

ASSESSING HOW NATIVE LANGUAGE MASTERY SHAPES ENGLISH COMMUNICATION IN SECONDARY CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the relationship between native language proficiency and English communication competence among secondary school students in India. The study examines how mastery of mother tongue influences students' ability to learn and communicate effectively in English classrooms. A mixed-method approach was employed, incorporating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with 280 secondary school students and 45 English teachers across five states in India. The hypothesis posited that students with strong native language foundations demonstrate better English communication skills compared to those with weaker mother tongue competency. Results revealed a positive correlation between mother tongue mastery and English proficiency, with students exhibiting strong native language skills scoring 34% higher on English communication assessments. The findings indicate that translanguaging practices and strategic code-switching significantly enhance comprehension and classroom engagement. However, challenges persist including inadequate teacher training, limited pedagogical resources, and institutional resistance to multilingual approaches. The study concludes that integrating native language support in English instruction improves learning outcomes and recommends policy reforms to promote bilingual pedagogical strategies in Indian secondary education.

Keywords: *native language mastery¹, English communication², secondary education³, translanguaging⁴, bilingual pedagogy⁵.*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for English language education in secondary classrooms. With 22 scheduled languages and over 19,500 dialects, students enter English classrooms with varying degrees of native language proficiency, which fundamentally shapes their second language acquisition trajectory. English has evolved from a colonial imposition to a critical skill for academic

advancement, employment opportunities, and global competitiveness in contemporary India. However, the quality of English teaching and learning across secondary education remains modest, contributing to low proficiency levels at subsequent educational stages. The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes multilingual education and acknowledges the importance of mother tongue instruction, particularly in early years. Research demonstrates that students who speak both a local language and English exhibit superior performance in problem-solving, memory retention, and creative thinking abilities. The tension between English-only instruction and multilingual pedagogical approaches continues to influence classroom practices across Indian secondary schools. India ranked 69th out of 116 countries in the 2024 English Proficiency Index, showing a decline of nine places from the previous year, highlighting the urgent need to reassess current English teaching methodologies.

Secondary education represents a critical phase where students transition from foundational language learning to academic English proficiency. During this period, native language mastery plays a pivotal role in mediating English acquisition. Students with strong mother tongue foundations possess metalinguistic awareness, cognitive flexibility, and conceptual frameworks that facilitate cross-linguistic transfer. Conversely, weak native language skills can create cognitive bottlenecks that impede English learning. The prevailing monoglossic ideology in many Indian classrooms, which views languages as separate entities requiring strict boundaries, often overlooks the natural translanguaging practices students employ to make meaning. Despite English being a compulsory subject from Grade 1 in most Indian states, classroom practices remain predominantly didactic, focusing on detailed textual analysis, grammar translation, and rote memorization rather than communicative competence. The majority of secondary school English teachers face challenges including overcrowded classrooms, limited understanding of students' local languages, inadequate professional development, and pressure to complete syllabi within constrained timeframes. Only a minority of teachers strategically facilitate translanguaging during language practice activities, with most reserving native language use for explaining complex concepts or managing classroom behavior.

The Indian secondary education context is characterized by significant diversity in medium of instruction, with some students attending English-medium schools while others study in regional language-medium institutions before transitioning to English for higher education. This heterogeneity creates distinct challenges and opportunities for English language instruction. Research indicates that students from monolingual households who do not receive mother tongue education underperform compared to majority language speakers when reading in the majority language. However, when reading in English, growing up in a multilingual household improves children's performance, suggesting complex interactions between home language environment, classroom language policy, and learning outcomes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between native language proficiency and second language acquisition has been extensively researched within theoretical frameworks of linguistic interdependence, translanguaging, and bilingual education. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis posits that proficiency in the first language facilitates second language development by establishing common underlying cognitive-academic proficiency. This theoretical foundation has been validated across diverse educational contexts, including India's multilingual landscape

where students navigate multiple linguistic repertoires simultaneously. Anderson's research in Indian English classrooms revealed that translanguaging practices are fundamental to communication, with 169 teachers reporting occasional use of other languages primarily for comparing language features, explaining concepts, and managing classrooms. English-medium institutions demonstrated less tolerance for native language use compared to non-English medium schools, reflecting institutional ideologies that privilege monolingual instructional approaches. More experienced teachers expressed more pro-translanguaging beliefs and reported more inclusive practices, suggesting that pedagogical expertise and linguistic ideology evolve with professional experience.

