The Uneven Playing Field: English Learning Disparities in India

Shashikumara Y. B.

Lecturer in English, Seshadripuram Pre-University College, Tumakuru -572105

Abstract. *This article examines how English functions as a gatekeeping language in India, producing an "uneven playing field" across caste, class, gender, region, and school type. Drawing on recent scholarship on English-medium instruction (EMI), language policy debates after NEP 2020, and postcolonial discussions of linguistic hierarchy, the study argues that unequal access to quality English learning is not merely a pedagogic problem but a literary-cultural one: English mediates who is heard, published, and deemed "educated," while devaluing multilingual repertoires and vernacular knowledge systems. The paper synthesizes findings from contemporary policy analyses and classroom-based studies to map three linked disparities: (1) material inequality (teacher availability, infrastructure, digital access, school funding); (2) symbolic inequality (accent prejudice, "good English" as respectability and employability); and (3) curricular inequality (canon selection, textbook ideology, assessment regimes, and monolingual classroom norms). It then traces how these disparities travel into higher education and labour markets, shaping confidence, participation, and the production of cultural capital. In addition, the article reads literary and cultural texts campus narratives, fiction of aspiration, and Dalit life writing to interpret how learners experience shame, desire, mobility, and resistance around English. The theoretical frame combines Bourdieu's linguistic capital, postcolonial critiques of colonial language legacies, and translanguaging perspectives that treat mixed language practices as resources rather than deficits. The article concludes that equity requires additive multilingual pathways: strong foundational literacy in home languages, high-quality English taught as a subject (not a premature medium), and assessment models that recognize multilingual meaning-making while expanding access to academic English.*

Key words: *English-medium instruction; linguistic capital; educational inequality; multilingualism.*

Introduction

In contemporary India, English occupies a paradoxical position as both a language of aspiration and a language of stratification. It functions as a powerful vehicle of mobility facilitating access to higher education, white-collar employment, global markets, and digital economies while simultaneously reinforcing entrenched hierarchies of class, caste, and geography. Scholars have repeatedly emphasized that English proficiency in India operates as a form of symbolic and material capital, conferring legitimacy and authority within academic and professional domains (Bourdieu; Kalyanpur et al.). The expansion of English-medium instruction (EMI) across school and university systems reflects its perceived economic value in a globalized marketplace (Daghigh et al.; Bolton, Botha, and Lin). Yet the promise of English as a democratizing force remains unevenly realized.

The so-called "English advantage" is not uniformly accessible. Access to high-quality English education correlates strongly with school type (private versus government), urban versus rural location, socioeconomic status, and caste background (Sridhar and Mishra; Kumar). Elite private institutions often provide immersive exposure, trained faculty, and resource-rich environments, whereas many government schools struggle with teacher shortages, limited pedagogical support, and

infrastructural constraints. Consequently, English proficiency becomes less an outcome of individual merit and more a reflection of structural positioning within the education system. Boruah and Mohanty argue that the rapid growth of low-fee private English-medium schools often creates an illusion of opportunity without ensuring linguistic competence, thereby reproducing rather than resolving inequality.

The structural nature of English disparity is further shaped by historical and ideological forces. Postcolonial critics such as Phillipson highlight how the institutional dominance of English continues to echo colonial hierarchies, privileging standardized forms and marginalizing vernacular epistemologies. Simultaneously, translanguaging theorists such as García and Wei challenge monolingual norms that position multilingual learners as deficient, instead proposing that linguistic repertoires constitute valuable cognitive resources. Within this tension, English in India becomes both emancipatory and exclusionary an instrument of upward mobility for some and a gatekeeping mechanism for others.

Literary texts frequently capture this duality. Narratives such as Aravind Adiga's The White Tiger and Kiran Desai's The Inheritance of Loss dramatize how English proficiency marks social belonging while also exposing characters to humiliation and insecurity. Such representations illuminate the affective dimensions of language inequality shame, aspiration, silence, and resistance that statistical data alone cannot reveal. Literature thus becomes a critical site for understanding how linguistic hierarchies are internalized and negotiated.

