

English-Only Policy as a Difficult Circumstance in ESL Classrooms: An Autoethnographic Account

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Abstract

The English-Only approach to TESL in India has its roots in the Direct method of ELT. In this paper, I argue that this policy/method can be considered a difficult circumstance for ELT. The paper relies on data gathered through classroom observation and semi-structured interviews with teachers from three government schools in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu. It provides an autoethnographic account of how English is taught using 'unofficial' bilingual methods because the students cannot understand English. At the same time, the official English-only policy of teaching ESL is paid obeisance only on paper. The paper suggests that the bilingual method of teaching English, which is informally practised due to on-ground necessity, should be made official. This official bilingual method of teaching English could also include bilingual assessment and bilingual materials.

Keywords: English-only policy, bilingualism, government schools, difficult circumstances, low SES students

Introduction

The concept of 'Difficult Circumstances in ELT' originated from Michael West's (1960) book *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* which draws from his experiences of teaching English in Indian schools. He characterizes "difficult circumstances" as follows: large classrooms with 30-50 students, congested benches and spaces, ill-grading, teachers with low proficiency in English, and even hot weather, among others (West, 1960, p. 1). West's description of "difficult circumstances" fits most

schools in India even today, especially the government-run schools in semi-urban and rural areas. Moreover, the definition is restricted to only the material conditions of education.

Smith (2011) revived the concept of difficult circumstances as a research agenda. He emphasized the challenges encountered in classrooms with large student numbers, often in overcrowded, poorly equipped environments, with teachers potentially lacking English proficiency, and in climates exacerbating discomfort. Despite the prevalence of such conditions globally in English language teaching, they have been largely overlooked in mainstream discussions within the field. Anderson et al. (2021) underscore the importance of understanding effective practices through context-specific approaches from both teachers' and students' perspectives. Their paper advocates for research focusing on challenges encountered, suitable methodologies, learner and teacher autonomy roles, leveraging *multilingual practices*, disseminating successful strategies, involving practitioners in research, and even *rethinking the concept of "difficult circumstances."*

In line with this scholarship, I seek to rethink the conceptualization of difficult circumstances of ELT in line with the ascendant ideology of multilingualism in English language teaching. In this paper, I make a case to consider the English-only worldview of classroom pedagogy in these government schools as a difficult circumstance. The primary argument put forth through this study is that low resources need not necessarily affect ELT; instead, it is the worldview that an English-only policy is put to critique. In other words, the paper favours adopting bilingualism as a method to teach English more effectively.

Teaching English only through English and excluding all other languages goes against India's natural bi/multilingual nature. No part of India exists that does not have a linguistic minority. Every district in India has societal bilingualism at some level or other. In the backdrop to this, through my fieldwork in select government schools of Salem, I argue that the official English-only policy of ELT contributes to the "difficult circumstances" of teaching English. As a possible solution, I suggest a bilingual method of teaching English.

Bilingual English Education

According to Richards and Schmidt (2011, p. 55), bilingualism is the

use of at least two languages, either by an individual or a community of speakers, such as those residing in a specific area or country. When an individual uses two languages, it is termed individual bilingualism, while the collective proficiency in two languages within a community or society is labelled societal bilingualism. Richards and Schmidt (2011) write that bilingual education is ‘the use of a second or foreign language in school for the teaching of content subjects.’ They outline three different types of bilingual education: 1. Immersion programme, where “a single school language that is not the students’ first language is used. 2. Maintenance bilingual education, where initially, the students’ first language is used, but gradually, there is a shift to using the school language for teaching some subjects and the home language for teaching others. 3. Transitional bilingual education, which has the partial/total use of the students’ first language in the initial classes and then a total shift to the use of the school language only (pp. 54-55). The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020, introduced by the Government of India, advocates transitional bilingual education, wherein up to Class 5, the mother tongue will be the medium of instruction. This paper will not, however, go into more significant questions of NEP and will restrict itself to its field site alone.

Methodology

Three government schools in the Salem district of Tamil Nadu were selected for the study. These schools are the Panchayat Union Middle School Malangadu, Panchayat Union Middle School Rangapuram, and Government High School Panamarathupatti. All three are located in the rural areas. They are under the governance of their respective panchayats and do not have as many facilities as the Salem city corporation schools might have. My fieldwork site was the three rural government schools. The interlocutors of my study were, therefore, the teachers and the students. Based on interviews with the teachers and field observations, I collected information on them and the students. To understand their background, I asked the teachers to recollect how their English classes were and the challenges they faced while they were school children. I also asked the teachers about how they perceived the students, their parents, and their lives outside school. The answers to these questions were sufficient to draw a picture of their general social condition outside school and the implications of the same for their lives

and functions inside the school classrooms. The study sample includes students from Classes 6 to 8. Sixteen weeks of classroom teaching were analyzed, followed by in-depth interviews with 4 English teachers. The field notes, observations, and formal and informal interviews with teachers are conveyed autoethnographically from the lens of “difficult circumstances.”

