

Multilingual Classroom in Indian Context: Expectations, Opportunities and Challenges

Venkanna K.

Abstract

India, renowned for its linguistic diversity, faces unique challenges and opportunities in fostering inclusive education. The traditional monolingual approach to Education often marginalizes students whose mother tongues differ from the language of instruction. This research paper delves into the complexities of multilingual classrooms in the Indian context, examining the expectations, opportunities, and challenges they present. The study investigates existing policies, pedagogical approaches, and empirical evidence related to multilingual Education in India by analyzing relevant literature. The paper argues that embracing multilingualism as a resource, rather than a deficit, is crucial for achieving educational equity and unlocking the full potential of India's diverse student population.

Keywords: Multilingualism, India, education, classroom, challenges, opportunities, language policy

Introduction

India's linguistic landscape is a testament to its rich cultural heritage, boasting over 19,500 mother tongues (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). While integral to the nation's identity, this linguistic tapestry presents unique challenges to its education system. In recent years, Multilingual Education has garnered significant attention, driven by the growing recognition of language's crucial role in cognitive development, cultural preservation, and academic achievement (Cummins, 2000).

The importance of addressing linguistic diversity in Education cannot be overstated. Recent studies have illuminated the detrimental effects of linguistic marginalization, including academic underachievement, low self-esteem, and limited access to higher education and employment opportunities (Canagarajah & Liyanage, 2012). A particularly alarming study by Jhingran (2019) revealed that a mere 16 per cent of Indian children in Grade 3 could read Grade 2-level text in their regional language, underscoring the urgent need for more effective language policies in Education.

As multilingual education gains traction in global pedagogical discussions, theoretical frameworks provided by scholars such as Cummins (2000) and Garcia (2009) offer valuable insights into multilingualism's cognitive and social benefits. In the Indian context, the Three-Language Formula, a central policy since 1968, has aimed to promote multilingual competencies (NCERT, 2006). However, the persistence of a predominantly monolingual approach, often prioritizing English or Hindi, marginalizes students whose mother tongues are excluded from the educational mainstream (Mohanty, 2019).

This paper examines the multifaceted reality of multilingual classrooms in the Indian context, recognizing the critical need to address the disparities arising from linguistic diversity. By exploring the current linguistic landscape in Indian Education, we can better understand the challenges and opportunities presented by this diversity.

Current Linguistic Landscape in Indian Education

The linguistic terrain of India profoundly influences its education system, presenting benefits and challenges for educators, legislators, and students alike. India's linguistic diversity is unparalleled, with 22 officially recognized languages and hundreds of other languages and dialects spoken nationwide. This diversity is reflected in classrooms nationwide, where students from various linguistic backgrounds converge.

To illustrate the extent of this diversity, let us examine some key statistics:

Table 1: Linguistic Diversity in India

<i>Language</i>	<i>Number of Speakers (in millions)</i>	<i>Percentage of Population*</i>
Hindi	528.3	43.63
Bengali	97.2	8.03
Telugu	81.1	6.7
Marathi	83.0	7.09
Tamil	69.0	5.70
Urdu	50.8	4.19
Gujarati	55.5	4.58
Kannada	43.7	3.61
Odia	37.5	3.10
Punjabi	33.1	2.74

Source: Census of India (2011), Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India.

Table 2: Distribution of Students by Medium of Instruction in Indian Schools (2019-2020)

<i>Medium of Instruction</i>	<i>Percentage of Students</i>
Hindi	49.6%
English	26.1%
Bengali	7.2%
Marathi	4.8%
Telugu	3.5%
Tamil	3.3%
Gujarati	2.2%
Other languages	3.3%

Source: Unified District Information System for Education Plus (UDISE+) 2019-20 (Ministry of Education, 2021)

The data presented in Table 1 showcases the dominance of Hindi, spoken by 43.63 per cent of the population, followed by other major languages such as Bengali, Telugu, and Marathi. However, it is crucial to note that even languages spoken by a smaller percentage of the population represent millions of speakers, highlighting the need for inclusive language policies in Education.

Table 2 further illustrates the linguistic complexity in Indian schools, with Hindi and English serving as the primary mediums of instruction for 49.6 per cent and 26.1 per cent of students, respectively. While this data underscores the prevalence of these two languages in the education system, it also reveals the significant presence of various regional languages as mediums of instruction.

