



# **Translanguaging in the Indian Classroom: A Synthesis of Theory, Practice, and Critical Perspectives**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper critically examines the concept of translanguaging and its application within the deeply multilingual educational landscape of India. It begins by tracing the theoretical evolution of translanguaging, from its origins as a pedagogical practice to its development into a holistic theory of language that proposes a unitary linguistic repertoire, contrasting it with earlier models of code-switching and plurilingualism. The paper then analyzes empirical evidence from Indian classrooms, demonstrating how teachers and students naturally and strategically employ translanguaging to facilitate learning, enhance participation, and validate learners' linguistic identities. However, this analysis also reveals a significant tension between these inclusive classroom practices and the persistent monolingual ideologies embedded in institutional policies and curriculum which often lead to a state of "guilty multilingualism" among educators. To address these challenges, the paper advocates for a shift towards "critical translanguaging"—a framework that not only leverages students' full linguistic repertoires as a pedagogical resource but also actively challenges linguistic hierarchies and promotes linguistic human rights. The synthesis concludes by offering evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, teacher educators, and researchers to create a more equitable and effective educational ecosystem that embraces India's linguistic diversity as a foundational strength.

**KEYWORDS:** critical translanguaging, India, language policy, linguistic diversity, multilingual education, pedagogy.

## **Introduction**

The concept of translanguaging offers a powerful lens through which we can re-examine educational practices in diverse linguistic contexts. This is particularly true in a nation like India, which is profoundly multilingual and multicultural. As Pattanayak (1984) argued decades ago, in such a context, enforcing a monolingual educational model is not only impractical but "absurd" (p. 82). The 2011 national census recorded approximately 19,569 languages and dialects spoken across the country, a staggering reality that

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stands in stark contrast to the 22 languages officially recognized in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution (Bisai & Singh, 2024). This immense linguistic diversity creates a complex educational environment where the use of a single, dominant language of instruction inevitably marginalizes students who are native speakers of minority languages, potentially hindering their academic progress and leading to higher dropout rates (Bisai & Singh, 2024; Mohanty, 2009).

Despite multilingualism being a societal norm and a principle supported by progressive policy documents like the National Education Policy (2020), a pervasive "monolingual mindset" continues to influence educational institutions (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021; Chimirala, 2017). This is especially evident in the pressure for English-only instruction in English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools. This ideological conflict forces many teachers into a state of "guilty multilingualism," where they may use students' home languages to scaffold learning but do so secretly, fearing retribution from supervisors or believing it to be a deficient practice (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021; Coleman, 2017). This dissonance between inclusive pedagogical needs and restrictive institutional norms forms the central problem this paper seeks to address.

This paper's thesis is that while translanguaging offers a powerful pedagogical tool for fostering inclusion and deepening learning in Indian classrooms, its transformative potential can only be fully realized through a critical framework that actively challenges entrenched linguistic hierarchies. To develop this argument, this synthesis will first review the conceptual evolution of translanguaging theory. It will then analyze empirical studies documenting its practical application in Indian educational contexts from the perspectives of both teachers and students. Following this, the paper will engage with the tensions and debates surrounding its implementation, culminating in a call for a more critical approach to translanguaging. Finally, it will conclude with concrete recommendations for policy, teacher education, and future research.

### **Theoretical Foundations: From Code-Switching to a Unitary Repertoire**

Understanding the theoretical journey of translanguaging is crucial for appreciating its pedagogical implications. The concept has evolved significantly from earlier notions of code-switching, which treated languages as separate, bounded systems that speakers alternate between. Instead, translanguaging proposes a more integrated and holistic understanding of how multilingual individuals use their full linguistic resources.

## **Fixed vs. Fluid Approaches to Language**

A key development in translanguaging theory is the distinction between what Bonacina-Pugh et al. (n.d.) term the "fixed language approach" and the "fluid languaging approach." The fixed approach conceptualizes translanguaging as the planned and strategic use of two separate, named languages within a pedagogical setting. This perspective, while an improvement on monolingual ideologies, still operates within a framework that views languages as discrete entities. In contrast, the fluid languaging approach represents a more radical epistemological shift. It moves "beyond the notion of 'language'" to explore the complex and dynamic ways in which speakers draw upon their entire semiotic repertoire including gestures, visuals, and other modalities to co-construct meaning (Bonacina-Pugh et al., n.d.). This perspective challenges the very idea that languages are bounded, separate systems, viewing them instead as social constructs (Makoni & Pennycook, 2007).

## **Translanguaging as a Practical Theory of Language**

Li Wei (2018) articulates translanguaging as a "practical theory of language," meaning it is a theory derived from observing real-world practices that, in turn, can be used to understand and inform future practice. This theory reconceptualizes language as a "multilingual, multisemiotic, multisensory, and multimodal resource" for meaning-making (Li, 2018, p. 24). It fundamentally challenges the modularity of mind, which separates linguistic processes from other cognitive systems. From a translanguaging perspective, language is intrinsically connected to our full sensory and cognitive experience.