Brief Background of the Site and Interlocutors

Tamil Nadu follows a two-language formula. English is taught as a second language and is introduced as a subject in Class 1. However, the teachers who teach English at the primary level may not have a degree in English. At the primary level, a teacher teaches all the subjects regardless of their major. Also, many Panchayat Union Primary Schools are either one-teacher or two-teacher schools. So, the classes are multi-grade in such schools. Government schools in Tamil Nadu cater to students from low socio-economic status (SES) who would also be first-generation learners. Some of the difficult circumstances in Tamil Nadu government schools are that the use of L1 is discouraged, there is limited time for practising language skills, students have limited exposure to English outside the school premises, they have a fear of English, and the teachers have limited training.

Government school teachers are themselves largely first-generation graduates from rural or semi-urban areas. They also grow up with parents who have limited education. Their education often happens in Tamil-medium schools. However, they grow up to become English teachers. Many of the teachers interviewed do not consider themselves proficient English speakers. Only after joining college and after that did they start communicating in English. Many teachers reported that they practise their English with their students. A formal communication discourse is missing when speaking English, even among the teachers, apart from it being a teaching subject. The majority of the teachers are educated in Tamil medium. Just like students in government schools, teachers also grew up without any exposure to English outside school. Also, because of the lack of resources and guidance, they resorted to memorization and rote learning in order to pass English exams. Also, teachers were not taught English as a skill, and their learning, just like students, was also largely exam-oriented, with greater importance given to grammar.

In the classes I sat in, I observed that the workload of English teachers was heavy. All the corrections have to be done before the class. As such, many teachers carry the notebooks home. Schools with low classroom strength combine the classes into multi-grade ones, making them no less complicated to handle. Individual attention to students is difficult, though teachers attempt the same. In addition, many schemes and initiatives have been introduced that overlap. For instance, a bridge course was introduced to compensate for the learning gap caused during the pandemic. However, the teachers were still asked to complete the regular syllabus. There are English club activities, record keeping, spoken English classes, and regular English classes. Most schools, especially at the middle level and above, have large classes with 40-80 students.

Students mostly come from households where their parents are uneducated. Only a few parents could even sign their names. Most parents are daily wagers—either industrial workers or agricultural labourers. Some students themselves would be working alongside their parents in the fields. One teacher raised concerns over how students tend to lose interest in their studies after earning money. Learning English also takes a hit due to this. The students do not like learning English primarily because they believe it is difficult. This might be because they do not have the environment to practise it. A student in a private school is exposed to the language from kindergarten. However, in government schools, this is not possible. The English teacher cannot expect the students to learn anything after leaving school. They do not have the home support for that. If they are given a test, it must be ensured that they study within school hours. The students should not be pushed to learn as they might drop out. They should sit in class even if they are not learning.

English-Only Policy as a Difficult Circumstance

Based on the classroom observations, it has been noticed that teaching English in classrooms is fully textbook-oriented. The Tamil Nadu School Textbooks for English claim that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is followed. The CLT method does not foreground the teaching of grammar. It focuses on teaching English through its functional, real-life usage—i.e., English through its four language skills and their respective subskills. However, in reality, English is not learned/taught as a skill, and students resort to rote learning.

There are three terms in each academic year and one English textbook each term. Each English book has 3-4 units, and each unit has a prose, a poem, and a short story with comprehension and LSRW activities for each section. There are also grammar exercises and vocabulary activities. The teacher reads a text and transacts its contents bilingually. Once a text is taught, she helps the students complete the exercises by translating them into Tamil. For instance, comprehension questions will be asked of the students at the end of each reading section, and when they do not understand a question, the teacher will translate it into prompt answers. The students then answer in Tamil based on their understanding of the text. Post this, the teacher will write down her pre-made answers to these questions which the students copy in a fair notebook. These pre-made answers are sometimes taken from guidebooks that private publishers design.

Similarly, they also copy the glossary given in the textbook. The teacher also draws a mind map and consolidation of essential points from the text at the end of each lesson. The students copy all these into their classwork notebooks. I was told that when there is an inspection in the school, the officials will inspect these records. They also maintain notebooks for handwriting, homework, English club activities, and classwork notebook.