Linguistic diversity in Indian classrooms is a challenge not only for students but also for teachers. The effectiveness of multilingual Education largely depends on the preparedness of educators to navigate this linguistic complexity:

Table 3: Teacher Proficiency in Multilingual Instruction

<i>Region</i>	<i>Percentage of Teachers with Multilingual Training**</i>	<i>Availability of Instructional Materials (%)</i>
North India	45.6	65.4
South India	50.2	70.1
East India	40.1	60.3
West India	48.5	67.8
Rural Areas	30.4	50.6
Urban Areas	55.3	75.2

Source: National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT, 2018).

Table 3 reveals teacher training and resource availability disparities across different regions and between rural and urban areas. These disparities highlight the need for comprehensive teacher training programmes and equitable distribution of resources to implement multilingual education strategies effectively.

The data presented in these tables collectively paints a picture of India's linguistic richness and the complexities it introduces into the education system. This diversity necessitates a nuanced approach to education that can accommodate and leverage the multilingual abilities of students and teachers alike.

As we delve deeper into the challenges and opportunities presented by India's linguistic landscape in education, it becomes evident that a one-size-fits-all approach is inadequate. Tailored, culturally sensitive, and linguistically inclusive educational strategies are paramount. By

recognizing and addressing the linguistic diversity in Indian classrooms, we can work towards an education system that accommodates, celebrates, and utilizes this diversity as a strength, fostering improved learning outcomes and preserving India's rich cultural heritage.

The Three-Language Formula in India: A Persistent Challenge in Educational Policy

The Three-Language Formula has been a recurring theme in Indian education policy since the mid-twentieth century, aimed at balancing the needs of linguistic diversity, national integration, and access to global knowledge. While envisioned as a framework for fostering intellectual and emotional unity rather than a rigid constraint on language acquisition, its implementation has been fraught with challenges and remains a subject of ongoing debate. The 1961 meeting of Chief Ministers, culminating in an agreement that laid the groundwork for the formula, highlights the early attempts to grapple with this complex issue. This early conceptualization underscores the policy's intention as a tool for national cohesion rather than linguistic limitation.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 reaffirmed the importance of the Three-Language Formula in promoting multilingualism and strengthening national unity. However, this renewed emphasis also reignited long-standing controversies, exemplified by the Tamil Nadu Chief Minister's rejection of the policy, reflecting the state's enduring stance on this sensitive and politically charged matter. This underscores the inherent tension between national policy and regional linguistic identities, a challenge that has plagued the Three-Language Formula since its inception.

Formally introduced in 1968, the Three-Language Formula aims to ensure that students acquire proficiency in three languages: their regional language or mother tongue, Hindi (in non-Hindi-speaking states) or another Indian language (in Hindi-speaking states), and English or another modern Indian language. This structure seeks to give students a firm foundation in their local language, access to a wider communication network within India, and a connection to the global community through English. The policy applies to both public and private educational institutions, allowing flexibility in teaching medium among the three designated languages.

However, the implementation of this seemingly straightforward framework has been far from uniform. As documented in Erling et al.'s 2018 study, *Language in Education Policy in South Asia*, the degree of implementation varies considerably across states. Table 4 from their research reveals a mixed picture:

Table 4: Implementation of Three-Language Formula Across Indian States (2018)

<i>Level of Implementation</i>	<i>Number of States/UTs</i>
Full Implementation	18
Partial Implementation	14
No Implementation	4

Source: Language in Education Policy in South Asia (Erling et al., 2018)

These data demonstrate that while many states have embraced the Three-Language Formula, achieving consistent and comprehensive implementation nationwide remains a considerable hurdle. The reasons for this uneven implementation are complex and multifaceted, often rooted in regional linguistic politics, resource constraints, and differing interpretations of the policy's objectives.

The 1968 national education policy operationalized the Three-Language Formula, mandating the inclusion of a third language—in addition to Hindi and English—in the curricula of Hindi-speaking states. This third language is intended to reflect the diverse linguistic landscape of contemporary India, promoting exposure to languages beyond the dominant Hindi-English binary. This provision acknowledges the importance of preserving and promoting the many languages spoken nationwide.

At its core, the Three-Language Formula strives to cultivate multilingualism, facilitating effective communication among students from different linguistic backgrounds and contributing to national cohesion. Students develop an appreciation for linguistic diversity and a deeper understanding of the nation's rich cultural tapestry by engaging with multiple languages and cultures. The formula also aims to equip students with the linguistic tools necessary to navigate an increasingly interconnected world, with English as a crucial link to global communication and knowledge. However, the persistent challenges in its implementation necessitate ongoing dialogue and adaptation to ensure

that the policy effectively serves the diverse linguistic needs of India's population while simultaneously fostering national unity. Finding the optimal balance between these sometimes-competing goals remains a central challenge for Indian education policy.