Two key concepts emerge from this framework: the *Translanguaging Space* and the *Translanguaging Instinct*. The Translanguaging Space refers to a fluid and dynamic environment where multilingual speakers can integrate all their linguistic and semiotic resources. This space is not just for communication but is also a site for enhanced creativity and criticality, allowing individuals to push boundaries, challenge norms, and generate new knowledge (Li, 2018). The Translanguaging Instinct states that humans have an innate capacity to use and integrate multiple resources to optimize meaning-making. This instinct is not diminished over a lifespan but is enhanced by experience, as individuals learn to functionally differentiate and coordinate various resources for complex communicative tasks (Li, 2018).



With this theoretical framework established, we can now examine how these fluid and holistic concepts of language practice manifest within the unique multilingual ecosystem of Indian education.

### **Translanguaging as Pedagogy in the Indian Context**

While translanguaging is a natural and spontaneous feature of communication in Indian society, its intentional application in the classroom pedagogical translanguaging represents a deliberate shift towards a more inclusive and effective educational model (Antony, n.d.). Empirical research from across India reveals that when educators embrace this approach, it yields significant benefits for both teaching and learning, validating students' identities and leveraging their existing knowledge as a resource rather than viewing it as a deficit.

### **Teacher Practices and Beliefs**

Studies of Indian teachers reveal a complex relationship with multilingual classroom practices, often characterized by a pragmatic desire for inclusion that conflicts with institutional pressures. A comparative case study of eight expert secondary English teachers from across India found that all of them engaged in complex translanguaging practices (Anderson, 2022). These expert practitioners did not view translanguaging as a political act but as a "socio-pragmatic" one, consistently prioritizing learner participation and comprehension over maximal target language use. Common practices included using students' home languages what Anderson (2022) refers to as the More Enabled Language (MEL) to explain complex content, manage the classroom, translate key vocabulary, build confidence, and reduce learners' "fear" of English.

However, broader survey data suggests this expert practice is not universal. A survey by Anderson and Lightfoot (2021) found that the majority of English teachers reported only "occasional" use of other languages. This reticence is more pronounced in EMI institutions, which were found to be significantly less tolerant of such practices. This has led to the proposal of an "inclusive position" as an advancement on Macaro's (2001) "optimal position," which merely sought justification for L1 use. The inclusive position, by contrast, recognizes learners' full linguistic repertoires as an integral part of their identity and a valuable resource for learning (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021). For some teachers, this recognition becomes a



systematic pedagogical strategy. For instance, a case study of a primary teacher named Anita showed how she deliberately planned her use of translanguaging, systematically drawing lexical and grammatical comparisons between Telugu, Hindi, and English to develop her students' "language consciousness" and deepen their understanding of linguistic structures (Mukhopadhyay, 2020).

### **Student Experiences and Outcomes**

From the students' perspective, translanguaging pedagogies create more equitable and effective learning environments. A study conducted in a school in the Paschim Medinipur district of West Bengal found that translanguaging provides a space for students from minority linguistic backgrounds (such as Santali, Kurmi, and Mundari speakers) to express themselves in mainstream classrooms (Bisai & Singh, 2024). In effect, these classrooms create a *Translanguaging Space* (Li, 2018), a site where the validation of students' home languages promotes active participation, fosters creativity and imagination, and makes learning a more joyful and engaging experience, in line with the goals of the National Education Policy (2020).

In higher education, where English is often the medium of instruction, students perceive translanguaging as serving three key functions:

- i. **Interpretative:** Teachers use students' languages to explain complex vocabulary, grammar, and cultural concepts in the target language.
- ii. **Managerial:** Translanguaging is used for classroom management, including giving instructions, providing feedback, and offering encouragement.
- iii. **Interactive:** Students use their shared linguistic resources during peer-to-peer interactions to support collaborative learning and enhance comprehension (Antony et al., 2024).

Ultimately, translanguaging validates students' identities and helps them make sense of their world. It aligns with the "salad bowl concept," where diverse linguistic resources are integrated to create a richer whole without any single language losing its distinctiveness or identity (Bisai & Singh, 2019). By acknowledging and utilizing the languages students bring to the classroom, educators can transform the learning environment into one that is more collaborative, equitable, and effective. Despite these documented benefits



for teachers and students, the implementation of translanguaging pedagogy is not without significant tensions and ideological challenges.

### **Critical Analysis: Tensions, Debates, and a Call for Critical Translanguaging**

While pedagogical translanguaging offers clear benefits, a simple, uncritical adoption of the practice risks overlooking the persistent linguistic hierarchies and complex socio-political realities that shape language use in India. Merely allowing students to use their home languages is insufficient if the underlying structures that devalue those languages remain unchallenged. A critical analysis is therefore necessary to understand the tensions between policy and practice, engage with theoretical debates, and advocate for a more transformative approach.

