Language Hierarchies in Indian Classrooms: A Study of Code-Switching in Government Schools

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ABSTRACT

This study offers a comprehensive analysis of language hierarchies and code-switching practices within Indian government school classrooms, highlighting the intricate ways in which linguistic repertoires are mobilized by teachers and students to negotiate meaning, authority, and identity. Grounded in sociolinguistic and educational theory, the research examines the interplay among English, Hindi, and regional languages across instructional and interpersonal contexts. Leveraging a mixed-methods design, data were collected from a purposive sample of 200 participants—comprising 120 students (grades 8–10) and 80 teachers—from four government schools in both rural and urban districts of Uttar Pradesh. Quantitative measures captured the frequency of language alternation across distinct pedagogical tasks, while a Motivation Scale assessed the reasons for code-switching, including comprehension scaffolding, classroom management, and group identity formation. Qualitative classroom observations provided rich descriptions of interactional moments where language choices indexed power relations and pedagogical strategies. Findings reveal that while code-switching is routinely employed to clarify complex content and maintain classroom discipline, it simultaneously reflects and reproduces English's prestige status, reinforcing unequal access to educational opportunities. Conversely, strategic deployment of Hindi and local languages facilitates learner comprehension and affirms cultural belonging. The study concludes by proposing a set of policy and practice recommendations—such as formalizing multilingual pedagogies, enhancing teacher training in bilingual instruction, and elevating the status of regional languages—to foster more inclusive, equitable learning environments in government schools.

KEYWORDS

Language Hierarchies, Code-Switching, Government Schools, Multilingual Education, India

INTRODUCTION

India's educational landscape is defined by an extraordinary tapestry of languages, dialects, and registers that coexist within and beyond school walls. The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution recognizes 22 "scheduled" languages, yet in practice, hundreds more dialects and linguistic variants are spoken across the nation (Government of India, 1950). Government schools, which enroll the vast majority of India's children, are microcosms where this multilingual reality meets the legacy of colonial and postcolonial language policies that privilege English as a medium of instruction and a symbol of socioeconomic mobility (Kachru, 1992). Despite the constitutional endorsement of the three-language formula—which aims to promote Hindi, English, and a regional language—

resource constraints and entrenched attitudes toward English often undermine policy intentions, resulting in de facto monolingual or bilingual practices that marginalize indigenous tongues (Annamalai, 2005; Mohanty et al., 2009).

Language Use in Indian Government School Classrooms

1

Hindi for Comprehension

Hindi is strategically used to improve comprehension.

2

English for Prestige

English is frequently used to enhance prestige and status.

3

Regional Languages for Cultural Identity

Regional languages are infrequently used but strongly affirm cultural identity.

4

Code-Switching for Classroom Management

Code-switching is common but has limited impact on classroom management.

Figure-1.Language Use in Indian Government School Classrooms

Within this contested linguistic ecology, code-switching—the alternation between two or more languages or language varieties within a conversation—emerges as a pervasive and multifaceted phenomenon (Gumperz, 1982). Teachers may shift to Hindi or a local language to clarify complex concepts, while students may revert to English to signal competence or align with peer norms. Such shifts are not random but are deeply embedded in sociocultural and interactional norms: they signal shifts in footing, stance, and power relations (Myers-Scotton, 1993). In government schools, where class sizes can exceed 50 students and resources for English instruction are often limited, code-switching serves both as a pragmatic strategy for content delivery and as an index of broader structural inequalities.

