

INTERPLAY BETWEEN MOTHER TONGUE SKILLS AND ENGLISH COMMUNICATION AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL LEARNERS

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Abstract

This study investigates the complex relationship between mother tongue proficiency and English communication skills among secondary school learners in India. The primary objective was to examine how native language competence influences English language acquisition and communicative abilities in educational contexts. Employing a mixed-methods approach, this research hypothesized that strong mother tongue foundations positively correlate with enhanced English communication skills. The study involved 420 secondary school students (grades 9-10) from diverse linguistic backgrounds across urban and semi-urban schools in three Indian states. Data collection utilized standardized language proficiency tests, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Results revealed a significant positive correlation ($r=0.68$, $p<0.01$) between mother tongue literacy levels and English communication competence. Students with robust native language foundations demonstrated superior metalinguistic awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and grammatical accuracy in English. The findings also indicated that bilingual instructional strategies enhanced overall communicative competence by 34% compared to English-only approaches. Discussion emphasizes the cognitive advantages of mother tongue literacy in second language development, highlighting pedagogical implications for multilingual education frameworks. The study concludes that integrating mother tongue instruction strengthens rather than impedes English language learning, advocating for balanced bilingual educational policies in Indian secondary schools.

Keywords: *Mother tongue proficiency¹, English communication², bilingual education³, secondary learners⁴, metalinguistic awareness⁵.*

1. Introduction

The linguistic landscape of India presents a unique educational challenge and opportunity, with over 22 officially recognized languages and hundreds of dialects coexisting within a single educational framework. English, while being a language of wider communication and academic advancement, often conflicts with students' native linguistic identities in classroom settings. Secondary school learners, positioned at a critical juncture of cognitive and linguistic development, navigate this complex multilingual environment while striving for English proficiency essential for higher education and career prospects. The debate surrounding medium of instruction and the role of mother tongue in English language teaching has intensified in recent educational discourse, particularly following the National Education Policy 2020's emphasis on multilingual education and

mother tongue-based instruction. Research in applied linguistics increasingly recognizes that first language competence serves as a cognitive foundation for acquiring additional languages. The interdependence hypothesis proposed by scholars suggests that skills developed in one's native language transfer to second language learning, creating a common underlying proficiency that facilitates bilingual development. However, Indian educational contexts present contradictory practices, with many schools adopting English-medium instruction from primary levels while simultaneously witnessing high dropout rates and low learning outcomes among students from vernacular backgrounds. This paradox raises critical questions about optimal pedagogical approaches for developing English communication skills without compromising students' native language foundations. Secondary school learners, typically aged 14-16 years, possess established cognitive frameworks in their mother tongues but face increasing pressure to demonstrate English proficiency for board examinations, competitive tests, and future academic pursuits. The linguistic anxiety experienced by these learners often stems from perceived inadequacy in English rather than actual communicative deficits. Understanding how mother tongue skills interact with English language development at this crucial educational stage can inform evidence-based policy decisions and instructional practices. The current study addresses this gap by systematically examining the relationship between native language proficiency and English communication abilities among secondary school students across diverse linguistic communities in India, providing empirical evidence to support multilingual pedagogical frameworks that honor linguistic diversity while promoting English competence.

2. Literature Review

The extensive literature on bilingualism and second language acquisition reveals compelling evidence for the positive correlation between mother tongue proficiency and additional language learning (Cummins, 1979). Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis proposes that competencies developed in one language transfer to second language learning, creating common underlying proficiency that facilitates bilingual development. This theoretical framework has profound implications for educational practices in multilingual contexts like India, where linguistic diversity intersects with English language requirements in academic settings (Mohanty, 2019). Recent research from the UNESCO State of the Education Report for India 2025 emphasizes mother tongue-based multilingual education as essential for educational equity, enhanced learning outcomes, and cultural inclusion. The report, grounded in extensive field research across Indian states, demonstrates that children educated in their home language during early years develop stronger cognitive foundations and superior language acquisition capabilities (UNESCO, 2025). Vogelzang's 2025 study in TESOL Quarterly further corroborates these findings, revealing that minority language-speaking children in India who lack mother tongue support experience significant difficulties in subject comprehension when instruction occurs primarily in regional or majority languages (Vogelzang et al., 2025).

The cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism extend specifically to metalinguistic awareness, defined as the metacognitive ability to consciously reflect upon and manipulate language structures (Bialystok & Barac, 2012). Multiple empirical investigations confirm that bilingual learners demonstrate enhanced metalinguistic awareness compared to monolingual counterparts. Rauch and colleagues' longitudinal study tracking students from elementary through secondary school established metalinguistic awareness as a significant predictor for foreign language learning success (Rauch et al., 2016). Similarly, research examining bilingual effects across diverse linguistic backgrounds found that bilingual children consistently outperformed monolinguals on metalinguistic tasks requiring structural analysis of language, despite sometimes exhibiting smaller vocabulary sizes in individual languages (Bialystok et al., 2010). The translation of these cognitive advantages into practical educational outcomes depends significantly on instructional approaches. Emerging evidence from multilingual education contexts suggests that pedagogical strategies incorporating mother tongue instruction enhance rather than impede English language acquisition. Recent work on intercultural communicative competence

demonstrates that multilingual individuals exhibit greater cognitive flexibility, enhanced empathy, and superior adaptability in communication contexts (Gumperz, 1982; Kramsch, 2006). Task-based language teaching combined with translanguaging pedagogies allows learners to leverage their complete linguistic repertoires, resulting in more effective language learning outcomes than strictly monolingual instructional approaches (Cenoz, 2017).

Indian educational contexts present unique challenges and opportunities for examining mother tongue-English interplay. The National Education Policy 2020's recommendation for mother tongue instruction until at least Grade 5, preferably Grade 8, reflects recognition of linguistic foundations' importance in cognitive development (Government of India, 2020). However, implementation faces practical obstacles including inadequate teacher training for multilingual pedagogy, insufficient multilingual learning materials, and persistent societal perceptions linking English-medium education with social mobility. Research examining mother tongue influence on English learning among high school students in Chennai found that while native language interference creates initial challenges in grammar and pronunciation, students with strong mother tongue foundations ultimately achieve superior English proficiency through enhanced metalinguistic awareness and strategic language transfer (Mageshwari & Selvakumar, 2023). Cross-linguistic transfer research provides empirical evidence supporting mother tongue instruction's benefits. Studies on Spanish-English bilingual children demonstrate that vocabulary knowledge and morphosyntactic competence in the first language positively correlate with second language acquisition across multiple domains (Bedore et al., 2023). These findings align with the threshold hypothesis, which posits that adequate first language competence creates a foundation enabling successful second language development without cognitive deficits (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukoma, 1976). Contemporary research extending beyond early childhood confirms these patterns persist through adolescence, with secondary school bilingual students demonstrating advantages in foreign language learning attributable to heightened metalinguistic skills and cross-linguistic awareness (Maluch et al., 2016).

3. Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between mother tongue proficiency levels and English communication competence among secondary school learners.
2. To analyze the effectiveness of bilingual instructional approaches compared to English-only pedagogy in developing communicative skills among multilingual learners.

4. Methodology

This mixed-methods investigation employed a convergent parallel design to comprehensively examine the interplay between mother tongue skills and English communication competencies. The study was conducted across six secondary schools in three Indian states (Maharashtra, Karnataka, and West Bengal), selected through stratified purposive sampling to ensure linguistic and socioeconomic diversity. The participant pool comprised 420 students enrolled in grades 9 and 10 (ages 14-16 years), representing five major linguistic backgrounds: Hindi, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali, and Tamil speakers. Quantitative data collection utilized three standardized instruments: the Mother Tongue Proficiency Assessment measuring reading comprehension, vocabulary breadth, and grammatical accuracy in native languages; the English Communication Competence Test evaluating speaking fluency, listening comprehension, and written expression; and the Metalinguistic Awareness Inventory assessing participants' conscious knowledge of language structures and cross-linguistic transfer strategies. These assessments were administered during September-November 2024, with testing occurring in familiar classroom environments to minimize anxiety effects.

Qualitative components included structured classroom observations across 48 instructional sessions documenting pedagogical practices, language use patterns, and student engagement levels. Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 60 purposively selected students representing varied proficiency levels and linguistic backgrounds, exploring their perceptions of mother tongue's role in English learning, code-switching practices, and metalinguistic strategies. Teacher interviews complemented student perspectives, providing insights into instructional challenges and observed learning patterns. Statistical analyses employed Pearson correlation coefficients to examine relationships between mother tongue proficiency and English competence scores, followed by multiple regression analyses controlling for socioeconomic status, school type, and prior English exposure. Independent samples t-tests compared outcomes between students receiving bilingual instruction versus English-only pedagogy. Qualitative data underwent thematic analysis using iterative coding processes, with intercoder reliability established through independent analysis by two researchers achieving 87% agreement. Triangulation across quantitative and qualitative findings enhanced validity and provided comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

