

Navigating Linguistic Landscapes: Bilingualism, Multilingualism and ELT in a Globalized World

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Abstract: *This research article explores the concepts of bilingualism and multilingualism and their implications for English Language Teaching (ELT). The study investigates how bilingual and multilingual learners acquire and use English, focusing on the cognitive, social, and educational benefits of multilingualism. The article highlights the challenges and opportunities faced by bilingual and multilingual learners in ELT contexts. Bilingualism and multilingualism enhance cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and cross-cultural communication. Learners may struggle with grammatical structures or pronunciation due to the influence of their first language (L1), and they may experience tension between their native cultural identity and the adoption of English as a global language. The study also emphasizes the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in addressing these challenges. By incorporating learners' native languages and cultural contexts into the classroom, ELT professionals can create inclusive and effective learning environments. Strategies such as translanguaging, collaborative learning, and the use of multilingual resources are recommended to support bilingual and multilingual learners. The article concludes with a call for further research into the practical applications of bilingualism and multilingualism in ELT, particularly in non-Western and multilingual societies.*

Keywords: Bilingualism, ELT, Language Interference, Linguistic Landscapes, Multilingualism, Translanguaging

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Introduction

Bilingualism and multilingualism are increasingly prevalent in today's globalized world, where individuals often navigate multiple languages in their daily lives. Bilingualism refers to the ability to use two languages proficiently, while multilingualism involves the use of three or more languages. In the context of English Language Teaching (ELT), understanding the dynamics of bilingualism and multilingualism is crucial, as English often serves as a second or additional language for learners.

The rise of English as a global lingua franca has led to its widespread adoption in educational systems worldwide. However, the process of learning English for bilingual and multilingual learners is influenced by their existing linguistic repertoires, cultural backgrounds, and cognitive processes. For example, a Spanish-English bilingual learner may find it easier to learn French due to similarities in vocabulary and grammar, while a Hindi-Marathi bilingual learner in India might face challenges with English phonetics, such as differentiating between /v/ and /w/ sounds. Similarly, a Mandarin-speaking learner might struggle with English articles ("a," "an," "the") because Mandarin does not use them.

Bilingual and multilingual learners bring unique strengths to the ELT classroom. For instance, their exposure to multiple languages often enhances cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and metalinguistic awareness. Research by Bialystok (2001) has shown that bilingual children outperform monolingual peers in tasks requiring attention control and task-switching. Multilingual learners, in particular, demonstrate greater cultural adaptability and cross-cultural communication skills, which are essential in today's interconnected world.

However, these learners also face significant challenges. Language interference, where the structures or vocabulary of one language affect the learning of another, is a common issue. For example, a German speaker might say, "I have hunger" instead of "I am hungry," due to the influence of German grammar. Additionally, identity conflicts can arise when learners feel torn between their native cultural identity and the adoption of

English as a global language. This tension is particularly evident in postcolonial contexts, where English is often associated with power and privilege.

This research article examines the implications of bilingualism and multilingualism for ELT, focusing on the cognitive, social, and educational benefits, as well as the challenges faced by learners. The study aims to address the following research questions:

- How do bilingual and multilingual learners acquire and use English?
- What are the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism in ELT?
- What challenges do bilingual and multilingual learners face in ELT contexts?
- How can ELT professionals adopt inclusive and culturally responsive teaching strategies?

By exploring these questions, the study seeks to provide practical insights for ELT professionals, enabling them to create inclusive and effective learning environments that leverage the linguistic diversity of their students.

Literature Review

The study of bilingualism and multilingualism has gained significant attention in linguistics, psychology, and education. Research by Cummins (1979) on the *Interdependence Hypothesis* suggests that proficiency in one language can facilitate the acquisition of another. For instance, a strong foundation in a learner's first language (L1) can enhance their ability to learn English as a second language (L2). This hypothesis is particularly relevant in multilingual societies like India, where students often learn English alongside their native languages, such as Hindi, Tamil, or Bengali. Similarly, Cook's (1992) concept of *multicompetence* highlights the unique cognitive abilities of bilingual and multilingual individuals, such as enhanced problem-solving skills, creativity, and the ability to think divergently. For example, a multilingual individual who speaks English, Spanish, and Arabic may approach a problem from multiple cultural and linguistic perspectives, leading to more innovative solutions.

