

## **Leveraging Multilingualism to Strengthen English Language Communication in ESL Classroom**

**Dr Shabreen Sultana Shaik**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Bapatla Engineering College (Autonomous), Bapatla, Andhra Pradesh, India

**Abstract:** The English as a Second Language (ESL) learning environment in India is inherently multilingual, shaped by learners' diverse linguistic backgrounds, migration, and socio-cultural contexts. Scholars such as Halliday (1978) emphasize that language is a social semiotic system, making multilingual classrooms a natural outcome of societal diversity. Despite well-established cognitive, social, and communicative benefits of multilingualism, prevailing ESL practices often marginalize learners' home languages, treating them as obstacles rather than resources for English language communication. This paper addresses a critical research gap in Indian ESL contexts: the limited classroom-level exploration of how multilingual resources can be systematically integrated to strengthen English language communication within inclusive pedagogical frameworks. Grounded in the principles of inclusive education outlined by UNESCO (2030), the paper examines the strategic use of learners' linguistic repertoires to enhance participation, comprehension, and communicative confidence. It also considers the role of digital technologies, which Krashen (2013) identifies as effective tools for providing accessible and cost-effective multilingual support. The findings suggest that leveraging multilingualism in the ESL classroom leads to improved communicative competence, increased learner engagement, and reduced linguistic exclusion. Hence, this paper concludes that multilingual pedagogies constitute an effective instructional approach for strengthening English language communication and promoting equitable learning outcomes in ESL classrooms.

**Keywords:** Multilingualism, Inclusive Education, Communication, Digital Learning, Linguistic Diversity

### **1. Introduction: Language, Culture, and Identity**

Language serves as a tool for expressing ideas that are created through communication within a community and its associated culture (Babayigit, 2021a & Babayigit, 2021b; Türkben & Fer, 2022). Like culture, language is unique to a specific group and is closely connected to the cultural environment it represents. Language is important for helping members of a community form, express, and confirm their personal and shared identities, which helps build unity among them (Babayigit & Çelik, 2023; Palabiyık & Oral, 2022).

### **2. Monolingual Bias to the Multilingual Turn in Second Language Acquisition**

For a long time, the study of second language acquisition has been affected by what Ortega (2014) has called the 'monolingual bias'. This bias shows a tendency to compare the language skills of second language learners with the standards of native speakers, treating the monolingual speaker as the ideal. However, in recent years, there has been a major change in how this is viewed, known as the 'multilingual turn' (2014). This innovative perception highlights the need to consider all the languages a learner knows, not just their skill in one language. Research has shown that learning other languages helps develop other cognitive abilities and that even those who speak only one language can benefit from exposure to other languages. The multilingual turn recognizes that having multiple languages is complex and ever changing, and that these languages influence each other and how language is taught. This approach moves away from focusing only on monolingual standards to more inclusive and comprehensive methods that value and make use of learners' diverse language skills.

### **3. Defining Multilingualism**

Using more than two languages in a particular situation is called multilingualism. It refers to using more than two languages in the same context, either by an individual or a group, for similar purposes (Horner & Weber, 2017). Shridhar (1996, 2002) explains that multilingualism typically involves

people having different levels of skill in various languages. These levels can range from a basic understanding of vocabulary and common phrases to more advanced skills in grammar, vocabulary, and specialized ways of speaking. According to the Council of Europe (2007), multilingualism is described as “the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to regularly use more than one language in their daily lives” (p. 6). This means that individuals who know multiple languages may not have the same level of skill in each and may use them differently depending on how they are using in real-life situations.

