



Code-Switching as a Pedagogical Tool in Multilingual Indian Classrooms: An Applied Linguistics Perspective

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Abstract

Indian classrooms are inherently multilingual environments where teachers and students routinely draw on multiple languages, including English, Hindi, regional languages, and home dialects. Code-switching, the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation or instructional episode, has been a contested but persistent feature of Indian educational practice. While historically marginalized as a sign of linguistic deficit or pedagogical weakness, recent applied linguistics scholarship has increasingly recognized code-switching as a productive pedagogical resource, particularly in contexts of bilingual and multilingual education. This article examines code-switching as a pedagogical tool in Indian classrooms through an applied linguistics perspective, with particular reference to the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 and its emphasis on multilingual education. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship and policy documents published between 2010 and 2025, including international research on translanguaging and Indian-context studies of classroom code-switching. The analysis identifies four functional categories of pedagogical code-switching: cognitive scaffolding for content comprehension; affective and relational functions; metalinguistic awareness and language-specific instruction; and inclusion of linguistic minorities and home languages. The study draws on translanguaging theory, Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, and Indian sociolinguistic scholarship. Findings indicate that principled code-switching, when guided by clear pedagogical purpose, can enhance comprehension, participation, and equity in multilingual classrooms. The article concludes with recommendations for teacher education, curriculum design, language policy, and assessment practice in multilingual Indian schools.

Keywords:- Code-Switching, Translanguaging, Multilingual Classrooms, Applied Linguistics, India, NEP 2020, Mother Tongue Instruction, Bilingual Education

Introduction

India's linguistic landscape is among the most diverse in the world (Annamalai 2001; Pattanayak 1990). The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution recognizes twenty-two scheduled languages, while the People's Linguistic Survey of India has documented several hundred living languages and dialects. Most Indian children grow up exposed to two or more languages, and the typical classroom routinely accommodates speakers of multiple home languages, a regional language used as the medium of instruction, Hindi or another link language, and English (Khubchandani 1983; Sridhar 1996). This linguistic richness coexists with a school system in which language policies are often implemented in ways that valorize one or two named languages while implicitly devaluing students' wider linguistic repertoires (Mohanty 2019).

Code-switching, the alternation between two or more languages within a single conversation, classroom episode, or even single utterance, is a ubiquitous feature of Indian classroom interaction (Auer, 1998; Gumperz, 1982). Teachers explain English-medium content in regional languages, students discuss problems with peers in home languages before responding to the teacher in the medium of instruction, and instructional materials sometimes mix scripts and registers in ways that reflect the lived linguistic experience of classrooms (Vaish, 2008). Despite this ubiquity, code-switching has often been viewed pejoratively in educational and policy discourse, treated as a sign of linguistic insufficiency in either the teacher or the student, or as evidence of failure to maintain a target-language environment (Cummins 2007).

Recent decades have produced significant theoretical and empirical reconsiderations of these assumptions. The development of translanguaging theory in the work of Ofelia García, Li Wei, and others (García & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018), alongside accumulating evidence from bilingual and multilingual education research, has reframed the strategic use of multiple languages in classrooms as a legitimate and often valuable pedagogical practice (Creese & Blackledge 2010). Indian sociolinguistic scholarship, drawing on the foundational work of Lachman Khubchandani (1983), Probal Dasgupta (1993), and others, has long emphasized the integrative and fluid character of Indian multilingualism. The implementation of the National Education Policy 2020, with its strong commitment to multilingualism and mother tongue or local language instruction at least until Grade 5 (Government of India 2020), makes a sustained applied linguistic engagement with classroom code-switching especially timely.

Against this backdrop, the present article asks:

- How can code-switching be productively understood and used as a pedagogical tool in multilingual Indian classrooms,
- What are the implications for teacher education, curriculum, and language policy?

Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry:

- First, what theoretical frameworks most usefully ground a pedagogical view of classroom code-switching in the Indian context?
- Second, what specific pedagogical functions does code-switching serve, and under what conditions is it most beneficial?
- Third, what implications follow for teacher preparation, curriculum design, classroom assessment, and language policy?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes scholarship on code-switching, translanguaging, and multilingual education with specific reference to Indian classroom realities. It identifies four functional categories that organize the pedagogical use of code-switching. It articulates a set of implications for teacher education, curriculum, assessment, and policy aligned with the National Education Policy 2020. The remainder of the article proceeds as follows:

- Section 2 reviews relevant theory and evidence;
- Section 3 outlines the methodology;
- Section 4 presents the findings;
- Section 5 discusses implications; and
- Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Theoretical Foundations

The applied linguistic study of code-switching has drawn on multiple theoretical traditions. Sociolinguistic studies, building on the foundational work of John Gumperz (1982) and others, identified the pragmatic and interactional functions of code-switching in everyday talk and classroom discourse. Conversation-analytic approaches developed finer-grained analyses of how code-switching is sequentially organized and accomplishes interactional work (Auer 1998).