This article addresses three interrelated aims. First, it identifies key mechanisms producing English-learning disparities, including institutional resource gaps, teacher preparation deficits, assessment practices, and symbolic stigma attached to non-standard English varieties. Second, it connects educational inequality to literary and cultural representation, demonstrating how fiction and critical writing reflect and interrogate linguistic stratification. Third, it proposes equitable, multilingual interventions grounded in additive bilingualism and translanguaging pedagogy, advocating for policies that strengthen foundational literacy in home languages while ensuring meaningful access to academic English.

By situating English within broader sociopolitical and cultural frameworks, this study argues that the uneven playing field of English learning in India is neither accidental nor inevitable. Rather, it is socially produced through policy choices, institutional structures, and cultural ideologies. Addressing these disparities requires moving beyond binary debates English versus vernacular and toward models that recognize multilingualism as the foundation of both equity and excellence.

Background of the Study

The contemporary prominence of English in India cannot be understood without tracing its historical trajectory from colonial policy to postcolonial institutional continuity. The introduction of English as a medium of administration and higher education during British rule was not merely linguistic but ideological. Colonial education policy, especially following Macaulay's Minute (1835), positioned English as the language of "modern" knowledge and governance, thereby elevating it above indigenous languages in prestige and institutional power. As Bourdieu's framework of linguistic capital suggests, once a language is institutionalized within administrative and educational structures, it accrues symbolic authority that outlasts political regimes. Post-independence India retained English in higher judiciary, bureaucracy, science, and elite education, reinforcing its association with intellectual legitimacy and upward mobility (Phillipson; Sridhar and Mishra). Thus, English did not disappear with colonial rule; it was recalibrated as a tool of national development and global participation.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, globalization and neoliberal economic reforms intensified the demand for English proficiency. The growth of service industries, information technology sectors, and transnational labour markets solidified English as an employability skill. Consequently, English-medium instruction (EMI) defined as the use of English to teach academic subjects other than English in contexts where it is not the majority language expanded rapidly across India (Bolton, Botha, and Lin). EMI spread not only in elite urban institutions but also in low-fee

private schools catering to aspirational lower-middle-class families. Boruah and Mohanty observe that English increasingly functions as an educational commodity: schools market "English medium" status as a guarantee of mobility, often regardless of pedagogical quality.

This commodification of English has restructured educational landscapes. Government schools, traditionally offering regional-language instruction, have faced declining enrollments as families migrate toward English-medium private institutions. However, research demonstrates that EMI expansion frequently outpaces teacher preparation and infrastructural support (Daghigh et al.). Many teachers themselves lack advanced proficiency or training in bilingual pedagogy, leading to rote instruction and limited conceptual clarity among students. As a result, English becomes symbolically powerful yet pedagogically fragile.

Simultaneously, India's policy framework reflects enduring tensions between multilingual equity and economic pragmatism. National education policies have consistently emphasized the importance of mother-tongue instruction, particularly in early schooling, citing cognitive and pedagogical benefits. The National Education Policy (2020) reiterates the value of foundational literacy in home languages while acknowledging the continued importance of English for global engagement. This dual emphasis reveals a structural contradiction: while research supports mother-tongue-based education, social demand strongly favors English-medium schooling as a pathway to opportunity (Kumar; Kalyanpur et al.). The tension is not merely linguistic but ideological—between cultural preservation and market competitiveness.

To clarify the conceptual terrain, several key terms require definition.

English-Medium Instruction (EMI) refers to the teaching of academic subjects through English in contexts where English is not the primary home language of most learners. In India, EMI operates across private and increasingly public schools, often beginning from early grades.

EFL/ESL in India occupies a distinctive position. English in India is neither entirely a foreign language (EFL) nor fully a second language (ESL) in the classical sense. While it functions institutionally and legally as an associate official language, for many learners it remains socially distant and structurally acquired, creating hybrid pedagogical challenges.

Academic English denotes the formal registers and discursive conventions required for success in higher education—essay writing, argumentation, disciplinary vocabulary, and research communication. Mastery of conversational English does not automatically translate into competence in academic English, a gap often experienced by first-generation university students (Block and Khan).

