

Investigating Language Teacher Identity and Agency in Multilingual Primary Classrooms

K. Padmini Shankar

Abstract

Teachers' perceptions of their professional identity and their sense of agency—what they believe they can and should do—profoundly shape their classroom practice. While research on language teacher identity and agency is growing, studies situated in multilingual primary classrooms remain limited. This paper explores how a group of primary school teachers navigate their identity and agency in the context of a major policy shift from regional medium to English medium instruction. Using data from questionnaires and in-depth interviews, the study examines how teachers respond to the linguistic and cultural diversity in their classrooms. Findings suggest that the teachers often feel conflicted, apologetic, and emotionally burdened about their own and their students' multilingual identities. They face persistent pedagogical dilemmas about whether, when, and how to incorporate students' home languages, reflecting a complex negotiation between institutional expectations and their professional beliefs.

Keywords: Language teacher identity, teacher agency, multilingual classrooms, primary education, medium of instruction policy

Introduction

In multilingual classrooms, where cultural and linguistic diversity is part of the everyday fabric, teachers do more than deliver lessons—they help shape how students see themselves in relation to language and identity. In such settings, questions of teacher identity become especially important. What teachers believe about language, how they

view their own multilingualism, and how they position themselves in the classroom all play a role in shaping their teaching practices and influencing how students engage with learning. Teacher identity is not a fixed construct; it shifts and evolves through interactions with students, colleagues, and the broader school environment (Marcel, 2024). Teachers who view their multilingual backgrounds as pedagogic resources are more likely to adopt inclusive approaches that value students' linguistic and cultural repertoires. Such practices not only support academic development but also foster a sense of belonging and emotional security in the classroom. Students' multilingual identities, in turn, are shaped by a mix of personal experience, self-perception, and emotional connection to language. When teachers recognise and respond to these complex dimensions, they are better equipped to create learning experiences that build student confidence, reduce language anxiety, and support sustained engagement.

Despite the increasing recognition of identity in education research, much of the existing work has focused on students. Far less attention has been paid to how teachers understand and navigate their own identities in linguistically diverse settings, or how they exercise agency within such contexts. As Weng et al. (2019) note, teacher agency remains understudied in classroom-based ESL/EFL bilingual contexts, even as interest in the field grows. They argue for the importance of viewing teachers as legitimate and agentic actors within their professional environments. Recognising this agency is critical to understanding how teachers' evolving identities influence their pedagogical choices and how they respond to the institutional, social, and linguistic complexities of multilingual classrooms. This study addresses that gap by exploring how teachers understand and draw on their multilingual identities and how they attempt to exercise agency in practice.

Review of Literature

Recent scholarship has foregrounded the role of teacher identity and agency in shaping pedagogical practices, particularly within multilingual classrooms. Weng et al. (2019), in a synthesis of 32 studies, observed that research into teacher agency has gained momentum only recently. Building on this, Wang (2022), adopting an ecological perspective, investigated how high school English teachers in China responded to curriculum reform. Although many teachers expressed positive beliefs

and a willingness to adopt new practices, the study revealed that their agency was limited in practice, emerging more fully through sustained reflection and adaptation. Similarly, Tao and Gao (2017) found that language teachers in a Chinese university enacted agency in highly individualised ways during curricular reform, shaped by their identity commitments and prior experiences. Their study illustrates that teacher agency is not uniformly enacted but is mediated by personal histories and professional goals. Shankar (2024) investigated the experiences of teachers involved in English Medium Instruction (EMI) in primary schools in Andhra Pradesh, India and found that many struggled with limited English proficiency, leading to feelings of professional inadequacy that impacted their self-esteem and motivation. These teachers often resorted to using students' home language not as a deliberate pedagogical strategy, but rather as a means of masking their own linguistic limitations. Burner and Carlsen (2023) offer a scoping review of 56 studies that investigate teachers' multilingual beliefs and practices in English classrooms. Findings reveal variation in teachers' multilingual beliefs and practices, a gap between beliefs and practice, limited translanguaging, and insufficient evidence on the long-term impact of professional development.

