



## SHORT COMMUNICATION

## Language Learning and the Indian Education System: Does the Indian Education System Steer Students Away from Language Learning and Acquisition?

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## ABSTRACT

The development of language is a pivotal process in human beings. While the terms ‘language acquisition’ and ‘language learning’ are used interchangeably—they are vastly different—and work together to facilitate language development. Looking at multilingual societies, research diverges in two directions: one side states that multilingualism in the educational sphere can aid conscious language learning and the other that it can restrict the same. India’s case is interesting—although a majority of the population is at least bilingual, with most being able to speak three languages—this ability appears to be a result of environmental factors more than it does of the educational system, even though the latter actively promotes multilingualism. This paper analysed the Three-Language Formula (TLF) which is the basis of the Central Board of Secondary Education’s (CBSE) curriculum in India, as well as the teaching strategies in schools using a comprehensive secondary research methodology. It was found that while the policies in place are cognitively beneficial for students, considering simultaneous instruction of language is used, it is their inconsistent implementation through teaching methodologies that steers students away from further language learning. It is necessary that a shift is made away from the hierarchical treatment of languages through unregulated teaching practices and towards real-world multilingualism, which provides equal support for each language in the subcontinent.

**Keywords:** Language Development; Language Learning; Education; Multilingualism

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# 1. Introduction

Language acquisition is one of the first steps in the early cognitive development of a child. It refers to the process by which humans learn to comprehend and produce language, usually their mother tongue <sup>[1]</sup>. As Jean Piaget stressed, children actively construct their understanding of the world, rather than it being a passive phenomenon. This theory can be applied to the process of language acquisition, which is different from language learning, despite the two being used interchangeably. Language acquisition involves purposeful engagement with the target language, in which the speakers are mainly concerned with conveying and understanding messages. In this case, formal error correction and the explicit teaching of grammatical rules are insignificant as they occur mainly through interactions with native speakers. Acquirers need not have a conscious awareness of the “rules” the language possesses and may self-correct based on a “feel” for grammaticality. On the other hand, language learning involves many conscious error corrections and explicit learning of rules <sup>[2]</sup>.

Several facets of research exist regarding language learning in multilingual societies. There appears to be a consensus regarding the positive effects of multilingualism on intellectual functions. This implies that conscious language learning in countries where individuals are exposed to a multitude of languages would be easier compared to individuals in monolingual societies. However, some scholars argue otherwise.

In India, it is estimated that 22–44% of the population is bilingual while 5–15% are trilingual <sup>[3]</sup>. **Table 1** gives the details of the percentage of bilinguals and trilinguals in the total population speaking a particular Indian language according to the last census of India <sup>[4]</sup>.

guals in the total population speaking a particular Indian language according to the last census of India <sup>[4]</sup>.

In a society where a child is inherently able to speak at least two languages due to their upbringing, the education they receive should play an important role in how their further language learning would progress, as associations between socioeconomic factors and multilingualism have been found <sup>[5]</sup>. At the same time, the ability to speak multiple languages in Indians—especially languages other than English, Hindi, or their mother tongue—appears to be mainly due to environmental factors and demands, rather than from the formal education they receive. This can be attributed to the fact that the pattern of multilingual lifestyle in India involves usages of language in social interactions as well as in other spheres of life. The smooth functional allocation of languages into separate domains of use results in a complementary relationship. Further, there is an explicit separation of languages into non-competing domains of activities, including the household, the marketplace, religious ceremonies, formal communication, entertainment, media, intergroup communication, and so forth <sup>[6]</sup>.

Multiple languages constitute an integral part of the Indian education system, usually taught at the same time to students. However, there is an odd positionality of languages that reflects the deep-rooted systematic inequalities. English has an exclusive position of power, standing at the top of this hierarchy, followed by dominant regional languages such as Hindi and other state majority languages. All other languages, including foreign languages, lie at the very bottom and are often neglected. This leads to India’s multilingualism taking up a hierarchical form rather than each language being equal <sup>[7]</sup>. However, the educational

**Table 1.** Percentage of bilinguals and trilinguals speaking a particular language as per the census of India data (2011).

