

Navigating Multilingual Classrooms: Expectations, Opportunities, and Challenges in Inclusive Pedagogy

A. Sathiyaraj, M. Deivam & T. Arul Kavya

Abstract

The multilingual classroom presents a dynamic educational setting rich with opportunities for language development, cultural exchange, and academic success. However, it also poses challenges related to communication, inclusion, and pedagogical approaches. Educators play a crucial role in fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment where students from diverse linguistic backgrounds feel valued and supported. By embracing the concept of translation, educators can facilitate effective communication and meaning-making processes among students with varying language proficiencies. Strategies such as promoting multilingual identity, providing language support models, and implementing inclusive teaching practices are essential for creating a welcoming and empowering space for all learners. Through the implementation of these strategies, educators can enhance cross-cultural understanding, promote linguistic diversity, and support the academic growth of students in multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: Multilingual classroom, inclusive pedagogy, linguistic diversity, cultural exchange, language development

Introduction

The concept of a multilingual classroom refers to an educational environment where students from diverse linguistic backgrounds come together to learn and interact. This setting provides unique opportunities for cross-cultural learning, linguistic exchange, and the development of

intercultural competence (Krulatz et al., 2023). However, it also presents various challenges that educators must navigate to ensure a productive and inclusive learning experience for all students (Gitschthaler et al., 2021). Some of the expectations in a multilingual classroom include fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment, promoting language development in all students, and embracing cultural diversity (Dhokare & Jadhav, 2023). These expectations can be met by implementing inclusive pedagogy strategies, such as translation, which values and incorporates students' diverse linguistic resources for meaning making and communication (Tai, 2022). Additionally, educators in multilingual classrooms should be aware of the complex ways in which disabilities, gender, language barriers, ethnicity, and social class can influence a student's opportunity to succeed or fail in the educational system (García et al., 2006). They should strive to create a safe and supportive space where all students feel valued and respected, regardless of their language background.

Furthermore, educators should provide differentiated instruction that takes into account the various language proficiency levels and learning needs of students (Helman, 2016). By embracing the opportunities and addressing the challenges of a multilingual classroom, educators can create an inclusive learning environment that promotes linguistic and cultural diversity, fosters academic success, and prepares students to thrive in a globalized society (Faltis & Valdés, 2016). To effectively navigate a multilingual classroom, educators should embrace the opportunities and challenges that arise in such an environment. Educators operating within multilingual classrooms ought to actively endorse language development for every student, implement inclusive pedagogical strategies including translation, and acknowledge the multifaceted factors that influence student achievement (García & Sylvan, 2011). Through the cultivation of a learning atmosphere that appreciates linguistic diversity and acknowledges cultural variances, educators can promote cross-cultural comprehension and equip students for success within a globalized society (Hymel & Katz, 2019). Furthermore, differentiated instruction is instrumental in accommodating the diverse levels of language proficiency and varying learning requirements, thereby facilitating social inclusion and fostering academic success for all learners (Schmidt & Molin, 2023; McLoughlin, 2001).

Multilingual Classroom: Expectations

A multilingual classroom is an educational setting where students bring various first languages to their learning experience. The overarching expectation in such a classroom is the cultivation of an environment that not only acknowledges the richness of linguistic diversity but also leverages it to enhance learning for all students. Educators expect to foster a positive atmosphere that embraces different languages as assets, promoting academic development and intercultural competence (Tigert et al., 2022).

In a multilingual classroom, students are expected to receive equitable opportunities for language development. Teachers aim to support the improvement of students' dominant languages while concurrently facilitating the acquisition of the classroom's language of instruction, often English. This can be done by employing pedagogical strategies that validate and incorporate the students' native languages in classroom activities, discussions, and assessments.

Educators also expect to confront and surmount barriers to learning that may stem from linguistic differences. They work to devise instructional approaches personalized to the varied linguistic proficiency levels within the classroom. Employing techniques such as translanguaging and scaffolding, teachers provide differentiated support that assists students in engaging with the curriculum meaningfully (Mina & Cimasko, 2020).

Expectations further extend to promoting a culturally responsive classroom environment. This includes integrating content that reflects the varied cultures and backgrounds of the students, ensuring representation and relevance in learning materials. In doing so, educators promote an inclusive atmosphere where every student feels valued and respected.

