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Navigating multilingual classrooms: Strategies employed by English teachers in higher education

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Abstract

English language instruction in higher education is increasingly shaped by multilingual realities in which students enter classrooms with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Despite extensive scholarship on second language acquisition, limited research has critically examined how linguistic diversity within predominantly Hindi-speaking contexts influences pedagogical practice and learning outcomes in higher education. This study addresses this gap by exploring the challenges encountered by English teachers in multilingual classrooms and the strategies employed to facilitate effective language acquisition. Using a qualitative descriptive design grounded in thematic synthesis of relevant literature, the study analyses phonological, syntactic, and lexical differences between Hindi and English, as well as disparities in learner proficiency and educational background. The findings highlight persistent challenges, including pronunciation difficulties, structural interference, dialectal variation, and uneven exposure to English. Effective responses include code switching, bilingual instruction, translation practices, interactive learning methods, cultural contextualization, differentiated instruction, and personalized academic support. The study underscores the cognitive benefits of multilingualism while emphasizing the need for institutional support and professional development. Culturally responsive and flexible pedagogical approaches are essential for strengthening English learning outcomes in linguistically diverse higher education settings.

Keywords: Bilingual education; English language teaching; higher education; multilingualism; pedagogical strategies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English in higher education institutions in Madhya Pradesh involves navigating a complex linguistic environment where Hindi serves as a primary medium of instruction for many students. English teachers often face the dual challenge of teaching a foreign language while addressing the linguistic diversity among students who speak various dialects of Hindi. This research paper examines the strategies used by English teachers to bridge this gap, the challenges they encounter, and the broader implications of multilingualism on the educational process.

In Madhya Pradesh, a significant number of students enter higher education with limited proficiency in English. This is due to the prevalent use of Hindi and its dialects in daily communication and primary education. Consequently, English teachers must not only teach the language but also facilitate a transition from a predominantly Hindi-speaking background to an academic environment where English is the medium of instruction. This dual responsibility requires innovative and adaptable teaching strategies that can accommodate the linguistic diversity of the students.

Madhya Pradesh, located in central India, is characterized by its rich linguistic diversity. Hindi, the official language, exists in various dialects such as Malvi, Bundeli, Bagheli, and Nimadi. These dialects significantly influence the linguistic capabilities of students in higher education, affecting their comprehension and proficiency in English. This diversity necessitates a tailored approach to language instruction, as teachers must account for the specific linguistic backgrounds of their students. The variation in dialects also means that students come with different levels of exposure to standardized Hindi and English, creating a wide range of starting points in terms of language proficiency.

The dialectal differences in Hindi can lead to varying levels of linguistic competence among students. For instance, a student who speaks Malvi might have a different vocabulary and pronunciation compared to a student who speaks Bagheli. These differences can affect their understanding and use of standard Hindi, which is the language often used for instructional purposes in schools. Consequently, when these students are introduced to English, their learning is further complicated by the need to reconcile their dialectal variations with standard Hindi and English.

1.1. Purpose of study

This research examines the strategies used by English teachers to bridge this gap, the challenges they encounter, and the broader implications of multilingualism on education.

The primary research questions are:

- What are the main challenges faced by English teachers in multilingual classrooms in Madhya Pradesh?
- What strategies are employed to address these challenges?
- How does linguistic diversity impact English teaching and learning?

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study adopted a qualitative, descriptive research design to examine the challenges and pedagogical strategies associated with teaching English in multilingual higher education classrooms in Madhya Pradesh. Data were derived from a review and synthesis of existing literature on multilingualism, English language teaching (ELT), and higher education in linguistically diverse contexts, with particular attention to Hindi and its regional dialects (for instance, Malvi, Bundeli, Bagheli, and Nimadi) and their influence on English acquisition. The analysis focused on key thematic areas, including linguistic differences between Hindi and English (phonological, syntactic, and lexical), classroom dynamics shaped by dialectal variation, disparities in students' educational backgrounds and proficiency levels, and the cognitive and pedagogical implications of multilingualism. Instructional strategies such as code-switching, code-mixing, translation, bilingual teaching, interactive and participatory methods, cultural contextualization, differentiated instruction, progressive learning, and personalized support were examined as practical responses to these challenges. Through thematic synthesis, the study identified patterns in teaching practices and highlighted the need for institutional

support, multilingual resources, and professional development to enhance the effectiveness of English instruction in linguistically diverse higher education settings.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Challenges faced by English teachers

