

English as a Bridge Language in Learning Foreign Languages in India

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Abstract- In the contemporary multilingual educational landscape of India, English functions as a crucial bridge language that facilitates the learning of foreign languages. As globalization intensifies academic mobility, employment opportunities, and cross-cultural communication, the demand for foreign language education—such as German, French, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean— has grown substantially in India. This paper explores the role of English as an intermediary language that supports foreign language acquisition by providing grammatical awareness, cognitive scaffolding, and access to learning resources. Drawing upon theories of second and third language acquisition, existing literature, and the Indian educational context, the study analyses both the advantages and limitations of English-mediated foreign language learning. The paper argues that English significantly enhances the effectiveness of foreign language education in India, while also highlighting the need for inclusive and balanced multilingual pedagogies. The study concludes that English, when used strategically, acts as a powerful bridge language without undermining linguistic diversity.

In the Indian education system, the English language serves as a medium of instruction, as well as an instrument of socio-economic mobility, and also as a bridge for learning foreign languages. This paper will discuss how the English language helps in the acquisition of foreign languages in India by acting as a linguistic, pedagogical, and cognitive bridge. The paper will use the theories of second and foreign language acquisition, linguistic capital, and multilingual education to analyse the role of English in the curriculum, classroom, and motivation of learners to learn foreign languages. The English language helps Indian learners acquire foreign languages more efficiently, but the dominance of English also creates issues of linguistic hierarchy and inequality. The paper will critically analyse the policy of NEP 2020 and discuss the implications of English-mediated foreign language learning.

Keywords: English language, foreign language learning, multilingual education, linguistic capital, NEP 2020,

Indian education. Bridge language, English language, foreign language learning, multilingual education, India, third language acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

Language plays a central role in education, shaping cognitive development, academic success, and social mobility. In the age of globalization, multilingual competence has become an essential skill, and foreign language learning has gained prominence across educational systems worldwide. In India, a linguistically diverse nation with hundreds of languages and dialects, the learning of foreign languages presents both opportunities and challenges. English occupies a unique position in the Indian education system. Introduced during the colonial period and retained after independence, English functions as a second language, a link language, and a medium of instruction in higher education. Over time, it has become deeply embedded in academic practices, administration, and professional communication. As a result, English is not merely a subject of study but a foundational academic language for Indian learners. Foreign languages in India—such as German, French, Spanish, Japanese, and Korean—are largely taught through English rather than through regional languages. This makes English a bridge language, acting as an intermediary between the learner's mother tongue and the target foreign language. The present paper examines how English facilitates foreign language learning in India and evaluates its pedagogical, cognitive, and sociolinguistic significance.

The central argument of this paper is that English serves as an effective linguistic bridge that enhances foreign language acquisition by enabling grammatical transfer, vocabulary recognition, metalinguistic awareness, and access to global learning resources. At

the same time, the paper acknowledges challenges associated with English dominance and emphasizes the need for balanced multilingual approaches.

Learning foreign languages has assumed greater significance in India because of globalization, international education systems, migration, and employment opportunities across the globe. Foreign languages such as German, French, Spanish, Japanese, and Mandarin are being taught extensively in schools, colleges, and private institutions. In this backdrop, the role of English is critical as a connecting language that helps Indian students access foreign language education.

English serves as the main language of instruction, explanation, textbooks, and evaluation in most foreign language classrooms in India. This paper examines the role of English in facilitating foreign language learning while also influencing learner access, instruction, and language priority in the education system.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Second Language Acquisition and Foreign Language Acquisition research has repeatedly underlined the importance of previously acquired languages in learning new languages. Theoretical and empirical work in multilingual education suggests that language acquisition is a cumulative process where existing linguistic knowledge plays an active role in the acquisition of new languages. Researchers in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Third Language Acquisition (L3) have shown that learners use grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, and cognitive strategies from languages they already know, especially English, when acquiring a foreign language.