Linguistic hierarchy describes the stratification of languages and language varieties according to perceived prestige, utility, and legitimacy. Standardized English varieties frequently occupy the apex of this hierarchy, while regional languages and non-standard dialects are marginalized, both symbolically and institutionally (Bourdieu; Phillipson).

Translanguaging is a pedagogical and sociolinguistic framework that recognizes multilingual speakers as drawing upon integrated linguistic repertoires rather than switching between separate "pure" languages. García and Wei argue that translanguaging challenges deficit models by treating linguistic hybridity as a cognitive and communicative resource rather than a problem to be corrected.

Taken together, these historical, institutional, and conceptual dimensions demonstrate that English learning disparities in India are embedded within broader socio-economic transformations. The uneven playing field is not simply a consequence of individual effort or aptitude; it emerges from layered historical continuities, market-driven reforms, policy contradictions, and entrenched linguistic hierarchies. Understanding this background is essential for evaluating how English operates simultaneously as a language of aspiration and a mechanism of exclusion in contemporary India.

Viewpoint of Contemporary Writers

Contemporary Indian writers frequently approach English not as a neutral medium of communication but as a deeply politicized and affect-laden instrument of social mobility, exclusion, and identity

formation. In literary-cultural discourse, English is often depicted simultaneously as aspiration and anxiety an emblem of opportunity that carries with it the burdens of class performance and symbolic violence. Fiction, autobiographical writing, and campus narratives reveal how English operates within everyday life as a marker of dignity, employability, and belonging, while also generating insecurity and shame among those positioned outside elite linguistic networks.

Fiction of Mobility: English as Promise and Precarity

In novels cantered on social mobility, English often appears as a passport to upward movement. Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* dramatizes how the protagonist, Balram Halwai, recognizes English as a language of power associated with business, global capital, and urban modernity (Adiga). English becomes aspirational not merely for communication, but for self-reinvention. Yet the narrative simultaneously exposes the fragility of this aspiration: English proficiency does not erase structural inequality; rather, it reveals the distance between linguistic performance and genuine social mobility.

Similarly, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* portrays English as a lingering colonial residue that structures social hierarchies in postcolonial India. The judge's attachment to English and Englishness reflects internalized colonial admiration, while younger characters experience linguistic displacement and alienation (Desai). English here functions as cultural capital, conferring prestige but also deepening psychological estrangement. These fictional accounts underscore Bourdieu's insight that linguistic competence operates within fields of power where recognition depends on institutional validation (Bourdieu). English promises dignity and opportunity, yet it also produces class anxiety when speakers perceive their fluency as insufficient or socially illegitimate.

Campus and Elite Spaces: Accent as Social Filter

Contemporary campus fiction and memoirs often depict English as the language of elite academic belonging. In higher education contexts, fluency in standardized English becomes an unspoken criterion for participation, leadership, and recognition. Students from vernacular-medium or rural schooling backgrounds frequently encounter what Block and Khan describe as "micro-level hierarchies" within English-medium instruction (EMI) settings, where confidence, accent, and rhetorical style determine visibility (Block and Khan).

Accent discrimination emerges as a particularly potent form of symbolic sorting. Non-standard pronunciations are frequently interpreted not merely as linguistic variation but as indicators of class background or educational inadequacy. Such experiences echo Phillipson's critique of linguistic imperialism, wherein certain standardized forms of English acquire global legitimacy while other varieties are stigmatized (Phillipson). In literary representations, this stigma often manifests as silence characters who hesitate to speak for fear of ridicule or hypercorrection, where linguistic performance becomes self-conscious and strained.

The campus, therefore, becomes a site where English functions less as communicative tool and more as performative capital. Fluency signals belonging, while hesitation signals marginality. This dynamic illustrates what Bourdieu terms "symbolic violence," whereby dominant linguistic norms are naturalized as meritocratic standards (Bourdieu).