Sr.no	Language	Total Speakers	Bilinguals	% Bilinguals	Trilinguals	Trilingual %
1	Hindi	2,55,76,685	7,133	0.03%	25,57,685	10.00%
2	Bengali	20,25,303	1,400	0.07%	1,59,939	7.89%
3	Telugu	244	2	0.82%	220	90.16%
4	Tamil	341	6	1.76%	147	43.11%
5	Gujarati	560	13	2.32%	202	36.07%
6	Marathi	978	29	2.96%	310	31.69%
7	Punjabi	645	25	3.88%	403	62.48%
8	Assamese	1,51,11,351	20,25,303	13.23%	2,45,880	1.61%
9	Urdu	3,469	502	14.47%	1,646	47.43%
10	Malayalam	323	53	16.41%	141	43.65%

policies in place tell a different story. The curriculum in India has a strong foundation with an allegedly unbiased focus on languages. This raises a question of what truly leads to this disparity: is it the policy that deters students from pursuing a language further or something else?

This study aims to analyse why there appears to be a disconnect between the educational policies that promote the simultaneous learning of languages and the actual multilingual ability observed in Indians. By critically examining the Three-Language Formula (TLF), which forms a basis for language education, seeing if concurrent study of language is cognitively fruitful, and assessing the language teaching methodologies, it hopes to deduce a holistic explanation.

## 2. Materials and Methods

In order to derive the results of this comprehensive secondary research, information from prominent databases such as JSTOR and PsychNet, as well as established peer-reviewed journals such as *Developmental Science* and *Bilingual Research Journal* were used. Google Scholar was the main research engine utilised. The papers and books studied covered topics related to language acquisition, language learning, the process of language acquisition and learning in multilingual societies, policies related to language teaching curriculum in India, and fieldwork conducted about instruction methodologies in CBSE schools. These were published between 1974 and 2024.

The criterion for choosing the papers referenced was essentially based on their relevance to the study, their validity and reliability, and after a thorough review of whether their results still hold. There is a potential bias in data that is possible due to a reliance on literature that specifically analyses CBSE schools and it may not apply to other educational boards in India. Approximately fifty papers were reviewed with the aim of holistically studying the area being delved into.

## 3. Results

There appeared to be a stark difference between the advised educational policies and their implementation at ground level. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), which prescribes the curriculum to a large number

of public and private schools in India has put forward beneficial policies with regards to language education. However, the way languages are being instructed in schools, with an underlying hierarchical structure, appears to be the reason behind education not being a large contributing factor to further language learning in India. It is necessary that the instruction methodologies are remodeled so that the intended benefits of the language policy can be nurtured in the students.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. The Three Language Formula: A Curse or a Boon?

The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) is one of the most prestigious education boards in India, with almost 30,000 public and private schools in the country and worldwide following its suggested teaching methodologies. As it is the most accessible and affordable option for a majority of the students, CBSE offers education in around 40 languages, after taking into consideration the linguistic diversity present in the nation. Its language curriculum is based mainly on the Three-Language Formula (TLF), which was first introduced by the All-India Council for Education in September 1956<sup>[8]</sup>. To accommodate at least three languages over the first ten years of schooling, it was strategically implemented following a political consensus on languages in school education. According to this formula, each student needs to familiarise themselves with the following: (1) regional or native language; (2) the official language of the union or its associate official language, throughout the duration of its existence (English is the associate official language of the union, while Hindi is its official language); (3) a modern Indian or foreign language that is not used as a teaching language and is not covered by (1) and (2) above<sup>[9]</sup>.