In the context of multilingual and English-only settings, Davis and Howlett (2022) explored how six US language teachers enacted agency within the constraints of an English-only state policy. Their agency was closely linked to socio-political beliefs, professional identities, and school structures. The teachers engaged in multilingual advocacy through relationship-building, challenging students academically, working with administrators, and fostering collective action. In the UK context, Quehl (2021) investigated the conditions that hinder or enable teacher agency in multilingual pedagogies across five primary school classrooms. The study highlighted institutional norms privileging monolingualism and dominant EAL (English as an Additional Language) discourses as key constraints. However, teachers' reflexivity, pedagogical motivation, and collegial support emerged as small but significant affordances for agentic action. The role of teacher identity as both a driver and outcome of pedagogical practice has also received attention. Marcel (2024) examined how identity-based interventions—such as multilingual storytelling and reflective journaling—affected student engagement and anxiety in multilingual classrooms. The findings suggested that teachers

who drew on their multilingual identities fostered more inclusive and emotionally supportive learning environments, leading to improved student outcomes. Higgins and Ponte (2017) similarly explored how teachers' linguistic backgrounds shaped their beliefs and multilingual classroom practices in a professional development initiative in Hawaii. Encouraged to value students' diverse repertoires, teachers implemented strategies such as multilingual displays and student-led language teaching. These efforts supported student engagement and prompted teacher reflection on identity and pedagogy. Together, these studies reveal a dynamic interplay between teacher identity, agency, and multilingual pedagogies.

Theoretical Framework

Contemporary theoretical perspectives move beyond traditional monoglossic views of language, favouring more fluid, integrated understandings of multilingualism. The concept of heteroglossia underlines the full and flexible use of all available linguistic resources, rather than compartmentalising languages into separate systems. Agnihotri (2014) advances the notion of multilinguality, which challenges rigid boundaries between languages, suggesting that these divisions are often socially or politically constructed. In actual communication, languages overlap and merge seamlessly, making multilingual classrooms inherently porous and interconnected linguistic spaces. Mohanty (2019) defines multilingualism as the ability of individuals or communities to meet everyday communicative needs in two or more languages, depending on social context and interlocutors. Multilingual classrooms are rich, dynamic spaces where students bring diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As Banerji (2017) notes, such classrooms are shaped by the varied mother tongues and cultural experiences students carry with them, in addition to the language of instruction.

Mohanty (2023, 2024) argues that languages should be treated as assets rather than obstacles. He proposes that for many multilingual children, multilingualism is not a secondary skill but their primary mode of thinking and communication—what he terms Multilingualism as a First Language (MFL). As such, he advocates for classroom interaction to be grounded in this multilingual reality. The relationship between teacher identity and pedagogy is equally significant in these contexts. Varghese et al. (2016) posit that language teacher identity provides the analytical

lens for reconceptualising language teachers' knowledge base and investigating teachers, teaching, and teacher education. Canagarajah (2016), reflecting on his own experience of teaching multilingual writing, highlights how teacher identity—particularly critical stances on the dominance of English—can enrich pedagogical practice. Rather than being restrictive, such identities can provide empowering perspectives for students and foster innovative practices. Canagarajah also calls for classroom-based research to explore how multilingual teachers navigate competing identities and how they adjust their teaching in response to institutional, social, and student expectations. Teacher agency is exercised in the decision-making processes of teachers along with their actions as they (re)construct multiple identities (Kayi-Aydar, 2019).

Perceiving teacher agency as a product of professional identity, Wallen and Torney (2019) state that a plethora of factors “influence teachers’ sense of agency or instrumentality, notably emotions and perceptions of power under the influence of cultural and political constructs in social situations” (p. 130). And, as Barros et al. (2020) rightly remark “... a positive disposition towards multilingualism alone will not resolve the tensions precipitated by mainstream education’s long-standing monolingual bias. For this reason, it is important for monolingual self-identified aspiring teachers to be given opportunities to find ways to experiment with multilingualism as part of their emergent professional identities” (p.13).

Guided by these theoretical insights, the current study attempts to examine how language teacher identity and agency are constructed and enacted in multilingual primary classrooms from four salient dimensions: opportunities, constraints, obligations and intentions, forming the OCOI framework. Opportunities refer to the available resources, support systems, and contextual conditions that enable teachers to act and make pedagogical choices. Constraints are the structural, institutional, or socio-cultural barriers that limit or restrict teachers’ freedom to teach in ways they find appropriate. Obligations represent the formal and informal norms, policies, and stakeholder demands that shape what teachers are expected to do. Intentions capture teachers’ personal goals, values, and visions for meaningful teaching aligned with their professional identity and beliefs. These four key constructs collectively serve as a framework for interpreting the complex processes of teacher identity enactment and agentic positioning in multilingual classrooms.

