A Study on Multilingual Education in Primary Schools and its Impacts on Cognitive Development of a Child in Assam with Reference to Kamrup District

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Abstract- Assam's primary classrooms are naturally multilingual, with children encountering the home language alongside Assamese, Hindi, and English, and in many localities also Bodo, Bengali, Rabha, Garo, or Tiwa. This study focuses on Kamrup district to examine how multilingual education—defined as the planned use of two or more languages for instruction and learning support—relates to children's cognitive development in the early grades. Grounded in sociocultural and interdependence perspectives on language and learning, the paper analyzes how structured multilingual exposure is associated with executive functions (working memory, inhibitory control, and cognitive flexibility), metalinguistic awareness, attention, and early academic outcomes in literacy and numeracy. Contextual barriers—limited teacher preparation for translanguaging pedagogy, shortages of grade-level texts in home languages, parental perceptions that prioritize English, and timetable constraints—are also explored. The analysis indicates that when the home language is used as a scaffold and systematically bridged to Assamese/English, children demonstrate clearer concept formation, faster decoding and comprehension growth, and improved task persistence. The paper concludes that a locally adapted multilingual model—mother-tongue-based instruction in the foundational years with additive Assamese and English, explicit cross-language transfer strategies, and teacher professional development—can enhance cognitive development and reduce early learning gaps in Kamrup's government and aided schools.

Keywords:- Assam; Kamrup district; multilingual education; mother-tongue-based instruction; executive function; metalinguistic awareness; primary education; translanguaging; cognitive development; early literacy

INTRODUCTION

1. Background and Rationale

Assam is home to a dense mosaic of languages and scripts. Children in Kamrup district often begin school already navigating a repertoire that includes the home language (e.g., Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, Rabha, Garo, Tiwa, Nepali, or mixed urban varieties), the community lingua franca, and exposure to Hindi/English through media and markets. Primary schools thus function at the intersection of multiple linguistic ecologies. In this setting, multilingual education (MLE) is not a niche approach but a practical response to learners' lived experiences. National policy directions—particularly the emphasis on mother-tongue or home-language instruction in the foundational stage and additive multilingualism—reinforce this stance. Yet the classroom realization remains uneven across rural and urban blocks of Kamrup due to resource, training, and attitudinal constraints.

2. Problem Context in Kamrup

Despite natural multilingualism, many classrooms default to early English or Assamese dominance without planned bridges from the home language. Teachers frequently report difficulties in managing mixed-language groups; parents may equate English-medium exposure with quality; and curricular materials in non-dominant languages are scarce. These practices can suppress learners' available linguistic resources, leading to reduced participation, slow decoding, and fragile comprehension—especially for first-generation learners. Conversely, well-designed MLE can treat children's languages as cognitive tools, promoting concept formation and transfer across languages. A district-level, evidence-informed account is needed to guide teacher development, material design, and school-level language policies in Kamrup.

3. Conceptual Orientation

This study is anchored in two complementary ideas:

a) Sociocultural mediation:- Language mediates thinking; learning occurs through guided participation. When classrooms allow children to reason, discuss, and rehearse ideas in familiar languages, they can allocate more cognitive resources to meaning rather than form.
b) Cross-linguistic transfer:- Skills such as phonological awareness, morphological parsing, text comprehension strategies, and classroom discourse norms can transfer from one language to another when teachers make links explicit (e.g., mapping phoneme–grapheme correspondences, cognate awareness, parallel vocabulary building).

From these perspectives, cognitive development is operationalized as growth in:

1. Executive functions—working memory (holding/manipulating information), inhibitory control (suppressing irrelevant responses), and cognitive flexibility (shifting between tasks/languages);
2. Metalinguistic awareness—explicit reflection on sound, word, and sentence structures across languages;
3. Sustained attention and self-regulation during learning tasks; and
4. Early academic indicators—foundational literacy and numeracy performance as behavioral manifestations of underlying cognition.

4. Local Linguistic Ecology and Schooling Realities

Kamrup incorporates urban centres with English-medium private schools and a larger network of government LP/UP schools serving rural and peri-urban habitations. Classroom language profiles vary sharply by cluster: an Assamese-dominant hamlet may still include Rabha- or Garo-speaking children; urban classrooms often mix Assamese, Hindi, Bengali, and English exposure. Teachers commonly report:

- reliance on translation rather than planned bilingual tasks;
- scarcity of leveled readers and Big Books in home languages;
- limited assessment tools to capture growth in executive functions or metalinguistic skills;
- Timetable pressures that confine "language periods" rather than integrating language across the curriculum.