Additionally, educators in multilingual settings are prepared to continuously develop their understanding of language acquisition and cultural sensitivities to effectively guide their students. This involves ongoing professional development and collaboration with colleagues, potentially including language specialists, to refine strategies that address the dynamic needs of a linguistically diverse student body.

Ultimately, the aim is to prepare students not just academically but also socially, equipping them with the intercultural communication skills necessary to thrive in an increasingly globalized society. By meeting these expectations, educators contribute to students' personal growth, social inclusion, and the dismantling of linguistic hierarchies, fostering

an appreciation for the world's linguistic and cultural tapestry in the next generation.

Nep 2020: Multilingual Classroom

One of the most prominent features of NEP 2020 is its emphasis on the promotion of the mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction at least till Grade 5, and preferably till Grade 8 and beyond (Mahapatra & Anderson, 2023). This aligns with research showing that children learn and grasp concepts better in their mother tongue in the early years of education.

The policy demonstrates a progressive step towards multilingualism, recognizing the cognitive benefits of early education in a child's home language. It advocates for the inclusion of Indian Sign Language as a subject and teaching ISL-development programmes to support students with hearing impairments (Panda & Mohanty, 2014).

NEP 2020 also strives to address the challenges related to multilingualism and aims to support the development of linguistic proficiency in three languages, respecting the "three-language formula," while ensuring that at least two of the three languages are native to India. The aim is to promote multilingualism and the power of language in uniting people and preserving cultural heritage, along with improving cognitive abilities (Bashir & Jan, 2024).

To bolster this multilingual approach, NEP 2020 encourages the creation of high-quality textbooks and teaching-learning materials in home languages. It stresses training teachers to be adept at teaching in bilingual or multilingual classrooms, making them sensitive and inclusive to the diverse linguistic backgrounds of their students (Gupta & Chatterjee, 2023).

Multilingual Classroom: Opportunities

A multilingual classroom offers a wealth of opportunities that extend beyond traditional language learning. In such an environment, students can develop various skills essential for success in the modern, interconnected world—the opportunity for authentic cultural exchange. A classroom rich in linguistic diversity is also inherently rich in cultural perspectives. Students can share their cultural norms and practices with their peers, promoting a deep understanding of one another's backgrounds. This authentic exchange nurtures empathy, respect, and social cohesion. Multilingual settings also promote the

development of advanced cognitive abilities. Research suggests that multilingual individuals often display improved executive functions, such as problem-solving, switching attention, and working memory. Students can enhance these cognitive processes by regularly operating in a linguistically complex environment, improving overall academic performance (Planas, 2021).

Enhanced Cognitive Development: Research suggests multilingualism can positively impact cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and metalinguistic awareness (Poudel, 2019). Specifically, in the Indian context, where children often navigate multiple languages from a young age, this can be a significant advantage. For example, a child fluent in Hindi and English might better understand grammatical concepts in both languages.

Preservation of Linguistic Diversity: India's rich linguistic landscape is a valuable cultural asset. Multilingual classrooms can be crucial in preserving and promoting less dominant languages (Groff, 2017). Consider examples of successful bilingual education programmes in India that have helped revitalize local languages. Morve and Maurya (2022) mentions the challenge of teaching English in a multilingual classroom, which implies the inherent opportunity to leverage existing language skills.

Improved Intercultural Communication: Multilingual classrooms foster empathy and understanding between students from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Choudhary, 2016). In India, where cultural and linguistic diversity are intertwined, this can lead to stronger social cohesion.

Increased Educational Access: Using students' first languages as a bridge to learning can improve access to education for those whose mother tongue is not the primary language of instruction. This is particularly relevant in India, where many children enter school with limited proficiency in the dominant language of instruction (Saneka & de Witt, 2019).

Greater Academic Achievement: Research indicates that students learning in their mother tongue, alongside other languages, often perform better academically (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2019). Look for studies explicitly examining the impact of multilingual education on academic outcomes in Indian schools. (Macmillan Education India Report, 2023) mentions a report on the benefits of using the mother tongue in Indian classrooms, which could be valuable if you can access it.

Moreover, a multilingual classroom can challenge and ultimately shift long-standing beliefs and attitudes towards language learning and use. It can dispel common myths about bilingualism, such as the idea that learning two languages can confuse students or hinder their academic progress. By celebrating all languages, these classrooms can help to deconstruct language hierarchies and promote an inclusive language policy that recognizes the value of all linguistic resources students bring with them.

