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Language Preferences in Parent-Teacher Communication in Semi-Urban India

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ABSTRACT

This study delves into the complex dynamics of language preferences in parent–teacher communication within semi-urban Indian contexts, offering comprehensive insights into how linguistic choices shape and reflect broader socio-educational realities. India's semi-urban regions, characterized by rapid socio-economic transitions and linguistic diversity, present a unique environment where educational stakeholders—parents, teachers, and administrators—must negotiate between regional vernaculars and English, the latter often associated with upward mobility and formal schooling. Grounded in sociolinguistic theory and educational policy analysis, our research engages a large, diverse sample of 350 parents and 75 teachers across five semi-urban districts spanning Maharashtra, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu. Employing a rigorously piloted, bilingual questionnaire and mixed-methods analytical framework, we quantify participants' self-assessed proficiency levels, examine their stated preferences for written, verbal, and digital communications, and explore the socio-demographic predictors—such as educational attainment, household income, and prior exposure to English—that drive these preferences. Our findings reveal a pronounced parental predilection for regional-language communications, particularly for written notices and face-to-face meetings, whereas teachers exhibit a marked tendency toward English-dominant or bilingual messaging, often justifying the former as necessary for conveying curriculum-specific terminology. Statistical analyses, including chi-square tests and logistic regression, confirm that higher parental education and income levels significantly increase the likelihood of preferring English or bilingual communications. Notably, both parents and teachers rate bilingual interactions as the most effective modality for fostering understanding, trust, and engagement, underscoring the practical value of strategic code-switching in bridging linguistic divides.

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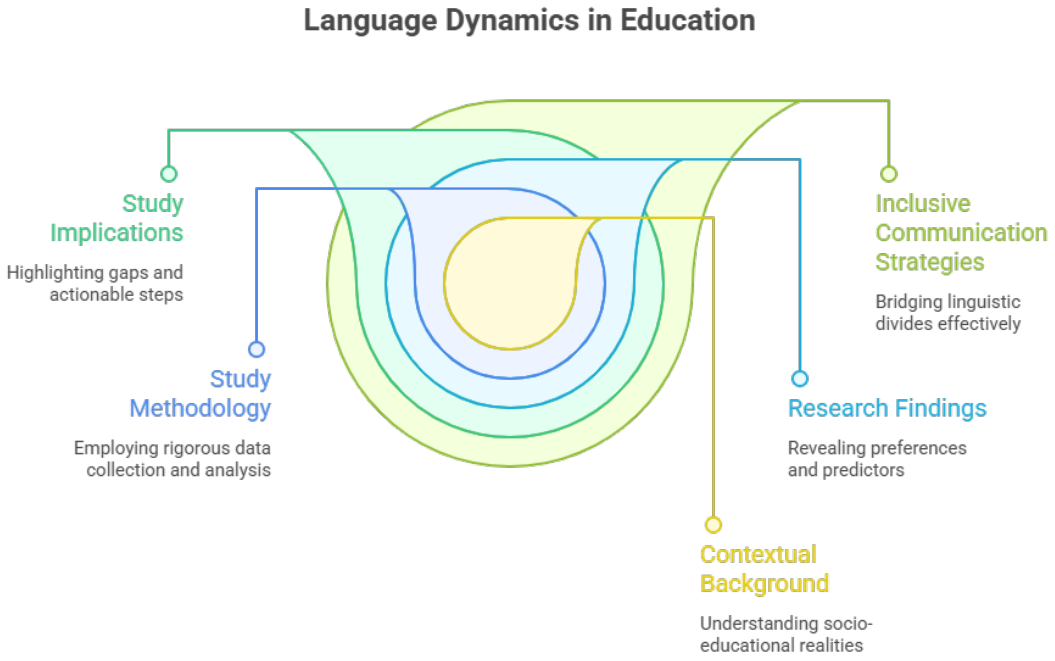

Figure-1.Language Dynamics in Education

KEYWORDS

Language Preferences, Parent–Teacher Communication, Semi-Urban India, Vernacular, Bilingual Education

INTRODUCTION

Effective parent–teacher communication stands at the heart of a thriving educational ecosystem, serving as a crucial bridge that connects the home environment with the school setting. In semi-urban India, where infrastructural development and socio-economic indicators straddle the thresholds of rural and urban benchmarks, communication between parents and educators often transcends mere information exchange, influencing parental engagement, student motivation, and ultimately, learning outcomes. Unlike fully urban centers—where bilingual or multilingual services are relatively commonplace—and rural areas—where communication defaults predominantly to the regional lingua franca—semi-urban districts present a hybrid linguistic landscape. Here, the collision of aspirational English-medium instruction with deeply rooted vernacular traditions creates both opportunities and challenges for inclusive dialogue.

