

EDUCATIONAL PLURALISM AND PEDAGOGICAL STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE LEARNING IN MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract

India's linguistic diversity shapes the educational landscape, creating both opportunities and challenges for students and educators. Multilingual classrooms reflect the nation's cultural pluralism, yet they also highlight disparities in access to quality education. This paper explores how linguistic diversity impacts learning and examines strategies that promote inclusion in multilingual classrooms. By integrating perspectives from linguistics, cognitive science, and education, this study investigates how multilingualism influences classroom interactions, cognitive development, and social integration. While multilingual environments foster cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and critical thinking, students often face barriers such as limited instructional resources, language hierarchies, and socio-economic inequalities that hinder effective learning. Addressing these challenges requires innovative pedagogical strategies, including translanguaging, scaffolding, visual aids, and culturally responsive teaching. This study draws on qualitative case studies and teacher interviews to identify best practices that enhance learning experiences in linguistically diverse settings. Findings suggest that effective multilingual education depends on inclusive teaching methods, teacher training programs, and equitable language policies that recognize and respect students' linguistic backgrounds. Moreover, the study highlights the need for curriculum reforms that integrate regional languages alongside English to bridge the gap between home and school languages. By situating multilingual education within the broader discourse of pluralism and contemporary social issues, this research advocates for a shift towards more inclusive educational models that empower students from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Ensuring educational equity in multilingual classrooms is not only a pedagogical necessity but also a step towards social justice and national development. This paper contributes to the ongoing conversation on how pluralism can be effectively embraced in education, emphasizing the role of policy makers, educators, and institutions in shaping an inclusive learning environment that values linguistic and cultural diversity.

Keywords: Multilingual education, inclusive teaching, linguistic diversity, cognitive strategies, educational equity.

1. Introduction

India stands as a compelling example of linguistic and cultural plurality. As a nation, it embodies a mosaic of languages, dialects, scripts, and oral traditions. According to the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, there are 22 officially recognized languages, yet these are merely the tip of the iceberg in terms of the linguistic wealth the country possesses. Linguistic surveys such as the *People's Linguistic Survey of India* have documented over 780 distinct languages and numerous dialects spoken by different communities, many of which are tied to specific geographic, tribal, or cultural regions (Annamalai 3; Sarkar and Ahmad). This multilingualism is not confined to inter-state diversity alone; it often manifests within states, districts, and even villages. In a single classroom, children may speak several different mother tongues, representing an extraordinary cognitive and pedagogical landscape (Moraru). This immense diversity is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it serves as a rich resource for cultural capital and identity formation; on the other, it creates profound challenges for educational policy and classroom practice, particularly in ensuring that all children can access and comprehend the curriculum meaningfully (Qureshi). Language plays a pivotal role in shaping one's cognitive development and academic progress. When the language of instruction is different from a child's home language, a cognitive dissonance is created, often leading to alienation, low participation, and academic underachievement. This is particularly evident in rural and tribal regions where the medium of instruction is frequently not aligned with the linguistic realities of students. In this context, multilingual education (MLE) has emerged as a necessary pedagogical response to linguistic heterogeneity in Indian classrooms. Multilingual education refers to the systematic use of more than one language in the classroom, beginning with the child's mother tongue and gradually introducing regional, national, or global languages such as Hindi and English. Scholars like Mohanty argue that MLE is not just an educational strategy but a social imperative to uphold inclusive, equitable, and democratic learning spaces (Mohanty, "Multilingual Education" 15). Through such an approach, education becomes an enabler of empowerment rather than an instrument of marginalization.

The cognitive benefits of multilingual education are well-documented. Studies show that children who are taught in their mother tongue during early education demonstrate better comprehension, critical thinking skills, and academic performance (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh 6). The cultural resonance that the mother tongue provides enhances the learner's sense of belonging and participation in the classroom. It creates a smoother transition from informal, home-based learning to the formal structures of school education. In contrast, initiating literacy in an unfamiliar language often results in a disconnect between the learner and the content, leading to dropouts, poor performance, and psychological stress. Despite the compelling case for multilingual education, its implementation in India remains patchy and inconsistent. While national policies such as the National Curriculum Framework (2005) and the more recent National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recognize the importance of mother-tongue-based learning, ground realities reveal a different picture. Language hierarchies persist, with English and Hindi continuing to dominate formal education at the expense of regional and tribal languages. This not only violates the linguistic rights of learners but also fosters a sense of inferiority among speakers of non-dominant languages. Furthermore, the infrastructure required for multilingual pedagogy: such as trained teachers, localized textbooks, and instructional materials; remains grossly inadequate (NCERT 42).

