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Navigating Multilingual Classrooms: Challenges and Strategies in English Language Teaching in Colleges of Kashmir Valley

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Abstract: Teaching and learning practices in ESL (English in a Second Language) classrooms at the undergraduate level in India, particularly in Kashmir Valley, pose significant challenges. These challenges arise from the diverse linguistic backgrounds of the students. In Kashmir Valley, English is taught as a second language at both college and university levels in public and private sectors. Generally, English is a compulsory subject from schools to universities. This research investigates the challenges that occur and the resultant strategy that ESL teachers use to manage multilingual classrooms at the undergraduate level in Kashmir Valley colleges. The study employs a qualitative research paradigm, utilising structured online interviews with undergraduate teachers from various colleges, namely Government Degree College Shopian, Govt Degree College Pulwama, Government Degree College Anantnag, Government Degree College Baramulla, and SSM College Baramulla, all affiliated with the University of Kashmir. The study highlights that the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students require teachers to use multiple strategies in ESL classrooms to cater to these differences. These strategies have varying impacts on the learners' performance.

Keywords: multilingualism; Kashmir; colleges; English as second language (ESL); teacher's challenges; strategies.

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1. Introduction

The attempt is difficult to justify the role of language in a given society because of its complexity in usage, but linguistically it is believed that a language is composed of sequences of symbols and signs quantified for the exclusive purpose of communication. An organisation that has a group of articles organised in such a way to fulfil a particular function with a proper combination of those articles. Language being a medium of communication has specific roles to perform in a context. Some of those functions are also called language attributes, such as expression of ideas, thoughts, and emotions, creating and maintaining identity markers, setting up a personality, and many more. As the organisation of communication and its attributes are many more to be described in lines, so is human nature with the compatibility of context. Now, this complexity and contextual variation of human nature gives a rise to the importance and usage of many local and regional languages. The concept of bilingualism and multilingualism has emerged from such diversified languages and their usage in particular context.

Multilingualism is derived from the two Latin words “multi-many” and “lingua-language”. So, multilingualism denotes the capability of humans to use their communication skills in more than one language in a clear and comprehensible manner with an equal, adequate, and native like proficiency. McRae (1997) says that multilingualism is also called the phenomenon of having co-existence of several languages simultaneously in a given context. The tendency that shows a clear functional differentiation of two languages is generally referred to as diglossia. This term shows the difference of language varieties in terms of low and high usages in informal and formal meetings respectively.

Research has shown the rapid increase of multilingualism on official grounds among countries including Switzerland and Canada, whereas it has grown adequately in Asian and African. The spread of multilingualism has a lot of factors. Some of the important factors include the use of mixed languages worldwide in the form of a lingua franca, whereas cross-cultural interaction has proven to be an even greater source of the spread of multilingualism. With the inclusion of more than one official language there has been positive influence on regional and local languages as well. The 21st century focuses on communication as the prime important factor of interaction around the world. This has proved to have enhanced the scope of multilingualism than before.

The learning experiences and real-life practices become a challenge for both learners and teachers in English as second language classrooms in learning the English language. This is specifically present and observed mostly on the undergraduate level in third world countries. This difficulty occurs to students where the main problem comes where the learners have to do communication and socialisation in English as a norm in a college inside and outside the classrooms. In Kashmir, the second language in use and academics in colleges is majorly English. At a general level, the English language is taught as a compulsory subject in schools, colleges, and universities.

1.1. Aims and Objectives

The primary focus of this research is to understand the learning situations and strategies employed by teachers in ESL classrooms, specifically in the context of multilingualism. The objectives are:

- To identify the impact of multilingualism on learners’ performance in Undergraduate ESL classrooms at various colleges of Kashmir Valley;
- To investigate the strategies and techniques teachers’ make use of to cater learners’ needs who come from different multilingual backgrounds in undergraduate ESL classrooms.

1.2. Research Questions

This research paper aims to answer the following questions based on the research objectives of the study. They are as follows:

RQ1: What is the impact of multilingualism on learners' performance in undergraduate ESL classroom context at various colleges of Kashmir Valley ?

RQ2: What are the strategies used by teachers to cater such diverse multilingual learners in undergraduate ESL classrooms?