Marginal Voices: English as Emancipation and Barrier

Dalit and subaltern narratives introduce a more complex engagement with English. For many writers from historically marginalized communities, English represents a language of resistance against caste-bound linguistic hierarchies embedded in regional vernaculars. English can provide symbolic escape from oppressive social categories, offering access to national and global discourses of rights and equality. As scholars such as Kalyanpur et al. note, English has at times been embraced by marginalized groups as a democratizing force capable of disrupting entrenched social hierarchies (Kalyanpur et al.).

However, this emancipatory potential coexists with institutional barriers. Entry examinations, civil service interviews, and academic assessments often privilege elite forms of English, disadvantaging first-generation learners. Literature reflecting these realities portrays characters confronting systemic

gatekeeping where minimal linguistic deviations are interpreted as intellectual shortcomings. Sridhar and Mishra highlight how policy rhetoric surrounding English often obscures these structural inequalities, presenting language proficiency as an individual achievement rather than a socially distributed resource (Sridhar and Mishra).

Thus, English becomes ambivalent: it offers access to broader discursive communities while simultaneously reinforcing new forms of stratification.

English as Power-Coded Performance

Across contemporary literary discourse, English is rarely depicted as a neutral skill. Instead, it appears as a "power-coded performance" a set of linguistic behaviors that signal education, cosmopolitanism, and authority. Writers emphasize that English competence involves more than vocabulary or grammar; it includes accent, confidence, familiarity with cultural references, and mastery of academic registers. García and Wei's concept of translanguaging challenges this narrow standard by arguing that multilingual speakers draw upon integrated repertoires that exceed rigid linguistic boundaries (García and Wei). Yet literary narratives often reveal institutional contexts where such hybridity is penalized rather than valued.

In sum, contemporary writers depict English as a socially charged currency circulating within India's stratified educational and cultural economy. Fiction of mobility foregrounds aspiration and precarity; campus narratives highlight accent-based sorting; and marginal voices articulate both resistance and vulnerability. English, in these accounts, is not merely a language but a mechanism of recognition and exclusion a performative marker shaping identity, dignity, and access. Literary-cultural commentary thus enriches sociolinguistic scholarship by revealing the lived, emotional dimensions of linguistic inequality, illuminating how the uneven playing field of English learning is experienced not only structurally but intimately.

Literature Review

- **Kalyanpur, Boruah, Molina, and Shenoy (2022),** *The Politics of English Language Education and Social Inequality: Global Pressures, National Priorities and Schooling in India.* Kalyanpur et al. (2022) examine the intersection of global neoliberal pressures and national education policy, arguing that English language education in India is deeply entangled with social inequality. The authors demonstrate how colonial legacies continue to shape contemporary educational structures, particularly through the symbolic authority attached to English as a language of modernity and progress. They contend that policy ambiguity—oscillating between multilingual ideals and English-centric aspirations—produces systemic disadvantages for marginalized learners. The book foregrounds how structural inequities in school funding, teacher preparation and access to linguistic capital reproduce class and caste hierarchies. Importantly, the authors challenge the narrative that English inherently democratizes opportunity, showing instead that unequal implementation perpetuates stratification.

- **Sridhar and Mishra (2019),** *Language Policy and Education in India: Documents, Contexts and Debates.* Sridhar and Mishra (2019) provide a historically grounded account of India's language policy debates, tracing the evolution of English from colonial administrative tool to postcolonial associate official language. The volume critically examines constitutional provisions, the Three-Language Formula, and successive education policies to reveal persistent tensions between regional linguistic identity and national/global aspirations. The editors argue that English's continued prominence reflects political compromise rather than pedagogical consensus. Their analysis underscores how policy rhetoric often emphasizes multilingual equity while institutional practice privileges English in higher education and elite domains. By situating language within political negotiation, the book highlights how historical contingencies continue to shape contemporary disparities.