The rationale for this study emerges from these complex realities. At its core is the belief that children's cognitive development cannot be divorced from their linguistic context. Theories

of cognitive development, particularly those advanced by Lev Vygotsky, underscore the centrality of language in shaping thought processes. According to Vygotsky, social interaction and language are not mere accessories to learning; they are its very foundation. Children internalize knowledge through mediated interaction in culturally meaningful ways, and language acts as the chief mediator in this process (Vygotsky 89). Therefore, the imposition of a non-native language as the medium of instruction impedes not only comprehension but also the natural trajectory of cognitive growth. A one-size-fits-all language policy undermines the pedagogical possibilities that a linguistically plural society like India offers. It marginalizes linguistic minorities, exacerbates educational inequality, and stifles creative and critical thinking. The challenge is to move from tokenistic representations of linguistic diversity to systemic and sustainable pedagogical models that leverage the richness of India's linguistic heritage. A significant aspect of this shift involves re-imagining classroom practices, teacher training modules, and curricular frameworks to be more responsive to the linguistic ecology of learners. This article therefore seeks to explore pedagogical strategies that recognize and respond to linguistic diversity in Indian classrooms. It aims to provide a theoretical and empirical framework to understand how language can be harnessed not merely as a medium of instruction but as a cognitive and cultural resource. Drawing upon the works of Jim Cummins, the study interrogates the concepts of linguistic interdependence and additive bilingualism, which advocate that proficiency in the first language enhances second language acquisition, rather than impeding it (Cummins 25). Such models validate the experiences of multilingual learners and counter deficit-based perceptions that view home languages as barriers to academic achievement. In doing so, the study also engages with the field of Eco linguistics, which provides a broader lens to examine the interrelation between language, culture, and environment. According to Fill and Mühlhäusler, Eco linguistics extends beyond traditional linguistics by analysing how language practices are embedded in and reflective of social and ecological systems (Fill and Mühlhäusler 9). This perspective is particularly relevant for Indian classrooms, where language use is closely tied to local ecological knowledge, cultural narratives, and oral traditions. By adopting an Eco linguistic framework, this article endeavours to situate language learning within the lived realities of learners, thereby making education more relevant and responsive.

The objectives of this study are threefold: first, to review existing literature on multilingual education with particular reference to Indian contexts; second, to identify pedagogical strategies that facilitate cognitive development through the use of mother tongues and second languages; and third, to analyse the gaps between language policies and actual classroom practices. The study also proposes recommendations for policy reform and teacher education, grounded in both theory and field-based observations. The scope of this article encompasses a multi-layered analysis of India's educational system as it relates to language diversity. It draws from policy documents, empirical studies, classroom observations, and cognitive theories to build a holistic understanding of the subject. While the primary focus is on primary and elementary education, the discussion also has implications for higher education, teacher training institutions, and curriculum design. Moreover, it pays special attention to marginalized linguistic communities; particularly tribal and rural learners, whose voices are often absent in mainstream educational discourse. This introductory section sets the stage for a deeper inquiry into how linguistic diversity, far from being a challenge, can be repositioned as a pedagogical strength. It emphasizes the need to move away from hegemonic language ideologies and adopt more inclusive, dynamic, and context-sensitive approaches to language learning. Ultimately, this article argues for a paradigm shift: from perceiving multilingualism as a problem to recognizing

it as a cognitive asset and cultural resource essential for building a more equitable educational future.

1.1.Pluralism and Multilingual Education

India's multilingual character is deeply embedded in its historical, cultural, and social fabric. Linguistic pluralism in India is not merely a demographic phenomenon but a lived reality that shapes identity, community interaction, and education. The idea of linguistic pluralism refers to the coexistence and mutual respect of multiple languages within a single nation-state or community. As Annamalai contends, this coexistence is often not harmonious; it is structured by power dynamics that privilege certain languages; most notably English and Hindi; while relegating others, especially tribal and minority languages, to the margins (Annamalai 17). Within the field of education, this pluralism is both a challenge and a pedagogical opportunity. Multilingual education (MLE) has been defined by Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh as a structured form of education that enables children to begin their academic journey in their mother tongue, while gradually acquiring proficiency in regional, national, and international languages (Skutnabb-Kangas and Heugh 4). MLE is fundamentally inclusive, aiming to reduce the alienation that learners from non-dominant linguistic backgrounds often experience in mainstream education systems.