Context of the Study

The introduction of English-medium instruction (EMI) in Telangana government primary schools began as a pilot in 2016–17 and expanded state-wide from 2022–23, with plans for full implementation up to Class X by 2024–25. This shift, driven by rising demand for English education, involved training approximately 104,000 teachers. However, concerns persist regarding the adequacy of preparation, especially in rural and multigrade classrooms, where teacher proficiency in English remains inconsistent and a shortage of EMI-trained teachers continues. While enrolments in government schools have increased, many students still struggle with basic English reading and writing skills. Against this backdrop, the current study examines how English language teachers draw upon their linguistic identities to exercise agency in shaping their classroom practices.

Aim and Rationale

In contexts marked by linguistic plurality and cultural diversity, teachers continuously negotiate their professional roles and make pedagogical decisions shaped by their beliefs, experiences, and teaching realities. However, research on teacher identity and agency within multilingual primary classrooms in India is limited. Therefore, this study investigates how English language teacher identity and agency are constructed and enacted in multilingual Indian classrooms. By centering teachers' voices and classroom actions, it attempts to understand the dynamic interplay between identity, agency, and multilingual classroom contexts. The study is guided by the following research question: How do English language teachers in multilingual Indian primary classrooms negotiate their professional identities and exercise agency in classroom practices?

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative approach to explore language teacher identity and agency enactment in multilingual primary schools. Four English language teachers (two female and two male), aged between 40 and 55, participated in the study. Their teaching experience ranges from nine to twenty-five years, providing a balanced representation of mid-career to experienced professionals in the field. All participants are multilingual, speaking between three to five languages. Three teachers

teach Grades 1 to 5, while one teaches Grades 3 to 5. The two teachers from government primary schools teach all subjects, whereas the private school teachers specialise in English and Science, and English and Social Studies, respectively. All four hold a Master's degree, in addition to a BEd, the mandatory teaching qualification in India. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire and in-depth informal interviews. The questionnaire comprised twenty open-ended questions exploring how teachers negotiate their professional identities and enact agency in multilingual classrooms

Data Presentation and Interpretation

The data are presented and analysed in relation to the four key aspects: opportunities, constraints, obligations and intentions discussed in the theoretical framework section.

1. Opportunities: What I Can Do: This section examines how school environments, personal skills, and professional experiences facilitate teachers' ability to address students' diverse linguistic backgrounds. It also investigates the types of institutional and peer support—such as training, resources, and collaborative networks—that empower teachers to implement multilingual strategies effectively. The teachers who participated in the study are proud of their multilingual identity and are aware of the different home languages of the students in their classrooms. They are happy to use Telugu, Hindi, Urdu and Kannada because the students are from diverse linguistic and economic backgrounds. One of the teachers states that “students are from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, and Chhattisgarh and ... from rich and poor family”. However, such home language use is only occasional and cautious and is not without guilt since the school and the parents have expectations. Teachers from the government school have received training when English medium was introduced but that is “not enough.” One of the teachers comments, “I use visual aids, gestures, and simplified language to make lessons easier for students from different language backgrounds. My experience with students from various regions has helped me learn how to adjust my teaching methods, and I also encourage peer support to help students explain things to each other in their own languages.” This teacher has received training through the Maple Bear Immersion Programme (a Canadian bilingual educational model combining the strengths of Canadian pedagogy with local curricula to nurture true English

proficiency alongside home language literacy), which helped them learn methods for engaging students in a multilingual environment.

2. Constraints: What I Cannot Do: This section presents the structural barriers such as school policies, curriculum demands, lack of resources, and personal or institutional constraints that restrict the use of multilingual strategies. The questions in this section aim to understand how these constraints shape and sometimes limit teachers' professional choices and classroom agency. Teachers from the English medium schools are constrained by the school policy that restricts them from using students' home language/s. One of the teachers remarks, "We are expected to use English in all classes except for the second and third language subjects. This is to ensure students are consistently exposed to English in all subjects." Teachers state that they understand the rationale of such policy but question, "What is the use if children cannot understand the concept? How does it harm if we used the home language/s?" They surreptitiously use multiple languages to "get around the situation." Further, they express the need for strategies and resources to address linguistic needs. In the case of teachers from government schools, the pressure is palpable from parents and community. Parents want their children to improve their English, so they insist on the use of English in the classroom. Further they are also constrained by time, heavy syllabus, not to mention the Facial Recognition System (FRS) used to automate student and teacher attendance, aiming to improve monitoring and reduce proxy attendance. However, the system faces challenges such as technical glitches, time-consuming processes affecting teaching hours, and serious concerns over student data privacy and lack of regulatory safeguards.