The TLF claims to help encourage bilingualism and multilingualism, traits that improve “cognitive growth, social tolerance, divergent thinking, and scholastic achievement”<sup>[10]</sup>. However, implementation of the TLF varies widely across the country today, facing several challenges. A few of these include a general opposition to the heavy language load in the curriculum, a lack of motivation to study any language other than Hindi in dominantly Hindi-

speaking areas, and a resistance to the study of Hindi in non-Hindi speaking regions<sup>[9]</sup>. Furthermore, a study by Mallikarjun discusses the National Curriculum Framework for School Education and its relationship with language instruction in Indian schools<sup>[11]</sup>. Several parents are hesitant about the number of languages being taught at early stages during their child's schooling years. Additionally, they fear that learning one or two languages is sufficient, as according to them, the effort to learn more than this leads to students not learning any languages properly at all, since they have to direct their attention to not only several languages but also to many other equally challenging subjects at the same time<sup>[12]</sup>. Whose claim stands? That of the TLF or that of the many apprehensive parents? To further examine this, it was studied whether the simultaneous learning of multiple languages can prove to be effective or not.

## 4.2. Can Students Efficiently Learn Multiple Languages Simultaneously?

Most Indians grow up bilingual, as illustrated by **Table 1**. The subsequent studies discussed in this section indicate that a heightened exploratory behaviour can be seen in infants who grow up bilingual: they are able to quickly shift their attention from an already familiar visual stimulus to another new stimulus. Moreover, they disengaged between the aforementioned two stimuli more frequently<sup>[13]</sup>. Bilingual children can also remember and process information more systematically, implying that they have better working memory<sup>[14]</sup>. Skills crucial for academic success such as increased attention and inhibitory control have been seen in these students as well<sup>[15]</sup>.

There is also a plethora of research, such as the following referenced, that suggests that simultaneously processing multiple languages can be unhelpful. Language control is needed while doing so, which includes the processes and mechanisms to orchestrate access to certain languages, to monitor lexical competition, to select the target item, to verify its goodness of fit to the intention and target language, and to prevent cross-language interference<sup>[13]</sup>. Bilingualism was once thought to be a detracting element in language development. Many parents worry that if their kids learn two languages at once, they may suffer from language difficulties. However, there are other reasons for speech and language delays, most of which are neurologi-

cal or physiological<sup>[16]</sup>.

In order to determine a nuanced stance, a study conducted by Berens et al. can be focused on. It was centered upon determining whether a simultaneous 50:50 dual-language program or a successive 90:10 dual-language program is most beneficial for bilingual students. They concluded that for children speaking languages with a deep orthography, language learning using the 50:50 dual-language learning approach provides children with several language processing advantages. In this approach, reading and other language activities take place in two different languages during the developmental period<sup>[17]</sup>. While the study's sample size consisted of English and Spanish speakers, its results can be generalized to the Indian population as well, considering it was earlier estimated that almost half of Indian children are also at least bilingual (see **Table 1** for specifics).

Thus, while there exists a probability that it is the introduction of multiple languages simultaneously that steers students away from language learning, there appear to be more reasons behind the same.

## 4.3. Language Teaching Methodologies

Studies conducted by Mohanty state that language education in India can be broadly classified into (1) Informal Multilingual Education, (2) Formal Multilingual Education with a Single Medium of Instruction, and (3) Formal Multilingual Education with Multiple Mediums of Instruction. (1) Involves education where the texts are explained further by the instructor in the mother tongue of the students, (2) involves one dominant language as the medium for teaching and (3) involves simultaneous instruction in two languages which may or may not be the students' mother tongue<sup>[7]</sup>.

In the above programs, there is no structured simultaneous use of multiple languages as the medium of instruction, nor do they target the development of higher-level proficiency in multiple languages. Moreover, there is hardly any regard given to weaker languages, and the imposition of the state's majority language as a medium of instruction on indigenous, tribal, and minority-group children, with English as the medium of instruction for all in English-medium private schools, has a common subtractive effect on a student's mother tongue<sup>[7]</sup>. Now that

it is evident that language education ends up unfairly promoting English while heavily sidelining other languages, another concern arises: where do foreign languages stand in this hierarchy?