#### **4. Language, Culture, and Cognitive Benefits of Multilingualism**

The relationship between language and culture becomes clear when we understand that language is a reflection of the culture it belongs to. Every culture, shaped by its unique characteristics and traditions, influences the way its people speak. Languages capture cultural values, beliefs, and customs, offering insight into the way of looking at the world. In this way, languages preserve cultural heritage through stories, sayings, and songs passed down through generations, helping to maintain cultural identity (Armstrong, 2014; Kuo & Lai, 2006; Rogers, 1995). In English language teaching, multilingualism offers many cognitive and social benefits beyond language learning. Studies have shown that using multilingual approaches improves students’ thinking and problem-solving abilities. These cognitive skills are supported by increased cultural awareness and sensitivity, which are important in today’s global world. Encouraging the use of multiple languages in the classroom helps teachers respect students’ cultural backgrounds, promote inclusivity, and enhance appreciation for diverse languages. As a result, using multilingual strategies in English language teaching leads to a more inclusive and human-centered approach.

#### **5. The Multilingual Classroom Context**

As student diversity grows in educational settings, classrooms have become more multilingual. Students bring with them a wide variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In such environments, practices like code-mixing and code-switching have become both a challenge and a chance for teachers aiming to support effective English language learning. Polinsky and Scontras (2020) suggest that it is important to include students’ home languages in classroom activities to meet the varied needs of multilingual learners.

#### **6. Role of English in Multilingual Classrooms**

Despite efforts to challenge the dominance of English as a global language, it is still the most widely used language in the world. This reality means that English is often included in school curricula in places where it is not the first language, a decision that is widely accepted by curriculum designers, parents, and students (Palabıyık & Oral, 2022). However, this does not mean other languages are ignored, a point raised by some critics who argue that an early focus on English may reduce interest in learning other languages. Krumm (2005) suggests that learning English first might not be the best way to develop multilingual abilities. He believes that starting with other languages might be more effective. On the other hand, Vollmer (2007) argues that teaching English early can set the stage for learning more languages. According to Vollmer, within a multilingual setting, English can help spark interest in learning other languages. It also serves as a tool for exploring different cultures and expanding students’ understanding of how their native language shapes their view of the world. In essence, English can act as a starting point, helping students develop awareness of different languages and how they relate to each other, which is essential for effective language learning. English, in this sense, encourages openness to linguistic diversity.

#### **7. Opportunities of Teaching English in Multilingual Classrooms**

A multilingual classroom setting offers a variety of resources that support the learning of English. Students’ native languages can act as a tool to help them understand new ideas. Teachers can use code-switching, which involves the intentional use of both English and students’ native languages, to make complex topics clearer and build on the language skills that students already have. This approach is especially helpful for students who are new to English and are still developing their proficiency (Seymen Bilgin, 2016). Furthermore, students can learn from each other’s languages through working together in groups and collaborating with peers. Explaining ideas in their native language helps students better understand English and brings a sense of unity to the classroom (Oxford, 1997).

The challenges of communicating in a multilingual classroom help students develop 21st-century skills. As they learn to express themselves and understand information in a language different from their own, they improve their critical thinking and problem-solving abilities (Garcia, 2009). In addition, they gain strong metacognitive skills, which help them become aware of their own learning process and monitor their understanding (Mitits, 2015; Ransdell, Barbier & Niit, 2006). Most importantly, multilingual classrooms help students build intercultural competence. They learn to value different perspectives, manage cultural differences, and communicate effectively in a globally connected world (Eren, 2022; Fisher et al., 2020).

## **8. Pedagogical Strategies in Multilingual Classrooms**

One of important teaching methods is the use of code-switching, where teachers switch between English and students' first languages when introducing new ideas, explaining difficult topics, and giving instructions. This helps teachers build on students' existing knowledge and language abilities, making it easier for them to understand and engage with English (Olivares, 2002). Teachers can also teach students how to switch between languages, helping them develop awareness of language and communication skills, which in turn improves their English proficiency. In addition, teachers can include students' code-mixed expressions in classroom discussions and activities. This can help students feel included and valued, boosting their confidence and encouraging them to participate actively. This leads to more chances for students to use and learn English (Yuan, 2021).