Multilingual Classroom: Challenges

The multilingual classroom, while rich with opportunities, has its challenges. Educators, students, and institutions may face several obstacles impacting the learning experience. Language barriers are the most immediate challenge. Students may have varying proficiency levels in the language of instruction, which can lead to difficulties in understanding the curriculum, participating in discussions, and demonstrating their knowledge. Teachers must find ways to communicate effectively with all students, often employing creative strategies or assistive technologies to ensure comprehension.

Teacher Training and Resources: Equipping teachers to manage multilingual classrooms effectively requires specialized training and resources (Poudel, 2019). The study highlights the need for teachers to “tackle” the multilingual classroom, suggesting a lack of adequate training (Morve & Maurya 2022).

Assessment and Evaluation: Developing fair and accurate assessments for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds can be challenging (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021).

Resource Allocation and Infrastructure: Providing adequate resources and infrastructure to support multilingual education can be a significant challenge, particularly in resource-constrained settings (Tupas, R. (2015).

Language Policy and Implementation: Navigating complex language policies and ensuring effective implementation can be a significant hurdle (Groff, 2017).

Social and Cultural Attitudes: Societal biases and preferences for specific languages can challenge multilingual education (Meier, 2017).

Policy and Institutional Support: Educational policies and institutional support play a critical role. Often, educational institutions may not

have policies that support multilingual education. Without a supportive infrastructure, from leadership to policy, educators may struggle to effectively address the complexities of a multilingual classroom (Ticheloven et al., 2021).

Conclusion

The multilingual classroom offers a wealth of opportunities for students to develop language skills, cultural awareness, and cognitive abilities essential for success in a globalized world. While challenges such as language barriers, resource limitations, and psychological well-being concerns exist, educators can navigate these obstacles by promoting inclusive pedagogy, embracing linguistic diversity, and fostering a supportive learning environment. By leveraging the benefits of translation, encouraging collaboration, and valuing students' linguistic identities, educators can create a space where all learners feel respected and empowered to thrive academically. Through continuous innovation, collaboration, and a commitment to inclusive practices, multilingual classrooms can serve as catalysts for promoting cross-cultural understanding, enhancing language proficiency, and preparing students to become global citizens equipped to navigate the complexities of our interconnected society.

References

- Anderson, J., & Lightfoot, A. (2021). Translingual practices in English classrooms in India: Current perceptions and future possibilities. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, Taylor & Francis, 24(8), 1210-1231. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2018.1548558>
- Bashir, R., & Jan, T. (2024). Multilingualism: An insight into the relevance and implementation of NEP 2020 recommendations. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 12(1), 240-245.
- Choudhary, S. (2016). A literary approach to teaching English language in a multi-cultural classroom. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 6(4) n.p. DOI:1.18870/hlrc.v6i4.352
- Dhokare, S., & Jadhav, S. (2023). Embracing diversity: The multilingual approach to education in India's NEP 2020. *Remittances Review*, 8(4), 3534-3553.
- Faltis, C. J., & Valdés, G. (2016). Preparing teachers for teaching in and advocating for linguistically diverse classrooms: A vade mecum for teacher educators. In Gitomer H. Drew & Courtenay A. Bell (Eds.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (5th ed., pp. 549-592). Ebook AERA (American Educational Research Association).