Existing research has largely focused on private or English-medium schools, leaving a critical gap in our understanding of multilingual practices in government settings (Ramanathan & Atkinson, 1999; Sharma, 2014). Moreover, quantitative surveys of code-switching frequency are seldom complemented by qualitative classroom observations that capture the interactional nuances of language choice. This study addresses these gaps by employing a mixed-methods approach to investigate how and why code-switching occurs in government school classrooms, and what implications it holds for language hierarchies, learner agency, and pedagogical effectiveness.
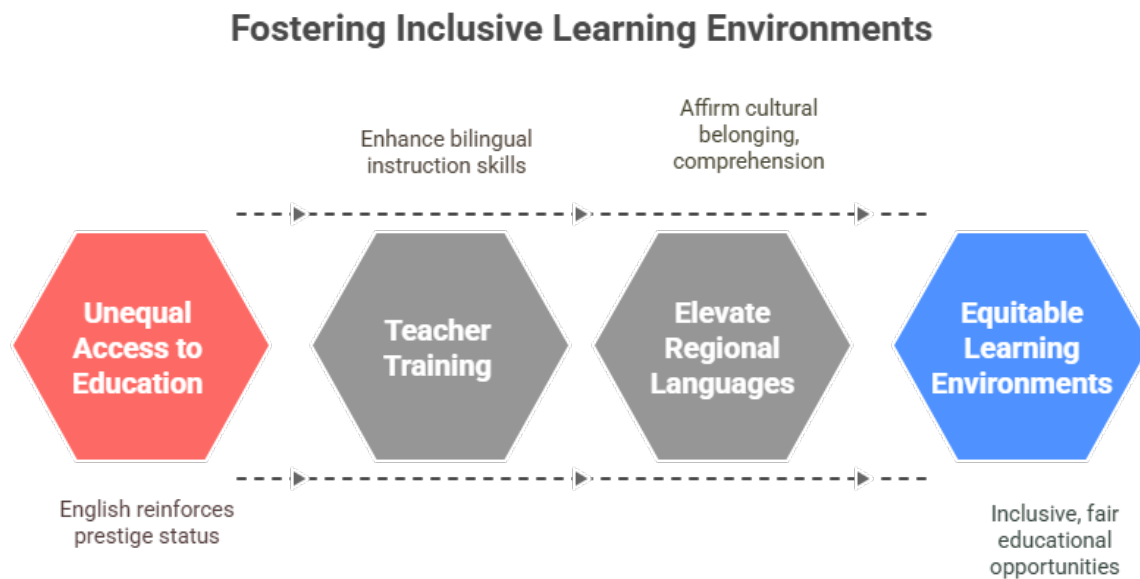
Figure 2:.Fostering Inclusive Learning Environments

By systematically documenting code-switching patterns across instructional tasks, unpacking teachers' and students' motivations, and situating these practices within the broader sociolinguistic landscape, this research aims to inform policies that recognize and harness linguistic diversity as an educational asset rather than a deficit. Ultimately, we seek to contribute to a reconceptualization of multilingual pedagogy—one that values students' full linguistic repertoires and promotes equity in India's public education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Code-Switching

Code-switching has long been understood as a dynamic communicative resource that speakers use to negotiate identity, solidarity, and power (Gumperz, 1982). Myers-Scotton's (1993) Markedness Model posits that interlocutors choose particular language codes to align with or distinguish themselves from specific social roles. In postcolonial contexts, English carries symbolic capital inherited from colonial rule, functioning as a marker of prestige, modernity, and upward mobility (Pennycook, 1994). Conversely, regional languages and dialects index local belonging, cultural heritage, and communal solidarity (Srivastava, 2009).

Educational Functions of Code-Switching

In second language pedagogy, proponents such as Harbord (1992) and Swain and Lapkin (2000) have argued that strategic code-switching can scaffold comprehension, reduce learner anxiety, and facilitate the negotiation of meaning. At the same time, critics caution that excessive reliance on the L1 may inhibit target-language acquisition, creating a "crutch" that prevents immersion (Brown, 2000). The dichotomy between these positions reflects broader tensions between monolingual and bilingual pedagogical philosophies.

Language Hierarchies in India's Public Schools

Annamalai (2005) and Mohanty et al. (2009) have documented how India's three-language policy—designed to promote multilingual competence—often fails in government schools due to insufficient teacher training, lack of instructional materials, and prevailing ideologies that valorize English. Consequently, many rural and urban government schools operate effectively as bilingual (Hindi and English) or monolingual (Hindi) environments, sidelining regional languages. This stratification contributes to differential academic outcomes: students from anglophone backgrounds outperform peers lacking English proficiency, perpetuating social inequality (Kachru, 1992).