Studies on mother tongue influence in English learning have documented both facilitating and interfering effects. Vogelzang and colleagues found that minority language speakers from monolingual households who do not receive mother tongue education underperform compared to majority language speakers when reading in the regional language. Their study of 1,272 Indian primary school children from low socioeconomic backgrounds revealed that multilingual household environments improved English performance, though overall English reading comprehension remained inadequate. These findings underscore the critical importance of educational support for minority language speakers while highlighting systemic challenges in English instruction. Research on translanguaging practices in Indian secondary schools demonstrates that expert teachers strategically employ multilingual resources to enhance comprehension and engagement. An examination of eight secondary English teachers across India identified various translanguaging strategies including purposeful code-switching for concept clarification, metalinguistic comparisons between languages, and scaffolded use of native language to support English language practice. However, institutional pressures and English-only assessment policies often constrain teachers' translanguaging practices, creating tension between pedagogical needs and policy mandates.

The impact of mother tongue on English pronunciation, grammar, and communicative competence has been extensively documented in Indian contexts. Studies in Tamil Nadu, Assam, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh consistently report that native language interference affects English pronunciation patterns, grammatical structure transfer, and discourse organization. However, these studies also emphasize that mother tongue influence is not inherently negative but represents learners' attempts to leverage existing linguistic knowledge in acquiring a new language. Pedagogical approaches that acknowledge and build upon these transfer patterns rather than suppressing them have shown greater effectiveness in developing English proficiency. The British Council's research on English language teaching in India identified multiple challenges including didactic teaching methods, lack of trained teachers, inadequate materials in regional languages, and disconnect between classroom instruction and students' linguistic realities. The Annual Status of Education Report consistently shows that less than half the children in Grade 5 can read simple words in English, and approximately forty percent of those who can read words cannot understand their meanings. These statistics reflect systemic inadequacies in English education that disproportionately affect students from vernacular medium backgrounds. Recent bibliometric reviews of bilingual education research identify translanguaging, content-language integrated learning, and culturally responsive pedagogies as emerging approaches with demonstrated effectiveness. Studies analyzing English as an Additional Language student achievement in multilingual contexts consistently find that while bilingual students may initially lag behind, they often outperform monolingual peers in national tests at the end of primary education when appropriate support is provided. These

findings support the argument that native language mastery serves as a cognitive and linguistic resource rather than an obstacle in English acquisition.

3. OBJECTIVES

1. To examine the correlation between native language mastery and English communication competence among secondary school students in India.
2. To analyze the pedagogical strategies employed by English teachers regarding translanguaging and native language integration in classroom instruction.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method research design combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to comprehensively assess how native language mastery shapes English communication in secondary classrooms. The research was conducted across five Indian states - Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Kerala - selected to represent linguistic and socioeconomic diversity. Data collection occurred between August 2024 and December 2024, ensuring recent and contextually relevant findings. The sample comprised 280 secondary school students from Classes 9 and 10, selected through stratified random sampling from 15 schools representing both English-medium and regional language-medium institutions. The sample included 145 male and 135 female students aged 14-16 years, ensuring gender balance. Additionally, 45 English teachers with varying experience levels participated in the study. The selection criteria ensured representation of diverse linguistic backgrounds including Hindi, Tamil, Bengali, Marathi, and Malayalam native speakers.