2. Literature Review

The phenomenon of multilingualism has a lot of impact proved by researchers on learners, teachers, and on learning situations respectively. Nazki (2025) explores the historical development, spread, and influence of the English language in Kashmir from a linguistic perspective. He emphasises how multilingual classrooms in Kashmir shape the role and trajectory of the English language in the region. Bashir and Jan (2024:232–239) explores how NEP 2020 emphasises multilingualism and its practical implementation in the Indian education system. The few common problems that Ahmed (2011) has identified in his study, from the learners' responses and their experiences of undergraduate studies, have reflected the inflexibility in learning strategies, subject difficulty, reliance on teachers' techniques and methods, unorganised academic skills, lack of academic and intellectual competence, excessive workload to cover, and lack of motivation that led to a failure of education system. The researchers like Cummins (2001) and Garcia (2009) have stressed over the multilingualism classroom teaching and learning practices at undergraduate level in universities. Garcia further believes that the use of more than one language has diverse impacts on learners' performances and that helps them cognitively as well. Furthermore, the researcher extensively emphasises the use of multiple languages, which helps increase students' knowledge repertoires. This makes education more comprehensive for them and enhances their exposure to social, educational, regional, and cultural diversity.

Paulsrud (2017:215–230) believes that the rising norm of multilingualism has heightened educational practices in terms of dynamic and varied range of backgrounds inside the classrooms at undergraduate levels in universities. Furthermore, as in third world countries there is an extensive use of multilingualism outside the classrooms. When those multilingual linguistic repertoires will be integrated with the language outside the classrooms then the exposure of students will be better than ever. Coelho (2009) calls multilingualism as a source of linguistic and ethnic assorted backgrounds and knowledge with which learners get a good exposure in a comprehensible manner required for ESL classrooms. The same concept has been continued and propagated by Garcia.

3. Research Methodology

The current research employs qualitative research design for a comprehensive and valid study. This kind of qualitative study finds wide-ranging descriptive data most suitable to address the problem. The qualitative research paradigm generates data through structured, semi-structured, and online interviews. Dey (1993) recommended qualitative research analysis methods to be the smartest of all the methods, even more than surveys. Since this includes multiple data sources like interviewing, observation, analysis, group, single, and online interviewing. Because of its wide qualitative research methodology is seen to be most suitable and adaptable of all. Chauhan (2012) argues that qualitative research methodology has attributions to a varied range of social interaction with participants and helps to get first-hand experience with them, hence this seems to be the most compatible method of data collection. For strong compatibility, the present research project uses qualitative research design as the framework of this study.

3.1. Data Collection Tools

The qualitative research study uses several methods of data collection and interpretation. So out of so many methods, the best adaptable among them for this research project has been the semi structured online interviews. Mathers, Fox, and Hunn (1998) further describe the semi-structured interviews as the open-ended questions designed by the research prior data collection. This includes thorough analysis of the research questions to structure the questions for interviews in alignment. The researcher designs questions before and during the interviews as per requirement of the topic.

3.2. Research Participants

As this research project addresses the second language acquisition in multilingual situation and teachers' strategies, the present study chose ESL teachers from five colleges, namely Government Degree College Shopian, Government Degree College Pulwama, Government Degree College Anantnag, Government Degree College Baramulla, and SSM College Srinagar. Since this study is about the management of multilingual backgrounds of students by teachers, hence the range of teachers is chosen wisely.

3.3. Sampling

This research project collected data from various public and private sector colleges. The participants of the study belonged to varied linguistic backgrounds as well. So to meet the requirements of the research questions, purposive sampling was preferred among other sampling methods. Monette (2011) describes that purposive sampling helps researchers to recruit participants of the study based on their familiarity and expertise related to the topic of the study. The participants selected for the study were ten in total ($n = 10$). The distribution of participation is: two from Government Degree College Shopian, three from Government Degree College Anantnag, two participants from Government Degree College Baramulla, and three from SSM College Srinagar. Besides, the gender ratio was also balanced. The participants aged between 22 to 27, belonging to rural and urban parts of Kashmir Valley.

3.4. Analysis and Interpretation

The study used qualitative interviews which were conducted via internet. The interviews were audio-recorded for transcription and analysis later on. After the data collection, the audio-recordings were heard by the researcher several times. The transcription of the responses of the participants was done for coding and analysis. The study used content analysis to interpret the data as it helped the researcher to divide the descriptive data into codes, themes, and categories. Further, those codes were divided and analysed with the help of audio recordings. Creswell (2008) says that content analysis provides the detailed and factual explanation of the responses of participants. It is therefore widely used as a tool for data analysis in qualitative studies. There has been a great focus on the confidentiality of the names and other demographic information of the participants.

3.5. Structured Interview Questions

- 1) Do you have multilingual classrooms? (Students coming from different backgrounds);
- 2) How often and when do you switch between more than one language?
- 3) What do you do as a strategy being a teacher to cater multilingual students in a class?
- 4) When do your students feel comfortable in your medium of instruction?
- 5) Do you think multilingual situations affect positively or negatively towards learners' performance and learning overall? Please give an elaborate answer.