- **Daghigh, Jan, and Kaur (2022),** *Neoliberalization of English Language Policy in the Global South.* Daghigh et al. (2022) situate English language policy within broader neoliberal transformations affecting the Global South. The editors argue that English-medium instruction

(EMI) has expanded in tandem with market-oriented reforms, positioning English as economic capital aligned with global competitiveness. The India-focused chapters analyze how policy shifts prioritize employability and global rankings over equitable language development. The volume critiques the commodification of English, suggesting that its market value often overshadows pedagogical concerns. Through comparative perspectives, the book demonstrates that neoliberal logics reshape educational priorities, reinforcing disparities when access to quality English instruction remains uneven.

➢ **Boruah and Mohanty (2022), "English Medium Education in India: The Neoliberal Legacy and Challenges to Multilingual Language Policy Implementation," in Daghigh et al.** Boruah and Mohanty (2022) specifically examine the rapid expansion of English-medium schooling in India, describing it as a parallel educational industry driven by parental aspiration and market demand. They argue that English-medium labels often mask weak linguistic outcomes, particularly in low-fee private schools where teachers lack advanced proficiency. The chapter critiques the displacement of regional-language instruction without adequate bilingual scaffolding, resulting in compromised comprehension and increased dropout risks. By framing EMI growth as a neoliberal response rather than a pedagogically grounded reform, the authors emphasize the erosion of multilingual equity and the reproduction of socio-economic divides.

➢ **Bolton, Botha, and Lin (2024),** *The Routledge Handbook of English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education.* Bolton, Botha, and Lin (2024) compile global perspectives on EMI, including substantial discussions of South Asian contexts. The handbook situates EMI within internationalization trends, highlighting tensions between global academic integration and local linguistic sustainability. Chapters focusing on India and neighboring regions identify domain loss in regional languages and uneven student preparedness as major challenges. The editors stress that EMI's effectiveness depends on institutional support structures, faculty training, and inclusive pedagogical design. By contextualizing India within broader global patterns, the handbook reveals how English-medium expansion often intensifies pre-existing educational inequalities.

➢ **Gargesh (2024), "English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education in India and Sri Lanka," in Bolton et al.** Gargesh (2024) maps the landscape of EMI in Indian and Sri Lankan higher education, identifying institutional pressures to adopt English as a marker of global relevance. The chapter highlights disparities in student readiness, particularly among those transitioning from vernacular-medium schooling. Gargesh argues that EMI often privileges linguistic fluency over conceptual mastery, leading to uneven academic participation. The analysis underscores the gap between policy mandates and classroom realities, revealing how insufficient language support structures disproportionately disadvantage first-generation university students.

➢ **Block and Khan (2021),** *The Secret Life of English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education: Examining Microphenomena in Context.* Block and Khan (2021) shift attention from macro policy frameworks to micro-level classroom dynamics. Their work examines how EMI operates as a "hidden curriculum," shaping patterns of participation, authority, and silence within academic spaces. The authors document how linguistic confidence influences classroom interaction, often privileging students from elite schooling backgrounds. They also explore subtle forms of resistance, including translanguaging practices and peer collaboration. By focusing on lived experiences within EMI environments, the book illuminates how structural inequality manifests in everyday pedagogical interactions.

➢ **Kudale, Valiyamattam, Kotte, and Nayak (2026),** *Teaching and Learning English Language and Literature in India: Existential Humanities in the 21st Century Classroom.* Kudale et al. (2026) bridge English language pedagogy and literary studies, emphasizing ethical and humanistic approaches to teaching in Indian classrooms. The editors argue that English instruction must move beyond instrumental goals toward critical engagement with lived realities. The volume foregrounds classroom ethics, teacher reflexivity, and the importance of contextual sensitivity in multilingual settings. By integrating literature with language teaching, the book proposes

pedagogical strategies that recognize students' diverse linguistic identities. Its emphasis on existential humanities challenges purely market-driven conceptions of English, advocating instead for equitable and inclusive educational practices.

