

## Developing Reading Skills of Young Indian Learners in Challenging Contexts: Reflections and Suggestions

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### Abstract

The majority of young learners in India study under challenging contexts owing to a combination of factors such as their low socio-economic status, mismatch between home language and language of instruction, and lack of support for literacy practices at home. To cater to parental aspirations, and global needs of access to higher education and jobs, government-run schools in Telangana, a state in the south of India, have introduced English as the medium/language of instruction (MoI) from primary grades. This has created a considerable gap as the MoI is neither available as a home language nor used for wider social communication outside class. In this challenging context, a series of projects led by the University of Cambridge, United Kingdom in collaboration with the EFL University, Hyderabad have thrown light upon the need to practice multilingual strategies, specifically translanguaging pedagogy, systematically to develop literacy skills. We propose that translanguaging pedagogy can be used in language classes as a tool for inclusive education. It can provide social justice because multilingual resources of learners can be used for literacy development, knowledge transaction, and their multilingual identity formation.

**Keywords:** Translanguaging pedagogy, language of instruction, multilingual learners, literacy skills, content knowledge

### Introduction

India, a multilingual and multicultural country, has a similar ethos mirrored in its education system. Post-independence there have been

concerted government efforts to address multilingual, and multicultural needs of learners through language policies, curriculum design, and implementation as classroom practices. The Indian trilingual policy in education is a case in point because since its inception in the year 1963 it has undergone a series of reforms. Two most recent iterations of the policy are that of the National Curriculum framework (2005), and National Education Policy (NEP) (2020). The NEP has been instrumental in the design of the most recent National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) (2023) to cater to the evolving needs of Indian learners from various multilingual, and socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds. However, a challenging issue in education, and more so in language education has been the age of first exposure to the language (or medium) of instruction, as it does not overlap with the home languages of a great number of children attending schools. In cases where there is no or marginal overlap, it fails to support academic development, and results in early drop-outs as children cannot comprehend the language of instruction (UNESCO, GMR 2016).

Inaccessibility to the language(s) of instruction becomes a violation of linguistic human right (Mohanty, 2019; Mohanty & Skuttnab Kangas, 2022). It is a matter of serious concern to all language teachers, and by implication teachers of other subjects. Though Indian policies have made provision for the use of three or more languages in education from early on in schools, there is no serious discussion on the matter of language of instruction, and how this creates difficulties for learners who do not use that language at home or in their wider community outside class. However at the implementation level there are talks amongst government officials, political leaders, and the parents when to start English education, and how soon to transition to using English as the medium of instruction (EMI). Such discussions have resulted in the hasty transition to EMI in schools. This has sadly resulted in a sharp decline in the number of languages of instruction in the last five decades (Meganathan, 2015). Currently the demand for conversion of schools to EMI is at its peak. This demand is unrealistic in face of inadequate qualified teachers who can teach through English, and lack of continuous profession development activities as teacher training, and developing material resources to deliver content in the target language. All these give rise to challenges in education, specifically English education. Thus, the focus of the current paper is a review of what constitutes classroom

challenges in India, and an exploration of a few multilingual strategies, which can be used along with the official language of instruction (here English). The strategies would be mainly to overcome challenges in developing reading skills of young school-going children. We focus on reading because it is a foundational skill based on which other language skills, and content knowledge can be developed.

### **Learning English in Challenging Contexts: Various Interpretations**

Some pertinent questions to consider for educators would be as follows: What gives rise to challenges in learning contexts? How can we identify a context as challenging? Are there features or variables that can be considered as challenging? In seeking answers to all these questions, we have to agree that the construct of 'a challenging context' would have a negative impact on learning outcome and therefore needs to be understood in the *context* of learning. Here, we are specifically considering language-learning outcomes. Clearly the construct has garnered a lot of attention, and there are divergences in its interpretation in the last seven to eight decades of teaching English as second/foreign language. Specifically in the context of India (and Global South) the term has been defined quite variedly depending upon the geo-political position of the researcher, and his/her identification with the contextual factors or variables as an insider (or outsider) of which factors give rise to challenges in ESL/EFL learning.