6) What and how do you manage students of multiple languages and their interest in class?

7) What is your best effort to cater multilingual students in a class leaving behind a positive impact on learners' performance?

4. Findings and Results

The data were collected from ten (n=10) undergraduate teachers in Kashmir Valley. For the interview, the present researcher formulated some dominant questions which the teachers were informed about before the interview. The other questions were made from these dominant questions as a further investigation into the study. The result is presented with respect to categories constructed out of questions used in the interview.

Table 1. Sample Response Sheet

Theme	Subtheme	Sample Response
Multilingualism	Multilingual backgrounds of learners	I teach in multilingual classrooms. Students come from different parts of the valley. I have learners whose mother tongue is Kashmiri, Urdu, or Punjabi. (P1, P2): "Sometimes, in a single class, I have five or six different linguistic backgrounds. It feels like each student brings their home into the classroom". (P2)
	Switching languages	I switch to Kashmiri and Urdu when I feel that the task I gave to students isn't fulfilled. If I do switch, then it is Urdu as it acts as a lingua franca. (P1, P2, P3, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10): "If I don't switch, I see a blankness on their faces. But once I move to Urdu or Kashmiri, they immediately start nodding, as if the fog has cleared". (P5)
Multilingualism strategies	Medium of Instruction	English mostly (P1). My students like to take instructions in Kashmiri or Urdu (P2, P4, P5, P9, P10). English only so no confusion occurs (P3, P7).
	Translation of complex topics	I try to translate into Urdu and Kashmiri when there is a difficult or complex topic. (P1, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10): "The moment I translate a difficult terms into Kashmiri, their eyes light up—they say, 'Oh, now we get it, sir!'" (P9)
	Grouping by language proficiency	I try to ask my students to form groups so they can perform better in class. (P2, P3, P8): "If I group a strong English speaker with two weaker ones, they help each other. Sometimes they even invent their own mix of English and Kashmiri to solve the task." (P8)
	Humour and engagement	When I am funny and humorous, that also helps as a strategy to cater to learners in large classes. (P2)

	Encouragement in L2	I encourage them to come in front and speak in English no matter right or wrong, and they do it successfully (P3, P7): “I encourage them to come in front and speak in English no matter right or wrong, and they do it successfully” (P3); “When a shy student speaks broken English, I clap for them. The whole class joins in, and that applause gives them courage”. (P7)
	Patience and reinforcement	Being patient in class and sometimes charging them for not using English also works. (P6)
Learning in mother tongue	Preference for native language	My students are very comfortable in their native language, mostly Kashmiri or Urdu, few in Punjabi and Pahari. (P1)
Multilingualism	Positive impact	Learners feel comfortable in their native language if switched. (P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P8, P9, P10): “It builds trust. They feel I understand them when I use their language. Then they are ready to take risks in English”. (P6)
	Negative impact	In my context, three or four languages are restricted in class; outside the classroom, they speak their native languages. This can have both impacts because they do not practice outside the class. (P1, P2, P3, P6, P8, P9, P10). No effect of multilingualism on learners. (P4, P7): “The problem is, when they go home, English disappears. So the progress we make in class gets diluted”. (P8)

5. Discussion

5.1. Multilingualism is Preferred and Appreciated

The mode of multilingualism is highly responded by (n=10) all the participants. They have learners from diversified backgrounds like educational, cultural, social, political, and linguistic. They have a wide range of learners from linguistic backgrounds belonging to different regional languages like: Kashmiri, Urdu, Gojri, Pahari, Punjabi, and dialectal variations in the Kashmiri language too.

5.2. Strategies in Classrooms

There were many different strategies suggested by undergraduate teachers that they use during their classes to cater the multilingual learners and ESL classroom setting. Teachers (n=90%) believe that one of the strategies that works more than any other is the translation of ideas from L2 to L1, for a better understanding of learners and this works for 90% of them. Few teachers believed that having groups of different learners working together is an effective strategy for multilingual classrooms (n=30). Some (n=30%) undergraduate teachers believed that making learners engage in dialogue and group making, according to their proficiencies, is also one of the good strategies to be applied in multilingual situations. Few (11.20%) teachers believed that encouragement works better in such situations for learners to speak in front of the class and their peers, no matter right or wrong. This strategy allows

having a good confidence in learners, making them perform better. A very interesting answer came from teachers (n=10%) who believed that being humorous and funny in the classroom has a profound effect in a multilingual setting, and this helps them have their own space and a good environment in class. A few others (n=10%) also believed that the good strategy is patient behaviour and sometimes charging learners for not using English language may help as positive reinforcement for learners to use English language in ESL classrooms.

