

Teaching English in a Multilingual Setting: A Case for Translanguaging

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the effectiveness of teaching English as an additional language in a primary school in the Tamil Linguistic Minority region of Palakkad District in Kerala. The study is set against the backdrop of the National Education Policy, which recommends using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, at least at the primary level. Drawing on a year-long English language skills acquisition programme conducted by a government college for students at a nearby local school in Athicode, Kozhinjampara, this paper aims to unravel the intricacies of teaching English in a multilingual environment. Based on 2 years of pedagogical experience, translanguaging is seen as an effective means of integrating additional language learning into mother tongue education, thereby providing a comfortable, approachable linguistic space for multilingual students in India.

Introduction

The significance of using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in primary classes has been validated and emphasised worldwide. When India, a multilingual country, implements this change, it will fundamentally alter the dynamics of English-language education in the country. This paper addresses this issue based on the experience of teaching English to primary students in a linguistic minority region. Located at the Kerala-Tamil Nadu border, the area is also bilingual, with two languages, Tamil and Malayalam. The need to think about teaching English as a foreign language and as a lingua franca to thousands of similar students across the country from now on is undoubtedly a very pertinent and challenging prospect. Added to this are factors such as students from lower- or middle-class socio-economic backgrounds, most of whom are first-generation learners, or whose first language is their mother tongue. They lack exposure to English, which could make it difficult for them to internalise its structure.

Background and Context

The study is based on a project undertaken at a Government Primary school in Kozhinjampara, a Tamil-speaking linguistic minority area in the district of Palakkad, Kerala.

The students use both Tamil, the language of Tamil migrants, and Malayalam, the state's official language. The project, called the *English is Cool* program, was launched by the Department of English of the Government Arts and Science College, Kozhinjampara, as an extension activity of the college.

Earlier, the Department had conducted a survey of the Nallepilly panchayat to assess the dropout rate among college students. The study's findings showed that, among many other factors, including socio-economic status and parents' lack of education, many students found it very difficult to understand subjects taught in English at the college level. That led to a considerable dropout ratio. Sheeja Kuriakose, in her dissertation, concludes from a quantitative survey on linguistic minority rights in Palakkad that, though people are aware of their linguistic rights and prefer Tamil over Malayalam or other languages, there is a gradual shift among the younger generation toward a preference for education in Malayalam rather than Tamil. As the respondents' education and job status increased, they wanted their children to have access to education in other languages (385-386). In line with this argument, we could see fewer students admitted to regional-language medium schools.

We also visited a nearby lower primary school. We found, through discussions with the school's teachers, that admissions decreased because it was a regional-language medium school that taught Malayalam and Tamil. Therefore, the parents were not ready to admit their children. This situation motivated us to start a year-long program in 2022 to help the students develop English language proficiency. The department's undergraduate students received ELT training from external and internal mentors, who were sent to the school daily to teach lower and upper primary students. The programme used a communicative approach to English language teaching, with activities and worksheets customised for each student. The students were divided into four groups according to their level.

This paper examines the project's efficacy, examining how students have benefited from this approach and the challenges in teaching English to regional language medium students.

Research questions and objective :

1. What challenges do students and teachers from multilingual backgrounds face in acquiring a foreign tongue?
2. How do multilingual situations affect the learning of another language?

Understanding this impact is crucial for designing effective language learning strategies in multilingual environments.

Significance and Scope

When India adopts the National Education Policy, which introduces the critical decision of learning in the mother tongue, it will undoubtedly pave the way for a revolutionary change that will end the language debate in intellectual circles. This will lead to

a more comfortable learning environment and a better cultural context for Indian kids. However, there are arguments over the impact of dominant languages on minority and tribal languages, and the exclusion they entail.

Although there are numerous arguments over the use of regional languages, it remains the case that English still occupies a dominant role as the co-official language of India alongside Hindi and as an elite language is mired in the “inter-regional ethnolinguistic politics” (Bharadwaj) of language in post-colonial India. English-language education in India must consider this divide when formulating policies. Although English language education has improved considerably in urban areas, rural areas have yet to benefit. Most students from rural areas find it extremely difficult and demoralising to use English as a language of interaction in official, academic, educational and other social contexts.

Notwithstanding, research on the acquisition of languages by children has focused on the positive role of the mother tongue not only in the learning of subjects but also in the acquisition of another language. This study provides practical insights into the challenges and benefits of this approach.

Literature Review

The fact that people proficient in a country's dominant language have more social advantages and cultural legitimacy is well established. Building on his idea of cultural capital, Pierre Bourdieu examines how people's linguistic capital becomes a game-changer in societal interactions. Therefore, accessibility to this symbolic capital also becomes a citizen's right. In the case of India, the use of English as a second language and an official language has created a lot of opportunities for the privileged and problems for the underprivileged.

The challenges faced by minority students in acquiring knowledge of subjects in English, as well as the hardships (Jhingran) and potential strategies for developing English as another language (Mahanand, Dewan and Mukherjee), have been researched with rigour. The politics and social dynamics of English language teaching in India (S.K. Das, Ghodke), the need for context-specific multilingual education (Mohanty and Mishra, Sridhar), and the need to implement mother tongue-based education for promoting social equity (Srinivasan), point to the urgent need to address the problem for a socially just educational turn. Sinha notes the convergence of scaffolded instruction, collaborative learning, multimodal resources, differentiated instruction, interactive teaching methods, continuous assessment and feedback, professional development for teachers, and community and parental involvement as essential strategies for an outcome-based learning process.

Focusing on the challenges faced by linguistic minorities, Annamalai argues for balancing the legacy of English with its decolonisation for the use of underprivileged sections of Indian society. This is much required in the context of the globalised economy and, equally significant for national cohesion, is the use of the mother tongue, which enables equal opportunities for minorities.

