



BRIDGING THE LANGUAGE GAP: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN TEACHING LANGUAGE TO TRIBAL AND RURAL SCHOOL STUDENTS IN KORAPUT DISTRICT, ODISHA

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Abstract

Language plays a foundational role in learning, communication, formation of identity, and participation in school. In multilingual contexts, however, the language spoken at home often differs from the language used in formal schooling. This situation is particularly visible in tribal and rural regions of India where children enter school with rich linguistic resources but encounter unfamiliar instructional languages as a part of classroom discourse. The present study examines opportunities and challenges associated with language teaching among tribal and rural learners in Koraput district of Odisha. A mixed-method research design was adopted. Data were collected from 50 Grade III students and 20 primary school teachers from Government Primary Schools of Mukhibedei Cluster under Semiliguda Block. Structured questionnaires and focus group discussions were used to gather quantitative and qualitative information. Findings reveal that a majority of learners belong to tribal language backgrounds and face difficulties in understanding classroom instruction delivered primarily in Odia. Students reported improved comprehension, participation, and confidence when teachers incorporated local languages into classroom teaching. Teachers identified storytelling, songs, role-play, peer learning, code-switching, and community-based examples as effective pedagogical practices. Nevertheless, challenges related to multilingual teaching materials, teacher preparation, curriculum adaptation, and institutional support continue to affect implementation. The study highlights the importance of mother tongue-based multilingual education and argues for stronger policy support, contextualized learning resources, and culturally responsive pedagogy. The findings have important implications for curriculum development, teacher education, and implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 in tribal contexts.

Introduction

Language is at the heart of education. Children learn concepts, express ideas, ask questions, and participate in social interactions through language. It serves not only as a medium of

instruction but also as a tool through which learners construct meaning and develop cognitive abilities. Educational experiences are therefore deeply influenced by the language environment in which learning takes place. India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. Hundreds of languages and dialects are spoken across different regions, communities, and cultural groups. Tribal communities contribute significantly to this diversity. In Odisha, districts such as Koraput, Malkangiri, Rayagada, Kandhamal, and Nabarangpur are characterized by vibrant multilingual traditions. Languages such as Desia, Kui, Gadaba, Paraja, Bonda, and several others continue to function as primary means of communication in everyday life. Despite this linguistic richness, formal schooling is generally conducted in dominant regional languages.

In Odisha, Odia serves as the primary language of instruction in most government schools. Consequently, many tribal children begin their educational journey in a language that differs from the one spoken at home. This mismatch often creates barriers to understanding, communication, participation, and academic achievement. The challenge is not merely linguistic. Language is closely connected with culture, identity, and lived experience. When classroom instruction ignores learners' linguistic backgrounds, children may struggle to connect school learning with their everyday realities. They may become hesitant participants, experience lower confidence, and encounter difficulties in literacy development.

Recognizing these concerns, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 advocates the use of the mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction during the foundational years. The policy emphasizes multilingualism as an educational resource and encourages pedagogical approaches that build upon children's existing linguistic competencies. The present study seeks to understand how language teaching is experienced by tribal and rural learners in Koraput district. It examines opportunities that support language learning, challenges encountered by students and teachers, and strategies that can strengthen multilingual education in tribal contexts.

Review of Literature

The relationship between language and learning has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Research consistently demonstrates that learners achieve better educational outcomes when instruction is linked to familiar linguistic and cultural contexts. Cummins (2000) proposed the Interdependence Hypothesis, arguing that development of the first language supports acquisition of additional languages. Skills developed in one language

can transfer to another, thereby strengthening overall learning. According to this perspective, mother tongue education does not hinder second-language acquisition; rather, it creates a strong foundation for future learning.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the central role of language in cognitive development. Learning occurs through social interaction, cultural mediation, and participation in meaningful activities. Language functions as a psychological tool through which children organize thought and construct knowledge. When teaching is grounded in familiar linguistic environments, learners can engage more effectively with academic content. Krashen's Input Hypothesis also provides useful insights. The theory suggests that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input. For tribal children entering school, instruction delivered entirely in an unfamiliar language may not constitute comprehensible input. The use of local languages can therefore serve as an important bridge facilitating understanding and learning.

Mohanty (2009) highlighted the importance of multilingual education in India's diverse linguistic landscape. His work demonstrated that tribal learners benefit significantly when their home languages are incorporated into classroom processes. Improved participation, stronger literacy skills, and higher retention rates have been reported in multilingual education programmes.

