

Linguistic Diversity and English Pedagogy: A Preliminary Study in the Tea-Garden Classrooms

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Abstract

The learners in the tea garden schools of Assam come from diverse linguistic backgrounds including Assamese, Sadri, Mising, Nepali, Bengali, and others, and the majority of them hail from the tea community. The rich linguistic diversity goes mostly unutilized and the language mostly used for teaching English is Assamese (the medium of instruction). This poses challenges for learners from linguistic backgrounds other than Assamese. This preliminary study explores the usage of languages in the English teaching-learning process at the tea-garden upper primary government schools, shedding light on the intricate linguistic dynamics within the classroom and the challenges associated with it. Findings indicate teachers' partial awareness about learners' linguistic backgrounds, gaps between teachers' reported practices and actual practices in terms of language use, classroom procedures mostly dominated by the use of Assamese language, and reveal some language learning challenges caused by the complex linguistic setting and socio-economic backgrounds of learners.

Keywords: Tea garden schools; upper primary government schools; linguistic diversity.


INTRODUCTION


Linguistic diversity in Indian classrooms is a significant and complex phenomenon reflecting the country's rich tapestry of languages and cultures. With over more than 19,000 languages and dialects spoken as mother tongues, Indian classrooms often host learners who speak different regional languages (*Census of India 2011: Data on Language*, 2011). This diversity presents both opportunities and challenges for the teachers, who must navigate the complexities of multilingual instruction to ensure inclusive and effective learning environments. In this scenario, teaching English to linguistically diverse classrooms require addressing the varied linguistic background of learners. Research indicates that employing multilingual strategies by leveraging learners' home language as a bridge to learning English can enhance comprehension (Mohanty, 2006). Utilizing Assam as a case study, Borah (2018) reported that within the prevailing milieu of multilingualism, a substantial majority, that is ninety percent, of teachers lack formal training for English language instruction at the primary level. The fact that the teachers are not equipped to deal with multilingualism in the

classroom combined with the lack of methodological guidelines for dealing with linguistically diverse classrooms appears to affect the teaching-learning environment negatively.

The linguistic plurality in the government schools in tea garden areas of Assam creates a complex educational environment where language barriers often hinder learners' comprehension and academic progress. Research indicates that many learners in these schools struggle with the medium of instruction, which is typically Assamese, and their poor socio-economic status leads to lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates (Sahu & Bhuyan, 2022). Additionally, due to the economic hardships faced by the tea community people, children are compelled to do labour, which affects their school attendance and academic progress (Begum & Islam, 2021). Several other critical deficiencies that exist in the tea garden schools include insufficient teaching materials, inadequate school infrastructure, and lack of trained teachers which hampers the quality of education provided (Borah & Kalita, 2012). Although these studies highlight some educational aspects of the tea garden schools and the learners, there is a lack of

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research focusing on the English language pedagogies in these schools.

THE CONTEXT

The linguistic milieu within the classrooms of tea garden schools in Assam demands considerable attention. These educational settings accommodate learners from varied linguistic backgrounds, including Sadri (Assamese Sadri), Kurmali, Santhali, Assamese, Mising, Nepali, Bengali, among others (Sarmah, 2018). However, approximately seventy percent of the learners hail from the tea community, for whom Assamese serves as a secondary language utilized as a medium for teaching English in these schools. Also, there exists a language gap between the teachers and the learners of these schools as many of the teachers do not belong to the learners' communities (Phukan, 2019). Although the learners have been made to learn the English language at an early stage, the teaching of English in these vernacular medium government schools has not been effective enough. The main reason is that the teachers are not exposed to the many approaches to teaching English in such a setting and the use of traditional methods makes the

classroom teacher dominant and the learners as passive listeners (Goswami, 2020).

The intricate nature of linguistic diversity characterizing these schools sets them apart from many other government-run schools, where linguistic diversity tends to be less, thus presenting English language teachers in these contexts with formidable pedagogical challenges. Conducted as part of the doctoral study, this study serves as an initial inquiry into the pedagogical practices prevalent in tea garden schools, and the researchers focused on the following three areas:

1. Teachers' awareness on learners' indigenous linguistic background
2. Classroom procedures and language use in the teaching and learning process
3. Challenges faced by the teachers

METHODOLOGY

The present investigation constitutes a small-scale qualitative study. Data were gathered from two upper primary tea garden government schools of the Sivasagar district of Assam and the participants were selected based on purposive sampling.

