

# Language and Ideology in Indian Multilingual Classrooms

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The advancement of multilingual education through the framework of Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) or using children's mother tongue in education gained a global momentum from the UNESCO global monitoring education (UNESCO GEM) report of 2003. Empirically driven linguistic theorizations of the cognitive benefits of bi/multilingualism (Bialystok, 2017) formed the basis of this report. Subsequently, the UNESCO GEM report of 2016 documented the widespread global implementation and recommendation of the framework in the last two decades. Alongside this, researchers and language educators in Global North and Global South have upheld MLE as a tool for inclusive and sustainable education, and human mobility as instantiated in the UNICEF annual report of 2018. The motivation for formalising and empowering mother tongue and home language use for educational purposes has also been advocated to protect the linguistic human rights and well-being of children (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2022) and ensure that their access to literacy is through mother tongue or the most familiar home language(s) (McCaffrey & Jhingran, 2024).

Furthermore, in second/foreign language acquisition and learning research there has been a noticeable 'multilingual turn' (Ortega 2013, 2019), as evidenced in the past four decades, in classroom data from English language classes with substantial use of multiple languages in teachers' classroom practices as well as interactional data of teachers and learners. However, in the Global South countries where such multilingual practices abound societally (Mohanty, 2019), the multilingual shift in the EMI instructional contexts though frequent (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018; Lightfoot et al., 2021) has been frowned upon by policymakers and researchers as the power of using English in class has overshadowed and made the use of other local languages less important or valuable as educational resources (Canagarajah, 2022; Sah, 2022). While the use of multiple languages in class has been spontaneous, they have lacked policy level support making teachers feel unsure or guilty of their multiple language use in English classes (Chimirala, 2017; Kuchah & Milligan, 2024). Analysing the phenomenon of presence of multilingual pedagogies in EMI classrooms in Global South contexts, Sah

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and Kubota (2022) present a timely critique that translanguaging in South Asian EMI schools is mediated through the language policies and ideological biases of the respective South Asian countries stemming from colonial mindsets. Consequently, Sah and Kubota argue that this creates language hegemony in education and disadvantage numerous learners whose home languages are not valued in the instructional context.

## **1.1 Multilingual Pedagogies in Indian classrooms**

Indian society since the ancient times has a rich storytelling culture across multiple languages (Balakrishna, 2020) and no hierarchical distinctions has existed between oral and written forms of languages for educational purposes (Kavirtna, 1971). The classrooms have been a microcosm of the multilingual and multicultural milieu (Groff, 2016) existing in the country from times immemorial which Mohanty (2019) argues to be still true for most Indian classrooms even though English is imposed as the dominant medium or language of instruction. However, providing evidence-based benefits (or challenges) of the use of multilingual resources in English Medium Instruction (EMI) classrooms in India is a fairly recent phenomenon. For instance, Anderson and Lightfoot (2018) comprehensively review the widespread presence of translanguaging in EMI schools in India. Additionally, Lightfoot et al. (2021) review multilingual practices and language mixing trends of teachers and learners in English and content classes taught in English to conclude that the practices are constrained by teacher ideology and state level (lack of) support for using multilingual resources in EMI schools.

Alongside the presence of multiple languages as pedagogical resources in the classroom space, in the recent times owing to its popularity in creating global citizenship and professional opportunities across socio-economic classes, several Indian state governments and the central government support the practice of EMI in public and private institutions right from the primary level; but there is administrative failure to train or recruit teachers who are sufficiently proficient in the language of instruction, here English. However, it comes as a relief that the recent Indian National Education Policy (2020) proposes mother-tongue-supported education to be followed up to grade eight and there be a late transition to EMI in secondary and higher education. On one hand, the opportunities and unity English education creates is undeniable (Kalan, 2016) but on the other, what remains unanswered is the fact that this so-called opportunity is heavily mediated by the socio-economic status (SES), manifested as class and caste of the primary stakeholders of education namely teachers, parents and children as Borooah and Sabharwal eloquently voices (2021). This is because English is neither spoken at home nor frequently used for social communication in the vast majority of the learners who come from low SES families (Tsimpli et al., 2020). In addition to this, teachers' low levels of proficiency in English pose a grave problem in natural and rich ways of knowledge transaction and meaning-making in class.

