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Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Strategy in Indian English Language Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

English classrooms in India rarely bring together learners with identical language backgrounds. Students may speak one language at home, use another in the community, and encounter English mainly through schooling, higher education, or work. Yet classroom practice has often treated English as though it must be learned apart from the languages students already know. Translanguaging offers a different starting point: learners can draw on their full linguistic resources to understand a text, discuss an idea, and prepare to communicate in English. This conceptual paper considers what that approach may offer Indian English language teaching. It draws on published work on translanguaging and Indian classrooms to discuss comprehension, vocabulary, participation, literary interpretation, and writing. It also considers practical concerns, including the need for meaningful English use, unequal status among learners' languages, and teacher preparation. The paper proposes a four-stage classroom cycle: activate prior knowledge, explore meaning collaboratively, produce in English, and reflect on learning. The cycle is a planning proposal, not a tested intervention. The paper therefore makes no claim that translanguaging will produce the same results in every setting. Its central argument is more measured: students' languages can support English learning when teachers use them deliberately, make room for different linguistic backgrounds, and keep the intended learning outcome in view.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Multilingualism is not an unusual feature of Indian classrooms; it is part of the setting in which many students learn. A student may speak Marathi with family, use Hindi in some public situations, and study English at school or college. Other students may have very different language histories. These differences shape what learners already know, how confidently they participate, and which expressions feel familiar. Despite this, English teaching has often been influenced by an English-only ideal that treats the use of other languages as a weakness. That assumption can overlook the knowledge students bring to a lesson.

Translanguaging offers a way to look more closely at how multilingual learners make meaning. During an English lesson, for instance, students might discuss a difficult idea in a familiar language, return to the English passage to check their interpretation, and then write a response in English. The movement between languages has a purpose: it helps students work through the content before demonstrating what they can do in the target language. It should not be confused with allowing every activity to drift away from English; the teacher needs to decide when multilingual discussion is useful and when learners need sustained practice in English.

This paper examines translanguaging as a teaching strategy in Indian English language classrooms. It considers its possible contribution to reading, vocabulary, discussion, literary interpretation, and writing, while taking seriously concerns about English exposure, language hierarchy, and classroom implementation. The discussion is based on published scholarship rather than new fieldwork. It does not present classroom observations or claim to measure learning outcomes. Instead, it brings selected studies into conversation with practical decisions teachers make when planning lessons for multilingual groups.

2. UNDERSTANDING TRANSLANGUAGING

Translanguaging is commonly used to describe how multilingual speakers draw on their linguistic resources to communicate and make sense of experience. In education, it can also refer to deliberate teaching practices that allow more than one language to contribute to learning. The point is not simply that a learner switches from one named language to another. Rather, learners use the resources available to them to understand a task, test an interpretation, and express what they know. Anderson (2024a) discusses the implications of translanguaging for English language teaching, while emphasising the need to consider what this perspective means for classroom practice.

In practice, translanguaging may include discussing a reading in a familiar language before responding in English, comparing expressions across languages, annotating an English text in

more than one language, collaboratively preparing a presentation, or using bilingual glossaries to clarify specialised vocabulary.

Translanguaging is related to code-switching and bilingual instruction, but the terms do not always describe the same thing. Code-switching commonly refers to movement between named languages in conversation; bilingual instruction often describes teaching organised through two languages. Translanguaging places greater emphasis on how multilingual speakers use their linguistic resources as a connected repertoire. These distinctions are useful, but they should not be made absolute. In actual classrooms, practices can overlap, and scholars disagree about where the boundaries of the concepts lie. Treffers-Daller (2024), for example, argues that code-switching and translanguaging share important features. For teachers, the practical issue is whether a language choice helps learners meet the lesson's objective, rather than which label is attached to the choice.

3. TRANSLANGUAGING IN THE INDIAN CONTEXT

Translanguaging deserves attention in India because linguistic diversity is a routine part of social and educational life. Some learners encounter English mainly through textbooks and formal instruction, while regional or community languages are central to family life, local knowledge, and everyday communication. Even within one class, students may differ in their home languages, reading experience, exposure to English, and confidence in speaking before others. A single language policy may therefore affect learners differently.

Research on Indian English classrooms suggests that multilingual practices are already part of teaching, including in settings where English is the expected classroom language. Anderson (2024b), in a study of eight experienced English teachers across three Indian states, reports that teachers and learners used multiple linguistic resources, although the practices varied across classrooms. The study is useful because it moves the discussion beyond an abstract debate about whether other languages should be allowed: it shows that teachers make language choices in response to the people and tasks in front of them. The findings should still be read in context; a small study of expert teachers cannot represent every Indian classroom.