2.2. Enforcement of the Three Language Formula in the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020

The National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for implementing the Three-Language Formula in Indian schools, addressing various aspects of language education from early childhood to higher education. This policy promotes multilingualism and cultural diversity while ensuring students develop proficiency in multiple languages.

One of the key aspects of the NEP 2020 is its emphasis on early childhood education as a foundation for language acquisition. The policy recommends that children aged 3 to 8 receive instruction in their mother tongue or a local dialect, recognizing the importance of building a strong linguistic foundation in the early years. This approach is supported by research indicating that children learn most effectively when taught in their native language during their formative years.

Flexibility is another crucial feature of the NEP 2020's approach to language education. While mandating that the first two languages studied must be indigenous Indian languages from the student's state or region, the policy allows for greater choice in the selection of the third language. This third language can be English or any other language of the student's choice. This provision is expected to alleviate concerns about the forced adoption of Hindi in non-Hindi-speaking regions, promoting a more inclusive and diverse linguistic landscape in Indian Education.

The NEP 2020 also recognizes the critical role of teachers in successfully implementing the Three-Language Formula. To this end, the policy proposes comprehensive training programs for educators, focusing on multilingualism and language pedagogy. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of recruiting teachers proficient in local languages, ensuring that students receive high-quality instruction in their mother tongues and regional languages.

The examination system outlined in the NEP 2020 reflects the policy's commitment to multilingualism. Students will be assessed on proficiency in all three languages, including English, ensuring they develop

comprehensive language skills across multiple tongues. This approach aims to create a more balanced and equitable evaluation system that values proficiency in Indigenous languages alongside English.

Finally, the NEP 2020 recognizes the potential of technology in supporting language education. The policy promotes the development of online resources and instructional materials in native Indian languages, facilitating students' learning in their mother tongues. This initiative aims to bridge the gap in available resources for Indigenous languages and support the implementation of the Three-Language Formula across diverse linguistic regions.

2.3. Concerns Regarding the Three-Language Formula:

The Three Language Formula, a cornerstone of India's language education policy, has been controversial in recent years. While designed to promote linguistic diversity and national unity, its implementation has faced numerous challenges and criticisms.

One of the primary concerns is the inconsistent application of the formula across different states, leading to undermining mother tongue languages. Despite its intention to protect the political rights of major ethnic groups, the policy has inadvertently contributed to the decline of various indigenous languages. In some regions, adding Sanskrit as a mandatory subject has further complicated the language learning landscape.

Another significant issue is the increased academic burden on students resulting from the three-language formula. This additional workload may potentially impact the overall quality of education and student well-being.

The draft policy's reliance on the premise that 54 per cent of Indians are proficient in Hindi has been called into question. According to the 2011 Census, only 52 crores out of 121 crore people reported Hindi as their spoken language, with approximately 32 crores claiming it as their native tongue. These figures suggest that Hindi is spoken by less than 44 per cent of the Indian population, with only about 25 per cent considering it their mother tongue. Despite these statistics, there has been growing pressure to establish Hindi as India's official language. This move has met resistance from several states, particularly in the South, who view it as an imposition.

Implementing the Three-Language Formula has been further hindered

by practical constraints. States like Tripura, Tamil Nadu, and Puducherry have struggled to provide Hindi education, while Hindi-speaking states have not reciprocated by including South Indian languages in their curricula. Additionally, state governments often face financial limitations when implementing the formula effectively.

The scarcity of resources presents a significant challenge, particularly in hiring an adequate number of language instructors within a limited timeframe. This shortage of qualified teachers and financial constraints pose substantial obstacles for state governments in successfully executing the policy.

In response to these concerns, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has attempted to address some issues surrounding the Three Language Formula. The NEP emphasizes the importance of using the mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction till at least Grade 5 and preferably till Grade 8 and beyond. It also reaffirms the commitment to the three-language formula, focusing on promoting national unity and multilingualism.

The NEP aims to provide greater flexibility and autonomy to states when implementing the language policy. It stipulates that as long as two of the three languages chosen are native to India, students can select the languages they wish to study. This approach is intended to mitigate concerns about language imposition and promote a more inclusive and diverse linguistic landscape in Indian Education.

The Three-Language Formula is still a key component of India's language education strategy; however, its application still has issues. By providing more flexibility and highlighting the value of mother language instruction, the NEP 2020 approach aims to alleviate some of these worries. However, successful execution, sufficient funding, and a well-rounded strategy that upholds linguistic variety while fostering national cohesion will ultimately determine the policy's success.