Hence, the positioning of English in the past trilingual language policy of India and the current multilingual policy forwarded by the NEP (2020) creates a complex scenario. A similar case in point is also present in the fraction of institutions that have regional languages as the medium of instruction which are not available as home language of learners who come from migrant families settled in different states of the country and speakers of minority and tribal languages residing in several Indian states (Mohanty, 2006, 2019). In both cases, the logic of using a monolingual (English) mode of transaction in the classroom instruction gives rise to the hegemony and ideology that impedes cognitive and intellectual growth leaving numerous teachers and learners disproportionately disadvantaged (Kalan, 2016; Tsimpli et al., 2020). The logic of inclusivity and the assumed prospect of upward social mobility through English instruction in reality leads to social exclusion and marginalisation (Sah, 2022) and poor-quality English education (Borooah & Sabharwal). Furthermore, when mother-tongue resources are undermined and English education becomes the norm, it violates learners' linguistic human rights (Mohanty, 2023).

## **2. FOCUS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE**

In this special issue, we have considered contributions that examine the power imbalances in Indian classrooms as a result of using the monolingual mode of instruction in a language of power like English and in using monolingual tasks and assessments to evaluate learning outcomes. Added to this, teacher perceptions of classroom-based learner estimates are imbalanced by teachers' lack of proficiency in the target language. We have invited alternatives to counter the monolingual model of imparting knowledge in English such that the voices of primary stakeholders of education, namely teachers and learners from different Indian states, social groups and classes are brought to the fore. The underuse of multilingual resources in a systematic and planned manner and/or sporadic and spontaneous use of home languages and life experiences as linguistic and cultural resources in class and the undue focus on standardizing the monolingual use of the medium of instruction lies at the heart of a deep-rooted social injustice. We have attempted to document voices in this special issue to counterbalance this hegemony of English in Indian classrooms and look for sustainable alternatives to make language education inclusive, accessible and socially just.

Three seminal strands of thematic investigations around the use of multilingual and multicultural resources and Indian teacher language choices and ideologies governing their language choices in class, both to teach language and content (e.g., science) have emerged in this special issue collection of four papers, one interview, and three book reviews. The thematic strands of exploration are presented in the following sections to specifically showcase the current trends of research in India around classroom use of translanguaging, teacher ideology and opinion about the usefulness of the phenomenon, and systemic resistance of its use due to popular perceptions of monolingual inputs

being necessary for development of language proficiency and content understanding in a socio-politically dominant language like English in India.

## **2.1 Crisis in Language Education in India and Situating Multilingual Pedagogy**

Indian multilingual classrooms are mediated by social hierarchies with caste and class being intersectional social constructs creating barriers to access quality education, especially when the medium of instruction (MoI) is English. This is because the language is not used for social communication by the majority of Indian learners who are from the low socio-economic status (SES) background and mostly from low caste communities. The first paper in this special issue by Kalyanpur revolves around this issue of the inequality of English education created by class and caste as a manifestation of critical discourse on education. She raises concerns on teacher bias on learner achievement in class in terms of the quality of English they use to communicate in class or remain silent in the fear of being reprimanded in class for speaking in poor English. Hence, Kalyanpur investigates teacher perceptions and learner estimates being influenced by the intersectionality of social caste and class. Subsequently, she reports that teacher perceptions negatively impact their expectations about learners' academic ability and to acquire English. She voices concerns against the acute marginalisation of lower caste and lower income group learners' academic ability due to their inaccessibility to quality English education.

Applying Bourdieu's theory of linguistic and cultural capital, and unexamined exclusion (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), Kalyanpur researches teachers from six schools - two high-tier, one middle tier and three low-cost schools in Mumbai (a city in East India) and gathers their perception based on qualitative classroom notes and post class interviews. She reports that teacher perceptions about learner ability differ based on the learners' social association, (un)familiarity with cultural tropes, and proficiency in English as a marker of their social status, which in turn stems from learners' life experiences. She poignantly brings out that English has a weaponising impact where teachers exert authority on learners who struggle to express themselves in English and the former maintains social distance to further entrench the power hierarchy in the teacher-learner relationship. Contrastively, the teacher-learner relationship is friendly and respectful where both teachers and learners are from high or medium socio-economic classes and upper castes.