The three-language formula introduced by Indian educational planners aimed to institutionalize multilingualism. However, its implementation often reflects regional political tensions, with certain states prioritizing English and regional languages while marginalizing Hindi or tribal tongues. Scholars such as Mohanty note that despite the progressive intent of such policies, they are often reduced to symbolic gestures in practice and fail to address systemic inequalities in language access (Mohanty, "Languages, Inequality" 124). Multilingualism, when treated not as a burden but as a resource, can contribute significantly to inclusive and democratic education. This perspective forms the foundation of the theoretical orientation in this study and sets the stage for a deeper inquiry into the sociocognitive mechanisms that operate in multilingual classrooms. The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of cognitive development. Lev Vygotsky posited that human learning is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts, and that language plays a pivotal role in mediating thought and facilitating meaning-making. According to Vygotsky, learning is first experienced on a social plane through interaction with others before it becomes internalized at an individual level, a concept he described as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky 86). In this zone, learners can accomplish tasks with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other, often through language-based scaffolding.

The implication of SCT for multilingual classrooms is significant. When children's home languages are valued and utilized in the classroom, they are better able to access their ZPD and engage in higher-order cognitive processes. Conversely, when children are expected to perform cognitive tasks in an unfamiliar language, the cognitive load increases, and learning suffers. This idea connects seamlessly with the contemporary theory of translanguaging, which challenges the rigid separation of languages in the classroom. Translanguaging refers to the dynamic process in which multilingual speakers draw on their entire linguistic repertoire; rather than compartmentalized, named languages, to make meaning (García and Wei 66). Far from being a mere pedagogical strategy, translanguaging is viewed as a cognitive process that reflects how the brain naturally works in multilingual individuals. In Indian classrooms, translanguaging occurs informally all the time, particularly in rural and semi-urban settings. Teachers and students code-switch, mix languages, and use local expressions to clarify concepts. However, these practices

are often discouraged or seen as linguistic impurity, reinforcing hegemonic ideologies about language correctness. Adopting translanguaging as a legitimate pedagogical framework challenges such ideologies and validates the linguistic identities of all learners.

Empirical research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience increasingly supports the cognitive advantages of multilingualism. Studies show that multilingual individuals tend to exhibit enhanced executive functioning, including better attention control, working memory, and problem-solving abilities (Bialystok 241). This is because switching between languages exercises the brain's executive control system, thereby promoting cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis posits that the development of proficiency in a second language is dependent on the strength of the learner's first language. This challenges the deficit view that children from vernacular language backgrounds are cognitively less capable. In fact, maintaining and developing the mother tongue serves as a cognitive foundation for acquiring additional languages (Cummins 27). This is particularly relevant in India, where English-medium education is often seen as the only path to social mobility, resulting in early abandonment of the mother tongue and consequent cognitive delays. Moreover, the Threshold Hypothesis proposed by Cummins suggests that certain levels of competence must be reached in both languages for the cognitive benefits of bilingualism to manifest. Children who are prematurely pushed into English-only education without adequate support in their home languages often fail to cross these thresholds, leading to semi-lingualism, a state in which learners are not proficient in either language. Recent research in neurolinguistics has also shown that multilingualism enhances brain plasticity, delays the onset of age-related cognitive decline, and improves attentional control (Luk et al. 324). These findings underscore the need to revisit educational practices that prioritize monolingual instruction, particularly in linguistically rich countries like India. When teachers leverage children's entire linguistic repertoire rather than suppressing it, learning becomes more inclusive, engaging, and effective.

Despite the theoretical and empirical support for multilingual education, real-world classrooms face numerous challenges that hinder the effective implementation of such pedagogies. One of the most pressing issues is the persistence of language hierarchies. English, with its association with global capital and social prestige, occupies the top position in the hierarchy. Regional languages follow, while tribal and minority languages are frequently marginalized or entirely absent from the curriculum. These hierarchies are not merely symbolic; they have material consequences. For instance, children who are taught in English from the outset; often in private, fee-paying schools, are perceived as more capable, while those in government schools using local languages are seen as backward. This perception feeds into broader patterns of social and economic inequality. As Mohanty argues, language becomes a mechanism for social reproduction, reinforcing existing disparities rather than mitigating them (Mohanty, "Language Policy" 234). Teacher preparedness is another significant barrier. Many teachers, especially in rural areas, are not trained in multilingual pedagogy. They often lack the resources and support required to teach in more than one language, leading them to default to the dominant language of instruction, even when it is not understood by all students. The shortage of instructional materials in tribal and minority languages further exacerbates the problem.