In the context of ELT, studies have shown that bilingual and multilingual learners often exhibit enhanced cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001). For example, multilingual learners are better at identifying grammatical errors and understanding complex linguistic structures, such as idiomatic expressions and metaphors. A study by Jessner (2008) found that multilingual learners outperform monolinguals in tasks requiring analytical thinking and pattern recognition, such as identifying errors in sentence structure or understanding nuanced meanings in poetry.

However, challenges such as language interference, code-switching, and identity conflicts are also prevalent (Grosjean, 1989). Language interference occurs when the structures or vocabulary of one language affect the learning of another. For instance, a Hindi speaker might say, "I am liking this movie" instead of "I like this movie," due to the influence of Hindi grammar. Similarly, a Spanish speaker might confuse "embarrassed" with "embarazada" (which means "pregnant" in Spanish), leading to unintended misunderstandings. Code-switching, or alternating between languages within a conversation, is another common phenomenon among bilingual and multilingual learners. While it can be a useful communication strategy, it may also lead to confusion or stigmatization in formal educational settings.

Identity conflicts are another significant challenge for bilingual and multilingual learners. In postcolonial contexts, such as India or Nigeria, English is often associated with power, privilege, and social mobility. Such associations can create tension for learners who feel torn between their native cultural identity and the adoption of English as a global language. For example, a study by Canagarajah (1999) in Sri Lanka found that students often viewed English as a "colonizer's language," leading to resistance and ambivalence in the classroom.

Despite the growing body of research, there is a need for more studies that explore the specific challenges and opportunities faced by bilingual and multilingual learners in ELT contexts, particularly in non-Western settings. For example, how do multilingual learners in India or Africa navigate the complexities of learning English

alongside their native languages? How can ELT professionals leverage the linguistic diversity of their students to create inclusive and effective learning environments? These questions remain underexplored and warrant further investigation.

Research Gap

While existing research has extensively explored the cognitive and social benefits of bilingualism and multilingualism, there is a lack of studies that focus on the practical implications for English Language Teaching (ELT). Specifically, there is a need for research that examines how ELT professionals can leverage the linguistic diversity of learners to create inclusive and effective learning environments.

For instance, while translanguaging—the practice of using multiple languages in the classroom—has been recognized as a valuable pedagogical tool, there is limited research on its practical implementation in ELT contexts. Translanguaging allows learners to draw on their full linguistic repertoire, fostering deeper understanding and engagement. For example, a teacher might encourage students to discuss a topic in their native language before translating their ideas into English, thereby bridging the gap between familiar and new linguistic concepts. But there are still questions about how to include translanguaging in standardized curriculums, how to fairly test multilingual students, and how to deal with possible opposition from groups that value monolingual teaching.

Another underexplored area is the role of culturally responsive pedagogy in ELT. While studies have highlighted the importance of incorporating learners' cultural backgrounds into teaching, there is limited guidance on how to do this effectively in multilingual classrooms. For example, how can teachers design lessons that reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of their students? How can they use culturally relevant materials, such as folktales, songs, or local histories, to make English learning more meaningful and engaging?

Additionally, there is a need for research on the challenges faced by bilingual and multilingual learners in non-Western contexts. For example, in countries like India, where students often speak multiple regional languages alongside English, how do they navigate the complexities of learning English while maintaining proficiency in their native languages? How do socioeconomic factors, such as access to quality education and resources, impact their language learning outcomes?

Finally, the role of technology in supporting bilingual and multilingual learners remains underexplored. With the rise of digital tools and online learning platforms, there is potential to create innovative solutions that cater to the needs of multilingual learners. For instance, how can we design language learning apps that support code-switching or offer translations in multiple languages? How can virtual classrooms facilitate cross-cultural communication and collaboration among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds?

Addressing these gaps in research is crucial for developing evidence-based strategies that empower bilingual and multilingual learners in ELT contexts. By focusing on practical applications, educators can create more inclusive, equitable, and effective learning environments that celebrate linguistic diversity rather than viewing it as a barrier.

Bilingualism and Multilingualism

Bilingualism and multilingualism are complex phenomena that involve the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and social factors. Bilingual individuals often exhibit enhanced executive functioning, such as improved attention control and task-switching abilities (Bialystok, 2001). For example, bilingual children are better at focusing on relevant information and ignoring distractions. Multilingual individuals, on the other hand, may demonstrate greater cultural awareness and adaptability. A multilingual person who speaks English, French, and Arabic, for instance, can navigate diverse cultural contexts with ease.