Linguistic Differences Between Hindi and English: The fundamental differences between Hindi and English pose a significant challenge for teachers. Hindi is a syllabic language with a relatively consistent phonetic script, whereas English has a more irregular phonetic system. This discrepancy can lead to pronunciation issues and misunderstandings. Additionally, the grammatical structures of the two languages differ markedly. Hindi typically follows a Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) order, while English uses a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order. This syntactic difference often confuses students. Furthermore, the vocabulary and idiomatic expressions in Hindi and English do not always have direct equivalents, complicating translation and comprehension (Agnihotri, 2010; Crystal, 2003).

The phonetic irregularities of English, where spelling and pronunciation do not always match, create hurdles for Hindi-speaking students. For example, the same letter combinations can produce different sounds in different words, such as in "thorough," "through," and "though." Such inconsistencies can be perplexing for students who are accustomed to the more phonetic nature of Hindi. Teachers must, therefore, spend additional time on phonics and pronunciation to help students grasp these irregularities (Crystal, 2003).

The syntactic differences between Hindi and English can lead to structural errors in students' speech and writing. For instance, a Hindi-speaking student might say "I book read" instead of "I read a book," directly translating the structure from Hindi. Teachers need to emphasize sentence structure and provide ample practice to help students internalize the SVO order of English. Moreover, idiomatic expressions in English often do not have direct translations in Hindi, requiring teachers to explain these expressions within their cultural context (Agnihotri, 2010).

Multilingual Classroom Dynamics: The presence of various Hindi dialects and slang in the classroom adds another layer of complexity. Students from different regions may use distinct expressions and terms, leading to misunderstandings and communication barriers. The cultural context embedded in language use can differ significantly among students, affecting their engagement and learning. Teachers must navigate these dynamics to create an inclusive classroom environment. They also need to be aware of regional slang and idioms that might influence students' understanding and use of both Hindi and English.

In a classroom where students speak different dialects, teachers face the challenge of ensuring that all students understand the standard Hindi used for instruction. This requires additional efforts in clarifying and standardizing the language of instruction. Furthermore, regional slang and idioms can create confusion and miscommunication among students and between students and teachers. Teachers must be sensitive to these differences and address them through clear and consistent communication (Mishra, n. d.).

Cultural differences also play a significant role in multilingual classrooms. Students from different regions bring their cultural contexts and experiences, which influence their language use and learning styles. For example, certain gestures or expressions might be acceptable in one region but misunderstood in another. Teachers must be culturally aware and sensitive to these nuances to foster a respectful and inclusive learning environment (Kramsch, 1993).

Educational Background and Proficiency Levels: Students come from varied educational backgrounds, with differing levels of exposure to English. This disparity requires teachers to adopt differentiated teaching methods to cater to varying proficiency levels. Some students may have had extensive English instruction, while others might have minimal exposure. This variance necessitates personalized teaching approaches and additional support for those with lower proficiency levels. Teachers must balance the needs of advanced students with those of beginners, often within the same classroom setting.

Students' educational backgrounds significantly impact their proficiency in English. Those from urban areas or private schools might have had more exposure to English and better resources for learning the language. In

contrast, students from rural areas or government schools might have had limited access to English education. This creates a wide disparity in language skills, making it challenging for teachers to address the needs of all students effectively (Sharma, 2019).