UNESCO has repeatedly emphasized mother tongue instruction as a critical factor in educational equity and inclusion. Research across multiple countries indicates that children who receive early education in their first language perform better academically and develop stronger conceptual understanding.

Studies conducted in Odisha provide additional evidence. Research examining multilingual education programmes in tribal districts has found positive effects on classroom engagement and learner confidence. Teachers often report that students become more willing to participate when familiar languages are acknowledged within classroom interactions.

However, the literature also identifies several challenges. Teacher preparation programmes frequently provide limited exposure to multilingual pedagogies. Teaching-learning materials in tribal languages remain scarce. Policy implementation often varies across regions, leading to inconsistencies in classroom practice. In some contexts, local languages continue to be viewed as obstacles rather than educational assets.

Recent discussions have increasingly focused on culturally responsive pedagogy. Scholars argue that effective language teaching requires more than translation. It involves integrating local knowledge systems, stories, traditions, and community experiences into learning. Such approaches help create meaningful connections between home and school while strengthening learners' identities.

The literature therefore establishes a strong theoretical and empirical basis for multilingual education while highlighting the need for sustained institutional support.

Conceptual Framework: The study draws upon three complementary perspectives: Cummins' linguistic interdependence theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, and the multilingual vision articulated in NEP 2020.

Cummins' framework suggests that children's first language serves as a foundation for future learning. Rather than replacing local languages, schools should build upon them. Vygotsky's perspective emphasizes the importance of social interaction and culturally meaningful communication. Learning becomes more effective when learners can relate new concepts to familiar experiences.

NEP 2020 reinforces these ideas by recognizing multilingualism as a resource rather than a problem. The policy advocates mother tongue-based education during foundational years and encourages integration of local languages into classroom practice.

Together, these frameworks suggest that language learning is influenced by the interaction between home language, school language, classroom pedagogy, and institutional support. This conceptual orientation guided the study's design and interpretation of findings.

Research Questions:

1. What opportunities support effective language teaching among tribal and rural learners?
2. What challenges are encountered by teachers and students in multilingual classrooms?
3. How does the use of local language influence learning experiences?
4. Which pedagogical practices are perceived as effective in tribal classroom contexts?

Objectives of the study:

1. To explore opportunities and effective strategies for teaching language to tribal and rural learners.

2. To identify challenges experienced by teachers and students in multilingual classrooms.
3. To understand the influence of local language use on students' learning experiences.
4. To examine pedagogical practices that support language development in tribal educational

Methodology: A mixed-method research design was adopted to provide a comprehensive understanding of language teaching practices and learner experiences. Combining quantitative and qualitative approaches enabled the study to capture both measurable trends and contextual insights.

The study was conducted in Government Primary Schools of Mukhibedei Cluster under Semiliguda Block of Koraput district, Odisha. The area is predominantly inhabited by tribal communities and presents a multilingual educational environment.

The sample comprised 50 Grade III students and 20 primary school teachers. Participants were selected through simple random sampling. Students represented different linguistic backgrounds, while teachers provided insights into classroom practices and instructional challenges.

Data were collected using structured questionnaires administered to students and teachers. In addition, focus group discussions were conducted with teachers to obtain deeper understanding of multilingual classroom realities.

Quantitative data were analyzed using percentage analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. Recurring themes, patterns, and experiences emerging from discussions were identified and interpreted in relation to the research questions.

Results and Findings: The findings reveal important insights into language learning experiences in tribal and rural schools.

- i. Linguistic Background of Learners: A majority of students reported speaking tribal languages at home. Approximately 62 percent belonged to tribal language backgrounds, while only 38 percent identified Odia as their primary language. This finding demonstrates the multilingual nature of classrooms in the study area.
- ii. Language learning difficulties: About 84 percent of students reported difficulties related to language learning. These included problems in understanding lessons, following instructions, reading texts, and expressing ideas. Teachers observed that

many learners possessed conceptual understanding but struggled to communicate using the language of instruction.

