
**FROM ENGLISH-ONLY TO MEANING-MAKING: TRANSLANGUAGING AS AN
INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY IN INDIAN UNDERGRADUATE ENGLISH CLASSROOMS**

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Abstract

English language teaching in India takes place within a uniquely multilingual social environment. Students entering undergraduate classrooms often bring two or more Indian languages, along with different levels of exposure to English. Yet English classrooms have traditionally been influenced by an English-only approach that treats the use of other languages as an obstacle to language learning. Such an approach can create anxiety, silence and unequal participation, particularly among learners who have had limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. This paper examines translanguaging as an alternative pedagogical approach for undergraduate English classrooms in India. It argues that students' first languages and other linguistic resources need not compete with English; instead, they can support comprehension, participation, confidence and the gradual development of English proficiency. Drawing on recent scholarship from 2022 to 2025, the paper discusses the pedagogical possibilities and limitations of translanguaging in multilingual classrooms. It also proposes practical strategies through which teachers can use students' complete linguistic repertoires without weakening the learning objectives of English. The paper suggests that translanguaging should not mean abandoning English or allowing unrestricted language switching. Rather, it should be understood as a purposeful pedagogical resource in which teachers move between languages when such movement helps students understand, think, discuss and eventually express themselves more effectively in English. In the Indian undergraduate context, such an approach can make English teaching more democratic, culturally responsive and connected to students' lived linguistic realities.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, translanguaging, multilingualism, Indian classrooms, undergraduate education, language pedagogy, inclusive education

Introduction

Teaching English in India has never been a simple matter of teaching one language to a group of learners. An undergraduate classroom may include students who speak Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Urdu, Marathi or other languages at home. Some may have studied in English-medium schools, while others may have had very little opportunity to use English outside their academic environment. Even when all the students are officially placed in the same English class, their linguistic experiences can be very different.

This diversity is one of the strengths of Indian classrooms, but it can also create a pedagogical challenge.

For many students, English is not simply another language. It is connected with higher education, employment, social mobility and professional confidence. Consequently, students often enter the English classroom with the feeling that their performance in English will determine how intelligent, capable or successful they appear to others.

This can produce an uncomfortable contradiction. Students may understand a concept perfectly in their familiar language but hesitate to express that understanding in English. A student may know the answer but remain silent because he or she is afraid of making a grammatical mistake. Another student may understand a poem or a lesson but struggle to explain it in English. In such situations, insisting on English-only communication does not necessarily produce better English. Sometimes it produces less communication.

It is in this context that translanguaging has become an important concept in language education.

Translanguaging refers broadly to the strategic use of a learner's entire linguistic repertoire for meaning-making and learning. It challenges the assumption that languages must always be kept in separate compartments. Recent research in India has examined translanguaging not simply as spontaneous movement between languages but as a possible pedagogical resource that can be planned and used purposefully by teachers and learners. Anderson's research on Indian English teachers, for example, documents multilingual classroom practices in which teachers and students draw upon their linguistic resources to negotiate meaning and support learning.

The purpose of this paper is not to argue that English should be replaced by students' first languages. Nor does it suggest that English proficiency can develop without substantial exposure to English. Instead, the paper asks a more practical question: Can students' existing languages be used as a bridge towards stronger English learning rather than being treated as interference?

The paper argues that they can.

English Language Teaching in a Multilingual India

The English classroom in India has to respond to a reality that cannot be reduced to the traditional distinction between “native” and “non-native” speakers. English is used in different ways across Indian communities and educational settings. Students often move naturally between English and Indian languages in everyday communication.

A student may speak Kannada at home, Hindi with friends, English in college and perhaps another language through digital media. These linguistic practices are not necessarily signs of confusion. They are part of the multilingual reality of contemporary India.

However, formal classroom practices have not always reflected this reality.

The English-only classroom has long been associated with effective language learning. The reasoning appears straightforward: if students are exposed to English continuously, they will eventually learn to communicate in English. There is some value in providing learners with meaningful exposure to the target language. Nevertheless, exposure alone does not guarantee understanding or participation.

The problem becomes particularly visible in undergraduate classrooms where students arrive with different educational backgrounds.

An English-only policy can unintentionally privilege students who already possess greater confidence in English. Students with weaker English proficiency may become listeners rather than participants. They may depend on memorisation instead of genuine understanding.

This is where multilingual pedagogy becomes significant.

A 2024 study published in the Journal of Indian Education examined attitudes towards translanguaging among 177 participants from central universities in North India. The study reported favourable student responses, particularly regarding comprehension, inclusivity and cultural exchange, while also identifying challenges that require selective and purposeful use of translanguaging.

The finding is important because it suggests that multilingual practices are not necessarily opposed to English learning. They can coexist with it.

Understanding Translanguaging

Translanguaging should not be confused with simply allowing students to speak any language whenever they wish.

