

# Assamese Language Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Leveraging Translanguaging Techniques

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## Abstract

No particular method of language teaching can be said to be the most effective in all classroom contexts. For language learning to be effective, the teacher must take into account the realities of the classroom, whereas such realities vary for each classroom depending on the learners' needs. One such undeniable reality in language education in Assam is the presence of linguistic diversity and multilingualism in the classroom. The concept of translanguaging, which is currently being discussed around the world in educational research, has the potential to give a new impetus to the Assamese language teaching practices by adopting a positive approach towards multilingualism as advocated by India's New Education Policy. This paper discusses the relevance of translanguaging in the context of Assamese language teaching as well as analyses the realistic landscape of highly multilingual Assamese language teaching classrooms highlighting some challenges reflected therein. Moreover, this paper proposes the use of techniques anchored in translanguaging in Assamese language teaching so that the multilingual learners' proficiency in different languages may be used as a resource rather than being regarded as a challenge.

**Keywords:** Translanguaging, Assamese language teaching, multilingualism, classroom realities

## Introduction

Although there has been a lot of discussion about the method of teaching

language since long, no method can be termed as the most effective one as no particular method can be equally effective for all types of classrooms. Brown (2002) has mentioned four features of methods as possible reasons for their 'demise' (p. 10):

- too prescriptive
- very distinctive at the earlier stages and indistinguishable from each other later
- not clearly verifiable by empirical validation
- associated with political and power interests and carriers of linguistic imperialism

Thus, the era of methods is considered to have come to an end, and the present time is often referred to as the 'post-method' era. Teachers are often introduced to educational theory and research during teacher training programmes, but they can determine the usability of those ideas only when faced with real classroom situations. In most situations, teachers have to devise their own techniques to cater to the needs of the students of a particular classroom. Each classroom environment, students' knowledge, their experience, their age and the nature of the subject matter to be taught guides the teacher on the appropriate methodology for the classroom. This implies that irrespective of the strategies teachers are trained on, in order for language education to be effective, the teacher must consider the realities in the classroom.

Differences between the classroom realities in western contexts and those in other contexts have also led to a reconsideration of the established language teaching methods. Most of the discussions around language teaching methods originated in Western countries. Many widely discussed methods such as Direct method, Grammar Translation Method, Communicative Language Teaching, etc. were originated and developed in western countries. As a result, mostly the learners (who often grow up in a monolingual environment) of Western countries were kept in mind during the evolution of such methods. Therefore, though such methods were also tried in other countries including India, such trials did not yield much positive result as the linguistic environment of India is very different. In the highly multilingual Indian environment, it is necessary to carefully examine whether a language to be taught will be considered as the first or second or third (or fourth?) language

and devise effective strategies for teaching the respective languages accordingly.

Studies on first language teaching and second language teaching offer relevant and useful insights for such multilingual contexts. Mohanty (2019) argues that instruction in a learner's home language works as a strong foundation for conceptual understanding and literacy, which can in turn help acquire additional languages. In the Indian context, studies and policy documents advocate mother tongue-based multilingual education as it promotes learner confidence and participation (Mohanty et al. 2009; NCERT, 2006). Scholarship on second language learning, such as Krashen's input hypothesis (1982) and Cummins' interdependence hypothesis (2001), underlines that skills in one language can positively support acquiring skills of another language. These insights reinforce the need to value learners' linguistic repertoires while teaching a language, particularly Assamese in the context of this discussion.

### **Translanguaging and Language Education**

A current trend that has been globally discoursed in the field of education in multilingual environment is pedagogical translanguaging. The use of the entire language repertoire of a person by going beyond the confines of a so-called particular language can be termed as translanguaging. Theoretically speaking, translanguaging can be interpreted towards two extreme ends of a continuum (García & Lin, 2016). At one end, both the named languages that have been used in the society and education system and the entire language repertoire of a multilingual person are recognised, and this is referred to as the weaker version of translanguaging. At the other end, the language used by multilingual individuals is regarded as a single flexible, dynamic language system, and not as a combination of separate languages, and this is called the stronger version of translanguaging.

Translanguaging is not actually an entirely new phenomenon for an environment rich in linguistic diversity. In a multilingual state like Assam, for instance, the linguistic repertoire of speakers consists of not just one language, rather it is a combination of multiple languages. For example, even if a person's home language is predominantly Assamese, his or her words or thoughts often include elements of other languages such as Hindi, English, Bodo, Mishng, Adivasi, and others.