Literary Interpretation

In literary representations of contemporary India, the "uneven playing field" of English learning emerges as a deeply embodied and socially coded experience rather than a purely pedagogical issue. English frequently appears as social capital, where fluency signifies class mobility, employability, and access to "modern" spaces of power, echoing Bourdieu's argument that linguistic competence operates as symbolic capital within stratified social fields (Bourdieu). In novels such as Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* and Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, English marks entry into elite domains while simultaneously exposing characters to class anxiety and precarious belonging (Adiga; Desai). The classroom and interview room become sites of self-surveillance, where learners internalize the fear of "wrong English," leading to silence, hesitation, and self-censorship forms of what can be read as symbolic violence enacted through language norms. Accent politics further intensifies this stratification: pronunciation and intonation are moralized, so that competence is judged less on communicative effectiveness and more on proximity to standardized, elite varieties, reflecting Phillipson's critique of hierarchical English norms (Phillipson). Yet literature also foregrounds resistance through hybridity. Multilingual speech, code-switching, and localized Englishes function not as deficits but as strategies of solidarity and survival, aligning with García and Wei's translanguaging framework that views integrated linguistic repertoires as creative and agentive resources (García and Wei). Thus, contemporary texts portray English as a performative currency within India's social economy simultaneously enabling aspiration and enforcing exclusion while also revealing the resilient, hybrid practices through which marginalized speakers negotiate and contest linguistic hierarchy.

Theoretical Perspective Related to English Language Learning

➢ **Bourdieu: English as Linguistic Capital:** Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes language as a form of symbolic capital distributed through institutional structures rather than as a neutral communicative system (Bourdieu). In the Indian context, English functions as high-value linguistic capital that grants access to elite educational institutions, professional networks, and social legitimacy. Schools operate as sites where this capital is unevenly allocated: students from privileged backgrounds enter classrooms already equipped with exposure to standardized English, while first-generation or vernacular-medium learners must acquire both linguistic competence and the cultural codes associated with it. The educational system thereby naturalizes inequality by framing English proficiency as meritocratic achievement rather than as a socially inherited resource. The "uneven playing field" emerges when institutions reward those who already possess dominant linguistic capital while marginalizing alternative linguistic repertoires.

➢ **Postcolonial Theory: English and Epistemic Authority:** Postcolonial theory interrogates the historical residue of colonialism embedded within contemporary language hierarchies. English in India carries the legacy of colonial governance, where it was institutionalized as the language of administration, law, and higher knowledge. Even in post-independence India, standardized English often retains epistemic authority—the power to define legitimate knowledge, academic discourse, and intellectual credibility. This authority can marginalize indigenous epistemologies and vernacular scholarship, reinforcing a hierarchy in which English-language production is perceived as more "global" or prestigious. Thus, postcolonial analysis reveals that the dominance of English is not simply pragmatic but historically layered, shaped by colonial power relations that continue to influence institutional norms and cultural valuation.

➢ **Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson): English and Global Power Structures:** Robert Phillipson's theory of linguistic imperialism argues that the global spread of English is closely aligned with economic, political, and cultural power structures that privilege Anglophone norms (Phillipson). In this framework, English expansion is not neutral globalization but a process that reinforces dependency and inequality. Applied to India, linguistic imperialism highlights how

global academic standards, corporate communication norms, and international rankings privilege English-medium proficiency, often pressuring institutions to adopt EMI regardless of local preparedness. This alignment between English and global capital intensifies domestic disparities, as access to quality English instruction remains socially stratified. Phillipson's perspective underscores that the uneven playing field is embedded within transnational systems of power, not merely local policy failures.

- **Translanguaging (García and Wei): Multilingual Repertoires as Assets:** Translanguaging theory challenges deficit models that treat multilingual learners as lacking proficiency in "pure" language systems (García and Wei). Instead, it views multilingual speakers as drawing upon integrated linguistic repertoires to construct meaning dynamically. In Indian classrooms, where students commonly navigate multiple languages, translanguaging provides a framework for inclusive pedagogy that values hybrid practices rather than suppressing them. This perspective reframes English learning disparities: difficulties arise not because learners lack ability, but because institutions enforce rigid monolingual norms that invalidate their full linguistic resources. By legitimizing multilingual strategies, translanguaging offers pathways to equity while strengthening cognitive and conceptual development.

