

Language of Instruction and Its Role in Shaping English Proficiency: A Classroom Perspective

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Abstract

The choice of language used for classroom instruction plays a pivotal role in shaping students' English proficiency and broader communicative competence. In multilingual societies, the decision to use a regional language or English as the primary medium has long-term academic, social, and professional consequences. English proficiency, particularly in countries like India, is often associated with access to higher education, global opportunities, and socioeconomic mobility. However, many learners struggle to adapt when there is a sudden shift from mother tongue-based instruction to English-medium instruction, creating gaps in comprehension and confidence. This paper explores how the language of instruction influences the acquisition of English skills from a classroom perspective. Drawing from empirical studies and classroom observations, the analysis highlights how early exposure, teacher proficiency, and pedagogical practices collectively shape outcomes in English learning. It also considers how regional languages can act as both a bridge and a barrier in the process of developing English competence.

The findings suggest that while English-medium instruction provides direct exposure, it is not always effective without adequate teacher preparation and student readiness. A balanced bilingual approach, where the mother tongue is strategically used to support English learning, appears to foster better results. The research concludes that thoughtful language policies and classroom practices are essential for ensuring that English proficiency develops without alienating students from their linguistic and cultural roots. Additionally, the abstract highlights the broader significance of this study in contributing to the ongoing debates on language policy, pedagogy, and cultural identity. By adopting a classroom-based perspective, it emphasizes practical implications for teachers, students, and policymakers, bridging theoretical discussions with day-to-day learning experiences. This approach underscores the urgent need for context-sensitive strategies that promote both linguistic diversity and global readiness.

Keywords- Language of instruction, English proficiency, classroom learning, bilingual education, second language acquisition, multilingualism, pedagogy

I. Introduction

Language of instruction has historically been debated in multilingual societies where English occupies a global status. In many countries, English is not only a subject but also the medium through which knowledge in science, technology, and commerce is delivered. From a classroom perspective, the choice between mother tongue instruction and English-medium instruction directly influences students' learning experiences and outcomes. The debate often revolves around balancing cultural identity with the practical benefits of English. Students entering classrooms where English is the primary medium often encounter challenges related to comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and fluency. These challenges are not only linguistic but also psychological, as learners may feel alienated when instruction occurs in a language unfamiliar to their home environment. This creates a gap in classroom participation and confidence, especially for children from rural or underprivileged backgrounds.

At the same time, parents and policymakers frequently view English-medium instruction as a gateway to upward mobility and global opportunities. Thus, classrooms become spaces where linguistic identity and practical necessity intersect. Understanding how this intersection impacts English proficiency is vital for educators, as it shapes both language learning and broader academic achievement. Furthermore, English proficiency plays an important role in shaping national competitiveness in a globalized economy. Countries with stronger English proficiency often enjoy wider access to international collaborations, digital resources, and global employment markets. Hence, the issue of instructional language goes beyond individual learners and becomes a societal concern, linking education, economics, and cultural integration.

II. Literature Review

Scholars have long examined the impact of instructional language on second language acquisition. Cummins (1979) introduced the theory of Common Underlying Proficiency, suggesting that skills acquired in the first language can transfer to second language learning. This indicates that strong foundational literacy in the mother tongue can positively influence English proficiency. Other studies, however, argue that direct immersion in English accelerates language acquisition, particularly in urban contexts where students are surrounded by English-rich environments. In the Indian context, researchers such as Annamalai (2004) and Mohanty (2019) highlight the complexities of teaching English in multilingual classrooms. They suggest that the dominance of English often creates inequalities, privileging students from English-speaking families while disadvantaging others. Studies on bilingual education further reveal that strategic use of the mother tongue as a scaffold can enhance comprehension and participation in classrooms. Recent global research also underscores the importance of teacher proficiency in English. Studies by García and Wei (2014) show that translanguaging practices—where teachers and students fluidly use two or more languages—help bridge comprehension gaps while promoting English learning. These insights reveal that the role of instructional language is not absolute but mediated by context, teacher preparedness, and pedagogical strategies.

In addition, UNESCO (2016) emphasizes that mother tongue instruction in early grades is essential for inclusive education and lifelong learning. The report argues that children learn best when taught in a familiar language, especially in foundational years. However, it also stresses that a gradual and well-supported introduction of English is necessary to prepare learners for higher education and global participation. Such findings highlight the need to balance local linguistic realities with international demands.

Classroom Dynamics and English Exposure

Within classrooms, the amount and quality of exposure to English significantly determine student proficiency. Students who receive instruction entirely in English may gain fluency faster, but this often depends on how well teachers themselves can model correct usage. In contexts where teachers are not confident in English, instruction may be fragmented, leading to incomplete understanding of both content and language. Another dynamic is peer interaction. In classrooms dominated by regional languages, English often remains restricted to textbooks and examinations. Students may hesitate to use English in discussions or group work, thereby limiting authentic language practice. Conversely, in English-medium classrooms where students are encouraged to use English in both academic and non-academic settings, proficiency develops more naturally. Importantly, classroom activities such as debates, role plays, and group presentations provide platforms for active English use. Teachers who incorporate bilingual strategies, such as explaining complex concepts in the mother tongue and reinforcing them in English, often report better comprehension. Thus, classrooms serve as laboratories where the choice of instructional language directly shapes learners' English growth.