These features make Kamrup a suitable microcosm for examining how multilingual practices shape cognitive outcomes.

5. Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this study is to analyze the relationship between multilingual education practices in Kamrup's primary schools and children's cognitive development in the foundational and preparatory grades. The significance is fourfold:

- Pedagogical: Provide classroom-ready strategies for leveraging the home language to build conceptual understanding and then bridge to Assamese/English.
- Assessment: Illustrate simple, feasible measures of executive function and metalinguistic growth appropriate for government schools.
- Policy/Planning: Inform school language policies, textbook procurement, and teacher professional development priorities specific to Kamrup.
- Equity: Support first-generation learners by validating their linguistic repertoires and reducing early learning gaps.

6. Research Gap

While Indian and international research links bilingualism with executive control and metalinguistic advantages, district-focused evidence that connects classroom MLE practices to measurable cognitive indicators within Assam—and specifically Kamrup—is limited. Most available data emphasize language outcomes (reading levels, vocabulary) rather than cognitive processes (flexibility, inhibition, working memory) or the mechanisms of transfer across Assamese/English and home languages. This study addresses that gap by aligning observed MLE strategies with cognitive indicators relevant to early grade learning.

7. Definitions

- Multilingual Education (MLE): Planned use of at least two languages for instruction, including the home language as a scaffold and Assamese/English as additional languages, with explicit cross-language transfer.

- Home Language: The language(s) most used by the child in home/community interactions; may differ from the school's medium.
- Cognitive Development (Primary years): Growth in executive functions, metalinguistic awareness, attention/self-regulation, and foundational academic behaviors that index underlying cognition.
- Translanguaging: Pedagogical use of a learner's full linguistic repertoire to make meaning, not merely side-by-side translation.

8. Delimitations

The focus is on government and government-aided primary schools in Kamrup district. The lens is educational/cognitive rather than sociolinguistic vitality or language endangerment. Cognitive indicators emphasize classroom-feasible tasks suited to Grades I–V.

9. Anticipated Contributions

The study is expected to:

- show that structured MLE (home language → Assamese/English bridging) correlates with stronger executive functions and metalinguistic awareness;
- identify specific teacher moves (e.g., contrastive phonics, cognate mapping, dual-language Big Books, think-aloud across languages) that mediate transfer;
- Propose a district-fit MLE implementation template linking pedagogy, materials, and assessment.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study has been designed with the following specific objectives:

1. To examine the role of multilingual education in shaping the cognitive development of children in primary schools of Kamrup district.
2. To identify the relationship between multilingual exposure and executive functions such as working memory, cognitive flexibility, and inhibitory control.
3. To assess the impact of multilingual instruction on metalinguistic awareness among primary school learners.
4. To compare cognitive performance of children in rural and urban multilingual classrooms of Kamrup district.
5. To document teachers' perceptions, strategies, and challenges in implementing multilingual education.
6. To suggest district-specific strategies and interventions for strengthening multilingual education to support both academic and cognitive development.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

1. Global evidence: bilingualism, multilingualism and cognition

A substantial body of experimental and review research highlights links between bilingual/multilingual experience and certain executive functions in childhood. Studies find that children who routinely manage two or more languages often perform better on tasks of inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and selective attention — capacities collectively referred to as executive functions. Several reviews and empirical papers attribute this advantage to the frequent practice bilingual children have in selecting the target language and suppressing the non-target language, which is hypothesized to train domain-general attentional control systems.

Carlson and Meltzoff's experimental work with kindergarten children showed that bilingual preschoolers outperformed monolingual peers on multiple measures of executive functioning, supporting the view that bilingual experience accelerates development of cognitive control during early childhood. These findings have been replicated across different language pairs and cultural contexts, although effect sizes and the exact pattern of cognitive gains vary with task type and socio-demographic controls.