- **Critical Pedagogy (Freire): Language Education as Liberation:** Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy positions education as a dialogic process aimed at reducing oppression rather than reproducing hierarchy (Freire). In language classrooms, this implies shifting from authoritarian correction-based models to participatory, reflective practices that empower learners. English learning, from a Freirean lens, should not become a mechanism of humiliation or exclusion; instead, it should enable learners to critically engage with social realities and articulate their experiences. When English is taught solely as a tool for market competitiveness, it risks reinforcing stratification. Critical pedagogy advocates for classrooms that acknowledge linguistic diversity, encourage dialogue, and dismantle stigma attached to non-standard speech.

- **Linguistic Human Rights (Skutnabb-Kangas): Safeguarding Home Languages:** Tove Skutnabb-Kangas advances the concept of linguistic human rights, arguing that equitable education requires the protection and development of learners' mother tongues (Skutnabb-Kangas). From this perspective, replacing home-language instruction prematurely with English-medium education can constitute a form of linguistic marginalization. Sustainable English acquisition is most effective when grounded in strong foundational literacy in the mother tongue. The linguistic human rights framework therefore calls for additive bilingual models, where English is introduced without eroding indigenous languages. Applied to India's multilingual context, this approach challenges monolingual EMI policies and emphasizes that genuine equity depends on safeguarding linguistic diversity alongside expanding access to English.

7. Findings from Previous Work

Existing research on English language learning in India consistently demonstrates that learning outcomes are shaped less by student motivation and more by structural conditions embedded within schooling systems. First, teacher competence emerges as a decisive factor. Studies across English-medium and government schools reveal that teacher proficiency in spoken and academic English, combined with training in communicative pedagogy, significantly influences student confidence and conceptual clarity. Where teachers themselves lack fluency or pedagogical preparation, instruction often defaults to rote memorization and textbook translation, limiting meaningful language acquisition. Exposure beyond the classroom access to reading materials, digital content, and conversational practice also plays a crucial role. Learners in resource-rich environments accumulate linguistic capital more effectively than those with minimal input.

Second, research on English-medium instruction (EMI) indicates that early introduction of English as the medium of subject teaching frequently produces surface-level fluency without deep conceptual understanding. When learners lack foundational literacy in their home languages, EMI may hinder comprehension of core subjects such as mathematics and science. Students may acquire memorized English terminology without internalizing underlying concepts, resulting in fragile academic

performance. This pattern reflects the gap between symbolic prestige of English and pedagogical preparedness for its effective use.

Third, the divide between private and government schooling reinforces class stratification through language. Elite private schools often provide immersive English environments, smaller class sizes, and trained faculty, while many government schools face resource constraints. Consequently, English proficiency becomes a proxy for socioeconomic status. Rather than equalizing opportunity, the language becomes an additional layer of differentiation within an already unequal system.

Fourth, rural and first-generation learners encounter compounded barriers. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom restricts practice opportunities. Fear of ridicule or correction fosters silence, particularly in interview or presentation contexts. Exam-oriented pedagogy further narrows learning to grammar drills and memorized essays, discouraging communicative competence. These structural pressures contribute to self-doubt and reduced participation.

Finally, digital learning often promoted as an equalizer can widen inequality when access to devices, stable internet, and English-language educational technology is uneven. Online platforms frequently assume a baseline proficiency in English, inadvertently excluding learners who require linguistic scaffolding. Thus, digital expansion without linguistic inclusion risks reproducing existing disparities in new forms.

Recommendations

Policy Level

At the policy level, equitable reform must begin with strengthening foundational literacy in learners' mother tongues. Research consistently shows that strong first-language literacy enhances second-language acquisition and cognitive development. Rather than replacing regional languages with premature English-medium instruction, policymakers should adopt additive models in which English is introduced systematically as a subject while home-language proficiency is consolidated.

Investment in teacher development is equally critical. Teacher training programs must combine spoken English proficiency with contemporary pedagogy, including communicative approaches and multilingual strategies. Continuous professional development, mentorship systems, and language immersion opportunities can enhance instructional quality. Without teacher empowerment, policy reforms remain symbolic.