Such translanguaging practices are very common in the daily lives of multilingual people and the classroom contexts are no exception. Considering these sociolinguistic and pedagogical contexts, Garcia et al. (2016; 2017) describes translanguaging as both *dynamic language practices of bilinguals* and *an instructional and assessment framework that teachers can use strategically and purposefully*.

As Canagaraja (2011) states, in multilingual classrooms, ‘translanguaging is a naturally occurring phenomenon’ (p. 8) and ‘mutual influences from the languages in one’s repertoire are treated as creative and enabling, not hindering, communication’ (p. 9). Current research in language education demonstrates that learners are more benefitted by using translanguaging practices as a resource for teaching and learning rather than being barred from using them in the classroom. It can make the language learning process more effective by drawing upon the learners’ already existing linguistic, social and cognitive resources.

In India, recent policy documents advocate valuing multilingualism in the educational system. The Government of India’s New Education Policy (2020) presents this issue as an important overarching component of the education policy. However, discussions and studies are still evolving regarding the implementation of these ideas in practical contexts. Especially in language education classes, multilingualism has often been considered a hindrance. This perception is apparent in the tendency to resist home languages and/or other languages in the English medium schools.

The evolving trend of studies in translanguaging in educational research combined with the positive attitude towards multilingualism reflected in India’s education policy can give a new impetus to the Assamese language teaching practices.

### **Linguistic Diversity in Assam’s Classrooms and Teaching of Assamese**

In a multilingual environment, a regional language can serve as the first, second, third or even fourth language for different members of the same society. This is because people from different communities—such as the Nepali, Bodo, Rajbongshi, Santhali, and Rabha—often live together in the same region or in adjacent areas. Thus, schools in such settings usually have students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. While Assamese is typically taught as a mandatory subject in these schools, it

may, within the same classroom, function as the first language for some learners, the second for others, and even the third/fourth for some. The diversity becomes more apparent in the ways children communicate in their everyday lives in and outside classrooms. For instance, learners whose home language is Rabha may naturally mix elements of Rabha, Assamese, and Bodo in their everyday communication. Such practices indicate how linguistic diversity and multilingualism form an important reality of Assam's classrooms.

Globally, there has been a lot of discussion about appropriate teaching techniques in a context marked with such linguistic diversity. In Assam, though scholarly works such as Das (1987) and Sharma (2021) about teaching of Assamese as a mother tongue and as a second language are available, minimal attention has been paid so far to teaching of Assamese with a particular focus on a highly multilingual environment.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach. Three Assamese language classrooms representing different sociolinguistic contexts—an English-medium urban school, an Assamese-medium tea-garden school, and an Assamese-medium semi-urban school— from three different parts of Assam were purposively selected to capture the multilingual realities characteristic of diverse educational settings in the state. Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews (conducted in August 2024) with one Assamese language teacher from each school. The teachers' narratives illustrate how linguistic diversity is experienced and managed in practice. The findings are then connected with existing translanguaging techniques to suggest practical directions for Assamese language teaching.

### **Assamese Language Classrooms: Some Realities**

This section presents three scenarios of Assamese language teaching classrooms along with the teachers' experience of dealing with the classroom realities for discussing the relevance of translanguaging pedagogy in the real classroom environment.

#### **Scenario 1 (Medium of Instruction – English, Class 8)**

The school, located in Guwahati, a city of Kamrup (Metro) district, has students speaking different languages in their classrooms. In

this classroom of 40 students, about half use Assamese as their first language, while the other half speak Nepali, Marwari, Bengali, Hindi, and other languages, as reported. Assamese is a compulsory subject in the school. But almost all learners are apprehensive of this subject, and get less marks in Assamese as compared to other subjects in the examination. Students whose first language is Assamese use Assamese in their home environment, although the use of the language in the school is very limited as all students are encouraged to use English for conversational purposes. The rest of the students understand the Assamese language partially. As a result, a teacher takes the help of English or Hindi to explain a lesson in Assamese.