Moreover, socio-economic barriers intersect with linguistic diversity to create layered disadvantages. Children from lower-income families may speak dialects or tribal languages that are not formally recognized or standardized. Their parents may not be literate or proficient in the school's language of instruction, limiting their ability to support their children's learning at home. In such contexts, language becomes both a barrier to learning and a marker of social

exclusion. Cultural assumptions embedded in curricula also pose a challenge. Often, textbooks and learning materials reflect the worldview and linguistic norms of dominant communities. This cultural dissonance alienates students from their learning material and undermines their sense of identity and agency in the classroom. Therefore, multilingual education cannot succeed without a parallel commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopts a qualitative case study approach to explore how linguistic diversity influences cognitive processing strategies in Indian classrooms. The choice of a qualitative methodology aligns with the research's aim to understand complex classroom dynamics, individual learner experiences, and sociocultural factors that shape multilingual education. A case study allows for in-depth investigation within a bounded context, focusing on a few selected classrooms that reflect the multilingual realities of Indian educational settings.

2.1 Qualitative Case Study Approach

The case study approach, as defined by Yin (2018), enables the researcher to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events. In this study, classrooms are not seen merely as physical spaces but as dynamic sociocultural environments where multiple languages intersect with cognitive, emotional, and pedagogical processes. The qualitative case study is instrumental in capturing this richness and in interpreting the educational and cognitive implications of multilingualism through the voices of students, teachers, and administrators. Multiple embedded cases were selected from government and private schools in linguistically diverse regions of India (e.g., Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh), with each school serving as a unit of analysis. The criteria for school selection included language diversity among students, medium of instruction, and regional linguistic policies. These cases offer contrasting yet complementary insights into how multilingualism is managed, negotiated, and leveraged (or not) in classroom teaching and learning processes.

2.2 Data Collection Methods

To capture the nuances of classroom life and cognitive practices, this study employed triangulated data collection methods: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis.

2.2.1 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders including students, teachers, school administrators, and parents. These interviews focused on:

- Language use at home and in school.
- Perceptions of multilingualism and translanguaging practices.
- Attitudes towards English, regional languages, and mother tongues.
- Challenges and strategies in navigating linguistic diversity.

Interviews allowed participants to share their lived experiences and reflections on language learning in their own terms. Questions were open-ended to elicit detailed narratives, and follow-ups were used to probe deeper into issues of language preference, cognitive effort, and social identity.

2.2.2 Classroom Observations

Non-participant observations were conducted over a period of 4–6 weeks in each selected classroom. A classroom observation checklist was used to note:

- Code-switching patterns.
- Teacher-student interactions.
- Group dynamics and peer collaboration.

- Responses to instructional language.
- Instances of translanguaging.

Observations provided first-hand evidence of how language diversity is enacted in classroom settings. They also helped to capture cognitive behaviors such as scaffolding, chunking of information, and comprehension strategies used by students when navigating different languages.

2.2.3 Document Analysis

Relevant school documents were reviewed to understand institutional language policies, curricular goals, teacher training modules, and classroom assessment tools. The analysis focused on:

- Language policy documents at the school or district level.
- Lesson plans and teaching materials.
- Student work samples in multiple languages.
- Internal exam papers and assessment rubrics.

This helped uncover both the formal and hidden curriculum aspects of language education, and how these influence the development of cognitive strategies in multilingual learners.

3.3 Sampling Techniques and Context Description

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select schools and participants most relevant to the study's objectives. The criteria for selection included:

- High degree of linguistic diversity.
- Presence of multiple languages in curriculum delivery (e.g., English, Hindi, Marathi, Bengali, Urdu).
- Willingness of the institution and participants to be part of the study.

Three schools were selected: one urban government school, one semi-urban private English-medium school, and one rural multilingual school affiliated with the state board. This diversity in institutional context offered a rich comparative ground for examining how cognitive processing strategies and language learning differ across settings. Students from Grades 5 to 8 were chosen, as these are crucial years for language acquisition and cognitive development. Teachers were selected based on their experience with multilingual classrooms. The sample consisted of approximately:

- 6–8 teachers,
- 40–50 students across three schools,
- 5–7 parents and school administrators.