French is arguably the most popular foreign language that is taught in CBSE schools both as a second language and a third language. In an empirical study by Singh that aimed to describe, explain and justify strategies of teaching/learning of French in the schools of India, it was found that while there is a huge prospect for the teaching and learning of French as a foreign language (FFL), there are several challenges that deter the same<sup>[18]</sup>. While the sample size was CBSE schools in Varanasi offering FFL, the observations can be safely generalized to the country as a whole and to other foreign languages being taught to some extent. Singh found that a large number of teachers had not undergone specialized training in teaching French as a foreign language and believes that the training courses attended by the few teachers prove to be inadequate. The textbooks used for instruction were also not uniform across schools, which creates disparities in knowledge. Moreover, the examination pattern does not focus equally on all competencies required to achieve proficiency in the language, which motivates the students to score well rather than grasp the language holistically.

The above demonstrates that, while the incentive for studying a foreign language under the CBSE curriculum is high, it is the teaching methodologies yet again that limit further learning of the language. Foreign languages, therefore, can also be placed at the bottom of this hierarchy: they are considerably promoted by the policies in place, but the way that they are taught does not allow students to attain any desirable progress. It is, therefore, safe to say that the Indian educational programs only offer very weak and surface level multilingual education. Hence, this begs the question of what successful multilingual education looks like.

Lindholm-Leary<sup>[19]</sup>, while rethinking language teaching and learning in multilingual classrooms, concluded that a well-integrated approach to language instruction should focus not only on the language in an academic sense but also on the content being taught as a whole. Further, equal opportunities to communicate in the language in both structured and unstructured domains should be provided,

while concurrently discouraging students from using non-instructional languages in the classroom<sup>[19]</sup>.

#### 4.4. Limitations

This study has potential limitations. The results derived are based on a structured secondary scoping review of available literature from the last fifty years. There might, however, be a disparity between these results and the actuality of the matter. As conducting primary research using the ideal sample size of the demographic being studied in this research was beyond the scope of the researcher, a strong reliance on pre-existing data was inevitable. Moreover, the assumption that the Indian education system steers students away from further language learning was based on the researcher's personal experience and observation, which provided a basis for this study. Therefore, it is subject to personal biases. This also explains a strong dependence on data from CBSE schools. However, it was best attempted to minimize this by solely depending on scientific and empirical studies conducted on the subject matter.

#### 4.5. Future Suggestions for Research

To comprehensively solidify the result that it is the instructional methodologies rather than the educational policies that deter further language learning, future studies can benefit from adopting a mixed-methods design, where standardised proficiency testing across language domains is undertaken, as well as surveys and interviews to provide better context to the results acquired and explore any further challenges. Stratified random sampling can be used in order to ensure that there is adequate geographical representation from across India. The inclusion criteria should be that the selected students have studied all three languages for at least 2–3 years so that it can be assumed that they had enough time to establish a foundation in each language. If the results indicate that there exists a clear hierarchy, then the conclusion derived from this study can be considered substantial.

In addition, the findings point out that there is a need to make changes to the language teaching methodologies. The three modes of instruction that Mohanty classified, as discussed, prove to be faulty and promote monolingual proficiency<sup>[7]</sup>. More significantly, India's multilingual edu-



cation policy and practice must move towards real-world multilingualism, which requires an educational system that supports multilingualism for all and moves away from forced homogenization through unregulated school practices.

## 5. Conclusions

Multilingualism in India is a result of the country's diverse cultural and linguistic history. With single citizenship being ensured to all, individuals usually move around the country and end up residing in a state different from where they belong. Consequently, they are exposed to a language that is different from their mother tongue, and many children end up picking one language over another.

The language education policies in the country, modelled according to the Three-Language Formula (TLF), cognitively speaking, are beneficial, considering that simultaneous language learning has been found to be helpful in culminating multilingualism alongside greater social tolerance, divergent thinking, and commendable academic performance. However, their instruction, which ends up placing the languages in a hierarchy, deters their equal fruitful development in children. With a view to furthering language development in Indian students, a restructure based on Lindholm-Leary's <sup>[19]</sup> suggestions can be adopted.

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Conceptualisation, P.P.; methodology, P.P.; validation, G.R.; formal analysis, P.P.; writing-original draft preparation, review and editing, P.P.; supervision, G.R.;. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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