.ed.gov/sites/default/files/EARNMultilingualSpotlight.pdf>
- Constitution of India. (n.d.). Constitutional provisions relating to Eighth

- Schedule. https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/EighthSchedule_19052017.pdf
- National curriculum framework for school education 2023. National Council of Educational and Research Training, Government of India. https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/NCFSE-2023-August_2023.pdf
- National education Policy 2020. Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India. https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf
- Ollerhead, S., & Leech, K.T. (2019, November 6). Promoting multilingual approaches in teaching and learning. UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning. <https://learningportal.iiep.unesco.org/en/blog/promoting-multilingual-approaches-in-teaching-and-learning>
- Osidak, V., Natsiuk, M., & Vogt, K. (2024). Teacher multilingual beliefs and practices in the English classroom: Implications for course development. *Advanced Education*, 24, 92-117. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1438469.pdf>
- Ray, R. (2021). Impact of multilingual approach to education on young learners in India. *Journal of Scientific Research of The Banaras Hindu University*, 65(9), 58-62. doi: 10.37398/JSR.2021.650909 https://bhu.ac.in/research_pub/jsr/Volumes/JSR_65_09_2021/9.pdf
- Shobha (2019). Teaching English in a multilingual context at the primary level in India: A pedagogic analysis. *Journal of Emerging Technologies and Innovative Research*, 6(7), 40-45.
- Vikøy, A. & Haukås, Å. (2023). Norwegian L1 teachers' beliefs about a multilingual approach in increasingly diverse classrooms. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 20(3), 912-931. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2021.1961779>

Ujjwala Sadaphal is an Associate Professor and Principal In-charge of Swavalambi College of Education, Wardha with twenty-four years of teaching experience.
ujjwala.sadaphal@gmail.com