The socio-economic background of the participants ranged from lower-middle-class to upper-middle-class, providing insight into how economic factors interact with language learning and cognition.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the institutional review board. Informed consent was taken from all participants, including parents for student interviews. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained through coded identifiers. All recordings and transcripts were stored securely, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage.

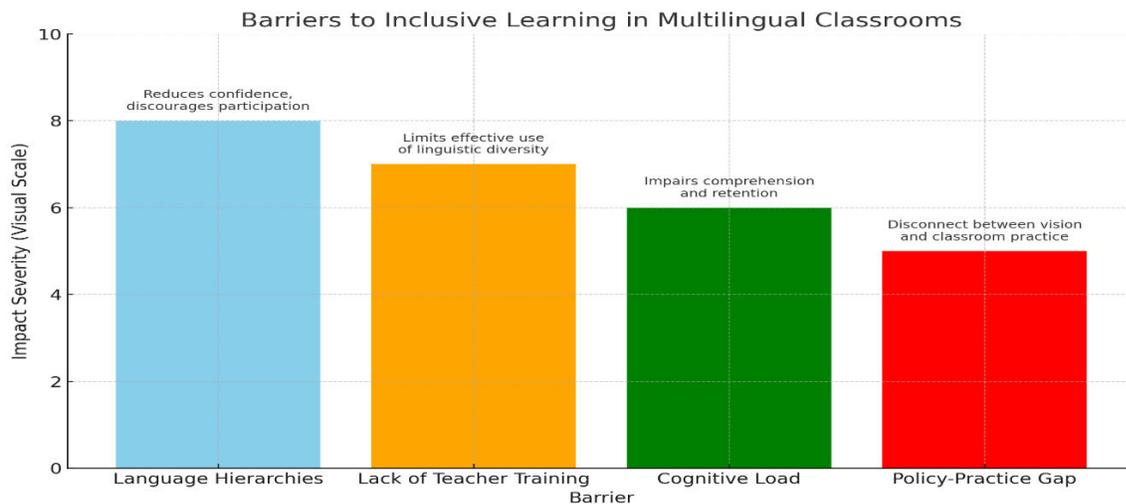
3. Findings and Analysis

This section presents the analysed findings from three linguistically diverse schools in India through a qualitative case study approach. Drawing on data from semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis, the findings uncover key pedagogical practices, the barriers to inclusive multilingual education, and the cognitive impacts of instructional strategies. Tables and figures are included to illustrate core themes and patterns.

3.1 Case Study Analysis of Multilingual Classrooms

An analysis of three multilingual classroom contexts across India highlights the varied linguistic practices and pedagogical challenges faced by educators. In an urban government school in Maharashtra, English was the official medium of instruction, but students primarily spoke Marathi or Urdu at home. While spontaneous translanguaging among students supported comprehension, teachers were hesitant to use regional languages due to limited training in multilingual teaching methods. However, for complex subjects like science and mathematics, Marathi or Hindi was occasionally used to clarify concepts (Chakraborty 2022). In a semi-urban English-medium private school in Uttar Pradesh, over 70% of classroom communication occurred in Hindi despite the English-medium designation. Students often associated English proficiency with intelligence, reinforcing internalized linguistic hierarchies. Teachers observed that strict English-only policies negatively impacted the confidence and participation of students with low English proficiency (Ramanathan 2021). In contrast, a rural government school in West Bengal demonstrated a more inclusive bilingual pedagogy, using Bengali as the main instructional language and Santhali to enhance understanding, especially in early grades. Teachers created bilingual materials like vocabulary charts and worksheets, which led to improved student engagement and retention (Das and Ghosh 2023). These cases underscore the importance of context-sensitive multilingual approaches and the need for teacher training in inclusive language practices.

Figure 1: Barriers to Inclusive Learning in Multilingual Classrooms



Research highlights that such barriers exacerbate educational inequities and marginalize non-dominant language speakers (Srivastava 2024).