3. Obligations: What I Should Do: This section explores how curricular mandates, administrative directives, societal norms, and perceived responsibilities influence teachers' decisions regarding language use in the classroom. The questions aim to uncover how teachers align their practices with these obligations while managing their own beliefs and pedagogical priorities. Curriculum guidelines and exam systems are in English, so teachers are required to teach in English to help students perform well in assessments. This makes it necessary to ensure students are familiar with English terminology and subject content in the language of the exams. As already mentioned in Section 2, school policy and parental expectations determine whether and how much home

language/s should be used in the class. One of the teachers remarks, "You cannot please everyone, your principal, the parents and the school inspectors... it is a tight rope walk and is quite stressful." It should be noted here that teachers do use home language/s but they experience guilt when they do so. Teachers wish to prioritise English and English medium instruction but they cannot because comprehension of concepts and the overall learning get compromised. Thus, being sandwiched by the school policy and parental expectations and their own and their students' needs (to use the home language/s) they experience a cognitive and affective conflict.

4. Intentions: What I Want to Do: The intentions section focuses on how teachers envision their roles in fostering inclusive language learning environments and their long-term intentions for using students' linguistic resources in teaching. The questions seek to understand teachers' proactive agency in shaping classroom practices that reflect their professional identities and values. One of the teachers observes, "Ideally, I would like to use a mix of English and home languages to explain difficult words or concepts so that students understand better. I believe that students should feel confident and happy while learning a language. I think it is important to respect their home languages and use them when necessary to support their understanding." Another teacher eloquently expresses, "For me, good teaching means using clear explanations, making lessons enjoyable, and giving every child a chance to participate, no matter what language they speak at home." Teachers from both the government and private schools state that if they had full freedom, they would create a print-rich environment with posters, charts, and storybooks in both English and home languages. They would also arrange the classroom in groups to encourage more peer learning and discussions. They would like to plan more interactive activities that allow students to use both languages naturally while learning new vocabulary and concepts in English.

Findings and Implications

The findings highlight an intricate interplay between the teacher's multilingual identity, professional agency, and the institutional demands of English-medium instruction (EMI) in primary education. The teacher regards their multilingual competence as both a personal and professional asset, enabling cultural inclusivity and fostering

meaningful connections with students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Although English is maintained as the primary medium of instruction, the teacher strategically uses students' home languages to clarify difficult concepts and enhance comprehension, reflecting a translanguaging approach that supports multilingual learners. However, the ability to exercise multilingual pedagogical flexibility is restricted by rigid EMI policies and curriculum mandates that emphasise English-only instruction. These structural constraints create a tension between the teacher's pedagogical beliefs and institutional expectations, leading to feelings of stress and professional frustration. Yet, instead of passively complying with these limitations, they negotiate agency within policy boundaries by employing adaptive strategies—such as gestures, visual aids, simplified English, peer explanations, and interactive activities—to address students' linguistic needs.

The teacher prioritises student confidence, emotional support, and respect for linguistic diversity. Their vision for an inclusive, resource-rich classroom with materials in both English and home languages is consistently moderated by institutional realities. Rather than perceiving constraints as fixed barriers, the teacher demonstrates resilience and innovation, using challenges as opportunities for reflection and pedagogical adaptation. This dynamic, context-responsive exercise of agency is neither passive compliance nor outright resistance but an ongoing negotiation shaped by policy contexts, institutional culture, and classroom realities. Ultimately, the teacher's multilingual identity and agency are enacted through a pragmatic balance of institutional alignment and student-centred practices. Recognising such negotiated agency is essential for developing policies and professional development frameworks that support effective, contextually responsive language teaching in multilingual classrooms.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the need to reconceptualise teacher agency and identity beyond simplistic binaries of resistance and compliance. In EMI contexts, agency is a dynamic, context-responsive process where teachers negotiate between institutional policies, their professional beliefs, and multilingual classroom realities. Teacher identity, shaped by personal values and pedagogical ideals, plays a crucial role in these negotiations. Recognising this complex interplay is essential for informing professional

development and policy reforms that support flexible, contextually responsive language teaching in multilingual classrooms.

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K. Padmini Shankar is a Professor at EFLU, Hyderabad. Her research focuses on teacher development, teacher identity and agency, classroom-based research, and teaching English to young learners.

padminishankar@efluniversity.ac.in