Other studies offer examples from particular settings. Mukhopadhyay (2020) describes a primary-level English as a second language classroom in which translanguaging helped the teacher explain concepts, compare vocabulary, and support participation. Jha and Dalal (2024) examine the need for translanguaging in English-medium instruction and English language teaching in relation to multiculturalism and NEP 2020; their study reports generally favourable views of selective translanguaging, alongside practical concerns about implementation. More recently, Selvan and Mukhopadhyay (2026) examine pedagogical translanguaging in Indian English classes through

narrative-reading lessons. Taken together, these studies offer reasons to investigate planned multilingual practice, but they do not justify treating it as a universal solution.

In Maharashtra, Marathi may be a useful resource when students already use it at home or in their communities. It can help a teacher unpack an unfamiliar concept, compare sentence patterns, or begin a discussion of a literary text. But Marathi should not be assumed to be every learner's strongest language. A class may include students who are more comfortable in Urdu, Hindi, a tribal language, or another regional language. An inclusive approach starts by learning about the languages students actually use and avoids turning one familiar language into a new classroom norm that excludes others.

4. POTENTIAL PEDAGOGICAL FUNCTIONS

4.1 Supporting comprehension

A student may recognise most of the words in an English passage and still find its argument difficult to follow. A brief discussion in a familiar language can help students identify the central idea, connect it with what they already know, and raise questions about unfamiliar references. The teacher can then direct them back to the English text: Which sentence supports that interpretation? What does a particular phrase suggest? What has the writer left unsaid? Used in this way, multilingual discussion prepares students to read more closely; it does not replace engagement with the English text.

4.2 Developing vocabulary and language awareness

Comparing English words with possible equivalents in students' other languages can draw attention to meaning, connotation, register, and context. A bilingual glossary may help, but a direct translation is not always enough. Words carry associations that do not line up neatly across languages, and idioms often need to be explained through examples. Teachers can ask students to compare two expressions, decide which one suits a particular situation, and then use the English word in an original sentence. The activity develops language awareness rather than treating vocabulary as a list of interchangeable labels.

4.3 Encouraging participation

Students who are uncertain about their English may stay silent even when they have something valuable to say. Pair or small-group discussion in familiar languages can give them time to shape an idea before sharing it with the class. The teacher can then invite an English summary, a short presentation, or a response to a follow-up question. This sequence may widen participation, but it requires care: multilingual discussion should lead to a meaningful opportunity to use English, and students should not be pressured to disclose a language identity or speak a language they do not feel comfortable using.

4.4 Supporting reading and literary interpretation

Literary texts can be challenging because they rely on ambiguity, cultural references, figurative language, and complex narrative perspectives. A short discussion in a familiar language may help students clarify the context of a poem or story and compare different readings. The teacher should then bring attention back to the language of the text: a metaphor, a shift in point of view, a repeated image, or a detail that complicates the first interpretation. The purpose is not to make the text easier by removing its difficulty, but to give students a route into close reading and evidence-based discussion.

4.5 Supporting writing and academic communication

Some learners can develop a complex argument orally in a familiar language before they can express it fluently in English. Allowing time for multilingual planning may help them organise their ideas before drafting. Students can also compare how transitions, paragraph structure, or tone work across languages. The final task, however, should match the learning objective. If the aim is to assess English writing, students need to produce an English text and receive feedback on its organisation, accuracy, vocabulary, and register. Planning support should help them write; it should not obscure what they can do independently.

4.6 Clarifying instructions and concepts

A short explanation in a familiar language can clarify what a task requires, what a technical term means, or how an activity should be completed. This may be useful when students meet unfamiliar content or complex instructions. Still, teachers should avoid translating every instruction automatically. Some classroom language is itself worth learning, and repeated opportunities to understand instructions in English can build learners' independence. The decision should depend on the difficulty of the task and the cost of leaving students confused.

5. A PRACTICAL CYCLE FOR PLANNED TRANSLANGUAGING

Translanguaging is more defensible when a teacher can explain why it is being used at a particular point in a lesson. The four-stage cycle below is proposed as a practical planning aid for Indian English language classrooms. It brings together the pedagogical possibilities discussed above; it has not been empirically tested as a model and should not be read as a fixed sequence that every teacher must follow. Teachers can adapt or shorten the stages according to the text, the learners, and the skill being taught.

Stage 1: Activate prior knowledge. Introduce the topic, image, question, or short passage. Invite learners to connect it with prior experience and, where useful, discuss key ideas in a familiar language. This stage should establish understanding without replacing engagement with the English material.

Stage 2: Explore meaning collaboratively. Students work in pairs or groups to clarify difficult words, compare interpretations, and identify questions. They may use more than one language in discussion, but the teacher gives them a specific task and ensures that all students have a meaningful role.

Stage 3: Produce in English. Learners prepare an English summary, paragraph, oral response, presentation, or set of answers. The teacher can provide key vocabulary, sentence starters, or a model structure. The aim is to convert the understanding developed during discussion into purposeful English use.