To begin with, we find Michael West's (1960) interpretation of challenging context in India at the time of his posting as an education officer in West Bengal, and Dhaka in the 1930s. He estimated it as low reading ability in Indian children coupled with unfavourable weather conditions that made classroom teaching inconvenient. Adding to the challenge was poor teacher resources to teach the language. His solution to address the challenging context was proposed through his reading experiments where he impressed upon the need to follow a direct method of teaching reading, and develop vocabulary to support reading skills. While his proposal might have a positive impact on reading development, there was no systematic report or findings documented to justify his claim empirically. Thereafter, we get another interpretation of learning English in challenging contexts in the Global South by Maley (2000) as a combination of the unfavourable weather conditions, poor infrastructure, and teacher resources. All of these resulted in poor learning outcomes.

While both the educators mentioned above identify features that pose challenges from their euro-centric vision in the context of Global South, we have a more reliable interpretation of challenging context from Kuchah (2018) located in Cameroon. He was trained in language pedagogy in the United Kingdom, thus having exposure to both world views, and contexts of ESL/EFL learning. He gives a more authentic report of challenges of teaching English or using it as the MoI where the society is multilingual. He voices concerns regarding the impossibility of teaching English in the monolingual manner when it is a multilingual context. It becomes a huge challenge as teachers, and learners are coerced to interact in class with monolingual norms, and the language learning outcomes have to meet the native speaker norm. Kuchah's interpretation of challenging contexts is also mirrored in the works of Amritavalli (2007, 2013) who discusses the importance of recognizing the fact that multiple languages are used in India across its different states. She pertinently argues that we naturally code-switch (or mix) using our multilingual repertoire during social communication as well as in classroom interactions. In this context, she undertakes an experimental project (2007) to develop reading skills in learners from deprived circumstances owing to their low SES background, and lack of time and money to attend mainstream schools. Her strategy was to use learner-selected texts to develop comprehension skills to help them become engaged with the learning process. Consequently, the learners were observed to take onus of learning the language based on whatever resources they could bring to the classroom. Amritavalli underlines the importance of enhancing learner autonomy in selecting texts, and using it to develop reading and academic skills. More recently Dixit (2023) has considered challenging contexts in Indian classrooms from the point of view of teacher's psychology in what they bring to the class along with their beliefs about the language of instruction. He concludes by identifying how top-down administrative regulations interfere, and prevent teachers from getting agency. This hampers their teaching activities. So, the notion of challenging context according to Dixit becomes a psychological construct rather than material lack of resources.

There is another interesting perspective that has gained attention in the last two decades. It is advocated in the work of Jim Cummins along with his colleague Margaret Early in 2011 (and subsequently in 2013 and 2021).

Norton in 2010 also voiced similar concerns. What these researchers propose based on evidence from various multilingual classrooms catering to low SES children in Pakistan, Uganda, Mexico, Greece, Burkina Faso and several other countries is that learner engagement grows when their home languages are brought in and used creatively in the classroom. Children show interest in advancing their literacy practices when their linguistic and cultural identities find a use, and recognition in class. They experience a sense of ownership to what they read, and how they can negotiate for meaning through their home languages. This increased self-esteem has a positive impact on their language-learning outcome.

In keeping with these various construals of 'challenging' or 'difficult' or 'deprived' circumstances, we now consider our understanding of challenging circumstances based on a series of projects on multilingual education (MLE) in India that we have been working on for the past eight years. The challenges in these projects have been identified as occurring due to two general reasons: the first emerges from the classroom context-low infrastructural and academic resources in the form of teacher resources, and learning materials. The second is due to the individual differences in learners occurring due to lack of facilities at home to support their educational and survival needs, their motivation to learn, and societal biases they face owing to the languages they speak as well as gender differences, to a certain extent. Therefore, in the following section, we look at a narrative account of the projects, and their impact on young Indian learners in English classrooms. This account would help to understand what poses challenges to teachers and learners, and how these were addressed through the projects. We conclude the paper with a few suggestions for the stakeholders of education for multilingual teacher training activities as the way forward towards sustainable and equitable education, and language development.