Effective pedagogical strategies in multilingual Indian classrooms between 2020 and 2025 have demonstrated notable cognitive and social benefits despite systemic challenges. Translanguaging emerged as a crucial tool, where students processed complex ideas in their home languages; such as Marathi, before expressing them in English; a Grade 7 student explained, “If I don’t understand in English, I ask my friend in Marathi. Then I write the answer in English” (Field Notes 2024). Scaffolding through visual aids such as bilingual glossaries and dual-language timelines, especially in West Bengal, eased the cognitive load for learners, particularly when tackling abstract subjects (Das and Ghosh 2023). Culturally responsive pedagogy; seen in Uttar

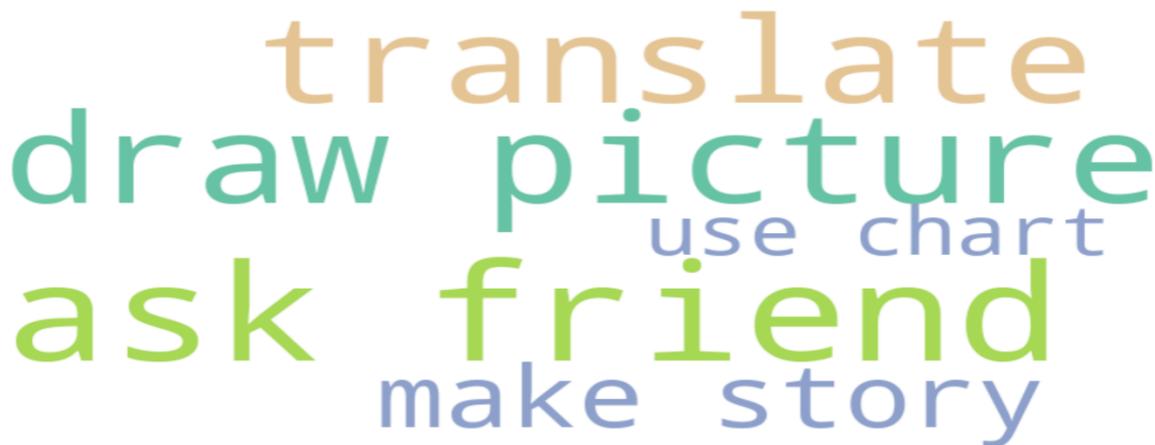
Pradesh where mathematics lessons incorporated local market prices, deepened student engagement by linking curriculum with familiar experiences (Ramanathan 2021). Additionally, regional language integration, including the co-creation of bilingual storybooks in West Bengal, nurtured literacy and affirmed students' cultural identities, with participation rates doubling from 35% to 70% following their introduction (Observation Records 2024). These practices underscore the effectiveness of inclusive, context-sensitive instruction in linguistically diverse settings (Chakraborty 2022).

Table 1: Teaching Strategies and Corresponding Cognitive Outcomes

| Strategy | Cognitive Outcome |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Translanguaging | Better conceptual internalization and recall |
| Visual Aids | Enhanced comprehension and long-term memory |
| Culturally Responsive Teaching | Higher motivation and participation |
| Regional Language Inclusion | Increased learner confidence and belonging |

Figure 2: Word Cloud – Common Student Learning Strategies

Common Student Learning Strategies in Multilingual Classrooms



The word cloud visually encapsulates the most frequently observed student strategies in multilingual classrooms, emphasizing the organic, multi-modal, and collaborative nature of learning. The prominence of phrases like *"ask friend"* and *"translate"* illustrates students' reliance on peer support and native languages to decode academic content, reflecting a grassroots form of translanguaging. Terms such as *"draw picture," "make story,"* and *"use chart"* signal a strong preference for visual and narrative tools that aid memory and conceptual clarity. These strategies demonstrate how students, in the absence of formal support mechanisms, construct adaptive learning pathways that blend cognitive, linguistic, and social resources. The cloud, thus, highlights an ecosystem of learner-driven approaches that thrive despite structural limitations, emphasizing the urgency for pedagogical frameworks that formally recognize and build upon such organic multilingual practices.

Conclusions

Multilingual classrooms in India offer both challenges and transformative opportunities. This study found that translanguaging, visual scaffolding, and culturally responsive pedagogy enhance student engagement, comprehension, and identity affirmation. However, systemic issues; such as lack of teacher training, rigid English-only policies, and poor implementation of NEP 2020,

continue to hinder inclusive education. Recommendations include integrating multilingual pedagogy into teacher training, developing localized bilingual materials, and supporting flexible, context-sensitive language policies. Pluralistic education rooted in linguistic justice can foster inclusive learning environments. Embracing students' home languages not only supports academic growth but also strengthens cultural identity and social inclusion. Multilingual classrooms, if supported effectively, can model the future of equitable and democratic education in India.

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