Translanguaging theory, developed in the work of Ofelia García, Li Wei (García & Wei, 2014; Wei, 2018), Angel Lin (2013), and others (Williams 1994), represents a major reconceptualization of multilingual classroom practice. Translanguaging treats bilinguals' linguistic resources not as separate language systems that should be kept apart, but as a single integrated repertoire from which speakers and learners draw flexibly to make

meaning (Canagarajah, 2013). From this perspective, classroom translanguaging, including planned and pedagogically purposeful code-switching, is a legitimate and often necessary feature of multilingual education rather than a deviation from monolingual norms (Creese & Blackledge, 2010).

Cummins' (2000, 2007) interdependence hypothesis and the related concept of common underlying proficiency offer cognitive support for translanguaging-informed pedagogy. The hypothesis argues that conceptual knowledge developed in one language transfers to other languages, provided that the relevant linguistic skills are adequate. This implies that drawing on students' stronger language to develop concepts that they will later articulate in another language is cognitively coherent and pedagogically productive. Vygotskian sociocultural theory, with its emphasis on language as a tool for thought and on the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986), further supports principled use of all available linguistic resources to scaffold learning.

Historical and Sociolinguistic Context of Indian Multilingualism

Indian sociolinguistic scholarship has emphasized the integrative and complementary character of Indian multilingualism. Lachman Khubchandani's (1983) work foregrounded the everyday, fluid, and non-conflictual coexistence of multiple languages in South Asian communicative life. Subsequent scholarship by Debi Prasanna Pattanayak (1990), Probal Dasgupta (1993), Rama Kant Agnihotri (2010), and others (Sridhar, 1996) has developed this perspective, often in dialogue with critiques of language-policy frameworks that treat Indian languages in isolation from one another (Annamalai, 2001).

Educational policy in independent India has navigated complex tensions among Hindi, English, and regional languages. The Three Language Formula, articulated in successive iterations from the Kothari Commission onwards, has shaped much of the official structure of school language education (Annamalai, 2001). The National Education Policy 2020 reaffirms multilingualism, emphasizes mother tongue or local language as medium of instruction at least until Grade 5 and preferably until Grade 8, and explicitly calls for innovative pedagogical approaches that draw on students' existing linguistic resources (Government of India, 2020; National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2023). Implementation, however, varies substantially across states, school types, and resource environments (Mohanty, 2019).

Empirical Studies on Code-Switching in Indian Classrooms

A growing body of empirical research has documented classroom code-switching in Indian contexts (Bhattacharya, 2021; Mohanty, 2019; Vaish, 2008). Studies have analysed teacher and student code-switching in primary classrooms in rural Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh, in middle school science classrooms in Hindi-speaking states, in English-medium private schools serving students with diverse home languages, and in higher education settings (Lin, 2013; Mohanty, 2009). The findings consistently show that code-switching is widespread, that it serves identifiable pedagogical functions, and that it often proceeds despite official policies that discourage or prohibit the use of languages other than the designated medium of instruction (Bhattacharya, 2021).

Code-Switching, Pedagogy, and Equity

Code-switching has important equity dimensions. Students from linguistic minority backgrounds, students whose home language differs significantly from the medium of instruction, and students from socioeconomically marginalized backgrounds are often disproportionately disadvantaged when classrooms enforce strict monolingual norms (Mohanty, 2009, 2019). Pedagogical use of code-switching can mitigate some of these disadvantages by allowing students to access content through their stronger language while developing proficiency in the medium of instruction (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cummins, 2007). At the same time, indiscriminate or unprincipled code-switching, particularly in ways that systematically reduce student exposure to academic registers of the target language, can undermine learning. The pedagogical question is therefore not whether to code-switch, but how to do so in principled, planned, and reflective ways.

Research Gap

Despite this expanding scholarship, several gaps persist. Comparative analyses across Indian states, school types, and language ecologies remain limited. Theoretical engagement with translanguaging in Indian-specific contexts is still developing, with most foundational translanguaging work having emerged from Latino and African educational settings. Implementation-focused research aligned with the National Education Policy 2020 is in its early stages. Teacher education programmes have been slow to incorporate evidence-based guidance on principled code-switching and translanguaging. The present article seeks to contribute to addressing these gaps.

Methods

This study employs a critical literature review methodology with thematic synthesis, suitable for integrating scholarship across applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, education, and language policy. The review proceeded through four stages.