- García, O., & Sylvan, C. E. (2011). Pedagogies and practices in multilingual classrooms: Singularities in pluralities. *The Modern Language Journal*, 95(3), 385-400.
- García, O., Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & Torres-Guzmán, M.E. (Eds.). (2006). *Imagining multilingual schools: Languages in education and glocalization*. Multilingual Matters.
- Gitschthaler, M., Kast, J., Corazza, R., & Schwab, S. (2021). Inclusion of multilingual students—teachers' perceptions on language support models. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(9), 1664–1683. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.2011439>
- Groff, C. (2017). Language and language-in-education planning in multilingual India: A minoritized language perspective. *Language Policy*, 16(2), 135-164.
- Gupta, D. S., & Chatterjee, J. (2023). Transforming English language teaching: A study of the National Education Policy 2020. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 65(4), 11-17.
- Helman, L. A., Rogers, C., Frederick, A., & Struck, M. (2016). *Inclusive literacy teaching: Differentiating approaches in multilingual elementary classrooms*. Teachers College Press.
- Hymel, S., & Katz, J. (2019). Designing classrooms for diversity: Fostering social inclusion. *Educational Psychologist*, 54(4), 331-339.
- Krulat, A., Neokleous, G., & Lorenz, E. (2023). Learning and teaching of English in the multilingual classroom: English teachers' perspectives, practices, and purposes. *Languages*, 8(2), 121. doi.org/10.3390/languages8020121
- Macmillan Education India Report (2023, February 7). Multilingualism in the classroom drives benefits beyond learning - Findings from Macmillan Education India Report. <https://www.prnewswire.com/in/news-releases/multilingualism-in-the-classroom-drives-benefits-beyond-learning--findings-from-macmillan-education-india-report-301740555.html>
- Mahapatra, S. K., & Anderson, J. (2023). Languages for learning: A framework for implementing India's multilingual language-in-education policy. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 24(1), 102-122.
- McLoughlin, C. (2001). Inclusivity and alignment: Principles of pedagogy, task and assessment design for effective cross-cultural online learning. *Distance Education*, 22(1), 7-29.
- Meier, G. S. (2017). The multilingual turn as a critical movement in education: Assumptions, challenges and a need for reflection. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 8(1), 131-161.
- Mina, L. W., & Cimasko, T. (2020). Expectations, mismatches, and translingual dispositions in teaching multilingual students. *Translingual dispositions: Globalized approaches to the teaching of writing*, 63-80.
- Morve, R. K. & Maurya, S. C. (2022). Multilingualism and teaching methods: A study with the reference of Indian English language teaching classrooms.

- Journal of Practical Studies in Education*, 3(2), 7-11. <https://doi.org/10.46809/jpse.v3i2.43>
- Panda, M., & Mohanty, A. (2014). Language policy and education: Towards multilingual education. In R. Tripathi, & Y. Sinha (Eds.), *Psychology, development and social policy in India* (103-179). Springer, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-81-322-1003-0_6
- Planas, N. (2021). Challenges and Opportunities from translanguaging research on multilingual mathematics classrooms. In: A. A. Essien, & A. Msimanga (Eds.), *Multilingual Education Yearbook*. Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-72009-4_1
- Poudel, G. P. (2019). Innovations in multilingual classroom: Exploring teachers' experiences. *Journal of NELTA Gandaki*, 2, 29-42.
- Ray, R. (2021). Impact of multilingual approach to education on young learners in India. *Journal of Scientific Research*, 65(09), 58-62.
- Saneka, N. E., & de Witt, M. (2019). Barriers and bridges between mother tongue and English as a second language in young children. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 9(1), 1-8.
- Schmidt, C., & Molin, L. (2023). Paradoxes of access to equity: Multilingual primary school classroom practices. *Language and Education*, 38(2), 286-302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2023.2261421>
- Tai, K. W. (2022). Translanguaging as inclusive pedagogical practices in English-medium instruction science and mathematics classrooms for linguistically and culturally diverse students. *Research in Science Education*, 52(3), 975-1012.
- Ticheloven, A., Blom, E., Leseman, P., & McMonagle, S. (2021). Translanguaging challenges in multilingual classrooms: Scholar, teacher and student perspectives. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 18(3), 491-514.
- Tigert, J. M., Peercy, M. M., Fredricks, D., & Kidwell, T. (2022). Humanizing classroom management as a core practice for teachers of multilingual students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 56(4), 1087-1111.
- Tupas, R. (2015). Inequalities of multilingualism: Challenges to mother tongue-based multilingual education. *Language and Education*, 29(2), 112-124.

A Sathiyaraj is guest faculty in the Department of Education, The Gandhigram Rural Institute(DTBU), Gandhigram, Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu.

edusathiya@gmail.com

M Deivam is Assistant Professor in the Department of Education, HNB Garhwal University (A Central University), SRT Campus, Tehri Garhwal, Uttarakhand.

deivammuniyandi@gmail.com

T Arul Kavya is a research scholar in the Department of Education, The Gandhigram Rural Institute (DTBU), Gandhigram, Dindigul District, Tamil Nadu.

kavyathaveethuraja1993@gmail.com