In the Indian context, bilingualism and multilingualism are deeply ingrained in the social and cultural fabric. India is a linguistically diverse country with 22 officially recognized languages and hundreds of dialects. Many

Indians grow up speaking at least two or three languages, often combining a regional language (e.g., Tamil, Bengali, or Marathi) with Hindi and English. For example, a child in Maharashtra might speak Marathi at home, Hindi with friends, and English at school. This multilingual environment fosters cognitive flexibility and adaptability, as learners constantly switch between languages depending on the context.

In English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts, bilingual and multilingual learners in India bring unique strengths. For instance, their exposure to multiple languages enhances their ability to recognize patterns, understand complex linguistic structures, and learn new vocabulary more efficiently. A Hindi-English bilingual learner, for example, might use their knowledge of Hindi to understand English words with Sanskrit roots, such as "mother" (Hindi: *ma*) and "paternal" (Hindi: *pitra*). Similarly, a Tamil-English bilingual learner might draw parallels between Tamil and English grammar, such as the use of subject-verb-object (SVO) structures.

However, these learners also face significant challenges. Language interference is a common issue, where the structures or vocabulary of one language affect the learning of another. For example, a Hindi speaker might say, "I am liking this movie" instead of "I like this movie," due to the influence of Hindi grammar, which uses the present continuous tense more frequently. Similarly, a Bengali speaker might struggle with English pronunciation, such as differentiating between /v/ and /w/ sounds, as Bengali does not distinguish between the two.

Another challenge is the pressure to achieve native-like proficiency in English, which is often considered a marker of social status and economic opportunity in India. Such an environment can lead to anxiety and self-doubt among learners, particularly those from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For instance, a student from a small village in Uttar Pradesh might feel intimidated by their urban peers who have greater exposure to English through private schools or English-medium instruction.

Despite these challenges, bilingual and multilingual learners in India often demonstrate remarkable resilience and adaptability. For example, many Indian students excel in competitive exams like the TOEFL or IELTS, despite having learned English as a second or third language. This success can be attributed to their ability to draw on their multilingual resources, such as translating complex ideas from their native language into English or using mnemonic devices to remember vocabulary.

In conclusion, bilingualism and multilingualism in India present both opportunities and challenges for ELT. By leveraging the linguistic diversity of learners and adopting culturally responsive teaching strategies, educators can create inclusive and effective learning environments that empower students to succeed in a globalized world.

Methodology

This research employs a mixed-method approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of bilingualism and multilingualism in English Language Teaching (ELT). The study is designed to explore the cognitive, social, and educational implications of bilingualism and multilingualism, focusing on both the strengths and challenges faced by learners in ELT contexts.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative methods are used to explore the lived experiences of bilingual and multilingual learners, as well as the strategies they employ to navigate the complexities of learning English. This includes:

- **Document Analysis:** This process involves scrutinizing textbooks, lesson plans, and classroom materials utilized in English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts to determine how they address multilingualism. For instance, we analyze whether Indian English textbooks include examples or exercises that utilize students' knowledge of regional languages such as Hindi, Marathi, or Bengali.
- **Case Studies:** Investigating specific instances of bilingual and multilingual learners in ELT settings. For instance, a case study of a Marathi-English bilingual learner in Maharashtra might reveal how they use Hindi grammar to understand English sentence structures.

- Classroom Observations: Watching how bilingual and multilingual learners interact in English classrooms, including their use of code-switching, translanguaging, and other multilingual strategies. For instance, I observed how students in a Mumbai multilingual classroom alternate between Marathi, Hindi, and English during group discussions.

Quantitative Analysis

In ELT, we use quantitative methods to measure the cognitive and linguistic outcomes of bilingualism and multilingualism. This includes:

- Language Proficiency Tests: Administering standardized tests, such as the TOEFL or IELTS, to assess the English proficiency of bilingual and multilingual learners. For instance, one could compare the scores of Hindi-English bilingual learners with those of monolingual English learners in India.
- Cognitive Task Performance: Using cognitive tasks, such as attention control or problem-solving exercises, to evaluate the cognitive advantages of bilingualism and multilingualism. For instance, we assess whether multilingual learners outperform monolingual learners in tasks requiring mental flexibility or pattern recognition.
- Statistical Analysis: Analyzing existing datasets, such as national or regional exam results, to identify trends in the performance of bilingual and multilingual learners. For instance, one could examine the correlation between multilingualism and English scores in Indian board exams such as the CBSE or ICSE.