I observed that the teachers are focused on completing the syllabus before the next summative exam. The students are made to memorize the contents in the fair notebook to score well in the exam. This is because the exams and tests are conducted only in English, and the students do not have enough proficiency in English to produce answers/language on their own. Memorizing the contents also involves repetition and drilling. They provide attention to specific items the teachers anticipate in the question paper. Letter writing, for instance, is given more importance because the students can score ten marks without much effort.

The teachers often complained that the textbooks were too advanced for these learners. For instance, the seventh standard textbook lists advanced words such as gaily, suburbs, and squirm that the students may not use immediately. Besides, the meanings of these words are also provided in a sophisticated language that makes it difficult for the students to understand. Hence, the teachers transact the meaning of these words in Tamil with the help of a bilingual dictionary, and the students often

write down the Tamil meanings of these words to make sense. Although the introduction of Continuous and Comprehensive Assessment (CCE) changed how learning was viewed, learning is still exam-oriented to a large extent. Students' performance in summative exams is still used as a yardstick to judge not only the students but also the competence of the teachers. The fear of being questioned by the officials during inspections is one factor affecting English being taught as a subject rather than a language.

ELT here involves many prescriptive instructions and repeated activities. There is an emphasis on grammatical rules and their memorizing. The classroom activities are primarily directed at completing the prescribed syllabus. Teachers reported that all their time and effort is directed towards examinations. The end-of-term summative assessments dictate what should and should not happen in the classroom. Much time is spent on record-keeping and drilling for inspection purposes. Individual attention is only possible for some students due to the large classrooms. Administrative burdens also take a more significant toll when it comes to 'teaching' English as a language for teachers and 'learning' for students.

'Unofficial' Bilingualism

In order to navigate all the difficulties discussed above, the teachers resort to bilingualism, employing a bilingual method to teach English. Tamil is used to mediate the classroom discussion. A simple illustration to substantiate the same can be—'suburb,' a word in the Class 7 glossary. The meaning given in the textbook is 'an outlying area.' The students, however, do not understand the word 'outlying.' The teacher who teaches 'suburb' also needs to teach what 'outlying' is, and doing so in English is a pointless exercise. It would be much simpler if the teacher could provide the learners with the Tamil equivalent. This is precisely what they do—they use Tamil whenever necessary within and outside the classroom. From my fieldwork, I identified two patterns in their language use to ensure students' comprehension:

1. The teachers utter a sentence in English and then say the same in Tamil while giving instructions, during classroom management, providing feedback, and even during teaching and explanations.
2. The teachers employ code-mixed sentences in Tamil and English.

When the first pattern is used, many students wait for the teacher's

utterance in Tamil after her English utterance rather than attempting to understand the English utterance. However, the students comprehend the commonly used phrases such as “Open book, turn to this page, did you do your homework, keep quiet, answer this question, do you remember.” In the second pattern of code-mixed sentences, the mixing varies depending on students’ comprehension. For example, a question in English: “Why was grandma worried?” would be translated into “*Grandma yen worried ah irnthanga?*” If this is not understood, then this is further simplified—the rephrased question in Tamil: “*Grandma yen kavalaiya irnthanga?*” The teachers seem to be partially implementing what Agnihotri (2022) advocated as a single language period because teaching separate language grammars “is not only a colossal waste of time of students and teachers, but it also perpetuates wrong and ill-informed grammatical concepts, without bringing about any awareness regarding the nature and structure of language among students”. Bringing two or more languages side by side and teaching their structures would be vastly more enriching and simpler.

Furthermore, the students almost always answer quickly in Tamil. They are comfortable in comprehending the texts as they are being taught in Tamil. When seen closely, it is evident that the teacher simplifies the question for the learners to ‘help’ them answer. Students with good proficiency would understand the question in English, although they usually answer either exclusively in Tamil or bilingually. This proves how informal bilingual test practices exist in the current classrooms, although they are never observed or acknowledged. The teachers continue to use two languages, hoping the students will eventually ‘pick up’ the target language. The students, on their part, interact with each other and the teachers almost exclusively in Tamil. They are not proficient in producing their sentences in English, although they imitate commonly used phrases and clauses such as ‘How are you,’ ‘Did you have lunch,’ and ‘You are looking good.’ The students try to speak in broken English and manage. However, the teachers do not get enough time outside their teaching to encourage students to build upon this interlanguage and become more proficient.

