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5. Learning through Mother Tongue & English in the Context of Arunachal Pradesh

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Abstract

This paper explores the minute relationship between native language instruction and the use of English as a medium of education in Arunachal Pradesh, a region known for its rich linguistic plurality in Northeast India. By reviewing the historical shifts in educational language policy and evaluating current practices, the study sheds light on the challenges posed by a predominantly English-based system. While English has gained prominence due to its perceived utility in higher education and employment, this approach often hinders comprehension and engagement for students who speak a variety of indigenous languages at home. The research draws on both educational theory and field-level insights to argue for a more balanced model—one that supports mother tongue instruction in the foundational years of schooling and gradually integrates English as students progress. This dual-language strategy is proposed as a means to bridge educational gaps, safeguard linguistic heritage, and expand students' future opportunities in a multilingual society.

Keywords: *Mother tongue education, English as medium of instruction, Multilingualism, Language policy, Arunachal Pradesh, Tribal languages*

1. Introduction

The question of appropriate language of instruction has been central to educational debates in multilingual societies worldwide.¹ This issue is particularly complex in Arunachal Pradesh, India's northeastern-most state, which is home to 26 major tribes and over 100 sub-tribes, each with distinct linguistic traditions.² Historical circumstances, geographical isolation, and cultural dynamics have created a unique linguistic landscape in this region, presenting distinctive challenges for educational policy and practice.

The linguistic diversity of Arunachal Pradesh is remarkable—each valley, sometimes each village, speaks a different language or dialect, with most having no written script until recent standardization efforts.³ This diversity has necessitated pragmatic approaches to language in education, leading to shifting policies from Assamese to Hindi and eventually to English as mediums of instruction. These transitions reflect not only pedagogical considerations but also socio-political realities and aspirations for mobility and opportunity.⁴

This research paper examines the historical trajectory of language policies in Arunachal Pradesh's education system and analyzes the current status of English as the primary medium of instruction against the backdrop of mother tongue-based learning theories. The central question guiding this research is: How can the education system in Arunachal Pradesh effectively balance the need for mother tongue instruction with the pragmatic advantages of English language learning?

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The study draws upon historical records, educational policies, theoretical frameworks of bilingual education, and contemporary assessments of learning outcomes to propose a more integrated approach to language instruction that serves both identity preservation and educational advancement goals in this unique multilingual context.

2. Historical Evolution of Language Policies in Arunachal Pradesh

2.1 Pre-Colonial and Early Colonial Period

Prior to formal educational structures, knowledge transmission in Arunachal Pradesh occurred primarily through oral traditions within tribal communities.⁵ Each tribe maintained distinct linguistic practices, with knowledge passed intergenerationally through mother tongues. Historical records concerning the region remain sparse until the arrival of the Ahoms in Assam, with Arunachal Pradesh itself remaining largely unknown territory to historians until relatively recent times.⁶

2.2 British Colonial Intervention

The British took possession of the region in 1883, appointing an assistant political officer in 1882 as the first step toward bringing the territory under administrative control.⁷ However, British administration largely left the region to its own devices, particularly following the 1911 incident involving the murder of Noel Williamson [8]. Educational initiatives during this period were minimal, with the first venture lower primary school established in Pasighat in 1918, followed by another in Dambuk in 1922.⁹

2.3 Post-Independence Language Policies (1947-1970)

Following India's independence, educational expansion in Arunachal Pradesh (then known as the North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA) accelerated, bringing language policy questions to the forefront. Initially, it was decided that local languages should serve as media of instruction. However, the lack of standardized scripts for most tribal languages created an “anomalous situation” where teachers used either Hindi or Assamese depending on their background and students' capacity to follow either language.¹⁰

By 1959, a policy decision established Assamese as the medium of instruction at middle and higher levels, despite some resistance.¹¹ This period saw significant expansion of primary education, with 129 primary schools established by 1961.¹² A tiered approach to language instruction emerged by 1965: Assamese served as grade-I language, Hindi as grade-II, and English as grade-III.¹³

2.4 Transition to English Medium (1970-Present)

The controversy over medium of instruction intensified as education advanced. In May 1970, J.N. College in Pasighat advocated for replacing Assamese with Hindi and English.¹⁴ A pivotal decision came in 1971 when the administration affiliated all schools of NEFA to the central school system, establishing English as the medium of instruction from upper primary onwards.¹⁵

This transition coincided with Arunachal Pradesh's political evolution toward statehood (achieved in 1987), with English becoming the official language of the state. English now serves as a common language alongside Hindi and Assamese in this multilingual state where no indigenous language has gained acceptance as a universal medium of communication.¹⁶