### **Scenario 2 (Medium of Instruction – Assamese, Class 8)**

The school is located in the tea garden area in Amguri Block of Sibsagar district. The class consists mainly of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds including Assamese, Sadri, Mising, Nepali, Bengali, and others. The students belong to various tribes including the Sadri, Santhali, Kurmali, etc. Most of the students in the class understand basic conversational Assamese more or less, but they face difficulties with understanding formal standard Assamese. On the other hand, the teacher is a speaker of Assamese language, and hardly understands most of the other language varieties students use.

### **Scenario 3 (Medium of Instruction – Assamese, Class 4)**

Situated three kilometres away from Barpeta town, the school has classes with 30-40 students, out of which barely three or four students are Hindu Bengalis and the rest are from the Muslim community. Although the Assamese language is the medium of instruction, the students mostly speak a language variety similar to Bengali. They find it difficult to understand the Assamese language and find the subject very difficult. The Assamese-speaking teacher has to work very hard to get the students to learn the subject and the language.

A close look at these scenarios reveals that although the medium of instruction is often considered as a factor contributing to the complexity of learning the Assamese language, the challenges students face may also be attributed to their diverse home languages, which are often different from Assamese, regardless of the instructional medium. That said, the environment reflected in these scenarios is commonly seen in Assam and cannot be ignored if the Assamese language education has to be effective.

One of the teachers in each of the above classroom scenarios was interviewed to find out how the teachers deal with these classroom realities. All quotations were translated from Assamese to English.

As the teacher in Scenario 1 shared,

*They (the school authorities) want the students to use English all the time, and we are required to give instructions in English. The use of Assamese language has been compulsorily reduced, and the aspect of Assamese language education seems to have been neglected. Since Hindi and English are already learnt, the writing also has the influence of particularly Hindi alphabets (in letters like ষ, ঠ).*

*In higher classes, Assamese words have to be explained in English. The meanings are easily understood only when communicated in English. Students find it difficult to recognise letters even in Class 8. They may be able to read aloud a poem and memorise it, but if they are asked to write, they will memorise the words and just copy them. Even a variation in terms of a single word makes lives difficult for them. In such a situation, there is no other way but to teach students in an examination-centric way. Specific strategies are needed for making students motivated to learn the Assamese language. (Scenario 1)*

In this scenario, though the teacher has not been able to decide possible strategies, she feels the need for special methods for teaching Assamese in a linguistically diverse context. She has highlighted the challenges posed by the influence of other languages in the learning of Assamese and the mandatory limited use of Assamese language. In this classroom scenario, home languages of almost half of the total number of students (Nepali, Marwari, Bengali, etc.) are almost completely ignored in the process of teaching and learning.

Here is an excerpt from a teacher's narration of experience of teaching Assamese in Scenario 2.

*We ask the students to use the correct formal Assamese language in the school so that they can understand each other well. They should use their own languages in their family and in their community rather than using it in the school. Only then will they be able to learn the Assamese language well. (Scenario 2)*

It reflects the teacher's belief that students need to minimise the use of

their own languages in order to maximise their learning of Assamese language. She consciously discourages the use of their own language in the school and encourages the use of the standard variety of the Assamese language. Thus, the teacher considers the tendency to use home languages as a hindrance to the learning of the Assamese language, making the teaching-learning process more challenging particularly for the students speaking language varieties other than Assamese.

The teacher in Scenario 3 speaks of another kind of complexity in her classroom.

*It is very difficult to make students understand any elements of the Assamese culture or background. They hardly have any knowledge of cultural items like Ojapali, Biyanam, etc. that are there in the textbook for Class 4-5. These are completely new concepts for them. Just as it is difficult to explain the background of foreign literature or a foreign story, so is the case here. Students hardly have any knowledge of Assamese culture. When I say something, they keep nodding, but do not understand the language much. They completely rely on rote learning. (Scenario 3)*

In this situation, the teacher has been dealing with dual challenges – a cultural gap and the linguistic differences. She finds it difficult to communicate the concepts in Assamese language and literature as students' own cultural and linguistic practices contain elements that are different from Assamese language and culture.

From what we can see in the classroom scenarios and the teachers' teaching experience in the three scenarios, students' home languages, if they are different from Assamese, are often neglected and/or discouraged in the Assamese language classrooms. Multilingualism as well as linguistic diversity are often perceived as a problem by the teachers, though the teachers sometimes feel the need for effective strategies to deal with the challenges possibly caused by linguistic diversity.