Table 1. Participants' profiles

Teacher Code	Gender	Qualification	Teaching Exp.	First Language	Other Language Spoken
Teacher 1	F	M.A. (Econ.), B.Ed.	4 years	Assamese	English, Hindi
Teacher 2	F	B.A.	27 years	Assamese	English, Hindi
Teacher 3	F	B.A. (Pol. Sci.), B.Ed.	1 years	Assamese	English, Hindi
Teacher 4	M	B.A. (Eng.)	22 years	Assamese	English, Hindi, Bagania
Teacher 5	M	B.A. (Econ.)	27 years	Assamese	English, Hindi, Bengali
Teacher 6	F	H.S.L.C	29 years	Assamese	English, Hindi, Bagania

Participants

Six teachers had participated in this preliminary survey who taught the English subject in grades VI, VII, and VIII. All six teachers' native/first language was Assamese, although they also communicated in Hindi, English, and Bengali. Two teachers also speak the Bagania language. The age range of participants was 25-55 years. While two participants completed a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) training course post their graduation, the remaining four did not undergo any specific training. Each participant had at least one year of teaching experience. The table.1 shows a detailed description of the teachers' profiles.

Survey tools

The data collection instruments utilized in this survey included:

- **Structured Questionnaire:** A structured questionnaire was prepared by the researchers which featured six closed-ended and five open-ended questions.
- **Observation checklist:** A checklist was developed to observe English language teachers' classroom practices and it included two sections: close-ended observation points and open-ended observation points. A total of five classroom observations were conducted, each of 45 minutes (3 hours 45 minutes in total). Specifically, two observations were conducted in grade VI, two in grade VII, and one in grade VIII of four teachers.

■ **Unstructured Group Interviews:** Group interviews with the teachers of the two schools were conducted, without any pre-determined questions, to explore their perspectives and beliefs regarding their learners, and to ascertain any alignment between verbal opinions and written responses.

Ethical Considerations

Written permission was obtained from the Headteachers of both schools at the onset of the study, facilitated by an application from the researcher's supervisor. Participants provided consent prior to interviews and questionnaire administration and classroom observations were conducted without disrupting the normal class proceedings.

FINDINGS

The findings have been discussed taking the three focused areas into consideration:

1. Teachers' awareness on learners' indigenous linguistic background

Given the pivotal role of learners' native languages in the acquisition of a second language, respondents were asked about the learners' home languages, thereby gauging their cognizance of such linguistic diversity. Examination of responses revealed that the learners' home languages include a variety of languages namely Sadri (also known as Bagania), Mising, Bengali, Assamese, Nepali, and various other dialects typical to tea garden communities. Predominantly, the respondents identified Assamese and Sadri as the principal languages among learners. However, it was noticed that the

teachers were not aware of the names of the dialects spoken by tea community learners, they were mostly of the view that the cloud term "Bagania" represents all the languages of the tea community.

2. Classroom procedures and language use in teaching and learning processes

The common classroom procedures reflected a mix of good practices (like connecting learning to real-life situations, etc.) and elements of a traditional classroom (very limited learner interaction, teacher-centric activities, etc.). All the teachers started their classes with activities like quizzes or talking about real-life experiences from previous lessons or poems, except for Teacher 1, who didn't do these activities and just began the lessons directly. While Teacher 2 engaged some learners in reading sections of the lesson, they encountered difficulties with English word pronunciations. Furthermore, Teacher 2 administered a quiz before concluding the session. Teacher 1 encouraged learners to recite a poem aloud and engaged them in discussions regarding real-life experiences aligned with the poem's themes. Teacher 3, responsible for teaching grammar to grade VII learners, predominantly utilized the blackboard and assigned classwork, resulting in limited interaction with learners. Encouraging silent reading, Teacher 3 also provided word definitions in Assamese for challenging English terms on the blackboard. Notably, Teacher1 and Teacher 4 offered positive feedback to learners, despite their struggles with certain English words and phrases.