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Bilingual Education Theory

The debate surrounding language of instruction in Arunachal Pradesh can be analyzed through several theoretical frameworks of bilingual education. Particularly relevant is Cummins' distinction between

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Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).¹⁷

According to Cummins, BICS refers to “cognitively undemanding manifestations of language proficiency in interpersonal situations.”¹⁸ This encompasses oral proficiency, accent, and interpersonal communication competence. CALP, conversely, pertains to “aspects of language closely related to the development of literacy skills.”¹⁹ CALP involves universal, cross-linguistic dimensions of competence that, once acquired, can be transferred between languages.

Cummins argues that minority-language children often face academic failure when introduced to a second language before developing CALP in their first language.²⁰ This theoretical perspective has profound implications for Arunachal Pradesh, where many children encounter English as a medium of instruction before consolidating academic language skills in their mother tongues.

3.2 Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) offers another relevant theoretical framework. This approach advocates beginning education in the child's mother tongue while gradually introducing additional languages.²¹ Research indicates that strong foundation in first language facilitates second language acquisition and strengthens overall academic performance.²²

In linguistically diverse contexts like Arunachal Pradesh, MTB-MLE faces implementation challenges but potentially offers significant cognitive and educational benefits by building on children's existing linguistic resources rather than replacing them.²³

4. Current Status of English in Arunachal Pradesh

4.1 English as Medium of Instruction

English currently serves as the primary medium of instruction in Arunachal Pradesh schools from upper primary level onwards. The state follows NCERT curriculum with “literature-based English texts” where language skills have “not been given due importance”²⁴; this approach emphasizes literature appreciation over functional language acquisition, potentially disadvantaging students who lack foundational language skills.

4.2 Functions of English in Educational and Social Contexts

English in Arunachal Pradesh serves multiple functions characteristic of English as a Second Language (ESL) settings:

- Instructional function (medium of instruction)
- Regulative function (language of law and administration)
- Interpersonal function (language of communication)
- Commercial function (language of trade and commerce)
- Creative function (language of literary expression)²⁵

Despite these formal functions, English remains primarily an academic language with limited presence in students' daily lives. This creates a disconnect between classroom instruction and lived experience, complicating language acquisition.

4.3 Popular Media Influence on Language Acquisition

An interesting phenomenon observed in Arunachal Pradesh is the greater influence of popular media (television, films—particularly Bollywood) on language acquisition compared to academic instruction.²⁶ This has contributed to Hindi gaining ground as a lingua franca while English remains primarily confined to formal educational contexts. The imbalance between English as the official

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medium of instruction and Hindi as the de facto language of communication presents significant challenges for educational outcomes.

5. Challenges in English Language Learning in Arunachal Pradesh

5.1 Linguistic Distance

Students in Arunachal Pradesh face significant challenges learning through English due to the substantial linguistic distance between their mother tongues and English. Most tribal languages in the region belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family, with grammatical structures, phonological systems, and conceptual frameworks markedly different from English.²⁷ This linguistic distance increases the cognitive load of learning and complicates comprehension of academic content presented in English.

5.2 Limited Exposure Outside Educational Settings

English functions primarily as an academic language in Arunachal Pradesh, with minimal presence in students' daily environments. As noted in the document, English is “not reflected in informal environments, that is spoken one.”²⁸ This limited exposure restricts opportunities for language acquisition through immersion and natural communication, confining English learning to formal instruction settings where it may be perceived as abstract and disconnected from lived experience.

5.3 Teacher Preparedness and Communication Barriers

The effectiveness of English-medium instruction is significantly impacted by teacher preparedness and communication barriers. The document identifies “the worst situation” as occurring “when the teacher is unable to communicate with the children in grades 1 and 2, since she does not understand their language.”²⁹ This communication gap is “common in several pockets of Arunachal where one or more teachers in a school are from a non-tribal background.”³⁰

Even with efforts to recruit local teachers, multilingual classrooms present continuing challenges when “the teacher may be an Arunachalee but may not know the language of one group of children.”³¹ These communication barriers fundamentally undermine the teaching-learning process, particularly in foundational years when basic concepts are being established.

5.4 Socioeconomic Factors and Family Literacy Levels

Learning difficulties faced by students depend partly on “the socio-economic background of children including literacy level of family members.”³² In regions where family literacy levels are low, particularly in English, children receive minimal support for English language learning outside school. This compounds the challenges of English-medium instruction by limiting opportunities for reinforcement and practice in home environments.