### **A Narrative Account on Multilingualism in Indian Primary Level Classrooms**

Based on a series of recent MLE projects that we undertook in India from 2017 till present we have had first hand evidence of the learning difficulties children from challenging contexts face. We also got evidence of their resilience to learn, and negotiate learning in class using their multilingual, and multicultural resources amidst such difficult conditions. The challenges are due to a host of factors such as low

SES family status, poor levels of nutrition, lack of parental support for literacy practices at home, early family migration due to survival needs in many cases, gender bias, and a gap between languages spoken at home and the language of instruction.

The projects, their outcomes, and the insights we can draw from them can be broadly divided into two phases: In the first phase from 2017 to 2020 we undertook a four-year long project called MultiLiLa (refer to Tsimplici et al., 2020) and another short-term teacher training project of six months (refer to Lightfoot et al., 2022) with two broad objectives: (a) to document the learning outcomes of children from challenging contexts in India across three sites—Delhi, Hyderabad and Patna in a longitudinal manner; the learning outcomes were in multiple areas as language learning abilities (print and oral), general intelligence, cognitive capacities, and mathematical ability; and (b) to observe and report the classroom behaviour of children and teachers in terms of their multiple language use for purposes of instruction, communication, and comprehension checks.

A key finding of the MultiLiLa project was that children who experienced an overlap between home/community languages to language of instruction fared better than the ones who experienced a gap between the languages. Thus, the children who were attending EMI schools experienced greater learning challenges than their peers who studied in regional medium (Hindi and Telugu) schools. Another interesting finding from the classroom observations in the project and its associated short-term impact study on teacher training was that teachers experienced varying levels of difficulty in teaching English (Lightfoot et al., 2021). As a natural extension of multilingual communication in their daily lives, they interacted in classes using their multilingual repertoire very spontaneously, both to explain content, and language features. After observing their natural practices, we took up the six-month teacher-training project where we drew their attention to using multilingual resources in a planned manner. We helped them understand how to build lessons using planned translanguaging pedagogy (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020). They responded to our efforts positively, and started showing an interest to use the strategies in class to a certain extent. But were not entirely confident of using the multilingual strategies in a planned manner (Lightfoot et al., 2022).

As we were about to wrap up the first phase of our work in the first quarter of 2020, the pandemic hit us, and halted our work for more than a year. Though we were awarded funds to commence the second phase of our work, we had to wait till the mid 2022 to start the new phase of work. In the second phase from 2022 to 2023, we undertook a teacher-training project to train teachers to employ their multilingual repertoire, and use translanguaging pedagogy in a planned manner to develop primary grade learners' vocabulary, and reading skills. We studied the impact of training on systematic practices the teacher participants employed in their classes. This time, we planned to train them on developing comprehension skills, mostly in reading, using the translanguaging pedagogy. We focused on reading, as this is a fundamental to academic success. It is useful both for language, and content teachers. As we trained, and collaborated with the teachers to develop reading skills, and vocabulary knowledge using translanguaging strategies, and multilingual lesson plans, we observed that the teachers became more conscious in using their multilingual repertoire to bring out meaningful, and context appropriate responses from the learners (Mukhopadhyay et al., 2023). In turn, the learners also started using their multilingual repertoire to express understanding, and application of language features. Teachers also showed awareness of the use of translation as a strategy to enhance children's vocabulary knowledge, and comprehension skills.

In sum, the MultiLiLa, and multilingual teacher training projects have provided us evidence of language, and content learning in challenging contexts from very close quarters. We have evidenced that children's robust language learning capacities have got enhanced under two conditions: one, when they have experienced a home to school language link; and two, when they have been supported by teachers' use of translanguaging pedagogy. The acceptance of their responses where they are allowed to use their multilingual and multicultural resources has been beneficial for the learners. Getting trained, and working collaboratively with research associates have helped them in planning, and executing the lessons better. It has made them more reflective, and conscious about their language choices to better understand how they can help children use multilingual vocabulary to comprehend texts better.