Differentiated instruction is essential in such settings. Teachers must assess the proficiency levels of their students and tailor their teaching methods accordingly. This might involve grouping students by proficiency levels, providing additional support to those who need it, and challenging advanced students with more complex tasks. However, managing such differentiation within a single classroom can be demanding and requires careful planning and resource allocation (Patel, 2025).

3.2. Strategies employed by English teachers

Code-switching and code-mixing: One effective strategy is the use of code-switching (alternating between Hindi and English) and code-mixing (blending elements of both languages). This approach helps in making complex concepts more relatable and accessible to students. By using familiar Hindi terms and gradually introducing English equivalents, teachers can facilitate a smoother transition for students. Code-switching also allows teachers to maintain students' attention and engagement, making lessons more interactive and understandable.

Code-switching and codemixing can serve as bridges between the students' native language and English. For instance, a teacher might explain a complex grammar rule in Hindi before providing examples in English. This method ensures that students grasp the concept in a language they understand well before applying it in English. Furthermore, using codemixing, where elements of both languages are combined within a sentence, can help students become more comfortable with English gradually. For example, a teacher might say, "Today we will learn about the past tense ka use." Such strategies make the learning process more inclusive and less intimidating for students (Kramersch, 1993).

Translation and bilingual teaching: Translating key terms and concepts into Hindi helps students grasp the material more effectively. Utilizing bilingual textbooks and supplementary materials supports students in bridging the linguistic gap. This strategy ensures that students understand fundamental concepts in their native language before attempting to learn them in English. Bilingual resources also provide a reference point for students, aiding in their independent study and revision.

Translation and bilingual teaching involve the use of both Hindi and English for instruction. Teachers might present new vocabulary in English and then provide the Hindi equivalents, ensuring that students understand the meanings. Bilingual textbooks, which present content in both languages, can be particularly useful. These resources allow students to refer back to the Hindi explanations whenever they encounter difficulties with the English text. Moreover, bilingual supplementary materials, such as glossaries and grammar guides, can reinforce students' understanding and support their independent learning (Sharma, 2019).

Interactive and participatory teaching methods: Encouraging group discussions and peer learning activities allows students to learn from each other and overcome linguistic barriers collaboratively. These methods promote active participation and critical thinking, essential skills for language acquisition. Using multimedia tools such as videos, audio clips, and visual aids enhances comprehension and retention of English language concepts. Interactive methods also cater to different learning styles, making lessons more inclusive and effective.

Interactive and participatory teaching methods engage students actively in the learning process. Group discussions, for instance, encourage students to express their ideas and learn from their peers. This collaborative learning environment helps students overcome their language barriers and build confidence in using English. Peer learning activities, such as pair work and group projects, also provide opportunities for students to practice their language skills in a supportive setting (Mishra, n. d.).

Multimedia tools are effective in making lessons more engaging and comprehensible. Videos and audio clips can provide contextual examples of language use, helping students to see and hear how English is used in real-life situations. Visual aids, such as charts and diagrams, can simplify complex concepts and enhance

students' understanding. By incorporating these tools, teachers can cater to different learning styles and ensure that all students benefit from the lessons (Kramersch, 1993).

Cultural contextualization: Providing examples and references from the students' cultural context aids in making the learning experience more relevant and engaging. By incorporating cultural references that students can relate to, teachers make lessons more interesting and easier to understand. Being sensitive to cultural nuances and incorporating them into teaching methods helps in building a supportive learning environment. This approach fosters a sense of belonging and respect among students, enhancing their motivation to learn.

Cultural contextualization involves using culturally relevant examples and references in teaching. For example, a teacher might use a popular Bollywood movie to explain a particular grammar rule or vocabulary set. This method makes the lessons more relatable and engaging for students, as they can connect the content to their own experiences. Additionally, incorporating cultural elements into the teaching process shows respect for students' backgrounds and fosters a sense of inclusion (Sharma, 2019).

Being culturally sensitive is crucial in a diverse classroom. Teachers must be aware of the cultural contexts that influence students' language use and learning styles. For instance, certain cultural norms might affect students' participation in class or their attitudes towards certain topics. By understanding and respecting these cultural nuances, teachers can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment where all students feel valued and motivated to learn (Patel, 2025).