Tamil is used to transact the content of the English textbook to the students through translations, explanations, and examples. It is also used in everyday classroom interactions between students and teachers. For example, if a poem is being taught, the teacher would first read

the lines and explain them in Tamil. The teachers provide feedback in Tamil when students need help understanding things, get low marks, or make grammatical errors. If the feedback is given in English, it will not be conveyed. The teachers also use Tamil while carrying out formative assessment activities. They give instructions and feedback bilingually. They also translate questions and clarify doubts bilingually during assessment. The truth is that government schools called 'English Medium Instruction schools' are not so in practice. Even in English classes, although it is not 'allowed' to use the mother tongue when teaching English, the teachers do so out of necessity. They believe bilingual teaching is the only possible method since the students do not understand English. However, they never acknowledge this in official forums or work to make it the official policy.

The teacher trainers and the higher officials discourage using Tamil in the English classroom. They also scrutinize teachers who use Tamil to teach English during surprise inspections. Fearing the officials, the teachers switched to 'only English' teaching during visits. However, when they are not under surveillance, they use Tamil freely. English is taught through Tamil guiltily—as a necessary evil. This points to teachers' lack of understanding of bilingual language teaching methods. They are discouraged from using Tamil and consider their teaching not at par with teachers who use 'only English.' When asked about bilingual textbooks, one teacher says, 'The students will become self-reliant, and the teacher will not have a role to play if bilingual textbooks are used.' This response, in a way, re-enforces what John Sekar states: 'Teachers love being teachers and are reluctant to become facilitators. Once they are willing to act as facilitators, they are willing to use Communicative Language Teaching and its different versions (Sekar, 2017). The teacher despises the use of bilingual textbooks while also acknowledging their usefulness to the students.

The emphasis on an official English-only policy while continuing to deny the reality of the effective bilingual practice carried out in all the schools is the essence of what is systematically flawed in the teaching of English in the government schools of Tamil Nadu. The official policy is at odds with the nature of language and language teaching. It is against the comfort of all involved and is an arbitrary and dogmatic denial of dignity. Agnihotri (2010) laments how procedure-oriented approaches (in his case, the trifecta of 'an MCB (Main Course Book), a WB (Work

Book) and a TM (Teacher's Manual)'... 'imprisons the teacher and the pupil completely and even in the Primary and Upper Primary classes where total freedom is in principle available, both teachers and children function like slaves...'

Making the Unofficial Official

Taking a cue from the narratives and field work explicated, one can infer that bilingualism is already being practised, and this research proves that it is the natural way of learning a language and hence could be made the official policy of the state of Tamil Nadu. The NEP at the centre has already put forth multilingualism as the primary medium of instruction and language learning in schools all over India, from the primary level. Tamil Nadu needs to implement the same in the form of bilingualism. The NEP promotes multilingualism in line with its agenda of the three-language formula. For its part, Tamil Nadu can advocate bilingualism in line with its two-language formula. We propose the following ways to implement an official policy of a bilingual teaching method:

1. **Bilingual Assessment:** We argue for English language assessment to be conducted bilingually. The assessment should also be bilingual since the classroom instruction has been bilingual. It has been observed in schools that the teacher has to read the subheadings and translate them for the students while conducting tests. In such a scenario, the practice should be made official, and adequate training should be given to teachers on bilingual methods.
2. **Bilingual Textbooks and Materials:** Drawing on studies such as Vennela (2021) that have shown a tradition of Bilingual textbooks in the colonial Madras Presidency, I suggest using Bilingual textbooks and other materials, such as bilingual glossaries and dictionaries, in which definitions are given in whole or in part in Tamil, to be implemented through official orders in all government schools to teach English.

Though some teachers believe bilingual methods need to be used only in the initial stages and must be phased out eventually, taking a cue from Agnihotri's (2010, 2014) standpoint, this study also vouches to make bilingualism the official and permanent language teaching policy. The teachers must receive training in Bilingual Methods and legitimize the use of bilingualism in teaching English. Without formal pre-service or in-

service training, the teachers will continue to hold negative attitudes and beliefs towards bilingualism. Therefore, proper teacher training will also ensure the meaningful use of the mother tongue in tandem with English. Agnihotri notes that ‘the main purpose of English language teaching as in the case of teaching any other language is to sustain multilinguality and encourage critical thinking...’ making the bilingual method the official policy will help realize this objective.’ He also adds that ‘the fact that all of us learned our English through our own languages is evidence enough that there is no need for ‘English only’ classes... it is time we shed the false assumptions regarding the superiority of the English-only approach’ (2010).

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