A way to mitigate the negative impact of English-only MoI, which creates socio-linguistic inequities, Kalyanpur opines, is to first bring about a change in social attitudes towards castes and to actively recognise that learners' access to quality education gets mitigated by the two social categories of caste and class working as a stigma. She hopes that with higher enrolment of learners from low caste and low-income group families, their acceptance in mainstream educational institutions would be higher, and they

would be able to employ multilingual resources to learn. Hence, her paper concludes with a note of optimism that over time increased representation of disadvantaged learner groups in the Indian education system would bring about curricular changes and practices for socially inclusive pedagogies such as multilingual pedagogy and translanguaging would gain prominence.

## 2.2 Multilingual and Translanguaging Pedagogies

The special issue showcases Indian research on teacher perspectives and ideologies governing their classroom practices in the English class. The manner in which language teachers incorporate multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies for effective classroom communication and teaching concepts, clarifying learner doubts, and in giving feedback are documented in the next three papers authored by Kandharaja and Vennela, Chimirala, and Muthyalu respectively. All of them show that teacher practices and perspectives on learners are governed by a set of individual teacher factors such as proficiency in the language, ideologies around the use of languages in class and agency they experience in using multilingual strategies in the English classroom. Alongside this, they have to navigate through parental and societal expectations and state and national language policy recommendations, all of which play important roles in teachers deciding (or experiencing guilt or conflict) to use multilingual strategies in class. Thus, the three papers in this issue throw light upon English and content teachers' choices for instruction in English language and content classes (e.g., science classes) and using multilingual resources being governed by an interplay of individual and societal factors.

Kandharaja and Vennela's paper in the special issue deals with the role of language ideology of teachers in creating agency and successful use of translanguaging as a predominant and successful strategy to help them implement their language policy in class. They report an in-depth study of teacher ideology as expressed through semi-structured interview-based recalls of two teachers. The researchers use The Douglas Fir Group (2016) framework of micro level of social activity of teachers, meso level of sociocultural institutions and activities and macro level ideological structures governing multilingual use in classroom to thematically analyse teacher responses and justifications regarding their use of 'spontaneous translanguaging.' Additionally, they use Garcia et al.'s (2017) three-strand model of teacher *stance*, *design*, and *shifts* to explain the trends and purposes of their spontaneous translanguaging across the micro to meso levels. The key findings show that teachers' positive opinion about the use of languages in class drives them to employ translanguaging spontaneously and meaningfully. The teachers opine that they are able to find a use for translanguaging meaningfully at three levels: first at the micro level of classroom practices as an effective strategy to aid learning and improve English proficiency, and create a safe space where learners can use their home language resources; second at the meso or institutional level use translanguaging stemming from teacher ideology even though the school context and medium of education does not support their practices; and third at the macro level



of social perspectives like promoting critical and inclusive perspectives amongst learners so that the latter can draw upon their life experiences as background knowledge to learn new content.

In explicating about the use of spontaneous translanguaging and opinion about the usefulness of the practice, the teachers contrast their agency and create a balance in presenting their opinion by expressing a few negatives about the use of this methodology: first they reveal that they do not have much agency to formally use it extensively as they face resistance from school administration; second there is no continuous teacher training support to help them use the method more systematically; and third the monolingual mode of assessment defeats the purpose of practicing translanguaging in class as children are expected to express understanding monolingually. In all, Kandharaja and Vennela's paper presents teacher's opinions and beliefs about using spontaneous translanguaging and their critical language awareness of its benefits at the micro and meso levels as well as the resistance against its use at the meso and macro levels. Acknowledging the use of the translanguaging phenomena in Indian classrooms in a widespread manner by Anderson and Lightfoot (2018) and Lightfoot et al. (2021) was a necessary first step to document the use of translanguaging in Indian classrooms. Kandharaja and Vennela's study provides an in-depth analysis of Indian teacher ideology and awareness regarding the use of spontaneous translanguaging, marking a significant step forward in documenting this phenomenon in Indian classrooms with a critical socio-ideological lens.

The second paper in the special issue is by Chimirala who argues for social justice in language education of indigenous tribal minority (ITM) girl child who comes from poor circumstances and the severe linguistic conflicts she faces in class thereof. Since English as the MoI is popularly conceived to be the language of upward social mobility in India, children irrespective of their home support for education and nonavailability of English for social communication outside class are expected to show proficiency in this language in class. Often with minority and tribal group children, their home languages are devalued and shamed and never brought into the classroom space. They are forced to use more socially dominant and 'acceptable' or 'respectable registers' of languages in class. Consequently, their linguistic and cultural resources find no use in class to learn new content and develop proficiency in a language of instruction like English that hardly ever finds a use in their social life outside class.