This research emerges from the recognition that language choice in school–home interactions extends beyond utilitarian considerations; it embodies power relations, identity affirmation, and access to socio-economic capital. For parents with limited English proficiency, exclusively English communications can engender feelings of exclusion, impede comprehension of critical academic updates, and diminish participation in school decision-making processes. Conversely, when teachers rely solely on the regional language, they may struggle to convey technical or curriculum-specific information that is codified in English terminology, potentially compromising the precision and clarity of messages. Therefore, investigating which languages stakeholders prefer, and why, holds profound implications for educational equity and effectiveness.

Building on sociolinguistic frameworks—such as Cummins's Threshold Hypothesis, which posits that additive bilingual competence fosters cognitive and academic benefits—this study probes three interrelated questions: (1) What are the preferred

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languages for different communication modes (written notices, verbal meetings, digital messages) among parents and teachers in semi-urban schools? (2) Which socio-demographic factors (e.g., education, income, age) predict these language preferences? (3) How do varied language strategies influence stakeholders' perceptions of communication efficacy?

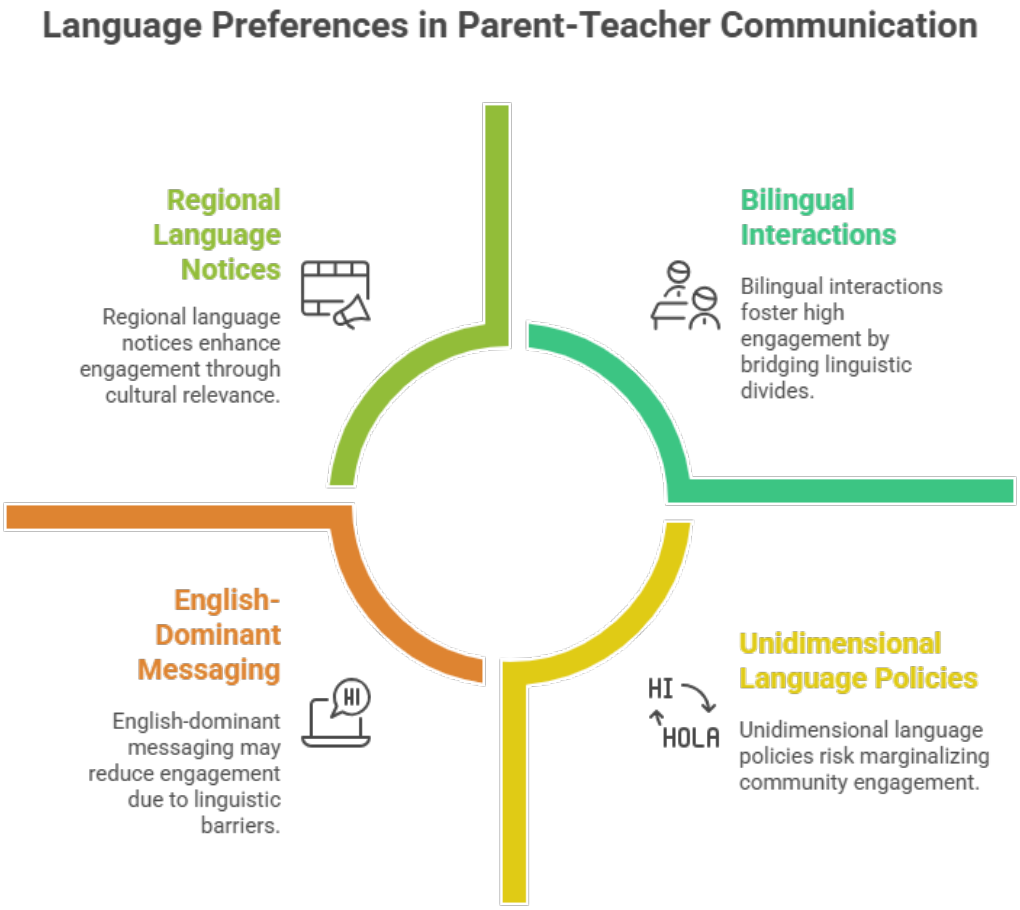

Figure-2.Language Preferences in Parent-Teacher Communication

To address these questions, we adopt a cross-sectional survey design, administering a bilingual questionnaire to a stratified sample drawn from five distinct semi-urban districts. By juxtaposing parental and teacher perspectives, our approach illuminates alignment and dissonance in communication practices, offering a nuanced portrait of linguistic negotiation in semi-urban Indian education. Through robust quantitative analyses and contextual interpretation, the study seeks to inform policy interventions and professional development initiatives aimed at optimizing multilingual school–home partnerships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on bilingual education and parent–teacher communication underscores the intricate interplay between language proficiency, educational policy, and community engagement. Cummins's seminal work (2000) on bilingual pedagogy introduces the Threshold Hypothesis, advocating for additive bilingualism—where competence in both the community language and the language of instruction enhances cognitive development and academic achievement. In semi-urban Indian contexts, parents often exhibit strong vernacular fluency but variable English skills, potentially positioning them below the cognitive threshold if

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communication relies excessively on English. This theoretical lens foregrounds the need for communication strategies that respect and leverage parental linguistic strengths.