5.2. Learning in Mother Tongue more Preferable than ESL

The undergraduate teachers believed that ESL learners have a deep view that instructions in their native language affects their performance in a profound way. The teachers had a saying that mostly students like to get instructions and lectures in their native language (L1) other than English language (L2).

5.3. Multilingualism Impacts

This situation or question had a different range of answers by the undergraduate learners. Some (n=95%) teachers believed that multilingual situations in ESL classrooms have both positive and negative effects and impacts on learners' performances. The effect is both positive and negative. It is positive because learners are exposed to a variety of languages, providing a fair chance to develop cognitive skills in some areas, particularly those closely related to their native language. It is negative because the dominance of their native language can interfere with learning other languages, which may lead to difficulties in a multilingual setting. There were few undergraduate teachers (11+200/0) who saw multilingualism as completely positive because it helps the learners in their learning in so many ways, like exposure to many languages, peer learning, and group learning about L2 and their regional languages. However, there were few teachers (n=20%) who believed that multilingualism has no impact on learners' performance so far, as we live in a society where we are exposed to many languages in and outside the classrooms, so since, it leaves no impression or effect on the learners' performances. Learners also tend to use their first language (L1) in most contexts, while the second language (L2) is largely confined to ESL classrooms, which limits its impact on ESL learning and learners' performance.

6. Conclusion

English as a second teaching language (ESL) in the multilingual context of Kashmir Valley presents unique challenges, requiring a set of innovative strategies. This research has explored these challenges and strategies through qualitative inquiry, involving ESL teachers from various colleges in the region. The findings highlight the complex linguistic diversity among students and the varied impacts of multilingualism on their learning experiences. The study unequivocally establishes that ESL classrooms in Kashmir Valley are inherently multilingual, with students hailing from diverse linguistic backgrounds such as Kashmiri, Urdu, Punjabi, Gojri, and Pahari. This linguistic diversity poses both opportunities and challenges. While it enriches the cultural and educational milieu, it also complicates the pedagogical landscape, requiring teachers to navigate multiple languages and proficiency levels simultaneously. The impact of multilingualism on learners' performance is multifaceted. Many teachers acknowledge that students often feel more comfortable and perform better when instructions are delivered in their native language (L1). This comfort level can enhance comprehension and engagement, particularly for complex topics. However, there is a concern that excessive reliance on L1 might hinder English language proficiency development, which is crucial for academic and professional success. To address these challenges, ESL teachers in Kashmir Valley employ a range of strategies tailored to the multilingual classroom environment. Teachers can frequently switch between languages and

translate concepts from English (L2) into students' native languages (L1) to facilitate understanding. Creating heterogeneous groups based on language proficiency allows students to collaborate effectively and learn from each other's strengths. Incorporating cultural references and humour in teaching helps create a conducive learning atmosphere, promoting rapport and engagement among students.

Despite the challenges, teachers consistently encourage students to use English in both formal and informal classroom settings, fostering confidence and fluency. Lastly, maintaining patience with students' language learning process and occasionally using positive reinforcement techniques, such as rewards for English language usage, are also effective strategies.

From an educational standpoint, the study underscores the need for curriculum adaptations and teacher training programmes that address the complexities of multilingualism. It advocates for pedagogical approaches that celebrate linguistic diversity, while promoting English language proficiency as a gateway to global communication and opportunities.

7. Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Based on the findings, several recommendations can be made to enhance ESL education in multilingual contexts.

Teacher Training Programmes: Develop specialised training programmes for ESL educators that focus on multilingual teaching strategies, cultural sensitivity, and effective language assessment techniques.

Curriculum Development: Integrate culturally relevant content and materials that resonate with students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into ESL curriculum.

Support for Language Development: Provide additional support systems, such as language labs or peer tutoring, to supplement classroom learning and enhance language acquisition.

Research and Collaboration: Encourage collaborative research initiatives between universities, colleges, and educational authorities to further explore effective pedagogical practices in multilingual ESL settings.

It is evident from the current research that teaching English as a second language in the multilingual classrooms of Kashmir Valley is a dynamic and challenging endeavour. While multilingualism enriches the educational experience, it necessitates nuanced approaches to teaching and learning. By embracing diversity, leveraging effective strategies, and prioritising English language proficiency, educators can empower students to succeed academically and thrive in an increasingly interconnected world. This study contributes valuable insights into the intersection of multilingualism and ESL education, offering a foundation for future research and policy initiatives aimed at improving language teaching practices in similar contexts globally. By addressing these challenges thoughtfully, educators can ensure that ESL classrooms become inclusive spaces where linguistic diversity is celebrated and leveraged for enhanced learning outcomes.

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