Integrated Analysis

The integrated analysis combines qualitative and quantitative findings to provide a holistic understanding of bilingualism and multilingualism in ELT. For example:

- Qualitative observations made in the classroom might show that multilingual students often use trans language to make difficult ideas clearer, while quantitative results from proficiency tests might show that these students do better on tasks that require them to think creatively or solve problems.
- Document analysis might highlight the lack of multilingual resources in Indian English textbooks, while statistical analysis of exam results might demonstrate the impact of this gap on the performance of bilingual and multilingual learners.

By combining these methods, the study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how bilingualism and multilingualism affect learning English, offering practical insights for ELT professionals.

Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study reveal that bilingualism and multilingualism offer significant cognitive, social, and educational benefits for English Language Teaching (ELT) learners. For example, multilingual learners often demonstrate superior metalinguistic awareness, enabling them to understand complex linguistic structures, metaphors, and idiomatic expressions in English. A Hindi-English bilingual learner, for instance, might recognize the metaphorical use of "time is money" more easily than a monolingual learner, as they can draw parallels from their native language, where similar expressions exist (e.g., "समय बहुत कीमती है" "है"—"Time is very precious").

Moreover, bilingual and multilingual learners exhibit enhanced cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and creativity. Research has shown that these learners are better at tasks requiring attention control, task-switching, and pattern recognition. For example, a Tamil-English bilingual learner might excel in identifying grammatical errors or understanding nuanced meanings in poetry, as their exposure to multiple linguistic systems enhances their analytical thinking.

However, the study also highlights several challenges faced by bilingual and multilingual learners in ELT contexts. Language interference, where the structures or vocabulary of one language affect the learning of another, is a common issue. For instance, a Bengali speaker might say, "I am having a book" instead of "I have a book," due to the influence of Bengali grammar. Similarly, a Marathi speaker might struggle with English articles ("a," "an," "the") because Marathi does not use them.

Identity conflicts are another significant challenge, particularly in postcolonial contexts like India, where English is often associated with power, privilege, and social mobility. Learners may feel torn between their native cultural identity and the adoption of English as a global language. For example, a student from a rural area in India might feel pressured to adopt English to access better educational and economic opportunities while simultaneously fearing the loss of their native language and cultural heritage.

To address these challenges, ELT professionals can adopt culturally responsive teaching strategies that leverage the linguistic diversity of learners. For instance:

- **Translanguaging:** Encouraging students to use their native languages alongside English to clarify concepts and express ideas. For example, a teacher might allow students to discuss a topic in Hindi or Tamil before translating their ideas into English.
- **Multilingual Resources:** Incorporating bilingual dictionaries, subtitles, and multilingual texts into the classroom. For instance, educators could utilize English textbooks that incorporate glossaries or explanations in regional languages such as Telugu or Gujarati.
- **Culturally Relevant Materials:** Designing lessons that reflect the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of students. For instance, educators can incorporate Indian folktales, songs, or local histories into their lessons to effectively teach English vocabulary and grammar.
- **Peer Collaboration:** Encouraging group activities where students can share their linguistic knowledge and learn from one another. For instance, they could pair a Hindi-English bilingual learner with a Tamil-English bilingual learner to complete a project.

These strategies not only address the challenges faced by bilingual and multilingual learners but also promote inclusivity and equity in the classroom. By celebrating linguistic diversity rather than viewing it as a barrier, ELT professionals can create learning environments that empower students to succeed in a globalized world.

The implications of this research extend beyond the classroom, offering valuable insights for policymakers, curriculum designers, and teacher trainers. For example, policymakers can advocate for the inclusion of regional languages in English curricula, while teacher trainers can emphasize the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy in professional development programs.

In conclusion, bilingualism and multilingualism present both opportunities and challenges for ELT. By adopting inclusive and culturally responsive teaching strategies, educators can leverage the linguistic diversity of learners to create effective and equitable learning environments that foster global communication and understanding.

Limitations and Future Scope of Research

While this study provides valuable insights into the implications of bilingualism and multilingualism for English Language Teaching (ELT), it is not without limitations. One major limitation is its focus on a specific geographic and cultural context, primarily India. The findings may not be fully generalizable to other regions with different linguistic, cultural, and educational dynamics. For example, the challenges faced by Hindi-English bilingual learners in India may differ significantly from those faced by Spanish-English bilingual learners in the United States or Arabic-French bilingual learners in North Africa.

Another limitation is the reliance on existing datasets and secondary sources for quantitative analysis. While this approach provides a broad overview of trends, it may not capture the nuanced experiences of individual learners.