3.3. Adaptation and learning capacity of students

Initial adjustment phase: Students often exhibit hesitation and a lack of confidence initially. Creating a supportive and nonjudgmental classroom atmosphere is crucial for helping them overcome this barrier. Teachers can use positive reinforcement and encouragement to build students' confidence. Focusing on building a strong foundation in basic English language skills through repetitive practice and reinforcement is essential during the initial phase. This foundation sets the stage for more advanced learning and ensures that students have the necessary skills to progress.

The initial adjustment phase can be particularly challenging for students who are not confident in their English skills. They might hesitate to participate in class or express their ideas, fearing criticism or embarrassment. Teachers can help students overcome this hesitation by creating a supportive and nonjudgmental classroom atmosphere. Positive reinforcement, such as praise and encouragement, can boost students' confidence and motivate them to participate more actively in class (Kramersch, 1993).

Building a strong foundation in basic English language skills is crucial during the initial phase. Teachers should focus on essential skills such as vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, providing repetitive practice and reinforcement to help students internalize these basics. This strong foundation will enable students to tackle more advanced language skills with greater confidence and competence (Sharma, 2019).

Progressive learning: Adopting an incremental approach to teaching, where new concepts are introduced gradually and reinforced regularly, facilitates better retention and understanding. This method allows students to build on their existing knowledge and develop a deeper understanding of the language. Conducting regular assessments and providing constructive feedback helps in monitoring progress and addressing learning gaps. Assessments should be varied and inclusive, catering to different learning styles and abilities.

Progressive learning involves introducing new concepts gradually, allowing students to build on their existing knowledge. This incremental approach helps students to develop a deeper understanding of the language and facilitates better retention. Teachers should regularly reinforce previously learned concepts, integrating them into new lessons to ensure that students retain and apply their knowledge (Patel, 2025).

Regular assessments are essential for monitoring students' progress and identifying learning gaps. Teachers should use a variety of assessment methods, including quizzes, oral presentations, written assignments, and group projects, to cater to different learning styles and abilities. Constructive feedback is crucial for helping students understand their strengths and areas for improvement, guiding them towards better performance (Mishra, n. d.).

Personalized support: Offering personalized support and additional resources to students who struggle with English ensures that they do not fall behind. This support can take the form of extra tutoring sessions, personalized learning plans, and access to additional resources such as online tutorials and language learning apps. Implementing mentorship programs where senior students or teaching assistants provide guidance and support can significantly enhance learning outcomes. Mentorship offers students a relatable and accessible source of help, encouraging them to seek assistance when needed.

Personalized support is crucial for students who struggle with English. Teachers should identify students who need additional help and provide targeted support to ensure that they do not fall behind. Extra tutoring sessions can provide individualized instruction and practice, addressing specific areas of difficulty. Personalized learning plans can tailor the learning process to the needs and abilities of each student, ensuring that they receive the appropriate level of challenge and support (Kramersch, 1993).

Access to additional resources, such as online tutorials and language learning apps, can supplement classroom instruction and provide students with more opportunities for practice and reinforcement. Mentorship programs, where senior students or teaching assistants provide guidance and support, can also be highly effective. Mentors can offer practical advice, share their own experiences, and provide a supportive and relatable source of help for struggling students (Sharma, 2019).

3.4. Multilingualism and its implications on teaching English

Cognitive benefits: Multilingualism is associated with enhanced cognitive abilities such as better problem-solving skills, improved memory, and greater mental flexibility. These cognitive benefits can positively impact the learning of English. Multilingual students often have a greater ability to understand complex concepts and see connections between different ideas. Skills and knowledge acquired in one language can transfer to another, facilitating the learning process. For example, students who are proficient in Hindi may find it easier to learn English grammar and vocabulary due to the similarities in linguistic structures.