Cummins' (2000) linguistic interdependence theory proposes that language proficiency can help develop another language by transferring underlying cognitive and academic skills. In the Indian context, English is the second language and plays a crucial role in learning a third language or foreign language like German, French, Japanese, or Spanish. Learners tend to use English sentence patterns, verb conjugations, and syntactic logic to understand and produce the target foreign language, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels.

Research studies on foreign language teaching suggest that English is a major explanatory language in the classroom where the teacher and the learner hail from different mother tongues. Grammar teaching, contrastive analysis, and vocabulary explanation are often accomplished through English. Research studies have revealed that the use of English as an explanatory language has helped in reducing learner anxiety, enhancing comprehension, and speeding up the early stages of foreign language learning.

Research studies on multilingualism in the Indian context have also brought out the mediating role of English between the learner's mother tongue and the foreign language. Researchers have suggested that English occupies a pivotal position in the Indian linguistic hierarchy because of its institutionalization in education, administration, and international communication. Consequently, foreign language learning programs, textbooks, online learning platforms, and evaluation systems are largely English-based. Research studies carried out in Indian higher education institutions have revealed that learners proficient in English perform better in foreign language learning with greater confidence and speed compared to learners from non-English-medium schools.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: ENGLISH AS A BRIDGE LANGUAGE

The concept of a bridge language refers to a language used as an intermediary medium to facilitate the learning of another language. In multilingual education, a bridge language supports comprehension, instruction, and cognitive processing when learners encounter a new linguistic system. In the Indian context, English functions as a bridge language in three major ways:

Pedagogical Bridge:

English is used by teachers to explain grammar, vocabulary, and syntax of foreign languages.

Cognitive Bridge:

Learners use their prior knowledge of English to understand similarities and differences between languages.

Resource Bridge:

English provides access to textbooks, dictionaries,

digital platforms, and academic materials.

According to theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Third Language Acquisition (L3), learners rely heavily on previously acquired languages while learning new ones. Since English is often the strongest second language for Indian students, it becomes the natural reference point for learning a third language.

III.1 Role of English in Foreign Language Classrooms

III.1.1 English as the Medium of Instruction

Foreign languages are taught through English as the medium of instruction in most Indian schools and colleges. Grammar description, sentence formation, and comparison are done in English. English is an essential teaching aid in this process.

For instance, the grammar of German or French is often described in comparison with English sentence formation, verb conjugation, and syntax.

III.1.2 Curriculum and Learning Materials

Foreign language learning materials such as textbooks, online platforms, and certification programs (Goethe-Institut, Alliance Française, JLPT, DELF) are English-centric. English is a necessary aid for foreign language learning.

IV. STATUS OF ENGLISH IN INDIAN EDUCATION

English holds a privileged and functional status in Indian education. It is taught as a compulsory or semi-compulsory subject in most schools and serves as the medium of instruction in higher education, particularly in science, technology, medicine, and professional courses.

Several factors contribute to the dominance of English in education:

- English is associated with academic success and employability
- Most competitive examinations and higher education curricula use English
- English connects India to global knowledge systems

Because of this widespread exposure, students

develop familiarity with English grammar, sentence structure, and academic vocabulary from an early stage. This linguistic capital plays a decisive role when students encounter foreign languages later in their academic journey.

V. ROLE OF ENGLISH IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

V.1 English as Medium of Instruction

In India, foreign languages are rarely taught through regional languages. Instead, English is the primary medium of instruction in:

- Schools offering foreign languages as electives
- Universities and colleges
- Private language institutes (Goethe-Institute, Alliance Française, Instituto Cervantes)

Teachers explain foreign language rules, sentence formation, pronunciation, and usage in English. This practice allows for clarity, standardization, and ease of understanding, especially in linguistically diverse classrooms where students speak different mother tongues.