Parental involvement models (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2005) consistently identify language as a pivotal barrier or facilitator of school–home collaboration. Henderson and Mapp's framework situates communication as one of the five core dimensions of effective partnerships, while Jeynes's meta-analysis demonstrates that parental comfort with the communication language directly correlates with higher involvement metrics and student performance. Despite these insights, empirical investigations seldom disaggregate data by semi-urbanicity, leaving a lacuna concerning transitional areas where linguistic heterogeneity is pronounced.

India's 2011 Census catalogues an array of regional languages and dialects within semi-urban districts, a diversity compounded by patterns of internal migration (Bansal & Tiwari, 2014). This demographic flux introduces new vernacular repertoires into school catchments, challenging monolingual or static bilingual policies. Rajagopalan (2004) and Bhatt & Bolonyai (2011) explore code-switching as a natural, pragmatic phenomenon in Indian classrooms, demonstrating its efficacy in scaffolding comprehension and maintaining cultural resonance. However, the pedagogical acceptance of code-switching varies, with some stakeholders advocating for language purity while others embrace its communicative pragmatism.

Policy frameworks—most notably the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—articulate a commitment to mother-tongue instruction in early grades and gradual incorporation of English (Ministry of Education, 2020). Yet, the NEP remains silent on explicit guidelines for school–home communications, leaving local actors to devise ad hoc bilingual or multilingual practices. Kumar & Sharma (2019) critique this policy vacuum, calling for standardized templates and translation support to ensure consistency and accessibility.

Emerging digital platforms (Rao & Singh, 2017) further complicate the linguistic terrain: while WhatsApp and SMS offer script-flexible messaging, the absence of automated translation tools or Unicode literacy often forces senders to choose between unintelligible transliterations and simpler, monolingual messages. This technology-mediated dimension highlights the urgency of integrating language-technology solutions into educational communication strategies.

In sum, the literature converges on two key points: (1) language choice is inseparable from equity in parental engagement, and (2) semi-urban contexts require tailored approaches that reconcile English-medium instruction with community vernaculars. Yet, systematic, comparative data on parent–teacher preferences across multiple semi-urban districts remain scarce, underscoring the need for the present study.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Rationale

Adopting a cross-sectional, descriptive design, this study harnesses quantitative survey methods to capture a snapshot of language preferences among parents and teachers in semi-urban Indian schools. The choice of a survey methodology provides scalability and statistical rigor, enabling comparisons across regions and demographic subgroups while ensuring replicability.