2. Theoretical frameworks: interdependence, threshold and sociocultural mediation

Several theories form the backbone of contemporary research on language and cognition in education. Cummins' *Interdependence Hypothesis* argues that cognitive/academic skills developed in a child's first

language (L1) can transfer to additional languages (L2) — implying that strengthening L1 supports overall learning and second-language acquisition rather than hindering it. Relatedly, the *Threshold Hypothesis* suggests cognitive and academic benefits appear once children reach a certain level of proficiency in the languages involved. Vygotskian sociocultural perspectives complement these accounts by emphasizing language as a mediational tool that shapes thinking through social interaction and guided participation. These frameworks justify mother-tongue-based pedagogies and planned cross-language scaffolding in early grades.

3. Multilingual education policy and India's context (including NEP 2020)

India's language-in-education landscape is explicitly multilingual and policy documents have increasingly endorsed mother-tongue/home-language instruction at the foundational stage. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 recommends the use of the home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5 (preferably to Grade 8) and advocates an "additive multilingualism" model to strengthen foundational learning and preserve linguistic identity. These policy directions are widely cited as supporting mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MLE) programs and the development of local multilingual curricular resources.

National and state actors (NCERT, SCERTs) have developed materials and seminars that emphasize MLE's pedagogical potential, but implementation gaps persist due to resource constraints, teacher training shortfalls, and sociolinguistic hierarchies that privilege English.

4. Indian empirical studies on MLE and learning outcomes

Research in India on MLE programs (including evaluations of MLE pilots and NGO-led projects) shows consistent educational advantages when mother-tongue instruction is used in the early grades. Evaluations (e.g., MLE+ and state pilots) report improved early literacy, higher participation, and better conceptual understanding when instruction uses the learners' home language and explicitly links to the regional or national language. However, many studies also caution that teacher capacity, availability of teaching–learning materials in local languages, and community attitudes strongly mediate program success. Mohanty and colleagues have documented both the promise of MLE initiatives and the practical hurdles of scaling them across India's diverse linguistic context.

5. Region-specific studies: Assam and Kamrup-related findings

Assam's multilingual ecology — with Assamese, Bengali, Bodo, and other tribal/community languages in active circulation — makes it a relevant site for MLE research. Regional studies and case reports from Assam identify similar patterns to national findings: mother-tongue instruction benefits comprehension and early literacy, but many schools either lack graded readers in local languages or default to Assamese/English early on. Some district- and school-level case studies (including work that sampled Kamrup and nearby districts) show that when mother-tongue practices were used alongside deliberate bridging to Assamese/English, children showed faster decoding and stronger comprehension. Nevertheless, published district-level empirical work linking classroom MLE practices specifically to cognitive measures (e.g., working memory, inhibitory control) in Kamrup remains limited — a gap this study aims to address.

6. Classroom practices, translanguaging and teacher readiness

Classroom observation studies in multilingual settings report a range of teacher practices: from ad hoc translation and code-switching to more planned translanguaging pedagogies that use both languages as cognitive tools (dual-language Big Books, contrastive phonics, think-alouds across languages). The literature emphasizes that high-quality MLE requires teacher training in bilingual pedagogy, availability of materials in home languages, and assessment systems that capture transfer across languages. Studies also show that without supportive training, teachers frequently fall back on translation or English-oriented approaches, undermining the potential cognitive benefits of MLE

7. Measurement challenges: linking classroom language practice to cognitive outcomes

A methodological theme in the literature is the challenge of measuring cognitive outcomes that are

sensitive to language background while avoiding confounds (e.g., socio-economic status, parental education, test language bias). International cognitive studies use carefully adapted executive function batteries (e.g., Stroop-like tasks, go/no-go, digit span) and combine these with language measures to isolate language-related cognitive differences. Indian researchers call for culturally and linguistically appropriate adaptations of these tasks when used in multilingual classrooms to ensure validity and fairness. This study's choice of EF and metalinguistic tasks follows these documented best practices.

8. Synthesis and identified research gap

Summarizing the literature: (a) bilingual/multilingual experience is associated with certain executive advantages in children; (b) theoretical frameworks (Cummins, Vygotsky) support mother-tongue-based instruction and cross-language transfer; (c) India's NEP 2020 and related state initiatives endorse multilingual approaches, and Indian MLE pilots report improved literacy and participation; (d) Assam's multilingual classrooms show promise but are uneven in practice. What remains thin in the literature — and what this research addresses — is a district-level linkage between observed classroom MLE practices in Kamrup and measured cognitive indicators (working memory, inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and metalinguistic awareness) using linguistically adapted instruments and triangulated observation/interview data.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-method design integrating descriptive survey, classroom observation, and quasi-experimental testing. Quantitative methods were used to measure children's cognitive development across multilingual and monolingual groups, while qualitative tools captured teachers' perceptions and instructional strategies in Kamrup district.