Chimirala presents forceful teacher narratives to elaborate upon the pedagogical strategies they adapt to address the conflict between exposure to language(s) of upward mobility versus valuing home languages of tribal girls for educational purposes. She reports that there is a conscious attempt by the teachers who express their agency, especially their relief and concerns, to use translanguaging to break away from the English-only hegemony, inadvertently created through national and state language policies and Western school of thought persisting on a monolingual mode of instruction for English education. Chimirala presents examples of teacher narratives from a set of

51 teachers, teaching in fourteen schools where ITM girl children were enrolled. She demonstrates four patterns of translanguaging pedagogy used in language and content classrooms: using multilingual, multimodal ways of translanguaging in class, requesting ITM teachers for parallel translanguaging, learner centered, and peer-monitored translanguaging to build inclusive space in class for the girl children to comprehend lessons and express themselves meaningfully. She presents a detailed classification of informal teacher estimates of linguistic disadvantages of the girl children manifested through their poor decoding and print comprehension and lack of connection between what is taught in class and their passive presence in class to the extreme case of experiencing seclusion during peer interactions. Alongside this, she documents the categories of relief teachers experience by being agentive to help children access learning, materialise their right to education, and help them escape the disadvantages of seclusion in class. Again, to counterbalance the notion of self-created teacher agency, she presents teacher excerpts where they point out school-level resistance stemming from the state policy, personal ethical concerns and logistics concerns that intensify their internal conflict to pursue translanguaging in class.

Her paper concludes with a few recommendations: firstly, systematic recognitions of the needs and evaluation of minority and tribal children be done to prevent their marginalisation; secondly, translanguaging as a multilingual pedagogy can help decolonise English education in India and provide for social justice to children from minority communities; and lastly, classroom-based creative attempts of the teachers be documented and shared to provide further support to teachers working in challenging contexts and who want to ‘put the child first’. Furthermore, she urges that the practices and dilemmas need further documentation from teachers who work in low resource and challenging contexts and the logic of their practices need to be valued and become normative and acceptable in language education.

The last paper in the special issue by Muthyalu presents Indian science classrooms and teacher-learner use of translanguaging to promote learning and informal teacher assessment of increase of conceptual clarity in science lessons. This paper is yet another attempt to showcase teacher awareness of translanguaging practices at the secondary level science classrooms, an area hitherto under-represented in multilingual education research in India, though some examples are present in Charamba’s studies (2019, 2022, 2023) in Africa. Muthyalu argues that as knowledge building is a dialogic and collaborative activity, there is a strong need for using multiple language resources of the learners for concept learning and comprehending abstract knowledge in science lessons within the EMI context of secondary education in India. Although Charamba (2019, 2022) has previously reported the positive impact of translanguaging instructional materials in science assessment of African learners, Muthyalu points out that an investigation on the conscious employment of multilingual resources such as translanguaging to support conceptual clarity has not been undertaken yet.

Therefore, she presents perceptions of science teachers on using translanguaging strategies in class and their informal estimates of learner progress on knowledge construction, gaining conceptual clarity in understanding abstract scientific concepts, and application of the constructs. She uses semi-structured interviews of five teachers teaching physics, chemistry and biology to learners of eight to tenth grade in government aided EMI schools where there was restricted use of English outside class. Teacher responses are analyzed thematically in two ways: first, to understand their perceptions and ideologies regarding the use of translanguaging to enhance conceptual clarity in science lessons; and second, to provide informal assessments or estimates of learners' conceptual clarity of scientific terms and their application. The teachers express that they use both English and Telugu, a dominant home language, to provide explanation and elaboration of scientific concepts, and easy understanding through activity-based learning where learners are encouraged to use multiple languages to express comprehension. The teachers also highlight that because of translanguaging-based interactions learners are able to express understanding and participate in class without being scared of committing mistakes of communicating only in English.

Muthyalu concludes by drawing upon the positive perceptions and critical language awareness of the teachers on using translanguaging to clarify concepts in science lessons and that this drives the teachers to support the learners to engage in discussions and express understanding using their multilingual resources, which are integral to creating a space where translanguaging helps in raising learner engagement and participation by valuing their home language resources. She also reinforces that poor quality science education in the monolingual English-only mode can be countered by providing access to scientific understanding through translanguaging and activity-based approach where learners can draw upon their everyday experiences, home language proficiency to communicate in class, and express understanding in a manageable manner in class without feeling guilty or anxious that they do not have adequate English proficiency to express their understanding of science lessons well in that language.