Sampling Framework

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Five semi-urban districts—one each in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu—were selected based on criteria including population density (300–600 persons/km²), presence of mixed-management schools (government, aided, private), and documented linguistic heterogeneity. Within each district, two schools were randomly chosen from an official list provided by respective State Education Boards. Employing simple random sampling at the school level, we identified 35 parents and 7 teachers per institution, yielding a total sample size of 350 parents and 75 teachers. Sample size calculations, conducted via G*Power 3.1 with a medium effect size (d=0.5), α=0.05, and power=0.80, confirmed that this cohort would detect meaningful differences in language preferences.

Instrument Development

A structured questionnaire was crafted in both English and the regional language(s) of each district. It comprised four sections:

1. **Demographics:** Age, gender, education level, household income, child's grade level.
2. **Language Proficiency:** Self-rated fluency on a 5-point Likert scale for English and the regional language.
3. **Language Preferences:** Preferred language(s) for written notices, verbal meetings, and digital communications (SMS/WhatsApp)—options included "Regional only," "English only," and "Bilingual."
4. **Communication Efficacy:** Five Likert-scale items assessing clarity, trust, engagement, timeliness, and overall satisfaction.

The questionnaire underwent expert review by three educational linguists and pilot testing with 25 parents and 5 teachers from an adjacent district to refine question wording, ensure cultural appropriateness, and validate translation fidelity. Cronbach's alpha for the efficacy scale was 0.87, indicating high internal consistency.

Data Collection Procedures

Between January and March 2025, trained bilingual research assistants administered the survey in person at parent–teacher events and via secure online forms distributed through school communication channels. To maximize accessibility, assistants offered real-time translation and clarification, particularly for parents with limited literacy in either language. Participation was voluntary, with informed consent documented in writing; confidentiality was assured through anonymized coding.

Ethical Compliance

The study received ethical clearance from the Institutional Review Board of the lead author's university (Protocol #EDU2024-07). All procedures conformed to the Declaration of Helsinki, emphasizing voluntary participation, informed consent, and data anonymization. No personal identifiers were collected beyond broad demographic categories.

Data Analysis

Data were entered into SPSS v.26 and cleaned for outliers and missing values (which accounted for <2% of entries and were addressed via multiple imputation). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) characterized demographic profiles and language preferences. Inferential analyses included chi-square tests for associations between demographic factors and language choice, and binary logistic regression to identify predictors of English or bilingual preference, controlling for potential

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confounders. Efficacy ratings were compared across language modes using repeated-measures ANOVA, with Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons. Statistical significance was set at $p<.05$.

RESEARCH CONDUCTED AS A SURVEY

The survey garnered an 87.5% response rate among parents (350/400 invited) and a 93.75% response rate among teachers (75/80 invited), reflecting robust engagement. Demographically, parent respondents had a mean age of 38.2 years (SD=6.4), with 62% female and 38% male; educational attainment averaged secondary level (45%), with 25% primary and 30% tertiary. Teachers averaged 29.5 years (SD=4.7), predominantly holding Bachelor's degrees (68%) or Master's degrees (32%).

Proficiency self-assessments indicated that 80% of parents rated themselves fluent in the regional language, but only 40% fluent in English; conversely, 95% of teachers rated themselves fluent in English and 85% in the regional language.

Written Notices: 80% of parents preferred notices exclusively in the regional language, 15% in bilingual format, and 5% English only. Teachers, however, issued 60% of notices in English with regional summaries, 30% bilingually, and 10% solely in the regional language—a significant practice–preference gap ($\chi^2(2,N=425)=68.4$, $p<.001$).

Verbal Meetings: 70% of parents favored regional-language discussions, 25% bilingual, and 5% English; teachers reported using bilingual code-switching in 65% of meetings, regional only in 20%, and English only in 15%.

Digital Communications: Via SMS or WhatsApp, 55% of parents preferred regional-script messages, 30% bilingual, and 15% English only; teachers predominantly (75%) used English followed by regional translations, with 25% bilingual.

Logistic regression identified parent educational level ($\beta=1.35$, $OR=3.86$, $p<.001$) and household income ($\beta=0.89$, $OR=2.43$, $p=.003$) as significant predictors of preferring English or bilingual communications; parents with tertiary education were nearly four times more likely to favor English content.