Population and Sample

- Population: All government and government-aided primary schools in Kamrup district, Assam.
- Sample:
  - Schools: 20 (10 rural, 10 urban), stratified by location.
  - Students: 200 (100 rural, 100 urban) from Grades III–V, selected through random sampling.
  - Teachers: 40 (two per school).
  - Parents: 40 (two per school, purposive sampling).

Grouping by language exposure:

- *Monolingual*: Home + school in Assamese only.
- *Bilingual*: Home language (e.g., Rabha/Bodo/Bengali) + Assamese medium instruction.
- *Multilingual*: Home language + Assamese + English/Hindi exposure in school.

Tools and Instruments

1. Cognitive Measures
   - Working Memory: Digit Span Task, Picture Recall.
   - Cognitive Flexibility: Color–Shape Sorting, Trail Making Test.
   - Inhibitory Control: Child-adapted Stroop Task, Go/No-Go.
   - Metalinguistic Awareness: Word Boundary Test, Phonological Awareness, Sentence Judgement.
2. Teacher Questionnaire (semi-structured) on perceptions of multilingual teaching, challenges, and practices.
3. Observation Checklist for classroom language use and instructional strategies.
4. Parent FGDs for understanding language exposure at home.

Procedure

1. Baseline Survey to document language profiles of sampled schools.
2. Cognitive Tasks administered individually to students in controlled school settings (15–20 minutes each).
3. Observations & Interviews conducted alongside testing to triangulate findings.
4. Data Entry & Analysis using SPSS: descriptive statistics, *t-tests*, and *ANOVA*.

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1: Mean Cognitive Scores by Language Exposure

Language Group	Exposure	Working Memory (Mean ± SD)	Cognitive Flexibility	Inhibitory Control	Metalinguistic Awareness	Overall Score	Composite
Monolingual (n=60)		18.2 ± 3.1	14.5 ± 2.6	15.0 ± 2.9	12.8 ± 2.4	60.5	
Bilingual (n=70)		21.7 ± 3.5	16.9 ± 2.8	17.4 ± 3.0	15.5 ± 2.7	71.5	
Multilingual (n=70)		23.4 ± 3.7	18.3 ± 3.1	18.6 ± 3.2	17.1 ± 2.8	77.4	

Interpretation:

- Multilingual children scored the highest across all domains, especially in metalinguistic awareness and cognitive flexibility.
- Bilinguals' outperformed monolingual peers significantly ($p < 0.05$), indicating additive benefits of exposure to more than one language.
- Monolingual learners lagged in working memory and metalinguistic tasks, reflecting fewer opportunities for cross-linguistic transfer.

Table 2: Cognitive Performance by Location (Urban vs Rural)

Location	Working Memory (Mean ± SD)	Cognitive Flexibility	Inhibitory Control	Metalinguistic Awareness	Overall Score	Composite
Rural (n=100)	20.5 ± 3.6	15.8 ± 2.9	16.4 ± 3.0	14.2 ± 2.6	66.9	
Urban (n=100)	22.4 ± 3.8	17.6 ± 3.1	17.8 ± 3.1	16.0 ± 2.9	73.8	

Interpretation:

- Urban children outperformed rural peers in all domains, possibly due to higher exposure to English and better availability of instructional resources.
- Rural schools showed greater reliance on home language + Assamese, with fewer opportunities for structured English exposure, slightly limiting metalinguistic growth.
- However, the gap was narrower in working memory, suggesting that core cognitive functions are less dependent on urban resources compared to language-based skills.
- Even in rural settings, multilingual children outperformed urban monolinguals, underscoring the intrinsic cognitive benefits of multilingualism.
- The urban–rural gap widened with greater multilingual exposure, suggesting urban schools integrate multiple languages more systematically.

Table 3: Interaction of Language Exposure and Location

Group	Rural (Mean Composite)	Urban (Mean Composite)	Difference
Monolingual	59.2	62.0	+2.8
Bilingual	69.5	73.2	+3.7
Multilingual	74.8	80.0	+5.2

Interpretation:

- Urban multilinguals scored highest overall (80.0), reflecting richer opportunities for structured multilingual practice.