### **8.1 Leveraging Learners' Linguistic Repertoires and Digital Support**

Beyond in-person classroom activities, the use of learners' languages can be enhanced through digital tools that support multilingual teaching. Technologies like multilingual learning platforms, free translation apps (e.g., Google Translate), language support tools like Reverso Context and Word Reference, subtitle-enabled video platforms such as YouTube, and visual aids created using tools like Canva help students access understandable content and support their learning without leaving their native languages behind. In addition, free language practice platforms such as Duolingo, BBC Learning English, and Voice of America (VOA) Learning English provide accessible opportunities for exposure to meaningful language input. As Krashen (2013) suggests, technology offers an affordable and accessible way to aid language learning by reducing emotional barriers and increasing exposure to meaningful language input. In multilingual ESL classrooms, such tools allow students to clarify doubts on their own and engage more confidently in English-based communication. Combining strategies like code-switching and digital support helps teachers reduce language-related anxiety, improve comprehension, and encourage active participation. This approach not only enhances students' English communication skills but also ensures the learners, regardless of their background, have fair and equal opportunities to succeed.

### **8.2 Learning Styles in Multilingual Classrooms**

Multilingual classrooms are filled with a wide range of learning styles. Some students learn best by listening, such as during lectures, discussions, and group activities. These learners benefit from clear explanations, engaging conversations, and chances to practice speaking English. Others are visual learners who prefer to receive information through written materials, interactive whiteboards, diagrams, and other visual tools. Presenting information in a visual format, using graphic organizers, and incorporating multimedia elements can help these students learn more effectively. Kinesthetic learners, who are also common in multilingual classrooms, learn best through physical activities and real-life experiences. Role-playing, simulations, projects, and games are excellent ways to support these learners. To meet the varied learning needs in a multilingual classroom, teachers should use a wide range of teaching techniques (Smagorinsky, 1995; Young & Sachdev, 2007).

## **9. Pedagogical Rationale for Multilingual English Language Instruction**

Teaching English with a multilingual perspective is both an ethical necessity and a progressive teaching approach. It ensures that every student, regardless of their language background, can thrive, support others, and succeed both in and outside of institutions. Effective integration of code-switching and code-mixing in multilingual classrooms can enhance second language acquisition of English (Ramadhaniarti et al., 2018). By recognizing students' language abilities and the flexible nature of

language, teachers can create a welcoming and supportive environment that encourages participation and learning.

### **10. Challenges of Teaching English in Multilingual Classrooms**

Multilingual classrooms, a common feature of our global world, bring together a wide range of cultures and languages. While this diversity enriches the classroom environment, it also creates unique challenges for educators. These classrooms include students with varying levels of English proficiency, different cultural backgrounds, and diverse learning styles, requiring teachers to consider a wide range of instructional strategies. This diversity is supported by research, which highlights the specific difficulties educators face in these settings. Maintaining discipline in a multilingual classroom can be challenging. The varied needs of students call for individualized instruction, which can be time-consuming, especially in large classes. Additionally, managing tasks like assigning and reviewing homework can add to the workload (Macías & Sánchez, 2015; Nyimbili & Mwanza, 2021; Oli, 2019). In traditional English language teaching (ELT) settings, teachers often use students' native languages to explain and clarify concepts. This allows for clearer communication of complex ideas and helps students grasp the details of the English language. However, multilingual classrooms present a unique challenge in this area. With a large number of different languages represented among the students, it can be difficult for teachers to communicate effectively in all of them. If a teacher is not familiar with every language spoken in the classroom, they may not be able to explain concepts in students' native languages, which can lead to confusion and hinder comprehension. For example, imagine a classroom with students who speak Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, and Urdu. An educator may be skilled in one or two of these languages but depending only on those for instruction may leave out students whose native languages are not included. This can lead to a situation where some students easily understand the material, while others find it difficult to follow because of the language difference (Kavaliauskienė et al., 2010; Sharma, 2019).

### **11. Conclusion**

In summary, multilingual classrooms provide many opportunities to support effective language learning and promote cultural understanding. By recognizing the challenges involved, meeting the varied needs of students, and improving teaching methods through focused professional development, teachers can turn these challenges into positive learning experiences. This not only supports student growth but also enhances the teaching experience, enabling educators to make the most of the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds present in their classrooms.