The distinction is important.

Unplanned language switching may sometimes help communication, but pedagogical translanguaging involves a conscious decision about when and why another language can support learning.

For example, an English teacher introducing the concept of “alienation” in a literary text may first ask students how they would explain the idea in Kannada or Hindi. Students may discuss the concept briefly in a familiar language and then work towards expressing the same idea in English. The purpose is not to avoid English. The purpose is to make the conceptual meaning accessible before asking students to produce the English expression.

Similarly, a teacher introducing a difficult academic word can allow students to identify equivalent or related ideas in their home languages. Students then compare the meanings and return to English.

In such cases, the first language is not the destination.

It is the bridge.

Recent work on multilingual pedagogy in Indian classrooms describes translanguaging as a form of teacher-learner interaction through which participants draw upon their shared linguistic repertoire to negotiate meaning. Mukhopadhyay and Anderson emphasise that such practices may be spontaneous, planned or a combination of both.

This understanding is especially relevant to undergraduate education because students need both conceptual understanding and English-language development.

Translanguaging and Student Confidence

One of the most immediate advantages of translanguaging is its potential effect on student confidence.

Many English teachers have observed a familiar classroom situation: the same student who speaks confidently in a familiar language becomes extremely quiet when asked to speak only in English.

The problem may not be lack of knowledge.

It may be fear.

Students worry about pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary and the possibility of being laughed at by their classmates. This fear can gradually create a pattern of avoidance. The student speaks less, receives less practice and consequently develops less confidence.

A carefully used multilingual approach can reduce this psychological barrier.

If students are first allowed to discuss an idea in a familiar language, they may have something meaningful to say when they eventually move into English. Instead of asking students to generate both the idea and the English formulation at exactly the same moment, the teacher can separate the two stages.

Think in familiar language.

Discuss the idea.

Organise the thought.

Then express it in English.

This sequence can make the English classroom less intimidating.

It also recognises an important truth about language learning: students do not stop thinking in their first language simply because they enter an English classroom.

Translanguaging and Comprehension

Comprehension is another area in which translanguaging can be particularly useful.

Undergraduate English courses frequently involve difficult literary, theoretical and academic texts. Students may encounter terms such as “postcolonialism,” “patriarchy,” “alienation,” “modernity,” “diaspora,” “hegemony” or “ecocriticism.” Asking students to understand such concepts entirely through English can sometimes create unnecessary difficulty.

The teacher can introduce the concept in English, allow students to discuss it in a familiar language and then return to English for formal articulation.

This process does not reduce academic standards.

In fact, it can strengthen them.



A student who understands a concept deeply in one language can gradually learn how that concept is constructed and communicated in English.

The 2024 Indian study on translanguageing found that students viewed the practice positively in relation to comprehension and inclusivity.

The pedagogical implication is clear: teachers should not automatically interpret the use of another language as evidence that students are failing to learn English.

Sometimes the additional language is precisely what enables them to learn.

Translanguageing in the Literature Classroom

The literature classroom provides particularly rich possibilities for translanguageing.

Indian students often encounter literature that contains cultural references, social relationships and historical contexts that are already familiar to them. Allowing students to connect a literary text with their own linguistic and cultural experiences can deepen interpretation.

For instance, when teaching a poem about migration, the teacher might ask students to discuss the idea of “home” in their own languages before analysing how the poem represents it in English.

When discussing a short story involving a grandmother, students might first describe similar relationships in their home language and then examine how the English text constructs the relationship.

Such activities do not dilute literary analysis.

They make it personal.

Students begin to realise that literature is not something that exists only in textbooks. It can speak to experiences they already understand.

Translanguageing can therefore create a connection between textual knowledge and lived experience.

This is especially important in undergraduate education, where students should gradually move from memorising interpretations to developing their own critical responses.

Translanguageing and Speaking Skills

A common concern is that allowing students to use their first language will reduce their opportunities to speak English.

This concern should not be dismissed completely.

If students use their first language throughout the entire class, they may receive insufficient English practice. Therefore, translanguageing must be purposeful and limited by the learning objective.

The answer is not an absolute English-only policy.

It is strategic use.

A teacher may, for example, organise a three-stage speaking activity:

Students discuss the topic briefly in pairs using their full linguistic resources.

Students prepare their main ideas.

Each student presents the final response in English.

This approach gives students preparation time without removing the requirement to communicate in English.

The teacher can gradually increase the proportion of English as students become more confident.

In this sense, translanguaging can function as a scaffold.

A scaffold supports a learner while the learner is developing independence. It is not intended to remain forever.

Translanguaging and Writing

Writing presents another useful area for multilingual pedagogy.

Students often have ideas but struggle to organise them in English. Asking them to write immediately in formal academic English may cause them to focus almost entirely on grammar.

A more productive approach may begin with brainstorming.

