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English Language Teaching in Multilingual Classrooms: Revisiting Language Pedagogy

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Introduction

India's National Education Policy (NEP) in 2020 has renewed in Indian education the focus on multilingualism, an omnipresent societal reality that has always been highlighted in policy, but hardly acknowledged in practice. The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) (2005) called for the use of multilingualism "as a resource, classroom strategy and a goal by a creative language teacher" (p. 36) in an attempt "to promote multilingual proficiency in every child, which includes proficiency in English" (p. ix). The National Focus Group (NFG) position paper on the teaching of English (2006) created a roadmap for subsequent curricula, teaching materials, pedagogy and assessment for the teaching of English at school within Indian multilingualism. In the decade following the NCF 2005, a wealth of research on the benefits of an MLE approach and on teaching English through children's existing multilingual experiences emerged, which discussed and demonstrated how children's cognitive, linguistic and cultural knowledge may be developed systematically and holistically (Agnihotri, 2010; Mohanty, 2016). However, curriculum frameworks failed to ground syllabi in multilingualism, nor did language teacher education situate pedagogy training around children's multilingual capacities.

That decade, however, saw other impactful developments around the teaching of English premised on the NCF (2005) and NFG (2006) guidelines. With English being reframed as an Indian language that "needs to find its place along with other Indian languages" (NFG, p. 3), state governments across India decided to introduce English as a subject at school from Grade 1 instead of Grade 3, 5 or 8, believing that an

early introduction would help English assimilate seamlessly within the three language formula (TLF) framework. National (and state) textbook revision exercises for government schools saw more "Indianisation" of content, with more inclusion of stories and non-fictional material from Indian literature and cultural practices and accompanying visual images. The private school sector offering English as a medium of instruction (EMI) remained largely outside the ambit of any direct implementation of policy focus on localising the teaching of English, but leading textbook publishers of English textbooks for private schools, began in parallel including more features of "Indianism" in textbooks as a selling point. None of these efforts, however, were founded on the basic principles of multilingual education.

The NEP 2020's spotlight on multilingualism as the foundational core of Indian education raised the hopes of practitioners and researchers advocating the adoption of home-language based translanguaging strategies in English language pedagogy (Anderson, 2023; Mishra & Mahanand, 2020). The National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCFFS, 2022) declared that "[c]hildren best attain multilingual skills when a rich and natural environment of meaningful and purposeful use of languages is created around them" (p. 73). The NCFSE 2023 devoted chapters and sections on curricular goals for language education, with detailed competencies and illustrative learning outcomes for the three languages (named R1, R2 and R3) to be taught as part of the TLF across all stages of education. However, these policy documents have largely remained silent on pedagogical procedures for the teaching of English within the multilingual habitus. There is minimal discussion on *how* home/other/multiple languages are acquired in the social environment and may be taught in classrooms. There is also no deliberation on language hegemony, dominance and marginalisation—factors that have deeply affected language education in India. The challenge for educators now is to revisit English language pedagogy for both regional and English medium schools to remove these gaps.

Multilingualism, Pedagogy Principles and English

Recent empirical research on multilingualism in teacher education (Erling et al., 2016; Mackenzie & Walker, 2013) demonstrates how pedagogy preparation informed by multilingualism-as-practice could bring about

a paradigm shift in classroom practices. If teachers are provided with illustrations of pedagogy that draw upon students' home languages to negotiate content in English, such practices would place learning English well within students' cognitive abilities and also foster learning across the curriculum. In language teacher education, such pedagogies would encourage teachers' reflection on their own language learning strategies and foster discussions on ways of incorporating meaningful languaging activities in multilingual classrooms. Below I revisit some assumptions and principles that have guided the teaching of English in India for the past few decades to reflect on how English language pedagogy could perhaps be better adapted for the multilingual classroom.

Is English a Second Language in India?

For too long in Indian education, we have considered English as a Second Language (ESL). National and state governments have continued to design teaching materials and pedagogy training for English teachers following ESL principles, which assumes that most children have a fair amount of exposure to English in their immediate contexts. In reality, in rural and remote areas of most Indian states, English is hardly present in the community, except perhaps through shop/road signage and product labels. In such contexts, English is only available as a subject in school. Urban spaces have more visibility and use of English, within classrooms and outside, but urban India comprises less than 20 per cent of the Indian education landscape. Furthermore, across the country, there are countless private English medium schools, but except for the high-cost schools, English is neither the teachers' nor the learners' strongest or most familiar language of communication (Boruah, 2017; Kalyanpur et al., 2022; Mohanty, 2017).

With unequal visibility in a child's immediate social context, it is impractical to assume that English can be taught as a second language to all Indian children. Textbooks framed through the ESL approach usually include lessons with long, dense texts, comprehension questions demanding the ability to infer, interpret and analyse, and methodologies that provide minimal scope for use of English for social purposes. Even though recent iterations of textbook preparation at national and state levels have ensured the inclusion of content from Indian cultural and literary traditions, the academic language itself has remained a barrier to proficiency. The Annual State of Education (ASER) reports continue to

show dismal statistics for English: The 2023 report, for example, which assessed around 700,000 children in Grade 5, showed that only about 17.5 per cent children could read simple English sentences.