Thematic Insights from Teacher & Parent Data

- Teachers: Many acknowledged cognitive benefits of multilingual practices but cited lack of training in structured translanguaging pedagogy.
- Parents: Rural parents valued Assamese for schooling but wanted English for "future opportunities," sometimes undervaluing the home language.
- Observations: Rural classrooms showed spontaneous code-switching but little structured MLE; urban classrooms more often used English alongside Assamese.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study investigated the impact of multilingual education on the cognitive development of primary school children in Kamrup district, Assam. Data from 200 students, supported by teacher and parent insights,

provided both quantitative and qualitative evidence. The findings are discussed below with reference to existing scholarship.

1. Multilingual Exposure Enhances Cognitive Development

The results revealed that multilingual learners consistently outperformed bilingual and monolingual peers across domains of working memory, cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and metalinguistic awareness. This finding aligns with Bialystok (2011) and Adesope et al. (2010), who highlighted the executive function advantage of multilingual children. In the Kamrup context, the ability to switch between home languages, Assamese, and English promoted greater mental flexibility and attentional control.

2. Bilingualism as a Cognitive Advantage over Monolinguals

While multilingual children scored highest, bilingual children also outperformed monolingual peers significantly. This resonates with Cummins' (2000) *linguistic interdependence hypothesis*, suggesting that skills developed in one language facilitate learning in another. In Kamrup, children using both their home language (e.g., Bodo, Rabha, Bengali) and Assamese developed stronger phonological awareness and problem-solving skills compared to strictly Assamese-medium learners.

3. Urban–Rural Disparities in Cognitive Outcomes

Urban learners demonstrated higher cognitive scores than rural learners. The gap was most pronounced in metalinguistic awareness, where urban multilinguals had greater exposure to structured English instruction and digital resources. However, rural multilinguals still outperformed urban monolinguals, confirming that language exposure outweighs resource limitations in shaping cognitive development (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

4. Teacher Perceptions and Challenges

Teachers largely recognized the cognitive benefits of multilingual practices but reported challenges such as lack of training in translanguaging pedagogy, overloaded curricula, and pressure to prioritize English. This echoes Heugh (2011), who emphasized that policy–practice gaps undermine multilingual education despite its known benefits.

5. Parental Attitudes toward Languages

Parental responses indicated a dual mindset: while valuing Assamese for schooling and administration, many parents, particularly in rural areas, prioritized English for future opportunities, often at the cost of mother tongue preservation. This reflects the tension described by Mohanty (2009) regarding the *"hierarchy of languages"* in India, where English is seen as a language of upward mobility.

Educational Implications and Suggestions:-

1. Strengthening Multilingual Pedagogy
   Teacher training modules should include translanguaging strategies and multilingual classroom practices, enabling systematic integration of home languages alongside Assamese and English.
2. Reducing Urban–Rural Gaps
   Rural schools need targeted interventions, such as digital language learning tools and community-based language resource persons, to reduce disparities in metalinguistic development.
3. Mother Tongue as a Cognitive Resource
   The study underscores that the mother tongue should not be sidelined. Using it in early primary education strengthens conceptual understanding and accelerates acquisition of additional languages.
4. Curriculum Reform
   Curricular materials should be redesigned to allow parallel use of multiple languages in storytelling, reading, and writing tasks. This will help children develop cognitive flexibility and deeper comprehension.
5. Awareness Campaigns for Parents
   Parents need to be sensitized about the cognitive and cultural value of home languages. This can be achieved through school–community workshops showcasing student achievements in multilingual tasks.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that multilingual education significantly enhances the cognitive development of children in Kamrup district, with the strongest gains observed in working memory, metalinguistic awareness, and executive functions. While urban schools showed an advantage in structured multilingual exposure, even rural multilingual

children outperformed urban monolinguals, proving that linguistic diversity is itself a powerful educational asset.

However, implementation challenges persist. Without adequate teacher training, curricular support, and parental awareness, the potential of multilingual education may remain underutilized. Aligning with the National Education Policy (2020), the findings strongly advocate for mother tongue–based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) as a strategy to improve not only academic performance but also cultural inclusivity in Assam's schools.

Ultimately, this study reinforces the idea that language is not a barrier but a bridge: when harnessed properly, multilingual education can serve as a catalyst for both cognitive growth and social cohesion in diverse contexts such as Kamrup district.

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