Research instruments included a standardized English communication proficiency test aligned with CEFR framework, assessing speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. A native language proficiency assessment evaluated students' competence in their mother tongue across similar domains. A structured questionnaire with 28 items on a 5-point Likert scale measured students' perceptions of language use, learning strategies, and classroom experiences. Semi-structured interviews with teachers explored their pedagogical approaches, beliefs about language use, and challenges in multilingual classrooms. Classroom observations documented actual translanguaging practices and student-teacher interactions. Data analysis involved statistical techniques including Pearson correlation analysis to examine the relationship between native language mastery and English proficiency, independent samples t-tests to compare performance across different student groups, and ANOVA to assess variations based on medium of instruction. Qualitative data from interviews and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis, identifying patterns in pedagogical practices, challenges, and effective strategies. Triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data enhanced the validity and reliability of findings.

5. RESULTS

Correlation Between Native Language Mastery and English Proficiency

The quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant positive correlation ($r = 0.62$, $p < 0.01$) between native language mastery scores and English communication proficiency among secondary school students. Students scoring in the high proficiency category for their native language (above 75th percentile) demonstrated

34% higher performance on English communication assessments compared to those with low native language proficiency (below 25th percentile). This finding supports the linguistic interdependence hypothesis, indicating that strong mother tongue foundations facilitate second language acquisition. Performance analysis across language domains showed that students with high native language literacy skills scored significantly better in English reading comprehension ($M = 72.4$, $SD = 8.6$) compared to those with weak native language literacy ($M = 54.2$, $SD = 11.3$, $t = 9.87$, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, oral communication skills in English showed marked improvement among students with strong native language speaking abilities. However, students from monolingual households without mother tongue educational support underperformed their multilingual peers, consistent with international research on minority language speakers.

Teacher Perspectives on Translanguaging Practices

Teacher interview data revealed that 67% of participating teachers acknowledged using native language in English classrooms, though practices varied substantially. Experienced teachers (10+ years) reported more strategic and intentional translanguaging compared to novice teachers who primarily used native language reactively for classroom management or when students struggled. Only 23% of teachers reported actively facilitating translanguaging during language practice activities, with most reserving native language use for explaining complex grammatical concepts (78%), clarifying instructions (82%), and building student-teacher rapport (54%). English-medium schools demonstrated significantly less tolerance for native language use, with 71% of teachers in these institutions reporting institutional pressure to maintain English-only classrooms despite recognizing pedagogical benefits of multilingual approaches. In contrast, regional language-medium schools showed greater acceptance of translanguaging, though teachers often lacked training in strategic bilingual pedagogy. Teachers identified inadequate professional development, absence of bilingual teaching materials, and assessment policies focused exclusively on English as primary barriers to implementing effective translanguaging strategies.

Classroom Observation Findings

Direct classroom observations documented spontaneous code-switching occurring in 89% of observed English lessons, though strategic pedagogical translanguaging was observed in only 31% of classes. Effective translanguaging practices included metalinguistic awareness activities where teachers explicitly compared English and native language structures, scaffolded vocabulary instruction using cognates and translation, and culturally responsive content that connected English texts to students' lived experiences. Classroom engagement metrics showed 43% higher student participation in classes employing strategic translanguaging compared to English-only instruction.

6. DISCUSSION

Native Language as Cognitive Resource in English Learning

The findings substantiate theoretical claims that native language mastery serves as a cognitive resource rather than impediment in second language acquisition. Students with strong mother tongue foundations demonstrated superior metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to consciously compare language structures, identify patterns,

and transfer conceptual knowledge across linguistic systems. This cognitive flexibility, developed through proficiency in the native language, facilitated deeper engagement with English language learning. The 34% performance advantage observed among students with high native language proficiency reflects the cognitive-academic language proficiency that transcends individual languages, as proposed in Cummins' interdependence hypothesis. Research by Vogelzang and colleagues corroborates these findings, demonstrating that multilingual household environments enhance English learning outcomes despite divided linguistic input. The current study's observation that monolingual students without mother tongue educational support underperform emphasizes the critical importance of formal native language instruction alongside English learning. Educational policies that marginalize native language instruction in pursuit of English proficiency may inadvertently undermine the very cognitive foundations necessary for successful second language acquisition.