In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts database, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined code-switching, translanguaging, multilingual education, mother tongue instruction, classroom discourse, India, and NEP 2020. The window was January 2010 to August 2025, with selected earlier sources retained for theoretical and historical grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical scholarship engaging with classroom code-switching, translanguaging, or multilingual pedagogy, with priority given to work focused on India and comparable multilingual contexts. Foundational international theoretical works on code-switching, translanguaging, and bilingual education were also included. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies focused exclusively on adult second-language acquisition outside school settings, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After title, abstract, and full-text screening, seventy publications were retained.

In the third stage, supplementary materials were drawn from public policy documents including the National Education Policy 2020, the National Curriculum Framework documents, state-level language policy texts, and reports from teacher education and curriculum institutions including the National Council of Educational Research and Training and the National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration. In the fourth stage, thematic synthesis generated four functional categories of pedagogical code-switching that structure the findings. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and balanced engagement with multiple theoretical traditions were maintained throughout.

Results

Cognitive Scaffolding for Content Comprehension

The first and perhaps most extensively documented function of pedagogical code-switching is cognitive scaffolding for content comprehension. Teachers in Indian classrooms routinely explain unfamiliar concepts, complex vocabulary, and abstract relationships in students' stronger language before consolidating the material in the medium of instruction. This practice draws on Cummins' (2000, 2007) interdependence principle, allowing students to engage cognitively with content even when their proficiency in the medium of instruction is still developing (Vygotsky 1986).

Empirical studies of Indian science and mathematics classrooms repeatedly identify this scaffolding function as central (Bhattacharya 2021; Vaish 2008). Teachers report that switching to a regional language or Hindi for definitions, explanations, and analogies enables students to grasp content that would otherwise remain inaccessible. The pedagogical key is the deliberate management of switching: introducing concepts in the stronger language, then developing the relevant academic vocabulary in the medium of instruction, and ultimately enabling students to discuss the content fluently in the target academic register (Cummins 2000). Without this deliberate progression, code-switching can become a default that prevents the development of academic proficiency in the medium of instruction.

Affective and Relational Functions

The second function is affective and relational. Code-switching plays significant roles in classroom relationship building, classroom management, and the development of student confidence and willingness to participate (Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Zentella 1997). Teachers shift to students' home languages or to a regional lingua franca for moments of personal connection, encouragement, humour, and rapport. Such shifts signal recognition of students' full identities and linguistic resources, rather than treating school as a place where home languages must be suppressed (Mohanty 2019).

Studies of student participation in Indian classrooms consistently document that students who feel constrained by exclusively English-medium environments often participate more actively when home languages or regional languages are accepted (Bhattacharya 2021). Affective acknowledgement through language choice is particularly important for first-generation learners, students from linguistic minority backgrounds, and students whose social and economic capital makes them less likely to feel at ease in formal English-medium settings (Mohanty 2009). Pedagogical sensitivity to these affective dimensions is itself a form of equity-oriented teaching.

Metalinguistic Awareness and Language-Specific Instruction

The third function involves the cultivation of metalinguistic awareness through deliberate cross-language reflection (Canagarajah 2013; García & Wei, 2014; Wei 2018). Skilled teachers use code-switching not only to convey content but to draw students' attention to language itself: comparing grammatical structures across languages, exploring etymological relationships, and analysing how the same idea is expressed differently in different languages. This practice develops a linguistic sensibility that supports learning across all languages in the student's repertoire.

In language and literature classrooms, principled code-switching also serves language-specific instructional purposes. For example, teachers may use English for a discussion of poetic devices in an English text while drawing comparisons with familiar literary forms in regional languages, or use Hindi or a regional language to provide authentic examples of cultural reference points that enrich student understanding of texts. The goal is not to dilute target-language exposure, but to enrich learning by drawing on the full linguistic and cultural resources of the classroom community.

Inclusion of Linguistic Minorities and Home Languages

The fourth function concerns the inclusion of linguistic minorities and home languages (Mohanty, 2009, 2019). Many Indian classrooms include students whose home languages are neither the official medium of instruction nor the dominant regional language. These can include speakers of Adivasi languages, urban migrants speaking varieties of Bhojpur, Maithili, Awadhi, Garhwali, or other regional varieties, and members of linguistic minority communities. For these students, the inclusion of home languages, even briefly and through limited code-switching, can have significant equity implications.

Inclusion practices range from explicit teacher-initiated invitations to share home language equivalents of vocabulary, to multilingual classroom labels and resources, to peer-supported translation arrangements among students. The National Education Policy 2020's recognition of mother tongues and local languages provides a strong mandate for such practices (Government of India 2020; National Council of Educational Research and Training 2023). Successful implementation requires careful attention to ensure that inclusion is genuine rather than tokenistic, and that students who speak less-represented home languages receive substantive learning support (Mohanty 2009).