Students can make notes in any language they find comfortable. They can then identify key ideas and vocabulary in English. After this, they can prepare an English outline and finally write the paragraph.

The process can be represented as:

Idea → Discussion → Organisation → English vocabulary → Draft → Revision

This approach gives writing a developmental character.

The student learns that good writing is not produced in a single attempt.

The teacher can then use the final stage to focus specifically on English accuracy, cohesion, vocabulary and academic style.

In this way, translanguaging supports English writing without replacing English writing.

The Teacher's Role



Translanguaging requires a teacher who is comfortable with multilingual realities.

The teacher does not have to speak every language represented in the classroom.

Instead, the teacher needs to create an environment in which students' languages are treated respectfully and strategically.

This requires a shift in the teacher's role.

The teacher is no longer simply the person who controls which language may be spoken. The teacher becomes a facilitator who decides how different linguistic resources can contribute to the learning objective.

Recent research on Indian English teachers demonstrates that multilingual classroom practices already occur in diverse educational settings. Anderson's study of expert Indian teachers provides evidence that teachers and learners use translanguaging in complex and context-sensitive ways.

The implication is that teacher education should prepare English teachers not only to teach English but also to work effectively with multilingual learners.

Challenges and Limitations

Translanguaging should not be presented as a perfect solution.

There are genuine challenges.

First, teachers may not understand all the languages used by students. This can make classroom management difficult.

Second, excessive use of familiar languages may reduce exposure to English.

Third, students themselves may sometimes prefer English-only instruction because they associate English with academic or professional advancement.

Fourth, there is a danger of using translanguaging superficially. Simply permitting students to use another language does not automatically create an inclusive classroom.

Research on selective translanguaging has also warned that multilingual practices can reproduce existing inequalities if teachers do not pay attention to power relationships between languages. A 2024 study in Learning and Instruction argues that translanguaging does not automatically eliminate linguistic hierarchies and calls for more critically informed forms of inclusion.

This caution is important in the Indian context.

Some languages enjoy greater social prestige than others. English itself carries considerable social and economic power. Therefore, a genuinely inclusive pedagogy should not simply replace one hierarchy with another.

The teacher needs to ask:

Whose language is being valued?

Whose voice is being heard?

Who remains silent?

These questions make translanguaging a pedagogical and social issue at the same time.

A Practical Model for Undergraduate Classrooms

Based on the discussion above, this paper proposes a simple five-step model for using translanguaging in undergraduate English classrooms.

1. Activate

Begin by connecting the topic with students' existing knowledge. Allow brief discussion in familiar languages.

2. Explore

Introduce the English text, vocabulary or concept. Students identify important ideas and compare them with what they already know.

3. Bridge

Ask students to move from their familiar linguistic expression towards English. Teachers can provide vocabulary, sentence structures and examples.

4. Produce

Students complete the target task in English—speaking, writing, presenting or analysing.

5. Reflect

Students consider what they learned and identify which English expressions helped them communicate their ideas more effectively.

This model maintains English as the principal learning target while recognising multilingualism as a resource.

It also makes the teacher's intention clear.

The Future of English Teaching in India

The future of English teaching in India is unlikely to be defined by a simple choice between English-only and multilingual classrooms.

The more useful question is how English can be taught effectively within India's multilingual reality.

This becomes increasingly important in higher education, where students need English for academic reading, writing, presentations, interviews and employment. At the same time, they should not be made to feel that their other languages are signs of inadequacy.

English proficiency and linguistic identity need not be enemies.

A student can become proficient in English while remaining deeply connected to Kannada, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam or another language.

Indeed, multilingualism can become an intellectual advantage.

Students who move between languages regularly develop the ability to compare meanings, notice differences in expression and consider more than one perspective. The English classroom can use this ability rather than suppress it.

Conclusion

English language teaching in India needs to recognise the classroom as it actually exists rather than as an imagined English-only space.

Students arrive with histories, languages, accents, memories and different educational experiences. These resources do not disappear when the English class begins.

Translanguaging provides one way of acknowledging this reality.

Its greatest value is not that it makes English learning easier at every moment. Its value lies in making the process of learning more human.

A student who is allowed to think before speaking, discuss before writing and connect new knowledge with an existing linguistic world may become a more confident learner. The teacher, meanwhile, can continue to maintain English as the principal target language while using other languages strategically when they support understanding.

The goal, therefore, should not be to create classrooms in which other languages are invisible.

The goal should be to create classrooms in which English becomes an additional resource rather than a replacement for students' linguistic identities.

For Indian undergraduate education, this is more than a methodological choice. It is an acknowledgement of the multilingual society in which English teaching takes place.

The effective English classroom is not necessarily the one in which only English is heard.



It may be the classroom in which students are given enough linguistic freedom to understand, enough confidence to participate, and enough sustained practice to express themselves effectively in English.

That is where translanguaging can make a meaningful contribution to English Language Teaching in India.

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