Expectations and the Ideal Multilingual Classroom in India

The concept of a multilingual classroom in India carries significant expectations, primarily focused on achieving equitable and quality education for all learners. These expectations, held by parents, educators, and policymakers, coalesce around the shared goal of improved educational outcomes but also diverge in their priorities.

While advocates of multilingual education champion bilingual or multilingual competency as a crucial objective, the perceived benefits extend beyond language acquisition. Cummins (2000) highlights the argument that students receiving instruction in their native language alongside national and international languages demonstrate enhanced cognitive abilities and improved academic achievement. This aligns with the various expectations outlined in Table 5, adapted from Cummins (2000).

Table 5: Expectations from Multilingual Education

Category	Expected Outcome
Parents	Academic excellence, job readiness
Educators	Enhanced cognitive abilities, student engagement
Policymakers	Inclusive Education, national unity

Source: Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy*. Multilingual matters.

Improved learning outcomes are a central expectation of multilingual classrooms. Research, such as UNESCO's 2016 report, indicates that children learn most effectively in their mother tongue, particularly in their formative years. By incorporating multiple languages into the classroom, educators aim to create a more inclusive and effective learning environment, directly addressing this fundamental principle. This links directly to preserving India's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. Multilingual Education is viewed as a key mechanism for maintaining this heritage. Providing space for regional languages within the curriculum fosters a connection to cultural roots while facilitating proficiency in widely used languages like Hindi and English.

Beyond academic and cultural benefits, enhanced cognitive development is another key expectation. Bialystok (2011) and other research demonstrate that multilingualism can positively impact cognitive abilities, improving problem-solving skills, creativity, and mental flexibility. Multilingual classrooms are expected to nurture these cognitive benefits in Indian students.

These expectations are reflected and reinforced within policy frameworks and pedagogical goals. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (Government of India, 2020) underscores the importance of mother tongue and regional languages in early education, advocating a multilingual approach to promote inclusivity and improved learning

outcomes. This policy envisions cognitive development, cultural inclusivity, and reduced dropout rates, particularly in rural and tribal areas, as achievable outcomes of this approach.

Finally, parental and community expectations play a significant role in shaping the ideal multilingual classroom. Annamalai (2004) notes that parents in multilingual communities often hold the dual expectation of preserving their linguistic heritage while ensuring their children achieve proficiency in English, recognizing its status as a global lingua franca and a pathway to upward mobility. This dual expectation necessitates a balanced curriculum that effectively caters to both local languages and the development of global competencies.

4. Opportunities Presented by Multilingual Classrooms

Multilingual classrooms present significant opportunities for enriching the educational landscape. These opportunities span inclusive education, global competitiveness, cultural exchange, cognitive enhancement, cultural preservation, and impactful policy implementation. Creating inclusive learning environments for students from diverse linguistic backgrounds is a key benefit, as it ensures equitable access to Education by removing language barriers. Furthermore, Multilingual Education fosters global competitiveness by equipping students with valuable language skills for an increasingly interconnected world. Within these classrooms, cross-cultural exchange and understanding opportunities emerge, nurturing a sense of national unity while respecting regional diversity. Multilingualism's cognitive and academic benefits further strengthen this intercultural dialogue, as research suggests it enhances cognitive flexibility, problem-solving, and academic performance (Bialystok, 2011). Leveraging these advantages, particularly in the Indian context, incorporating local languages alongside Hindi and English can lead to higher intellectual engagement and academic success. Crucially, Multilingual Education plays a vital role in preserving linguistic diversity, promoting social cohesion (Mohanty, 2019), and fostering cultural identity and inclusion among students. Finally, policy frameworks like the NEP 2020, which emphasizes mother tongue instruction in foundational years and mandates the development of multilingual resources (Government of India, 2020), provide a concrete pathway for realizing these benefits. This approach aligns with UNESCO's recommendations on multilingual Education (UNESCO, 2017), providing a globally recognized framework for promoting inclusive and effective educational practices.

Challenges in Implementing Multilingual Education in India

Implementing multilingual Education within India's diverse linguistic landscape presents a complex array of challenges. While the Three-Language Formula and the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (National Education Policy, 2020) advocate multilingualism, translating these progressive ideals into effective practice faces significant hurdles. These challenges span teacher training, curriculum development, resource allocation, and socio-cultural perceptions.