It is also important to recognize that classroom culture strongly influences language attitudes. When English is positioned as a superior language, students may undervalue their mother tongue, leading to identity conflicts. However, classrooms that validate multilingual practices tend to foster confidence and inclusivity, allowing students to embrace English without rejecting their cultural roots. Hence, exposure to English must be framed positively, as an addition rather than a replacement of the learner's existing linguistic repertoire.

Pedagogical Challenges

Despite policy emphasis on English, teachers face numerous challenges when implementing English-medium instruction. One common issue is code-switching, where teachers shift between English and the mother tongue to maintain clarity. While this aids understanding, it sometimes undermines consistent exposure to English. Another challenge lies in the lack of adequate training for teachers, particularly in rural areas where English is not commonly spoken outside the classroom. Textbook design also plays a role. Many English-medium textbooks assume prior familiarity with the language, which alienates first-generation learners. Without supplementary materials or teacher support, students struggle with comprehension and lose confidence. This is compounded by assessment systems that prioritize rote learning over communicative competence, leading students to memorize answers without developing actual proficiency.

Socioeconomic factors further exacerbate these pedagogical challenges. Children from privileged backgrounds have access to English media and parental support, while others rely solely on classroom instruction. Teachers, therefore, must navigate not only linguistic barriers but also the social inequalities that shape access to English learning resources. Moreover, pedagogical challenges are intensified by systemic constraints such as large class sizes and inadequate infrastructure. In overcrowded classrooms, teachers often lack the time to provide individual attention, which is essential for language learning. In such contexts, instructional language decisions become even more critical, as they determine whether students can meaningfully engage with lessons or remain passive recipients of information.

Policy Implications

Language policy decisions directly influence classroom realities. In India, the National Education Policy (2020) emphasizes mother tongue instruction in the early years, but the increasing demand for English-medium education reflects societal aspirations. Balancing these competing forces requires thoughtful planning that considers both equity and quality.

One implication is the need for gradual transition models. Introducing English as a medium of instruction from the middle grades, while ensuring strong literacy in the mother tongue during primary years, helps reduce cognitive load. Bilingual programs that allow for parallel use of English and regional languages also create inclusive environments where no student feels disadvantaged. Moreover, teacher development programs are essential for equipping educators with strategies to manage bilingual classrooms. Without adequate support, policies risk being aspirational without practical impact. Effective language policy must, therefore, be rooted in classroom realities and designed to empower both teachers and students. In addition, global examples provide useful insights. Countries such as Singapore and South Africa have implemented flexible bilingual policies that promote English while preserving local languages. These models show that policy frameworks must be adaptive, reflecting linguistic diversity rather than imposing rigid solutions. For India and similar multilingual nations, such comparative lessons can inform policies that balance global competitiveness with cultural inclusivity.

Teacher's Role in Mediating English Proficiency

Teachers serve as the most significant mediators between the language of instruction and student learning outcomes. Their ability to navigate multiple languages, adapt pedagogy, and build confidence in learners directly influences how English proficiency is developed in classrooms. Teachers often act as role models for communication, and their proficiency in English sets the tone for how students perceive and practice the language in both formal and informal settings. The effectiveness of English-medium instruction is largely determined by teacher preparedness. When teachers themselves struggle with English, their explanations become inconsistent, leaving students confused and disengaged. Conversely, well-trained teachers integrate language skills seamlessly into subject teaching, ensuring that students acquire both content knowledge and communicative competence. This dual responsibility highlights the need for teacher development programs that focus not only on subject expertise but also on language pedagogy.

Moreover, teachers who employ innovative strategies such as scaffolding, peer learning, and formative assessments create a supportive environment for English acquisition. By using real-life examples, storytelling, and interactive discussions, they make English learning less intimidating and more engaging. Teachers also play a crucial role in shaping classroom culture, where English can be positioned as a tool for learning rather than a marker of privilege, thus reducing the psychological barriers students face. Finally, research shows that teacher attitudes toward multilingualism influence classroom outcomes (Hornberger, 2009). Teachers who view students' mother tongues as assets rather than obstacles often implement translanguaging practices that enhance comprehension and foster inclusive participation. Hence, the teacher's role is not merely about delivering content in English but about strategically mediating between languages to ensure that learners achieve sustainable proficiency without feeling alienated.

III. Conclusion

The role of instructional language in shaping English proficiency is complex and multidimensional. Classrooms act as the primary space where students either gain confidence in English or develop barriers that persist throughout their academic journey. The effectiveness of English-medium instruction depends not only on exposure but also on teacher proficiency, pedagogical practices, and the balance between mother tongue and English use. Findings suggest that a balanced approach, where the mother tongue is valued alongside English, fosters better outcomes. Students learn best when they can connect prior knowledge with new linguistic input, and bilingual strategies provide the cognitive scaffolding needed for deeper understanding. Rigid monolingual models often fail to address the diverse needs of learners in multilingual contexts.

In conclusion, English proficiency is not merely a by-product of exposure but the result of deliberate planning in instructional language, pedagogy, and policy. Classrooms that embrace linguistic diversity while strategically promoting English offer the most sustainable pathway for preparing students for global opportunities without disconnecting them from their cultural identities. Finally, this study reinforces the importance of context-sensitive practices that recognize the realities of multilingual education. Future research should further explore the long-term outcomes of different instructional language models and their impact on social mobility, equity, and identity formation. By grounding policies and pedagogies in classroom realities, education systems can ensure that English proficiency develops inclusively and meaningfully.

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