6. Analysis of Language Learning Situations in Schools

6.1 Categorization of School Language Situations

To better understand the challenges of language instruction in Arunachal Pradesh, it is useful to categorize school language situations based on three key dimensions:

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Table 1: Categorization of School Language Situations in Arunachal Pradesh

Dimension	Description	Typical Scenario in Arunachal Pradesh
Medium of Instruction (MoI)	“The language used in school to teach different subjects” ³³	English (upper primary onwards); mixed approaches in early grades
Regional/Local Language	“The predominant language in the area where the school is situated” ³⁴	Varies by district/community; often a local tribal language or lingua franca (Hindi/Assamese)
Teacher Language Background	“Teacher's proficiency in the language used as the medium of instruction and the first language of the children” ³⁵	Often mismatched with student language background; varying proficiency levels in English

This categorization reveals the complexity of language situations in Arunachal Pradesh schools, where misalignments between medium of instruction, local language, and teacher language background create significant pedagogical challenges.

6.2 BICS vs. CALP Development in Multilingual Settings

Applying Cummins' theoretical framework to Arunachal Pradesh reveals a critical issue: many students are required to develop Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in English before establishing this proficiency in their mother tongues. As the document notes, minority-language children tend to experience academic failure “because they are introduced to L2 before they have a chance to develop CALP in L1.”³⁶

This premature transition to English-medium instruction may explain persistent academic struggles observed among students from tribal communities. Without strong cognitive-academic language skills in their first language, students face double challenges: mastering new academic concepts while simultaneously acquiring the language of instruction.

7. Toward an Integrated Approach to Language Instruction

7.1 Bridging Mother Tongue and English Instruction

Given the theoretical insights and observed challenges, this research proposes an integrated approach to language instruction in Arunachal Pradesh that bridges mother tongue and English education. This approach would:

- **Begin instruction in mother tongue:** Provide foundational education (grades 1-3) primarily in students' mother tongues or the most widely understood local language.
- **Gradual transition to English:** Introduce English first as a subject, then progressively increase its use as medium of instruction while maintaining mother tongue support.
- **Develop bilingual teaching materials:** Create resources that connect concepts across languages, supporting transfer of knowledge from mother tongue to English.

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- **Train teachers in multilingual pedagogy:** Equip teachers with strategies for effective code-switching, translation, and multilingual classroom management.

7.2 Addressing Practical Implementation Challenges

The implementation of this integrated approach faces significant challenges in Arunachal Pradesh's context:

- **Linguistic diversity:** With numerous tribal languages, many lacking standardized scripts, developing mother tongue materials for all communities presents logistical challenges.
- **Teacher preparation:** Most teachers are not trained in multilingual pedagogical approaches and may lack proficiency in relevant tribal languages.
- **Resource limitations:** Developing materials and training programs requires substantial investment in a resource-constrained setting.
- **Community aspirations:** Many communities prioritize English instruction due to perceived opportunities, sometimes at the expense of mother tongue preservation.

These challenges necessitate a pragmatic, phased implementation strategy that acknowledges resource constraints while working toward optimal educational outcomes.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

The evolution of language policies in Arunachal Pradesh education system reflects broader tensions between cultural preservation and modernization aspirations. The current predominance of English as medium of instruction represents a pragmatic response to linguistic diversity but creates significant learning barriers for many students.

This research suggests that an integrated approach incorporating mother tongue-based multilingual education in early years could significantly improve educational outcomes while preserving linguistic heritage. However, successful implementation requires addressing substantial practical challenges.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **Develop cluster-based mother tongue programs:** Where full mother tongue coverage is impractical, implement programs based on major language clusters, focusing initially on numerically dominant tribal languages.
2. **Invest in teacher training:** Prioritize multilingual pedagogical training for teachers, especially those working in early grades.
3. **Create transition bridging materials:** Develop bilingual materials that explicitly connect concepts across mother tongues and English to facilitate knowledge transfer.
4. **Engage communities:** Conduct awareness programs highlighting the cognitive benefits of mother tongue-based initial education for subsequent English acquisition.
5. **Implement pilot programs:** Begin with pilot implementations in selected districts, documenting outcomes to build evidence for wider application.

The linguistic complexity of Arunachal Pradesh presents unique educational challenges but also offers opportunities to develop innovative approaches to multilingual education that could serve as models for similarly diverse regions worldwide. By thoughtfully integrating mother tongue and English instruction, the education system can better fulfill its dual mandate of preserving cultural heritage while preparing students for broader participation in national and global contexts.

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