A critical challenge lies in teacher training and professional development. Teachers, the pivotal agents of Multilingual Education, often lack adequate preparation and support. A Ministry of Education study (Ministry of Education, 2021) reveals that many educators feel ill-equipped to address the multilingual needs of their students. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive teacher training programmes focused on multilingual pedagogies. While UDISE+ 2019-20 data (Ministry of Education, 2021) presented in Table 6 indicates that 89.3 per cent of teachers are professionally trained and 78.6 per cent are graduates, this training often lacks a specific focus on multilingual teaching methodologies. Furthermore, finding teachers proficient in multiple languages, especially in rural areas, continues to be a significant obstacle.

Table 6: Teacher Qualification and Training Status (2019-2020)

<i>Qualification/Training</i>	<i>Percentage of Teachers</i>
Graduate	78.6%
Postgraduate	14.3%
M.Phil/Ph.D	0.7%
Professionally Trained	89.3%

Source: UDISE+ 2019-20 (Ministry of Education, 2021)

The standardization of curriculum and assessment across multiple languages presents another significant hurdle. Ensuring equivalence in content and evaluation across different language mediums is complex and requires careful consideration. This complexity is further compounded by resource constraints and infrastructural limitations, particularly in rural schools (MHRD, 2018). Developing and distributing quality learning materials in multiple languages necessitates substantial financial and human resources, a challenge in a country as diverse as India, often operating with limited educational budgets.

Beyond logistical challenges, striking a balance between promoting regional languages and ensuring proficiency in widely used languages like English creates ongoing tension. The desire to preserve linguistic heritage often clashes with the practical need for languages that offer broader opportunities. Policy-practice discrepancies further complicate this tension. While policies like the Three-Language Formula and NEP 2020 are well-intentioned (Jhingran, 2009), their implementation is often hampered by regional disparities, lack of political will, and administrative bottlenecks.

Further pedagogical challenges arise in adapting curricula and instructional practices to a linguistically diverse student body (NCERT, 2014). Psychological barriers also play a significant role, as students and parents may perceive regional languages as less prestigious than English (Kumar, 2018), creating resistance to full multilingualism. Finally, inconsistent and fragmented educational policies across different states contribute to disparities in implementation and outcomes, hindering the effective realization of Multilingual Education's potential (National Education Policy, 2020).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

The diverse linguistic fabric of Indian society offers a distinct educational environment, presenting both opportunities and obstacles. Properly leveraging multilingualism in classrooms may lead to better cognitive results, cultural preservation, and social cohesion. However, achieving these benefits requires overcoming significant challenges in resource allocation, teacher training, and policy execution. As India moves towards educational reform through the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, policymakers, educators, and communities must collaborate effectively to integrate multilingualism in Education.

According to the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2018, 52.2 per cent of rural children in Class V could not read a Class II level text in their own language, emphasizing the literacy difficulties in multilingual rural settings (ASER, 2018). To enhance Indian linguistic policy in both theory and practice, several key recommendations are proposed:

Enhanced Teacher Training Programmes: There is a need to develop extensive teacher training programmes focusing on multilingual teaching methods. These should encompass pre-service and in-service training, equipping teachers with the necessary skills for effective multilingual instruction.

Curriculum Development: Investing in curriculum development that effectively incorporates multiple languages is crucial. This effort should be cooperative among linguists, educators, and cultural specialists to ensure linguistic precision and cultural relevance.

Technology Integration: Utilizing technology can significantly benefit multilingual education. This could involve creating digital learning resources in various languages and employing AI-powered translation tools to facilitate instruction.

Community Engagement: Local community involvement in the educational process should be strengthened. Engaging communities can help integrate local linguistic and cultural elements into the curriculum, ensuring its relevance and resonance with students.

Research and Monitoring: Continuous research is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of multilingual education strategies. Regular monitoring and assessment are vital for identifying best practices and pinpointing improvement areas.

Conclusion

The multilingual classroom setup in India represents a challenging yet potentially rewarding educational strategy. Despite notable implementation hurdles, the potential for improved learning outcomes, cultural preservation, and cognitive enhancement merits pursuit. As India navigates its linguistic diversity within the educational domain, it is essential to employ a balanced, research-based approach that addresses local needs while considering global contexts.

The success of Multilingual Education in India hinges on thorough policy implementation, sufficient resource distribution, and a commitment to ongoing research and refinements. By addressing challenges and exploiting opportunities, India can create an educational system that honours its linguistic diversity and equips its students to thrive in a multilingual world.

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Venkanna K. is a Degree Lecturer in English at TTWR Degree College (M) Nagarkurnool which is affiliated to Osmania University, Telangana.
drkunchamvenkanna@gmail.com