### **Use of Translanguaging in Assamese Language Teaching: Possible Strategies**

In the linguistically diverse environment reflected in the Assamese language classroom scenarios presented above, translanguaging strategies might offer certain techniques to deal with the diversity more effectively. Here is an attempt to discuss a few of such techniques. Some of these ideas are inspired by Celic and Seltzer (2013).

*Multilingual Wordlist*

Students might be asked to find the words in the lesson that are difficult for them to understand. After that, they might be divided into small groups (three or four students in each group) to write down the synonyms or possible meanings of such words in their own languages. For example, some of the words from a passage in a textbook of Assamese subject in an English medium school are 'অটবহ্', 'গৰাহত', 'পিতাক', 'মিলিজুলি', and 'দস্তুৰ'. If these words are identified by students as difficult words and if there are students who speak Bodo, Rabha and Bengali in a group, they can work together to prepare a list like the following.

Assamese	Bodo	Rabha	Bengali
অটবহ্			
গৰাহত			
পিতাক			
মিলিজুলি			
দস্তুৰ			

The teacher needs to facilitate the process of preparing the list. A question that may arise here is how the teacher helps the students if the teacher does not know the students' languages. A possible solution is the use of the 'more enabled language' (Durairajan, 2017) that the students use in the classroom for communicating with each other. It can be Hindi or Sadri or one of the other languages. Using the enabling language, the teacher can participate in the students' discussions and encourage them to find equivalents of the words in their own languages. This exercise is likely to serve two objectives – first, students can use their knowledge of their own languages for learning the Assamese words which leads to increased language awareness, and second, they will be more sensitised about each other's languages while working collaboratively during this activity.

*Project-Based Activities*

Some concepts or linguistic elements in the Assamese lessons can be made more accessible to the students by asking them to collect information from their own communities through project-based activities. For example, a question included in the Class 8 textbook (Ankuran, Part VIII, 2020, p. 59) asks students to write the names of some items produced in cottage industries that are used in everyday life.

While discussing the answer to this question, students may be asked to create a poster to present the local terms used for referring to the items in their own language varieties. Later, the terms may be compared to the Assamese terms for their learning. Moreover, the students can be encouraged to collect information about the customs and festivals in their respective communities through projects, and such activities might be meaningfully linked to any lessons in the Assamese textbook with a reference to customs and festivals. As language and culture have a strong relationship, such projects will possibly bring the students closer to the Assamese culture and language.

#### *Own Languages for Intermediary Support*

A common problem faced by teachers, as also reflected in the teachers' narration of their experience in the classroom scenarios discussed above, is the students' inability to give original responses in Assamese. If there are students from several communities in the classroom, they should be given time to do a brainstorming in their own languages before being asked to give oral or written responses in Assamese language. They can then discuss the possible responses in Assamese with each other. For example, a question in Ankuran, Part V asks students to speak and write about the differences between the letter written by Arup and the application taught by the teacher (p. 21). Allowing the students to speak or write the answer to this question in Assamese without any intermediate step of using their own languages may be challenging for them. An opportunity to do brainstorming in their own languages and discuss in groups for support will probably make the task much easier for them.

#### *Cultural and Linguistic Elements from Home Languages in Class Discussion*

While dealing with different lessons in the Assamese textbook, cultural and linguistic elements from students' own languages can be drawn into the discussion, whenever possible. For example, if there is a discussion on the pictures of rice being cooked or a child running in the text, students may be encouraged to share how they refer to such actions in their own languages. This increases their language awareness and enables them to understand the connection of Assamese language with their home languages.

The above-mentioned techniques are just a few of the many ideas that align with translanguaging pedagogy. Using such techniques has the

potential to make the Assamese language learning process relatively more student-friendly and motivating for students coming from different language communities and create a more inclusive environment in the classroom.

## Conclusion

The discussion on effective techniques for teaching and learning of the Assamese language in a linguistically diverse environment may still be said to be in its infancy. While the so-called traditional techniques are followed in the teaching-learning process of the Assamese language, considering some of the ways discussed in this paper might prove effective in view of the current discourse around the world on translanguaging, which also aligns with the current policy documents regarding multilingualism in India. However, it will probably be necessary to change the attitudes of different stakeholders including the teachers besides conducting training for enabling teachers to practically implement the techniques of translanguaging in Assamese language classrooms.

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