## **Recommendations to Develop Reading Comprehension Skills in Challenging Contexts**

Based on our findings, and observations from the projects reported above, we now present a list of recommendations for the stakeholders of education who can play an instrumental role in furthering knowledge progression, and development of children's multilingual competence. First, we chart out the role of teachers in language classrooms, specifically to develop reading comprehension. Thereafter, we include a set of suggestions for parents and the community at large to further support children's scholastic and affective development.

### **The Role of Teachers**

Reading instruction in Indian classrooms has received considerable attention right from the work of Michael West (1960) where he experimented with the direct method to teach reading in challenging circumstances. He was the first educator to suggest that the range of vocabulary (breadth) for developing reading comprehension in children has to be larger and more varied than vocabulary required for developing oral fluency in the target language. Several years later, Amritavalli (2007) studied the impact of raising learner autonomy to select texts that motivated learners from deprived contexts to make genuine attempts at reading comprehension, and experience sustained interest levels because of reading self-selected texts. Her experiment with raising learner autonomy yielded positive results. It gave us insights into how to use resources of the learners who come from input poor circumstances. To support young learners in challenging contexts, we have worked in a sustained manner in the last two years to train teachers to teach reading skills. In the training programme we have introduced a translanguaging reading model with a task-based approach (refer to Mukhopadhyay et al., 2022 for the model). Teachers have found the model to be very useful. They have used a variety of multilingual strategies in the reading class (for the findings refer to Mukhopadhyay et al., 2023). We have also observed that teachers need to be trained in using multilingual resources of the learners for reading classes to be successful. Thus, understanding the needs of multilingual learners from challenging contexts we propose the following steps that teachers can be trained in:

1. Design and use tasks that enhance vocabulary knowledge, as



this is very crucial in supporting early reading comprehension. Vocabulary knowledge would need to be developed along two parameters: (a) vocabulary breadth (number of new words that the child can recognize, and use) and (b) vocabulary depth (number of uses of word roots in different ways like change in part of speech, and meaning using derivational morphology: *beauty* → *beautiful* → *beautify*)

2. Employ learners' multilingual vocabulary repertoire to draw meaning, and form equivalents across languages (e.g., use of metaphors in colour terms across languages, like 'red' with meaning extensions of love, danger, etc.) as well as consider variations like language-specific meaning or form extensions (e.g., *to burn* vs. *jala diya* [= by burning give → use the root, here adjective (burn=jala) for concept and use a light verb (give=diya) to make it to a complex verb phrase])
3. Design lesson plans that systematically show the use of language of instruction interspersed with children's home languages to make translanguaging instances frequent.
4. Encourage learners to work in peer groups where the members share home languages. Assign reading and discussion tasks for the learners to engage in conversation using home languages and then translate the responses to the language of instruction (state language and/or English). Allow for code-switching and help children summarize the ideas in one or two languages. This would help in identity formation of multilingual children and make them open to participation in class (Cummins & Early, 2011).

### **The Role of Parents and Community**

To support children's education outside class, parents and other extended members of the family, and community can play a significant role. In low SES families, parents find supporting study practices difficult because they often have minimal literacy skills in any language. However, their oral skills of communication, and narration are well developed. So, if they are made aware that multilingual resources, and narrative skills can help in supporting education, and developing study skills, they would find ways to engage with their children's education. They can also feel connected to their children's growth.

They can participate in discussions with the teacher as to how to create avenues for further development. Furthermore, this would decrease their unrealistic expectations about EMI schools. It would make them understand that for academic development, it is important that the child can comprehend the language of instruction and connect it to their home languages.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have reviewed the construct of ‘challenging contexts’ in a location-specific manner. We have also reported recent projects undertaken in India to understand the impact of training teachers to use their multilingual repertoire to support children’s needs, and build their confidence to learn in schools. Lastly, we have considered the role of teachers as well as wider community members as parents to cater to the wide variety of multilingual children’s learning needs, and thus provide a model for inclusive education.

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