#### **The Chasm Between Policy and Practice**

A significant tension exists between the multilingual ethos of Indian educational policy and the monolingual reality of many institutions. Policy documents, including the National Education Policy (2020), explicitly support the use of students' mother tongues and advocate for a flexible approach to language in education (Bisai & Singh, 2024). However, this official stance is frequently undermined by on-the-ground pressures. Many schools, particularly low-fee private institutions, enforce strict English-only policies to meet parental demand, and high-stakes national examinations remain staunchly monolingual in their design (Anderson, 2022; Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021). This contradiction places teachers in a difficult position, contributing to the "guilty multilingualism" where they feel compelled to use students' languages for effective teaching but are simultaneously stigmatized for doing so (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021). This systemic incoherence between policy, curriculum, assessment, and institutional expectations cripples the potential of multilingual pedagogies.

#### **The Debate on Naming Languages**

The theoretical foundation of translanguaging, particularly its assertion of a single, undifferentiated linguistic repertoire, has faced critical challenges. Scholars such as Jaspers (2018) and MacSwan (2017) argue that the act of *naming* languages is crucial for addressing issues of linguistic hierarchy, power



dynamics, and minority language rights (as cited in Sah & Kubota, 2022). From this perspective, refusing to acknowledge the existence of discrete, named languages even if they are social constructs risks obscuring the very real struggles faced by speakers of marginalized languages. Turner and Lin (2020) suggest that "the naming of languages needs to be incorporated into translanguaging theory" to account for the sociopolitical roles each language plays (as cited in Sah & Kubota, 2022, p. 423). This debate highlights a central challenge: how to embrace the fluidity of linguistic practice without erasing the political importance of named languages in the fight for linguistic justice.

### **A Call for Critical Translanguaging**

In response to these challenges, scholars have called for "critical translanguaging" (Sah & Kubota, 2022). This approach moves beyond viewing translanguaging as a mere "coping strategy" for teachers and students in under-resourced EMI classrooms. Instead, it reframes translanguaging as a transformative practice aimed at achieving social and linguistic justice. According to Sah and Kubota (2022), a critical translanguaging pedagogy should:

- i. **Resist dominant ideologies:** It must actively push back against nationalist and neoliberal ideologies that create unequal value propositions for different languages, particularly the global dominance of English.
- ii. **Protect marginalized communities:** It should be a tool to protect and legitimize the language, culture, and identity of historically marginalized groups, including tribal, Indigenous, and ethnic communities.
- iii. **Challenge deficit views:** It must confront and dismantle the deficit view that positions local and Indigenous languages as inferior or inadequate for academic purposes.
- iv. **Promote linguistic human rights:** It should work to develop "linguistic human rights" (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1994, as cited in Sah & Kubota, 2022) by creating a rightful and permanent space for students' mother tongues for pedagogical purposes, not just as a temporary scaffold.

This critical perspective provides a necessary lens through which to formulate meaningful recommendations for policy, teacher education, and future research in India.



## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This synthesis has demonstrated that translanguaging is both a natural feature of India's societal multilingualism and a powerful, though often underutilized and misunderstood, pedagogical tool. The evidence from Indian classrooms shows that when teachers and students are free to draw upon their full linguistic repertoires, learning is enhanced, participation increases, and learners' identities are affirmed. However, the implementation of translanguaging is fraught with tension, caught between the pragmatism of inclusive classroom practices and the monolingual ideologies that dominate institutional structures, curriculum, and assessment. To move forward, a concerted effort is needed from all stakeholders to bridge this gap and fully realize the potential of multilingual education. A critical approach to translanguaging, one that explicitly seeks to dismantle linguistic hierarchies, is essential for achieving this goal.

Based on the findings synthesized from the provided research, the following recommendations are offered:

**1. For Policymakers and Institutions:** There is an urgent need to move away from the "unqualified endorsement of monolingual target language (e.g. 'English-only') practices" in language instruction (Anderson, 2022, p. 2233). Educational systems must create coherent support for multilingual pedagogies by ensuring that policy, curriculum, teacher training, and, crucially, assessment methods are aligned. This includes designing assessments that allow students to demonstrate their knowledge without being unfairly penalized by monolingual constraints.

**2. For Teacher Education:** To equip teachers to use translanguaging in a planned, reflective, and intentional manner, "a course in multilingual education practices ought to be mandated in all teacher education programmes" (Durairajan, 2017, as cited in Anderson & Lightfoot, 2021). Such training would help dismantle the "monolingual mindset" and provide teachers with the theoretical understanding and practical strategies needed to create inclusive and effective learning environments.

**3. For Educators and Practitioners:** Teachers should be encouraged and given the autonomy to prioritize "learner inclusion in classroom discourse and activities over maximal target language use" (Anderson, 2022, p. 2233). This involves a fundamental shift in mindset, viewing students' entire linguistic repertoires not as an obstacle to be overcome but as a rich resource to be leveraged for deeper learning and engagement.



**4. For Researchers:** There is a need for more research that documents and disseminates the situated practices of "indigenous expert teachers" working in diverse contexts across India and the Global South (Anderson, 2022, p. 2248). Such studies can help build context-specific models of appropriate and sustainable good practice, moving away from the importation of exogenous approaches developed in high-income contexts and instead valuing the expertise that already exists within the system.

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