5. Results

Correlation between Mother Tongue Proficiency and English Communication

Statistical analyses revealed significant positive correlations between mother tongue proficiency levels and English communication competence across all measured dimensions. The overall correlation coefficient of $r=0.68$ ($p<0.01$) indicated a strong relationship between native language literacy and English language abilities. Disaggregated analysis demonstrated particularly robust correlations in vocabulary acquisition ($r=0.71$, $p<0.001$) and grammatical accuracy ($r=0.65$, $p<0.01$), while speaking fluency showed moderate correlation ($r=0.52$, $p<0.05$). Students categorized in the high mother tongue proficiency group (top quartile, $n=105$) scored an average of 78.4% on English communication assessments compared to 54.2% for students in the low mother tongue proficiency group (bottom quartile, $n=103$), representing a 44.6% performance differential. Multiple regression analysis controlling for confounding variables including socioeconomic status, urban versus rural school location, and years of English instruction confirmed mother tongue proficiency as the most significant predictor, explaining 42% of variance in English communication scores ($\beta=0.58$, $t=8.42$, $p<0.001$).

Metalinguistic Awareness as Mediating Factor

Metalinguistic awareness scores demonstrated stronger correlations with English proficiency ($r=0.74$, $p<0.001$) than direct mother tongue proficiency measures, suggesting a mediational pathway. Students with robust mother tongue foundations scored 34% higher on metalinguistic awareness assessments, exhibiting superior abilities in identifying grammatical structures, analyzing syntactic patterns, and executing strategic cross-linguistic transfers. Classroom observation data corroborated these quantitative findings, documenting that high mother tongue proficiency students spontaneously employed comparative linguistic analysis 3.2 times more frequently than peers with limited native language literacy.

Comparative Effectiveness of Instructional Approaches

Schools implementing bilingual instructional models ($n=210$ students across three schools) demonstrated significantly superior outcomes compared to English-only institutions ($n=210$ students across three schools). Students in bilingual programs scored an average 34% higher on comprehensive English communication assessments ($M=72.8$, $SD=11.3$) versus English-only programs ($M=54.3$, $SD=14.7$), with independent samples t-test confirming statistical significance ($t(418)=15.32$, $p<0.001$, Cohen's $d=1.42$). Longitudinal tracking across

the academic year revealed differential improvement rates, with bilingual instruction students demonstrating 58% improvement in English proficiency compared to 31% for English-only instruction cohorts. Qualitative interview analysis revealed bilingual instruction students reported 67% higher confidence levels in English communication and described more sophisticated metalinguistic strategies including deliberate vocabulary mapping, grammatical structure comparison, and strategic code-switching for conceptual clarity.

6. Discussion

Cognitive Foundations: The Role of Linguistic Interdependence

The findings strongly support Cummins' linguistic interdependence hypothesis, demonstrating that competencies developed through mother tongue literacy create transferable cognitive frameworks facilitating English acquisition (Cummins, 1979, 2000). The documented positive correlation between native language proficiency and English communication competence aligns with contemporary research establishing mother tongue instruction as foundational for academic success in additional languages (UNESCO, 2025; Vogelzang et al., 2025). These results challenge prevalent assumptions in Indian educational discourse that early English-medium instruction accelerates proficiency, instead suggesting that robust mother tongue foundations optimize cognitive readiness for multilingual competence. The particularly strong correlation observed in vocabulary acquisition and grammatical accuracy domains reflects metalinguistic awareness's mediating role. Students with advanced mother tongue literacy demonstrated superior ability to identify linguistic patterns, apply grammatical rules systematically, and execute cross-linguistic transfers strategically. This finding resonates with Bialystok's research establishing metalinguistic awareness as a cognitive advantage specific to bilingual individuals, enabling more sophisticated language analysis and manipulation (Bialystok, 2001; Bialystok et al., 2010). The documented 34% higher metalinguistic awareness scores among high mother tongue proficiency students substantiate claims that bilingualism enhances cognitive flexibility and analytical capabilities extending beyond language domains.

Classroom observation data provided nuanced understanding of how mother tongue competence translates into English learning advantages. Students with strong native language foundations spontaneously employed sophisticated strategies including conceptual mapping across languages, grammatical structure comparison, and deliberate application of phonological awareness from first language to English pronunciation challenges. These behaviors exemplify what Cenoz describes as translanguaging pedagogy's benefits, wherein learners leverage complete linguistic repertoires rather than compartmentalizing languages (Cenoz, 2017). Such strategic language use reflects deeper cognitive processing and conscious metalinguistic manipulation unavailable to students lacking robust mother tongue foundations.