"Universal" Principles of Language Teaching

Over the last few decades, English language teaching syllabi across universities, BEd colleges and other teacher preparation agencies have also prescribed methodological principles for teaching English based on ESL theorisations emerging from Western scholarship. In these approaches, some notions have remained the canon, influencing teachers' belief systems. Here are a few:

- The ability to read and write English is of utmost importance, and hence literacy should begin with the alphabet.
- English literature uplifts a student's moral consciousness and provides mental sophistication; hence English should be taught through selections of literary texts.
- Grammatical accuracy is key to a good command over English, and hence there should be academic focus on English grammar.
- English should be taught through maximum exposure to the language just as children learn their home languages, and hence only English should be allowed in the English class.
- Children's home languages are a deterrent to learning of English as they promote negative transfer and also prevent children from acquiring English.
- Communicative activities encouraging students to work with peers is a good way to develop oral communication skills, so when students work in pairs or groups, they should use only English.

A common belief running through all these notions is that English can be only taught and tested through teacher-led, textbook-based classroom work. Teacher training thus continues to be top-down and prescriptive rather than building on teachers' knowledge base and multilingual experiences.

Teachers' Identity and Positionality in Praxis

A crucial aspect that has escaped the attention of curriculum developers or teacher educators is the role of teachers' self-reflexive positionality

on their linguistic identity, which influences their pedagogical stance for the teaching of English (Boruah, In Press). Conceiving pedagogical approaches that are context-sensitive, proficiency-focused and grounded in learners' and teachers' multilingual capacities is likely to help all stakeholders meet the (ambitious) learning outcomes for language education set in the NCFFS (2022) and the NCFSE (2023).

Research on the positive impact of drawing upon learners' and teachers' linguistic funds of knowledge to develop English proficiency (Anderson, 2023; DeCosta et al., 2017; Kandharaja & Vennela, 2024; Mukhopadhyay, 2020 and others) which has demonstrated how learners' language acquisition schema can be used in classroom practices as well as appropriate pedagogy for English.

Crosslinguistic Mediation as Scaffold in Learning English

Crosslinguistic mediation, or the unconscious and powerful sense-making strategies used by multilinguals to communicate spontaneously through different languages or varieties is increasingly being acknowledged in language pedagogy as an effective language learning resource. Anderson (2023, p. 49) notes: "Crosslinguistic mediation involves using our stronger languages to help … understand something encoded in a weaker language". For English language classrooms, this translates to invoking learners' multilingual strategy use in their stronger languages in systematic and purposeful ways, such that learners get an opportunity to add English to their existing multilingual repertoires. It is also important to understand that the use of English in the classroom cannot be limited only to specific academic activities or purposes if we want it to become part of a learner's social language repertoires.

Promotion of Oracy Before Production of Written English

Since English is introduced at school at the foundation stage (age 3-8), oral literacy needs to precede introduction of writing, with many verbal and visual inputs based on everyday life contexts appropriate to the child's age and community experiences. Furthermore, Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) initiatives in Indian states such as Odisha, Assam and Andhra Pradesh (Taneja, 2023) have demonstrated the effectiveness of introducing oral English only after the child has begun written literacy in their stronger language, and written English

after they have learnt to understand and speak English. While following these steps, the children's home/familiar language(s) continue to be used as a bridge to comprehension and literacy in English. The child's development of an active oral English vocabulary needs to become a linguistic and conceptual resource, aiding their written literacy.

Cognitive Flexibility and Language Fluidity: Using Children's Funds of Knowledge as a Metalinguistic Resource

A child's conceptual understanding of the world around them - including the environment, cultural habits and socialisation processes - is acquired rather than learnt. For example, by the time a child begins formal education at school, they already have a mental representation of the object called a 'tree'. They can identify a tree when they see it in pictures; they have a well-developed vocabulary relating to a tree in their familiar languages. When children encounter words related to a tree while learning to read, their schema provides a scaffold in developing their comprehension, and later, written competence in the language. If this natural sequence of cognitive and linguistic development is ignored and a child is introduced to the concept of a tree in an English lesson before they have built an oral vocabulary around it, their linguistic knowledge will not be able to keep pace with their cognitive development. Rather than forcing a child into a curriculum that does not replicate their real-world acquisition of languages, the curriculum should be designed to reflect children's natural language acquisition strategies.

Visual and Sensory Cognition Before Verbal Literacy to Avoid Language Fatigue

The teaching of oral English needs to use the child's visual or sensory experience of the world as a scaffold. Objects, pictures, feelings provide the child inputs to develop their working memory and to add to their common underlying language proficiency. Schema development is not language specific; a multilingual child's brain is naturally capable of storing and categorising information in ways that aid multiple language acquisition simultaneously or sequentially, without 'negative' transfer of 'poor' language habits. Semiotic representations of language are crucial aspects of the development of language proficiency, and hence these have to be prioritised over print in English language teaching curricula or pedagogy.