Multilingualism offers several cognitive benefits that can enhance the learning of English (Fann et al., 2024; Lasagabaster, 2025). Studies have shown that multilingual individuals often have better problem-solving skills, improved memory, and greater mental flexibility compared to monolinguals. These cognitive advantages can positively impact language learning, enabling students to grasp complex concepts and make connections between different ideas more easily (Patel, 2025).

The transfer of skills and knowledge from one language to another is another significant benefit of multilingualism. For example, students who are proficient in Hindi might find it easier to learn English grammar and vocabulary due to the structural similarities between the two languages. This transfer of skills can facilitate the learning process and help students to acquire English more quickly and effectively (Sharma, 2019).

Pedagogical Approaches: Adopting an integrated approach to language teaching, where English is taught in conjunction with Hindi, can help in leveraging students' existing linguistic knowledge. This approach recognizes the value of students' native language skills and uses them as a foundation for learning English. Implementing multilingual education policies that recognize and promote the use of multiple languages in the classroom can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment (John, 2025). These policies should support the use of bilingual resources, teacher training in multilingual education, and the development of curricula that reflect the linguistic diversity of the student body.

An integrated approach to language teaching involves using students' existing linguistic knowledge as a foundation for learning English. This approach recognizes the value of students' native language skills and leverages them to facilitate the acquisition of a new language. For example, teachers might use Hindi to explain complex English grammar rules or vocabulary before providing practice in English. This method ensures that students understand the concepts in their native language before applying them in English (Mishra, n. d.).

Implementing multilingual education policies that recognize and promote the use of multiple languages in the classroom can create a more inclusive and effective learning environment. These policies should support the use of bilingual resources, such as textbooks and supplementary materials, and provide teacher training in

multilingual education. Developing curricula that reflect the linguistic diversity of the student body can also enhance the learning experience and ensure that all students benefit from the education they receive (Kramsch, 1993).

Challenges of multilingualism: Limited availability of multilingual teaching resources and materials can pose a challenge for teachers. Developing and accessing high-quality bilingual resources requires investment and support from educational institutions and policymakers. Ensuring that teachers are adequately trained to handle multilingual classrooms and employ effective teaching strategies is critical for success. Professional development programs should focus on building teachers' skills in multilingual education, including strategies for codeswitching, cultural contextualization, and differentiated instruction.

While multilingualism offers several benefits, it also presents certain challenges. One significant challenge is the limited availability of multilingual teaching resources and materials. Developing and accessing high-quality bilingual resources requires investment and support from educational institutions and policymakers. Teachers often need to create their own materials or adapt existing ones to meet the needs of their multilingual classrooms (Patel, 2025).

Ensuring that teachers are adequately trained to handle multilingual classrooms and employ effective teaching strategies is critical for success. Professional development programs should focus on building teachers' skills in multilingual education, including strategies for codeswitching, cultural contextualization, and differentiated instruction. Providing teachers with the necessary training and resources can help them navigate the complexities of multilingual classrooms and deliver effective language instruction (Sharma, 2019).

4. CONCLUSION

Teaching English in higher education institutions in Madhya Pradesh presents a unique set of challenges due to the linguistic diversity of the region. English teachers employ various strategies such as codeswitching, bilingual teaching, and interactive methods to address these challenges and enhance student learning. Despite the difficulties, the cognitive benefits of multilingualism and the resilience and adaptability of students offer a promising outlook for English education in the region. By adopting integrated and culturally sensitive teaching approaches, teachers can effectively navigate the complexities of multilingual classrooms and foster a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

The findings of this paper highlight the importance of recognizing and leveraging the linguistic diversity of students in higher education. By adopting a nuanced and flexible approach to language teaching, teachers can address the unique challenges posed by multilingual classrooms and enhance the learning experience for all students. Furthermore, the support and investment of educational institutions and policymakers in providing the necessary resources and training for teachers are crucial for the successful implementation of multilingual education strategies.

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Ethical Approval: The study adheres to the ethical guidelines for conducting research.

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