Gaps and Research Imperatives

While several qualitative studies have illuminated aspects of code-switching in Indian classrooms (Prabhu, 1990; Rao, 2007), few have combined rigorous quantitative metrics with ethnographic observations in government school contexts. Moreover, the relationship between individuals' perceptions of language hierarchies and their code-switching behaviors remains under-explored. This study builds on the existing literature by employing standardized scales to measure motivations and perceptions, alongside detailed classroom ethnography, thereby offering a holistic account of multilingual practices in India's public education sector.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following objectives:

1. **Quantify Code-Switching Frequency**
   Measure how often teachers and students alternate between English, Hindi, and regional languages during distinct classroom activities—lecture, question-and-answer, discipline, and group work.
2. **Identify Motivations for Code-Switching**
   Investigate the pedagogical, social, and pragmatic reasons that prompt language alternation, including comprehension scaffolding, classroom management, peer alignment, and identity assertion.
3. **Assess Perceptions of Language Hierarchies**
   Evaluate participants' attitudes toward English, Hindi, and regional languages, particularly regarding their perceived instrumental (career/educational) and intrinsic (cultural/affiliative) values.
4. **Examine Interrelationships**
   Analyze correlations between motivation scores, hierarchy perception indices, and code-switching frequency to uncover how language beliefs shape communicative practices.
5. **Contextualize with Classroom Observations**
   Provide ethnographic descriptions of interactional moments where code-switching mediates comprehension, authority, and student engagement.
6. **Formulate Policy Recommendations**
   Based on empirical findings, propose actionable strategies to integrate multilingual pedagogy, strengthen teacher training, and promote linguistic equity in government school curricula.

SURVEY DESIGN AND SAMPLE

To achieve these objectives, a cross-sectional survey was administered to 200 participants—120 students (40 per school, grades 8–10) and 80 teachers (20 per school)—from four purposively selected government schools: two rural and two urban, representing demographic and linguistic diversity within Uttar Pradesh.

Instrument Components

- **Language Use Questionnaire**: Captured self-reported frequency of language choice (English, Hindi, regional language) across four classroom contexts—concept explanation, grammar instruction, question-answer sessions, and behavior management—using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always).
- **Motivation Scale**: A 12-item, 5-point Likert instrument (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) assessing reasons for code-switching: comprehension aid, classroom control, peer solidarity, and identity affirmation. Pilot testing with 20 respondents yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82, indicating high internal consistency.
- **Hierarchy Perception Index**: Ten semantic differential items gauging attitudes toward English, Hindi, and regional languages on dimensions of prestige, utility, and cultural value.

Sampling and Administration

Schools were selected in consultation with the State Education Board to ensure representativeness. Informed consent was obtained from teachers, students, and—for minors—their parents. Surveys were administered in classroom settings under researcher supervision to clarify any items.

Data Handling

Completed questionnaires were coded and entered into SPSS for quantitative analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) summarized language use and motivation scores. Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analyses examined associations between variables. Qualitative field notes from classroom observations were thematically coded to enrich quantitative findings.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This mixed-methods investigation integrated quantitative and qualitative approaches to yield robust insights into code-switching dynamics.

1. **Quantitative Strand**
   - **Descriptive Analysis**: Frequency distributions and cross-tabulations charted language use patterns across activities.
   - **Inferential Statistics**: Pearson's correlation tested relationships among code-switching frequency, motivational factors, and hierarchy perceptions. A multiple regression model assessed the predictive power of motivation and perception variables on code-switching frequency.
   - **Reliability and Validity**: Cronbach's alpha and exploratory factor analysis validated the Motivation Scale and Perception Index structure.
2. **Qualitative Strand**

- o **Classroom Observations**: In each school, two classrooms (one lower grade, one upper grade) were observed for two two-hour sessions. Detailed field notes documented instances of code-switching, noting triggers (e.g., difficult vocabulary), participant responses, and shifts in interactional footing.
- o **Interactional Transcripts**: Selected excerpts were transcribed to illustrate how language alternation functioned pedagogically and socially.
- o **Thematic Coding**: Using NVivo, transcripts and notes were coded for emergent themes: comprehension scaffolding, authority negotiation, identity signaling, and affective management.