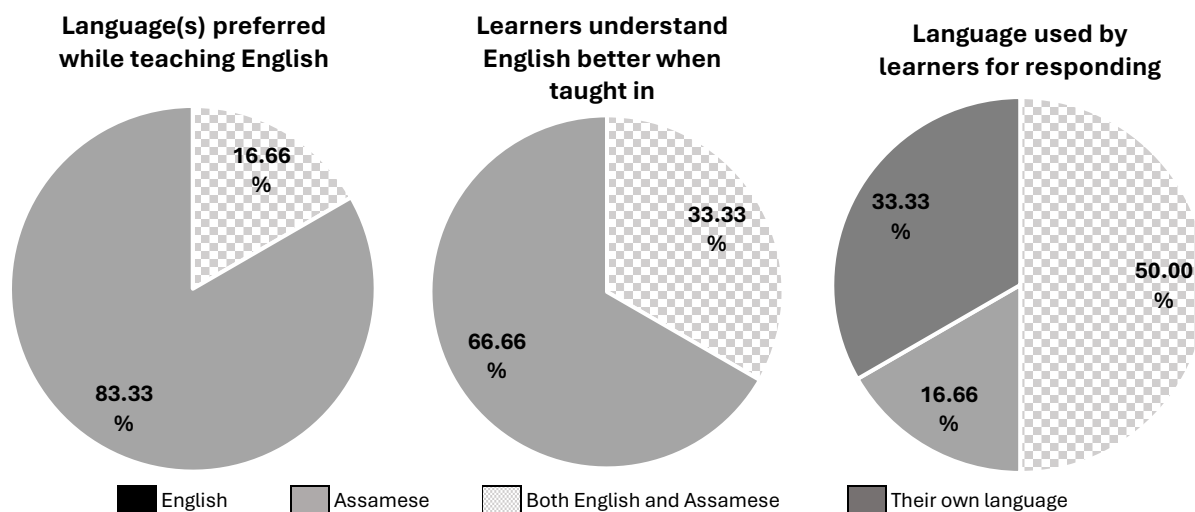


Figure 1. Teachers' responses on their preferences and perspectives

Upon investigating the ways languages are used in teaching and learning processes, the questionnaire responses and classroom observations revealed two different pictures. Through the questionnaire responses to the close-ended questions, it was found that all the teachers integrated both Assamese and English in English language pedagogy.

While a minority favoured exclusive instruction in Assamese as optimal for learner learning, the majority contends that bilingual instruction, including both Assamese and English, leads to better learning outcomes. Majority of them were of the opinion that the learners understand better when taught using both Assamese and English. No teacher chose the option of using any languages except Assamese and English. Furthermore, the majority of them responded that learners use Assamese as well as their own language (first/home language) in the English classroom to respond. The graphical representation (Figure 1) of these responses illustrates prevailing perspectives and preferences among the teachers regarding language use in the English classroom

Notably, the majority of respondents supported occasional utilisation of learners' first as well as other languages within English classrooms to optimize learning efficacy (Figure 2).

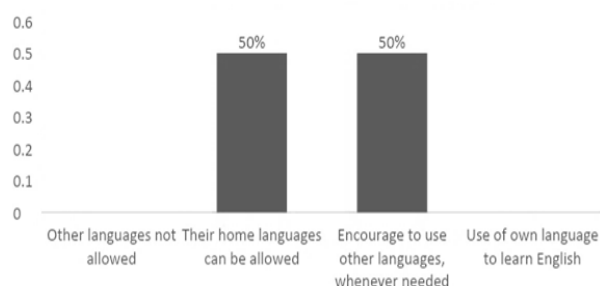


Figure 2. Teachers' responses regarding their opinion about learners' use of language in English classes

However, during the classroom observation, it was observed that all the teachers predominantly used only the Assamese language to elucidate English content, including poems, texts, and grammatical concepts during the lessons. Also, engaging in frequent questioning, they tried to assess learners' comprehension. Teacher1 and Teacher 2 resorted to translating individual English terms to Assamese when instructing grade VI and grade VIII learners, respectively. Notably, Teacher 4 encountered difficulty eliciting

responses from learners during a poetry-based lesson, indicative of their lack of confidence. Conversely, Teacher 3 faced interruptions from grade VII learners, who struggled to follow instructions even when delivered in Assamese. Additionally, Teacher 4 utilized the blackboard to provide Assamese transliterations of English alphabets to aid pronunciation. Despite acknowledging the potential benefits of incorporating learners' home languages in English learning, none of the teachers implemented this strategy in their classrooms.

The figure below provides an overview of the close-ended observation points of the five lessons (45 minutes each):

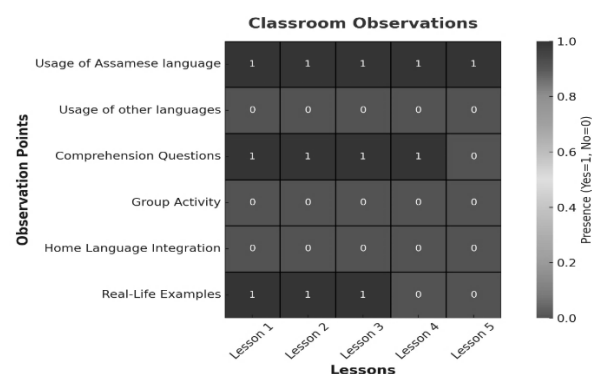


Figure 3. A representation of the classroom observation findings for English lessons

Challenges faced by the teachers

Since this was a preliminary study, the questions asked through the questionnaire and in the focus group discussion was kept a bit general. The teachers were asked to share challenges they encountered in delivering English instructions, and the researchers attempted to see their connections to the complexities possibly created by linguistic diversity. Responses revealed several recurring challenges, notably centred around grammatical intricacies, reading difficulties characterized by incorrect pronunciation, writing challenges typified by inaccurate spelling, limited English lexicon, and the need to deal with comprehension disparities resulting from the linguistic gap between learners' native language and the language of instruction. Notably, the latter challenge, which has a clear connection to the complexities of a linguistically diverse language classroom, corroborated findings explained by Phukan (2019), emphasising the linguistic barrier prevailing between tea garden learners and teachers.