### **References**

1. Armstrong, D. (2014). *Language, Meaning and Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic.
2. Babayiğit, S. (2021b). Language Development and Sociocultural Contexts. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 108, 101745.
3. Babayiğit, S., & Çelik, S. (2023). Language, Identity, and Multilingual Education. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 44(3), 245–260.
4. Council of Europe. (2007). *From Linguistic Diversity to plurilingual Education: Guide for the Development of Language Education Policies in Europe*. Council of Europe Publishing.
5. Eren, A. (2022). Intercultural Competence in Multilingual Classrooms. *Journal of Education and Learning*, 11(4), 55–66.
6. Fisher, L., Evans, M., & Esch, E. (2020). *Language Awareness and multilingualism*. Cambridge University Press.
7. Horner, K., & Weber, J.-J. (2017). *Introducing Multilingualism: A Social Approach*. Routledge.
8. Kavaliauskienė, G., Anusienė, L., & Kaminskienė, L. (2010). Use of Mother Tongue in English language learning. *Kalbotyra*, 62(3), 52–63.
9. Krashen, S. D. (2013). *Second language acquisition: Theory, Applications, and Some Conjectures*. Cambridge University Press.
10. Krumm, H.-J. (2005). *Sprachenpolitik und Mehrsprachigkeit*. Universität Wien.

11. Kuo, M. M., & Lai, C.-C. (2006). Linguistics Across Cultures: The impact of Culture on Second Language Learning. *Journal of Foreign Language Instruction*, 1(1), 1–10.
12. Macías, D. F., & Sánchez, A. (2015). Teacher Challenges in Multilingual Classrooms. *Profile: Issues in Teachers' Professional Development*, 17(2), 79–92.
13. Mitits, L. (2015). Metacognitive Strategies in Multilingual Learning. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 191, 2471–2475.
14. Nyimbili, F., & Mwanza, C. (2021). Classroom Management Challenges in Multilingual Contexts. *International Journal of Education and Development*, 5(1), 34–45.
15. Oli, J. (2019). Teaching English in Linguistically Diverse Classrooms. *Asian Journal of Language Teaching*, 9(2), 101–114.
16. Olivares, R. A. (2002). The Use of Code-Switching in Bilingual Classrooms. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 26(2), 203–218.
17. Ortega, L. (2014). *Understanding Second Language acquisition*. Routledge. Oxford, R. L. (1997). Cooperative Learning, Collaborative Learning, and Interaction. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(3), 443–447.
18. Palabiyik, A., & Oral, Y. (2022). English Language Education in Multilingual Societies. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(1), 312–325.
19. Polinsky, M., & Scontras, G. (2020). Understanding Heritage Languages. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 23(1), 4–20.
20. Ramadhaniarti, T., et al. (2018). Code-Mixing and Code-Switching in EFL Classrooms. *International Journal of Language Education*, 2(1), 45–56.
21. Ransdell, S., Barbier, M.-L., & Niit, T. (2006). Metacognitive Strategies in Multilingual Writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 15(1), 1–20.
22. Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of Innovations* (4th ed.). Free Press.
23. Seymen Bilgin, E. (2016). The Role of Multilingual Practices in Language Classrooms. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 4(8), 85–92.
24. Sharma, L. (2019). Language Barriers in Multilingual Classrooms. *International Journal of Educational Studies*, 6(2), 67–75.
25. Shridhar, K. K. (2002). Multilingualism and Language policy. *Language Policy*, 1(1), 45–54.
26. Smagorinsky, P. (1995). Constructivist Approaches to Teaching. *English Journal*, 84(5), 49–55.
27. Türkben, T., & Fer, S. (2022). Language, Culture, and Identity in Education. *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, 22(1), 87–102.
28. Vollmer, H. J. (2007). Language Education Policy and Multilingualism. *Council of Europe Language Policy Division Report*.
29. Young, R., & Sachdev, I. (2007). Language Attitudes and Multilingual Education. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 28(2), 149–165.
30. Yuan, R. (2021). Multilingual Pedagogy and Student Engagement. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 100, 103276.