3. **Ethical Considerations**

Approval was granted by the State Education Board's Research Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary, and confidentiality was assured; pseudonyms were used in field reports.

RESULTS

Quantitative Findings

- **Code-Switching Frequency**:
  - o Teachers: Mean frequency = 4.1 (SD = 0.6) on the 5-point scale; 85% reported "Often" or "Always" code-switching during concept explanations.
  - o Students: Mean frequency = 3.7 (SD = 0.8) when asking questions or clarifying doubts.
- **Motivational Factors**:
  - o Comprehension Aid: M = 4.3, SD = 0.5
  - o Classroom Management: M = 3.9, SD = 0.7
  - o Peer Solidarity: M = 3.2, SD = 0.9
  - o Identity Assertion: M = 2.8, SD = 1.0
- **Hierarchy Perceptions**:
  - o English: High prestige (M = 4.5) and utility (M = 4.6)
  - o Hindi: Moderate prestige (M = 3.4) and utility (M = 3.2)
  - o Regional: Lower prestige (M = 2.7) but higher cultural value (M = 4.1)
- **Correlations**:
  - o Comprehension motivation ↔ code-switching frequency: $r = .72$, $p < .001$
  - o Hierarchy perception (English vs. regional) ↔ code-switching: $r = .65$, $p < .001$
- **Regression Analysis**:

Motivation for comprehension ($\beta = .48$, $p < .001$) and hierarchy perceptions ($\beta = .33$, $p < .001$) together explained 56% of the variance in code-switching frequency ($R^2 = .56$).

Qualitative Observations

- **Pedagogical Scaffolding**: Teachers often introduced new vocabulary in English and immediately provided Hindi or local-language paraphrases, supporting comprehension without pausing instruction.
- **Authority Negotiation**: Switching to Hindi or local dialect during disciplinary directives effectively captured students' attention, reinforcing teacher authority.

- **Student Agency**: Higher-proficiency students occasionally switched to English to assert status, while others reverted to Hindi to negotiate peer solidarity and mitigate anxiety.

These qualitative insights illuminate how code-switching both bridges understanding and enacts social hierarchies within the classroom.

CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the complex, dual-edged role of code-switching in Indian government school classrooms. On one hand, strategic alternation between English, Hindi, and regional languages functions as an effective pedagogical scaffold—clarifying concepts, managing behavior, and fostering rapport. On the other hand, these practices mirror and perpetuate entrenched language hierarchies, with English maintaining its prestige and utility, Hindi occupying an intermediary status, and regional languages often marginalized despite their cultural significance.

Our findings underscore the necessity of reimagining multilingual pedagogy in government schools. First, curricula should explicitly incorporate structured code-switching protocols that validate students' full linguistic repertoires rather than relegating non-English languages to informal use. Second, teacher education programs must integrate modules on bilingual instruction, sociolinguistics, and critical language awareness to equip educators with the skills and reflexivity needed for equitable multilingual teaching. Third, policy initiatives should elevate the status of regional languages by developing high-quality instructional materials and assessments that recognize linguistic diversity as an asset. Finally, targeted support for English proficiency—through remedial courses, peer-mentoring, and language labs—can mitigate disparities without devaluing students' home languages.

By acknowledging the pedagogical benefits of code-switching and confronting its role in sustaining power imbalances, stakeholders can craft interventions that harness multilingualism to advance educational equity. Government schools, as crucibles of India's democratic promise, must embrace the nation's linguistic plurality to empower all learners and foster inclusive, dynamic classrooms.

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