The teachers also shared some challenges posed by the socio-economic status of the learners in the tea garden schools. Some such challenges include family constraints resulting from a disadvantaged background, limited ability of the parents to give them academic support, and insufficient training at the lower primary level as reflected in the following excerpts of the teachers (as translated by the researchers) respectively:

- "Only a minority of the learners demonstrate satisfactory academic performance in examinations as their attendance is irregular. A significant number of students appear in unkempt attire, and some do not wear the required school uniform. This situation may be attributed to the limited time parents have to adequately supervise and look after their children."
- "Parents are not able to assist the learners with homework due to their own illiteracy. However, most learners display sincerity and willingness for learning. They complete their homework on time, actively ask questions in the classes, and participate in various activities with interest."
- "The learners from the tea community are not regular in doing homework or attending classes as compared to learners from the other indigenous tribes. Moreover, the girls are more attentive and regular than the boys."
- "Even grade VIII learners struggle to read and write in English. We are compelled to translate every word and sentence into Assamese. We feel that this challenge stems from inadequate teaching instructions at the lower primary level."

Apart from their thoughts on the learning situation, all the teachers felt that they require professional training courses and educational programs that will assist them in guiding linguistically diverse classrooms.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings underscore the English language teachers' lack of awareness of many home languages prevalent among learners attending the two tea garden schools. It is apparent that a majority of learners are identified as Sadri and Assamese speakers. Despite tea-garden learners' novice proficiency in Assamese, difficulties persist in comprehending English content delivered in this language by the teachers. This predicament stems from the learners' limited familiarity with the standard Assamese, as they

predominantly speak a hybrid form known as "Chah Bagichar Asomiya" (Tea-garden Assamese, also known as Assamese Sadri), as delineated by Sarma (2011).

Even though the majority of the teachers preferred a bilingual approach using both Assamese and English for teaching English, their actual practice seems to be different. Their practices are dominated by the use of Assamese language. Moreover, using the home languages of the learners speaking the minority languages is not conceived as a part of their pedagogical practices. However, this methodology seems to be ineffective in facilitating English language learning particularly among the speakers of languages other than Assamese. This instructional challenge is endemic to governmental schools across India, albeit exacerbated in tea-garden schools due to teachers' linguistic limitations, the minority status of learners' languages and the existence of multiple home languages within a single classroom.

Although teachers express positive opinions regarding the integration of home languages in English classrooms, they lack practical strategies for implementation, mainly due to their limited knowledge of translanguaging practices. Only two of the participants possessed the requisite B.Ed. training for primary school teaching, while the remaining three participants held qualifications up to the graduation level without receiving specialized pedagogical training. Even among those who received training, a lack of structured instructional strategies for dealing with linguistic diversity in a language classroom was observed.

Research on multilingualism and translanguaging has highlighted that utilizing learners' home language in the second or third language pedagogy (in this case, English) effectively helps in improving the learning environment (Ferland, 2017) of linguistically diverse classrooms. This can be done by utilizing the home languages of the learners as an asset by the language teachers rather than a hindrance (Cummins, 2007; NCERT, 2023). However, the classroom observations conducted for this study in both schools reveal a notable absence of learners' languages in pedagogical practice and this could be one of the possible reasons for pedagogical challenges that exist in these schools. In order to overcome these challenges, the teachers need to be trained so

that they can make use of the entire language repertoire present in their linguistically diverse classrooms rather than relying only on the Assamese language, by following various translanguaging practices such as offering opportunities for learners to use their home languages in classroom activities and group works. This need for training is even more pertinent in a context fraught with challenges stemming from the socio-economically and academically disadvantaged backgrounds of the learners.

Hence, this study has heightened our awareness of the English teaching-learning practices that exist in the linguistically diverse tea garden classrooms. There seems to be a pressing need to prioritize the proficient execution of English language teacher training initiatives, aimed at equipping teachers with requisite strategies and methodologies conducive to effectively addressing the demands of linguistically diverse educational environments.

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