Pedagogical Implications: Bilingual Instructional Superiority

The empirical evidence demonstrating 34% higher achievement in bilingual instruction programs compared to English-only approaches carries significant implications for educational policy and classroom practice. These findings align with global research establishing mother tongue-based multilingual education as optimal for learning outcomes, cognitive development, and long-term academic success (Ball, 2011; UNESCO, 2025). The documented 58% versus 31% improvement rates suggest bilingual instruction creates more sustainable language development trajectories by building on existing cognitive-linguistic foundations rather than attempting to replace them. Interview data revealing 67% higher confidence levels among bilingual instruction students illuminates affective dimensions often overlooked in language education research. Linguistic anxiety, frequently experienced by students in English-only environments where their native linguistic identities receive minimal validation, can significantly impede communication development (Mohanty, 2019). Bilingual pedagogy's

acknowledgment of students' complete linguistic repertoires appears to reduce anxiety while simultaneously providing cognitive scaffolding through familiar language structures. This dual benefit psychological comfort plus cognitive accessibility explains the substantial performance advantages observed. The effectiveness of bilingual instructional approaches also reflects practical pedagogical advantages in clarifying complex concepts, providing accessible explanations of grammatical structures, and enabling students to demonstrate understanding through their strongest linguistic medium before transitioning to English expression. Teachers in bilingual programs reported greater ability to assess actual comprehension rather than conflating language limitations with conceptual misunderstanding, a common problem in English-only instruction where language barriers obscure students' actual knowledge and capabilities.

Contextual Considerations: Challenges and Opportunities in Indian Education

While findings strongly advocate for bilingual pedagogical approaches, implementation within Indian secondary education faces substantial challenges including teacher preparation gaps, limited availability of quality multilingual instructional materials, and persistent societal associations between English-medium education and upward mobility. The 2020 National Education Policy's emphasis on mother tongue instruction represents policy recognition of research evidence, yet translation into widespread practice requires comprehensive teacher professional development, curriculum redesign, and sustained investment in multilingual resource development (Government of India, 2020). Regional linguistic diversity presents both opportunities and complications. Schools serving students from multiple linguistic backgrounds require sophisticated multilingual strategies beyond simple bilingual models. The present study's inclusion of five major language groups revealed variation in cross-linguistic transfer ease, with Indo-Aryan language speakers (Hindi, Marathi, Bengali) demonstrating somewhat easier English acquisition pathways than Dravidian language speakers (Kannada, Tamil), likely reflecting typological similarities influencing transfer patterns. Such findings underscore the need for linguistically responsive pedagogy acknowledging specific transfer challenges and opportunities associated with different mother tongue-English pairings.

The documented benefits of mother tongue foundations should not be interpreted as advocating delayed English instruction but rather as evidence for balanced bilingual development. Secondary school students in this study benefited from cumulative mother tongue literacy development through primary schooling, creating cognitive frameworks supporting subsequent English acquisition. Optimal approaches integrate mother tongue and English instruction deliberately, facilitating cross-linguistic awareness and strategic transfer while developing competence in both languages rather than privileging one at the expense of another.

7. Conclusion

This empirical investigation establishes robust evidence for positive correlation between mother tongue proficiency and English communication competence among Indian secondary school learners. The documented relationship, mediated through enhanced metalinguistic awareness and supported by 34% higher achievement in bilingual versus English-only instructional contexts, challenges prevailing assumptions favoring early English-medium education. Findings align with linguistic interdependence theory and contemporary research establishing mother tongue-based multilingual education as optimal for cognitive development, learning outcomes, and long-term academic success. The study's contributions extend theoretical understanding of bilingual language development while providing empirical evidence informing educational policy and pedagogical practice. Results advocate for balanced bilingual instructional approaches that validate students' linguistic identities, leverage existing cognitive foundations, and facilitate English acquisition through rather than despite mother tongue competencies. Implementation requires sustained commitment to teacher professional development, multilingual resource creation, and societal reframing of linguistic diversity as

educational asset rather than deficit. Future research should examine longitudinal trajectories following bilingual versus English-only instruction through higher education and professional contexts, investigate optimal mother tongue-English instructional ratios across subject domains, and explore technological solutions facilitating multilingual pedagogy in linguistically diverse classrooms. Additionally, qualitative investigations examining students' own perceptions of linguistic identity development and the intersection of mother tongue competence with English learning aspirations would enrich understanding of bilingual education's affective and identity dimensions.

8. References

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