Stage 4: Reflect and consolidate. Learners identify what they understood more clearly, which English expressions they learned, and where translation was insufficient. They may keep a bilingual vocabulary record or revise their work after feedback. Reflection helps make the learning process explicit and encourages increasing independence.

Table 1. A four-stage cycle for planned translanguaging

Stage	Purpose	Example classroom activity
Activate prior knowledge	Connect the topic with learners' existing knowledge	Discuss the theme of a story in Marathi or another familiar language.
Explore meaning	Clarify ideas and compare interpretations	Annotate an English passage, discuss difficult expressions, and identify textual evidence.
Produce in English	Practise the target language	Write an English paragraph or deliver a short presentation.
Reflect and consolidate	Strengthen language awareness and independence	Record new expressions and explain one revision made after feedback.

6. CHALLENGES AND CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Translanguaging cannot resolve every difficulty in English language teaching. Learners still need regular opportunities to listen to, read, speak, and write in English. If most of a lesson takes place in other languages and students have little chance to use English themselves, the approach may work against the stated objective. Teachers therefore need to plan the role of each language and

make sure that multilingual support leads towards, rather than replaces, meaningful English practice.

A further concern is the unequal status of languages. A teacher might welcome Marathi or Hindi while giving little recognition to learners who speak other languages. This would reproduce exclusion in the name of inclusion. Teachers should not assume that all students share a language, nor should they treat one regional language as a compulsory bridge to English. Where the teacher does not know a student's language, peer explanation, bilingual resources, or carefully designed group work may help—but students should not be expected to act as unpaid interpreters or representatives of an entire language community.

Teacher preparation also matters. Planning a multilingual activity requires more than telling students they may speak another language. Teachers need to identify the learning objective, decide where multilingual discussion may help, provide a clear English-language outcome, and assess that outcome fairly. Without this planning, language use can become incidental and the link between the activity and the lesson's purpose may be difficult to explain.

Assessment needs to match the skill being assessed. If an assignment is intended to measure independent English writing, students should know that the final text must be in English and that the assessment criteria concern their use of English. If the aim is to understand a literary theme or a subject concept, multilingual discussion may be a reasonable part of the learning process. Separating the language used to explore an idea from the language required in the final response can make expectations clearer to students.

The usefulness of translanguaging will also depend on context: learners' age and proficiency, the languages represented in the room, the type of text, class size, available time, and institutional expectations all shape what is possible. A strategy that helps one group may not suit another. Research reviews, including Huang and Chalmers (2023), underline the importance of examining implementation and outcomes rather than assuming that the presence of multilingual activity is itself evidence of successful learning.

7. IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

A practical first step is to learn which languages students are comfortable using for different purposes. Teachers might invite voluntary responses, use an informal first-week activity, or ask students which languages help them discuss a difficult idea. This should be handled sensitively: students should not have to disclose personal information, and language background should not be treated as a proxy for ability. The purpose is to plan lessons that reflect the class as it actually is, rather than an imagined group of linguistically identical learners.

Once teachers have a clearer sense of the class, they can mark in a lesson plan where multilingual support may be useful and where English production is essential. For example, students might brainstorm in more than one language before giving an English presentation, annotate a passage bilingually before writing a response, or compare a familiar-language expression with an English phrase. Each activity should lead to a task that makes the intended English skill visible.

Students also need to understand the purpose of this approach. Using more than one language to think through a problem is not a reason to neglect English practice. Rather, it can be one step towards expressing an idea more clearly in English. Teachers can review whether the approach is working by looking at students' responses, listening to their discussions, and asking which parts of the task remained difficult. That evidence can guide the balance of languages in later lessons.

8. CONCLUSION

Translanguaging offers a useful perspective on the language resources students bring to English lessons in India. Research in Indian classrooms describes teachers and learners using more than one language to clarify concepts, compare vocabulary, discuss texts, and participate in classroom work. These findings make it difficult to dismiss all multilingual practice as a failure to maintain an English-only environment. They do not, however, show that every use of multiple languages improves learning or that the same approach will suit every classroom.

The central issue is how language choices are planned and evaluated. Teachers need to consider whether students receive enough meaningful English practice, whose languages are recognised, and whether the final task assesses the intended skill. The four-stage cycle proposed in this paper—activating prior knowledge, exploring meaning together, producing in English, and reflecting—offers one possible structure for planning such lessons. Its value remains a question for classroom-based evaluation, not a result established by this conceptual discussion.

Further research could examine planned translanguaging in undergraduate and postgraduate English classes across different regions of India. Possible studies include the effect of multilingual reading discussions on comprehension, the retention of vocabulary introduced through comparison across languages, and students' experiences of language choice during speaking and writing tasks. In Maharashtra, research could focus on Marathi-English interaction while recognising the range of languages present in local classrooms. Carefully designed classroom studies would help establish when translanguaging is useful, for whom, and under what conditions.

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