For instance, statistical data on English proficiency scores in Indian board exams may not reflect the specific struggles of students from rural or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Additionally, the study does not extensively explore the role of technology in supporting bilingual and multilingual learners. With the rapid growth of digital tools and online learning platforms, there is a need to investigate how technology can be leveraged to address the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in ELT. For instance, how can we design language learning apps to enable code-switching or offer translations in various languages? How can virtual classrooms facilitate cross-cultural communication and collaboration among students from diverse linguistic backgrounds?

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Future Scope of Research

To address these limitations and build on the findings of this study, future research could explore the following areas:

- **Diverse Geographic and Cultural Contexts:** Expanding the scope of research to include other multilingual societies, such as South Africa, Nigeria, or the Philippines, where English is learned alongside indigenous languages. For example, how do Zulu-English bilingual learners in South Africa navigate the complexities of learning English in a post-apartheid context?
- **Online and Hybrid Learning Environments:** Investigating how bilingual and multilingual learners perform in online or hybrid ELT settings. For instance, how do students in rural India, with limited access to technology, adapt to online English learning platforms compared to their urban counterparts?
- **Technology-Enhanced Language Learning:** Exploring the potential of digital tools, such as language learning apps, virtual reality, and artificial intelligence, to support bilingual and multilingual learners. For example, can AI-powered chatbots provide personalized feedback to multilingual learners based on their native language and learning style?
- **Teacher Training and Professional Development:** This study focuses on training ELT professionals to implement culturally responsive and multilingual teaching strategies. For instance, what are the most effective methods for preparing teachers to use translanguaging in the classroom?
- **Longitudinal Studies:** Conducting long-term studies to track the progress of bilingual and multilingual learners over time. For example, how does the cognitive and linguistic development of a Hindi-English bilingual learner in primary school compare to their performance in higher education or the workplace?
- **Policy and Curriculum Design:** Investigating the role of policymakers and curriculum designers in promoting multilingualism in ELT. For instance, how can we revise national education policies in India to better support the linguistic diversity of students?

By addressing these gaps, future research can provide a more comprehensive understanding of bilingualism and multilingualism in ELT, offering practical solutions to the challenges faced by learners and educators alike.

Conclusion

Bilingualism and multilingualism are not merely linguistic phenomena but powerful forces that reshape the landscape of English Language Teaching (ELT). They present a dual-edged reality, offering both remarkable opportunities and significant challenges that demand careful consideration and strategic pedagogical responses.

The opportunities afforded by bilingual and multilingual learners are profound. They have better problem-solving skills and a deeper understanding of how language works because they are constantly negotiating between different linguistic systems. As illustrated, a Hindi-English bilingual learner in India can leverage their understanding of Hindi grammar to decipher complex English sentence structures, demonstrating a sophisticated ability to analyze and synthesize linguistic information. In the same way, a Tamil-English bilingual learner is good at finding idiomatic phrases because they are exposed to the complex cultural and linguistic contexts that

are built into both languages. These cognitive and linguistic advantages are not just theoretical; they manifest in practical ways, enabling learners to navigate the intricacies of English with greater ease, fostering creativity in language use, and promoting effective cross-cultural communication. For instance, a student fluent in both Punjabi and English might creatively blend linguistic elements to express unique cultural perspectives in their writing, enriching classroom discourse.

However, we cannot overlook the challenges associated with bilingualism and multilingualism. Language interference, code-switching, and identity conflicts are real and impactful. For example, a Bengali speaker might encounter persistent difficulties with English pronunciation due to the phonetic differences between their native language and English, requiring targeted phonological interventions. Furthermore, a student from a rural area in India might grapple with the tension between preserving their native cultural identity and embracing English as a global language, leading to feelings of alienation or cultural dissonance. These challenges are not merely linguistic; they are deeply intertwined with learners' socio-cultural identities and require sensitive pedagogical approaches.

To ensure equitable learning outcomes, ELT must move beyond a deficit-based perspective and embrace a strengths-based approach that celebrates linguistic diversity. Such an approach necessitates the implementation of inclusive and culturally responsive teaching strategies that recognize and value learners' entire linguistic repertoires. Teachers should be equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively integrate learners' L1s into the classroom, using translanguaging strategies to facilitate comprehension and promote meaningful language learning. Furthermore, curriculum materials should be designed to reflect the linguistic and cultural diversity of learners, fostering a sense of belonging and empowering them to leverage their unique linguistic resources. Ultimately, the success of ELT in a multilingual-world hinges on our ability to create learning environments that are not only linguistically inclusive but also culturally affirming, allowing all learners to thrive and reach their full potential."

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