V.2 Grammatical Awareness and Structural Transfer

One of the most significant contributions of English as a bridge language is grammatical transfer. Students who have learned English grammar possess prior knowledge of linguistic concepts such as:

- Parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective)
- Tenses and aspects
- Sentence patterns
- Subject-verb agreement

When learning a foreign language, students map new grammatical structures into familiar English concepts.

For example:

- English present tense → German *Präsens*
- English auxiliary verbs → French compound tenses
- English word order → comparison with German verb placement

This comparative learning reduces cognitive load and accelerates comprehension.

V.3 Vocabulary Acquisition and Cognate Recognition

English shares lexical roots with many foreign languages, especially European ones. This lexical similarity enables learners to recognize cognates,

which are words with similar forms and meanings across languages.

Examples include:

- English: *culture* → French: *culture*
- English: *university* → German: *Universität*
- English: *information* → French/German: *information*

Such vocabulary overlap enhances retention, boosts confidence, and creates positive learning experiences. Learners often feel encouraged when they realize that foreign languages are not entirely unfamiliar.

V.4 Metalinguistic and Cognitive Advantages

Research in multilingualism suggests that learners who know more than one language develop heightened metalinguistic awareness—the ability to think about language as a system. English, as a second language, equips Indian learners with:

- Awareness of grammatical rules
- Sensitivity to pronunciation and intonation
- Analytical skills for comparing languages

These cognitive advantages are particularly useful in foreign language learning, where learners must constantly analyse patterns, exceptions, and meanings.

V.5 Access to Learning Resources and Technology

Another critical role of English as a bridge language lies in its function as a gateway to learning resources. Most foreign language materials in India are available in English, including:

- Textbooks and grammar guides
- Online courses and MOOCs
- Mobile applications (Duolingo, Babbel)
- Video tutorials and podcasts

Students with English proficiency can independently access and utilize these resources, making learning more autonomous and flexible. In contrast, learners with limited English skills face barriers to resource accessibility.

VI. Challenges of English as a Bridge Language

Despite its advantages, reliance on English as a bridge language also presents challenges that must be critically examined.

VI.1 English Proficiency Gap

Not all learners in India have equal proficiency in English. Students from rural backgrounds or government schools often struggle with English, which directly affects their ability to learn foreign languages.

VI.2 Educational Inequality

The dominance of English may reinforce socio-economic disparities, as students from privileged backgrounds often have better English exposure and access to resources.

VI.3 Overdependence on Translation

Excessive reliance on English translation can limit immersive learning in the target foreign language. Learners may depend too heavily on English rather than developing direct thinking in the foreign language.

VI.4 Marginalization of Mother Tongue

Using English as the sole bridge language may marginalize regional languages and exclude the learner's linguistic identity from the learning process.

VII. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND SCOPE FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

To optimize the role of English as a bridge language, educators must adopt balanced strategies:

- Use English as scaffolding, not as a replacement for immersion
- Encourage gradual transition from English-mediated explanation to target-language usage
- Integrate mother tongue support where necessary
- Train teachers in L3 pedagogy and multilingual teaching methods
- Future studies may investigate
- English as a bridge language in learning German, French, or Japanese
- Foreign language learning among non-English-medium students
- Translanguaging in foreign language classrooms
- Comparative effectiveness of English-mediated vs immersive models

VIII. CONCLUSION

English plays a vital role as a bridge language in learning foreign languages in India. Its function as a medium of instruction, grammatical reference, cognitive support system, and resource-access tool significantly enhances foreign language acquisition. While challenges related to inequality and overdependence exist, the overall impact of English as a facilitating language is overwhelmingly positive.

In a multilingual nation like India, English acts as a practical and effective intermediary that connects learners to global languages and cultures. A balanced, inclusive, and strategic use of English can strengthen foreign language education while preserving linguistic diversity and equity.

English is an important enabler in the learning of foreign languages in India, as it acts as a bridge. English makes it easier to learn and understand foreign languages, but at the same time, it might restrict inclusiveness. A balanced approach, which includes English, the mother tongue, and the foreign language, would help in achieving better foreign language education in India.

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