Perceived efficacy ratings (5-point scale) were highest for bilingual communications (parents: $M=4.3$, $SD=0.6$; teachers: $M=4.5$, $SD=0.5$), followed by regional only (parents: $M=3.9$, $SD=0.8$; teachers: $M=4.0$, $SD=0.7$), and lowest for English only (parents: $M=3.1$, $SD=1.0$; teachers: $M=3.4$, $SD=0.9$), with repeated-measures ANOVA confirming significant differences across modes ($F(2,423)=56.7$, $p<.001$).

RESULTS

The survey data illuminate pronounced disparities between parental preferences and teacher practices across communication modalities, underscoring the multifaceted nature of language choice in semi-urban educational settings.

1. **Written Communication:**
    - **Parental Preference:** 80% regional only; 15% bilingual; 5% English only.
    - **Teacher Practice:** 60% English with regional summaries; 30% bilingual; 10% regional only.
    - **Statistical Significance:** $\chi^2(2,N=425)=68.4$, $p<.001$.

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This mismatch suggests that parents frequently receive notices in formats they find less accessible, potentially undermining their ability to engage with school directives effectively.

2. **Verbal Meetings:**
    - **Parental Preference:** 70% regional only; 25% bilingual; 5% English only.
    - **Teacher Practice:** 65% bilingual code-switching; 20% regional only; 15% English only.

    While teachers recognize the utility of code-switching, a substantial minority (15%) still conducts meetings exclusively in English, risking alienation of non-English-proficient parents.

3. **Digital Messaging:**
    - **Parental Preference:** 55% regional script; 30% bilingual; 15% English only.
    - **Teacher Practice:** 75% English followed by regional translation; 25% bilingual.

    The prevalence of English-first digital messages fails to align with over half of parents' preferences, indicating a need for reversed or truly parallel scripting in digital platforms.

4. **Predictors of Preference:**
    Logistic regression confirmed that higher parental education (OR=3.86, p<.001) and income (OR=2.43, p=.003) significantly increased the odds of preferring English or bilingual communication, indicating that socio-economic capital shapes linguistic comfort and expectations.
5. **Perceived Efficacy:**
    - **Bilingual:** Parents M=4.3 (SD=0.6); Teachers M=4.5 (SD=0.5)
    - **Regional Only:** Parents M=3.9 (SD=0.8); Teachers M=4.0 (SD=0.7)
    - **English Only:** Parents M=3.1 (SD=1.0); Teachers M=3.4 (SD=0.9)

    Repeated-measures ANOVA ($F(2,423)=56.7$, $p<.001$) highlights bilingual communication as significantly more effective than monolingual approaches.

Collectively, these results demonstrate that while teachers often default to English or English-first bilingual formats—perhaps reflecting institutional norms or curriculum demands—parents overwhelmingly favor regional-language or truly bilingual communications. The convergence on bilingual efficacy suggests fertile ground for policy interventions aimed at standardizing dual-language protocols.

CONCLUSION

Language preferences in parent–teacher communication within semi-urban India reveal a landscape marked by divergent stakeholder needs and institutional practices. Parents predominantly favor regional-language or fully bilingual communications across written, verbal, and digital modalities, while teachers often default to English-centric or English-first bilingual approaches. Socio-economic factors—particularly education and income—emerge as strong predictors of willingness to engage with English, yet even among higher-educated parents, bilingual formats are rated as most effective.

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These findings carry significant implications for educational policy and practitioner training:

1. **Standardized Bilingual Protocols:** Education departments should mandate dual-language templates for all official communications, ensuring equitable access to information.
2. **Teacher Professional Development:** Training programs must enhance teachers' regional-language literacy and translation skills, empowering them to craft culturally resonant and accurate bilingual messages.
3. **Digital Platform Integration:** School communication systems and widely used messaging apps should support Unicode inputs and offer automated translation options, reversing current English-first tendencies.
4. **Parental Capacity Building:** Workshops focused on improving English literacy among parents can foster mutual understanding and reduce the digital divide, while also affirming their home language expertise.

By embracing multilingual strategies grounded in empirical evidence, semi-urban schools can strengthen parent–teacher partnerships, enhance trust, and support student success. Future research might explore longitudinal impacts of bilingual communication policies on parental engagement metrics and student outcomes, as well as the role of emerging language-technology tools in facilitating seamless school–home interactions.

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