- iii. Effectiveness of existing teaching methods: Only 22 percent of students felt that existing instructional approaches adequately supported their language learning needs. Learners expressed greater comfort when teaching included interactive activities, familiar examples, and local language support.
- iv. Influence of local language support: One of the strongest findings was that 88 percent of students reported better understanding when teachers used local languages alongside Odia. Students appeared more confident and engaged when familiar linguistic resources were incorporated into instruction.
- v. Availability of teaching-learning materials: Most students reported the availability of learning materials. However, teachers emphasized that many resources lacked linguistic accessibility and cultural relevance. Materials often reflected mainstream contexts rather than local realities.
- vi. Teachers' perspectives: Teachers identified code-switching, storytelling, songs, rhymes, role-play, peer learning, and community-based examples as particularly effective. They viewed linguistic diversity as an opportunity for enriching classroom experiences. At the same time, they highlighted challenges related to training, resources, and institutional support.

Discussion: The findings underscore the central role of language in shaping educational participation and achievement. The predominance of tribal languages among learners confirms that multilingualism is a defining feature of classroom life in Koraput district. Educational practices that ignore this reality risk creating barriers to learning. The high percentage of students reporting language-related difficulties suggests that linguistic discontinuity remains a major challenge. When children encounter unfamiliar instructional languages, comprehension becomes more difficult. Participation may decline, and confidence can be affected. These findings are consistent with previous studies highlighting the consequences of language mismatch. The positive influence of local language support provides strong evidence in favour of mother tongue-based multilingual education. Students demonstrated greater understanding and engagement when teachers used familiar linguistic resources. This finding aligns with Cummins' argument that learning is strengthened when learners can draw upon their first language.

Teachers' reliance on storytelling, songs, and community-based examples illustrates the value of culturally responsive pedagogy. Such approaches bridge the gap between school knowledge and everyday experiences. Rather than treating local culture as separate from formal education, they integrate it into the learning process.

The findings also support Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective. Learning occurs through meaningful interaction, and language serves as a key mediating tool. When communication takes place through familiar linguistic forms, learners are better positioned to construct understanding. Despite these positive practices, significant structural barriers remain. Teachers reported inadequate preparation for multilingual classrooms. Many lacked access to specialized training and contextually relevant resources. Without institutional support, innovative practices often depend on individual commitment rather than systematic planning. The findings therefore reinforce the importance of implementing NEP 2020 in ways that recognize local realities. Multilingual education requires curriculum reform, teacher development, community participation, and sustained policy support.

Educational Implications: The study offers several implications for educational policy and practice.

- I. Classroom teaching: Teachers should adopt bilingual and multilingual instructional approaches. Home languages can be used strategically to support comprehension, participation, and concept development.
- II. Teacher education: Pre-service and in-service programmes should include modules on multilingual pedagogy, language-inclusive classroom management, and culturally responsive teaching.
- III. Curriculum development: Curriculum frameworks should incorporate local culture, folklore, indigenous knowledge systems, and community experiences. Such integration can enhance relevance and learner engagement.
- IV. Teaching-Learning Materials: There is a need for bilingual textbooks, local-language storybooks, and supplementary materials that reflect learners' realities.
- V. Community Participation: Schools should actively involve parents, elders, and community members in educational processes. Local knowledge and oral traditions can enrich classroom learning.

VI. **Policy Implementation:** Educational authorities should strengthen mechanisms for supporting multilingual education through funding, monitoring, resource development, and professional support.

Limitations and Future Research: The study was limited to a specific cluster of schools and involved a relatively small sample. Findings should therefore be interpreted within the local context. The research focused on Grade III learners and did not examine variations across grade levels.

Future studies may explore longitudinal effects of multilingual education, compare different tribal regions, and examine the role of digital technologies in supporting language learning. Research involving larger samples and mixed regional contexts would provide broader insights.

Conclusion: The present study demonstrates that language teaching in tribal and rural schools is influenced by linguistic, cultural, pedagogical, and institutional factors. While language barriers continue to affect educational participation and learning outcomes, significant opportunities exist for creating more inclusive educational environments. The findings show that mother tongue support enhances comprehension, confidence, and engagement. Teachers have already developed innovative practices that connect classroom learning with students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Storytelling, role-play, songs, code-switching, and community-based examples serve as valuable pedagogical tools.

However, effective multilingual education cannot depend solely on individual teacher efforts. Sustained improvements require supportive policies, teacher preparation, contextualized learning materials, and institutional commitment. The vision of NEP 2020 provides an important framework for advancing these goals.

Ultimately, recognizing and valuing children's linguistic resources is both an educational and social imperative. When schools build upon the languages learners bring with them, education becomes more meaningful, equitable, and empowering. Such an approach can contribute significantly to improving learning outcomes and promoting educational inclusion among tribal and rural learners in Odisha and beyond.

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