Avoiding Overdependence on the Textbook for Language Development

A traditional curriculum for English (or any school subject for that matter) continues to be heavily dependent on textbooks, the mastery of which is considered visible evidence of learning development. Learning activities in English textbooks only partially help proficiency development, as the objectives of these exercises are to ensure lesson comprehension rather than genuine communicative interaction. As children move across grades, the lessons become denser and the language more complex, and the accompanying activities and exercises become more demanding in terms of language production. The curriculum fails the child, as its demands become unrealistic and provide little support to children in meeting the expected learning outcomes. However, school teachers of English in a variety of multilingual contexts in India who have either participated in multilingual education projects or undergone training in using translanguaging strategies in the English class have demonstrated strategies that can overcome curricular challenges.

Strategies for Activating Multilingual Schema

Teachers across grade levels and mediums of instruction have attested to the success of several strategies in developing students' confidence in English and motivation to participate more actively in their learning. Here are a few:

1. **A Cultural Calendar**: This is a map of curricular activities designed around learners' cultural practices. It typically includes a set of concentric circles where the outermost circle has the twelve English months. Each subsequent inner circle contains information around food, festivals, garments or flora and fauna from the learners' cultures celebrated or practised in different months. The information is then used to develop meaningful and relevant learning activities for practice in English.
2. **Storytelling:** This is a very productive tool to develop listening, speaking, reading and writing in English and also build vocabulary. Stories are narratives and hence develop oral comprehension, providing children with opportunities to listen to conversations, descriptions, opinions, etc. in English. When told or read with key words in home languages, it scaffolds comprehension. Stories are rich resources to develop reading through picture sequencing and

captioning tasks in English and home languages, and to eventually support the development of written composition skills.

3. **Multilingual Concept Mapping:** Teachers have reported that activities around multilingual definitions, picture labelling and word walls have led to active engagement of children from different language backgrounds and abilities in enhancement of English vocabulary as well as providing opportunities for self-paced learning. Activities that allow language mixing—a common practice of multilinguals—not only activates their underlying grammatical competence; it legitimises practices used in their natural language contexts.
4. **Homework as Social Practice:** Teachers of English working with marginalised language populations have shown how carefully designed homework can bridge academic distance, especially between first generation learners and their illiterate or semi-literate guardians. In one instance, a teacher gave her young learners a set of English consonant letters and asked them to work with their parents to locate objects around the house or neighbourhood that began with these letters (*bottle*, *bedcover*, *bus*, *biscuit*, *bathroom*). This turned into a kind of treasure hunt with parents excited to contribute to their child's learning. With older children, she designed a labelling task. Children found things at home to label and signpost (*bathroom, kitchen, water filter, don't touch*). This generated motivation as well as excitement; children enjoyed the role reversal, becoming English teachers to their parents.
5. **Differentiated Instruction and Graded Tasks:** Teachers who are familiar with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles found multiple ways of representing teaching points and activities for both oral and written English. Since multilingual classes are also heterogeneous (and often multigrade) spaces, teachers realised that UDL principles allowed their learners to learn English at their own pace. For example, a teacher in Assam used UDL principles to teach a poem called **The Rainbow** in Grade 3. One group of learners that had very little exposure to English discussed, in their own languages, the similarities and differences between a rainbow and a bridge. Another group labelled pictures in the text with words in English and their home language. A third group tried a

translation task, writing in their home language a summary of the poem. A group that was more proficient in English worked on a set of comprehension questions on the theme of the poem. She thus managed to engage the whole class in learning English through activities that spoke to their abilities and experiences.

Conclusion

As such strategies become a part of English teachers' pedagogical practices, they can contribute to theory building on effective approaches to teaching English in multilingual contexts. A few compilations are already showing the way. The British Council's (2019) resource book on multilingual approaches aims to provide a theoretical basis to methodology for multilingual classrooms along with a set of tried-and-tested activities (Heugh et al., 2019). The AINET Association of English Teachers' (2021) collection of teacher stories from eight ELT practitioners is another helpful resource (Gode et al., 2021). Together, these testimonies can provide a powerful knowledge base to serve as a methodological guide for teachers of English in multilingual contexts. It is unlikely that in the near future national or state government education policies will discontinue the existing textbook-based, writing-focused curricula prescribed for government schools. But teachers might be able to scaffold their curricular expectations with strategies such as the ones discussed above, so that learners' English proficiency development complements their natural language development pathways and allow them to employ their cognitive and cultural schema in the acquisition of English. Efforts such as these may ultimately inform the next iteration of education policies, so that the call for multilingualism does not remain mean tokenism, and curriculum frameworks can respect, acknowledge and draw from effective languaging practices in multilingual societies.

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