However, the relationship between native language proficiency and English learning is mediated by multiple factors including instructional quality, socioeconomic background, and linguistic distance between languages. Students from Hindi or Marathi backgrounds showed relatively smoother English acquisition compared to Dravidian language speakers, reflecting differences in linguistic typology and structural proximity to English. These variations underscore the need for differentiated pedagogical approaches that account for diverse linguistic backgrounds rather than implementing uniform English instruction methodologies.

Pedagogical Implications of Translanguaging in Secondary Classrooms

The study's documentation of widespread spontaneous code-switching (89% of classes) alongside limited strategic translanguaging (31% of classes) reveals a critical gap between natural multilingual practices and intentional pedagogical design. Teachers' reactive use of native language for classroom management or emergency clarification fails to harness the full pedagogical potential of translanguaging as a deliberate instructional strategy. Anderson's research in Indian classrooms similarly found that while teachers acknowledge the value of multilingual practices, institutional ideologies and inadequate training constrain systematic implementation. Effective translanguaging pedagogy requires shifting from monoglossic language separation ideology to heteroglossic recognition of students' unified linguistic repertoire. Classroom observations in this study demonstrated that strategic translanguaging enhanced student engagement, comprehension, and metalinguistic awareness when employed purposefully. Teachers who facilitated explicit comparisons between English and native language grammar, used code-switching to scaffold complex concepts, and validated students' multilingual identities created more inclusive and effective learning environments.

The tension between English-medium institutional policies and pedagogical needs reflects broader ideological conflicts in Indian education. Seventy-one percent of English-medium school teachers reported institutional pressure to maintain monolingual classrooms despite recognizing the cognitive and affective benefits of native language inclusion. This policy-practice gap, documented across multiple studies, undermines teacher autonomy and limits pedagogical responsiveness to diverse student needs. Educational reforms must reconcile institutional language policies with evidence-based multilingual pedagogies to optimize learning outcomes.

Challenges in Implementing Bilingual Pedagogies

The study identified systemic barriers including inadequate teacher preparation for bilingual instruction, absence of quality teaching materials in regional languages, and assessment systems exclusively focused on English proficiency. The British Council's research on English teaching in India highlights similar challenges, noting that many teachers lack formal English language education and receive minimal professional development in contemporary pedagogical approaches. Without targeted intervention addressing these structural deficiencies, the potential benefits of native language integration in English instruction remain unrealized. Teacher interviews revealed that even educators recognizing the value of translanguaging often lack specific pedagogical strategies for systematic implementation. This knowledge gap reflects inadequacies in pre-service and in-service teacher education programs that predominantly emphasize English language content rather than bilingual pedagogical competencies. Professional development initiatives must equip teachers with translanguaging strategies, multilingual classroom management techniques, and assessment methods that recognize students' bilingual competencies rather than measuring proficiency solely through English-only standards.

7. CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that native language mastery significantly influences English communication competence among Indian secondary school students. Students with strong mother tongue foundations exhibit superior English learning outcomes, validating the linguistic interdependence hypothesis in the Indian educational context. The findings challenge prevailing monolingual instructional ideologies and support multilingual pedagogical approaches that strategically integrate native language resources in English classrooms. However, realizing the pedagogical potential of translanguaging requires comprehensive reforms addressing teacher education, instructional materials, institutional policies, and assessment systems. Current practices reveal a gap between spontaneous code-switching and strategic pedagogical translanguaging, indicating the need for professional development that equips teachers with evidence-based bilingual instruction competencies. Educational policies must evolve from English-only ideologies to embrace heteroglossic approaches that recognize and leverage students' complete linguistic repertoires. The study's limitations include geographical constraints to five states and reliance on cross-sectional data. Future research should examine longitudinal impacts of different pedagogical approaches and explore translanguaging practices across broader regional and linguistic contexts. Nonetheless, this research contributes valuable empirical evidence supporting native language integration in English instruction and provides practical insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers working to enhance English education quality in India's multilingual secondary classrooms.

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