An important contribution of Muthyalu's paper is that not only does it present a thematic analysis of science teachers' ideology and positive perception of using translanguaging in EMI context in India, but it also presents a set of pedagogical strategies of translingual communication and bilingual teaching materials as practical examples that science teachers can follow in multilingual contexts. However, the validity of the impact of such practical strategies in science learning needs to be corroborated with further classroom-based research.

### **2.3 Teacher Practices and Continuous Professional Development Opportunities**

The special issue also focuses on teacher development on multilingual pedagogy and how they can engage in professional development activities such that they can cater to



the evolving multilingual and multicultural needs of their learners. For instance, Kalyanpur's paper proposes that the teacher education curriculum could include teacher-supportive language pedagogies sensitive to the needs of Indian learners and translanguaging could be pivotal in giving access to quality education when learners' local or home languages are respected and find a use in class. So, policy reforms on teacher education can ensure that learners from disadvantaged backgrounds find it easy and meaningful to navigate through school and college education (Karthik & Noblit, 2022).

Indian teacher practices around translanguaging and multilingual pedagogies are reported in an interview by Jason Anderson from the University of Warwick. Referring to his recent doctoral research conducted with in-service Indian teachers of ELT, Anderson (2022) situates translanguaging as a type of multilingual pedagogy where teachers may draw from a single repertoire either in moments of spontaneity or in a planned manner or both. These instances are acts of meaning negotiation as well as communication in class to facilitate learning. The interactions are more engaging for the learners as they get to use their home language resources. However, he cautions that the teacher's role in using multilingual resources is as much an individual choice and endeavour as it is a systemic support to provide continuous professional development in practicing multilingual pedagogies in class. As he rightly opines, without such a bidirectional support it is impossible to sustain multilingual pedagogies in class, which when used effectively can provide social justice through language education.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

Overall, this special issue has selected papers and related work based on Indian classrooms to highlight the need for delivering quality education to the majority of Indian learners who come from low SES and marginalised backgrounds but live in linguistically rich environments and neighborhoods. Making space for multilingual and translanguaging pedagogies for such learners would provide them social justice in language education (Mohanty, 2019, 2023) and ensure academic and professional success later in life. The papers and the interview critique the monolingual method of teaching English and accepting EMI unquestionably. They present discussions on the need to strengthen teacher identities, critical language awareness, agency, systemic support and creation of safe spaces in class to practice translanguaging and multilingual pedagogies. Adoption and practice of inclusive and critically aware methods would strive to meaningfully utilise learner resources to scaffold learning and mutually respect one another's role in education.

Note that the strength of presenting research in this special issue is that all the papers have revolved around qualitative methods of gathering in-depth data based on teacher perspectives and their language ideology in multilingual classrooms in India using tools such as semi-structured interviews, classroom narratives and stimulated recalls of post

classroom teaching. The studies have investigated sources and categories of teacher perspectives, beliefs and ideology of language choices in multilingual classrooms and the impact those have on their critical language awareness and their estimates of how their practices scaffold learning of children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. For current research in Indian multilingual classrooms, and similar challenging multilingual contexts in the Global South, we have so far achieved two necessary steps in research by first acknowledging the presence of translanguaging and other teacher-led multilingual strategies and teacher-learner multilingual interactions in classes (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018; Lightfoot et al., 2021) and second, through the papers of this special issue, by documenting teacher perspectives and ideology governing their language choices and classroom interactions along with forming informal learner estimates.

Now we need to move forward in two possible directions of future research to deepen our understanding of how to decolonize English teaching and its impact on learning outcomes: the first direction of research would be to correlate and validate teacher concerns and perspectives with their actual classroom practices and interactional patterns through mixed methods of data gathering and analysis, and capture instances they experience ease versus difficulties in using such methodologies. The second direction of research would be to build on the efficacy of multilingual pedagogies and assessments to support learning outcomes in order to track learner growth formally and informally through quantitative and mixed methods of data gathering analysis. These new directions would help us establish the robustness and efficacy of multilingual models of learning and education in India and in the Global South.

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