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an integrative applied linguistic framework that combines translanguaging theory, Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, sociocultural learning theory, and Indian sociolinguistic scholarship to ground a principled approach to classroom code-switching. The four functions identified, cognitive scaffolding, affective and relational functions, metalinguistic awareness, and linguistic inclusion, are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. Effective multilingual pedagogy typically draws on all four functions according to the demands of different teaching moments.

For teacher education, the findings highlight the need to incorporate explicit, evidence-based guidance on principled code-switching and translanguaging into pre-service and in-service teacher preparation (Creese & Blackledge 2010; Cummins, 2007; García & Wei, 2014). Many Indian teachers practice code-switching intuitively, but without theoretical grounding or pedagogical planning. Teacher education programmes can develop teachers' capacity to identify code-switching purposes, plan switches strategically, and reflect on their effectiveness (Lin 2013). This requires updates to teacher education curricula, modelling by teacher educators in their own practice, and accessible materials that translate research insights for classroom use.

For curriculum design, the findings suggest the value of multilingual instructional materials that explicitly support principled code-switching rather than assuming a strictly monolingual delivery. Such materials might include teacher guides indicating points at which translation, paraphrase, or comparison across languages can deepen learning, multilingual glossaries for content-area vocabulary, and assessment items that recognize student knowledge regardless of the language in which it is expressed (National Council of Educational Research and Training 2023).

For language policy, the findings affirm the alignment between the National Education Policy 2020's multilingual orientation and applied linguistic evidence, while highlighting implementation gaps (Government of India, 2020). State-level policies and school-level practices need adjustment to permit and support principled code-switching. Resistance from parents seeking English-medium education for upward mobility, and from administrators concerned with examination outcomes, requires careful engagement that demonstrates how

multilingual pedagogy supports rather than undermines language and content learning (Bhattacharya, 2021). Communication with parent and community stakeholders is essential.

For assessment practice, the findings raise important questions. High-stakes examinations conducted exclusively in the medium of instruction may underestimate student knowledge if students have developed conceptual understanding through their stronger language. Where examination policies permit, the use of bilingual question papers, the acceptance of bilingual answers, and the development of multilingual assessment instruments deserve consideration. Within-classroom formative assessment can adopt translanguaging principles more readily than summative high-stakes testing.

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, the analysis depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven across Indian states, school types, and grade levels. Variation in teacher training, school resources, and language ecologies is considerable, and the findings should not be applied uniformly. Primary classroom-based research, including detailed observational and discourse-analytic studies, is needed to enrich the picture sketched here. The voices and experiences of students themselves, including their reflections on their own code-switching practices, are underrepresented in much of the formal literature.

Conclusion

This article has examined code-switching as a pedagogical tool in multilingual Indian classrooms through an applied linguistics perspective. Drawing on translanguaging theory, Cummins' interdependence hypothesis, sociocultural learning theory, and Indian sociolinguistic scholarship, and synthesizing recent empirical and policy literature, the analysis identified four functional categories of pedagogical code-switching: cognitive scaffolding for content comprehension; affective and relational functions; metalinguistic awareness and language-specific instruction; and inclusion of linguistic minorities and home languages. Together, these functions describe a principled multilingual pedagogy aligned with the realities of Indian classrooms and the multilingual orientation of the National Education Policy 2020.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, code-switching is not a deficit to be eliminated from multilingual classrooms but a resource to be cultivated and used with pedagogical intention. The shift from deficit framing to resource framing is essential for both equitable practice and aligned policy. Second, principled code-switching requires teacher education, curriculum support, and assessment practices that recognize its pedagogical purposes. Without such infrastructure, code-switching may continue informally but without the planning and reflection that produce the strongest learning outcomes. Third, applied linguistics has a critical role to play in supporting the implementation of the National Education Policy 2020 by translating research insights into accessible guidance for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Classroom-based observational and discourse-analytic studies across Indian states and school types would deepen the empirical base. Intervention studies evaluating specific principled code-switching strategies in different content areas would generate evidence for practice. Comparative work across Indian states with different language ecologies and policy implementation profiles would clarify what shapes outcomes. Studies focused on linguistic minority students and on first-generation learners would strengthen the equity dimension of this research agenda. Research on assessment practices, including the development and validation of multilingual assessment instruments, is particularly needed. Finally, longitudinal studies tracking student multilingual development over multiple grades would illuminate long-term outcomes of principled code-switching pedagogy. By advancing such an agenda, applied linguistic scholarship can make a meaningful contribution to the educational futures of multilingual Indian children.

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