In acknowledging the linguistic resources of a multilingual student and thereby augmenting his capacity to learn new languages, Jim Cummins terms Translanguaging/cross-linguistic pedagogy a practice gaining international significance in the context of large-scale immigration worldwide. This pedagogy draws on the linguistic resources of the learner's mother or home language and does not see one language as having any specific superiority over another. Here, the teacher considers a learner's bilingual resources as advantageous rather than detrimental to learning a second language. This cross-linguistic pedagogy effectively uses students' multilingual repertoires rather than the traditional grammar-translation method, practised out of context. It even enables translation between languages, making it an effective tool for learning another language.

Contextualisation of Research Topic

When the programme was launched, during the first year, the resources used were from the BBC Learning English website and British Council Learn English programs. During the first year, the students were grouped into lower and upper primary groups, and the instructors were asked to provide LSRW activities. However, the results were not very satisfactory, as evidenced by the school students' summative assessments. The instructors also reported on the challenges they faced in the bilingual class. Consequently, the classes were further divided into four groups, and new, graded texts were introduced that were more contextually grounded and culturally relevant to the Indian students.

Storytelling is a tool that has been widely used to enhance learners' interest. In one exciting session, storytelling was used to capture students' attention. The instructors performed storytelling in English, and students of the Tamil medium were asked to render the story in their language, which they did effortlessly. This made the language classroom more interactive and fun to be in. This also reduced learners' inhibitions about taking part in the English language classroom. This was repeated in Malayalam medium classes with similar results. Thus, using students' language resources made the classes more active and yielded better results than in a monolingual classroom. In another exercise, students were encouraged to write about themselves using cues and were asked to translate the same into their mother tongues, which they did with considerable ease.

When students showed a moderate improvement in their English language skills in the second year of the program, challenges remained. The lack of sufficient infrastructure in the school posed a problem for adopting listening activities in the form of audio and video recordings. Due to insufficient projectors, more extensive reading texts were not introduced in the classes either. However, translanguaging emerged, inadvertently, as an enabling tool in such situations.

Methodology

To assess the efficacy of the program and the challenges faced in teaching English as an additional language to Tamil linguistic minority students, we designed two questionnaires which used a descriptive research design to collect feedback from both the instructors who

were actively involved in teaching English and the school teachers who monitored these classes and directly were in-charge of the students. The structured questionnaire used both quantitative and qualitative analysis, including ratings on various aspects of the program, and included open-ended questions to gather comments and suggestions. Regular feedback was also taken from the school authorities. This was done to compare the responses of both the instructors and the school teachers about the program. The students were assessed based on formative and summative assessments. Interviews with the students were also conducted.

Results and Discussions

Survey 1

The survey by 75 respondents who participated in the program as instructors indicated a predominantly positive experience. Most rated their experience as "Excellent" or "Good." They also suggested that a significant percentage of students (75% and above) benefited from the program. Activity-based methods, language games, and group work were highlighted as particularly influential. However, though the multilingual nature of the classroom was challenging for them, 52% affirmed that it also had a positive advantage on the learning experience. The use of a common language proved less inhibitive for the learners. Some instructors recommended utilising more multilingual resources and a common language to interact with and attract the students to the learning process and using visual tools to enhance the program further. In addition, some instructors found code-switching an indispensable practice in a multilingual setting.

Survey 2

The survey aimed to gather feedback from teachers on the program's effectiveness and to collect suggestions for improvements. Feedback was collected from schoolteachers who observed the program's impact on their students, capturing their views on its effectiveness and challenges. The teachers opined that learning a foreign language is challenging for students of the regional language medium. According to their observations, only 50% of the students benefited from the programme. However, they agreed that overall, English proficiency improved after two years of the program.

Both surveys highlight the overall positive impact of the English Skill Acquisition Program. From the instructor's perspective, the first survey emphasises effective teaching methods and the management of multilingual classrooms. In contrast, the second survey, from the teachers' perspective, highlights the challenges regional-language-medium students face and suggests practical improvements to the program's implementation.

Implications and contributions to the field

A.K. Mohanty and Pattnayak rightly point out that, even though there is policy support for mother-tongue-based multilingual education, its practical implementation in classroom and marginalised student community settings remains a dream; there is a wide gap between policy and practice. If education has to become sustainable, inclusive, and equitable,

this must be treated urgently. Using a translanguaging methodology for teaching English in Indian classrooms could yield better results, as it motivates learners to overcome their inhibitions and use their language to learn another language. This can provide an atmosphere that is not intimidating for the learner and accentuates her learning speed. More than monolingual classrooms, we need more spaces where multiple languages are at play.

Conclusion

The program shows the need to integrate the learner's language as an indispensable tool in learning an additional language, which may or may not be similar. As Deidre Kirwan notes:

Valuing pupils' home languages and encouraging them to use their growing language skills in school presents essential opportunities to facilitate the development of plurilingual repertoires and language awareness in all learners. (44)

However, the classroom practices must be thoroughly thought out and carefully planned. It should not revert to the grammar-translation method, which completely ignores listening and speaking skills in that language. The unique challenges in addressing the needs of Tamil Linguistic Minority students must be considered, and practical strategies devised. This may include addressing the shortage of ample bilingual texts, which could be a significant deficit in such a process.

At this stage, it is imperative to delve deeper into ways to devise multilingual tasks that benefit Indian students. Teachers must be trained and updated on the approaches and methodologies to be adopted in such a language classroom. Bilingual texts, visual and aural aids, collaborative learning tasks, and graded learning strategies are essential in this approach. More research on Translanguaging practices will provide new avenues for English language learning in India.

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