Additionally, regulatory frameworks should monitor quality claims made by low-fee private English-medium schools. Accreditation standards should assess teacher qualifications, classroom practices, and measurable language outcomes rather than relying solely on the "English medium" label as a marketing device. Establishing minimum language-teaching benchmarks can reduce exploitative practices and protect vulnerable families from investing in ineffective schooling.

Pedagogy Level

At the classroom level, translanguaging pedagogy offers inclusive alternatives to rigid monolingual models. Planned bilingual scaffolding where teachers strategically use students' home languages alongside English can deepen conceptual understanding and reduce anxiety. Multilingual discussions, peer collaboration, and culturally relevant materials validate students' linguistic identities while gradually strengthening English proficiency.

Pedagogical culture must also move away from "error-shaming." Fear of incorrect pronunciation or grammar discourages participation and perpetuates silence. Supportive feedback, formative assessment, and classroom norms that normalize linguistic experimentation can foster confidence. Addressing accent discrimination explicitly can further dismantle stigma associated with non-standard varieties.

Building academic English requires structured engagement beyond grammar drills. Reading circles, writing workshops, and genre-based instruction can equip learners with the discursive skills needed for higher education. Exposure to diverse English texts including Indian English literature can bridge cultural familiarity and linguistic development.

Assessment Level

Assessment reform is essential for sustainable equity. Evaluative systems should move beyond rote grammar exercises to measure comprehension, argumentation, critical thinking, and communicative clarity. Performance-based tasks, oral presentations, and portfolio assessments can capture broader dimensions of language competence.

In early grades, allowing multilingual support during assessments can reduce cognitive overload and ensure that conceptual understanding is not obscured by limited English proficiency. Gradually increasing English academic load as learners build confidence promotes smoother transitions to higher education.

Conclusion

English in India operates as both a bridge and a barrier: it enables mobility while institutionalizing inequality through unequal schooling, symbolic stigma, and monolingual curricular norms. Reading educational research alongside literary representation shows how English shapes identity, voice, and belonging not only test scores. Equity demands additive multilingual pathways that protect home-language learning while expanding high-quality access to academic English. Such a shift can reduce linguistic stratification and sustain India's plural literary culture.

References

1. Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. Atlantic Books, 2008.

2. Block, David, and Sarah Khan, editors. *The Secret Life of English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education: Examining Microphenomena in Context*. Routledge, 2021.

3. Bolton, Kingsley, Werner Botha, and Benedict Lin, editors. *The Routledge Handbook of English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education*. Routledge, 2024.

4. Borg, Simon, Amol Padwad, and Pranjana Kalita Nath. *English Language Teaching, Learning and Assessment in India: Policies and Practices in the School Education System*. British Council, 2022.

5. Boruah, Padmini, and Ajit Mohanty. "English Medium Education in India: The Neoliberal Legacy and Challenges to Multilingual Language Policy Implementation." *Neoliberalization of English Language Policy in the Global South*, edited by Ali Jalalian Daghigh, Jariah Mohd Jan, and Sheena Kaur, Springer, 2022, pp. 51–71.

6. Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*. Harvard UP, 1991.

7. Canagarajah, Suresh. *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*. Routledge, 2013.

8. Daghigh, Ali Jalalian, Jariah Mohd Jan, and Sheena Kaur, editors. *Neoliberalization of English Language Policy in the Global South*. Springer, 2022.

9. Desai, Kiran. *The Inheritance of Loss*. Hamish Hamilton, 2006.

10. Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 1970.

11. García, Ofelia, and Li Wei. *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

12. Gargesh, Ravinder. "English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education in India and Sri Lanka." *The Routledge Handbook of English-Medium Instruction in Higher Education*, edited by Kingsley Bolton, Werner Botha, and Benedict Lin, Routledge, 2024, pp. 365–79.

13. Government of India. *National Education Policy 2020*. Ministry of Education, 2020.

14. Kalyanpur, Maya, Padmini Bhuyan Boruah, Sarina Chugani Molina, and Sunaina Shenoy. *The Politics of English Language Education and Social Inequality: Global Pressures, National Priorities and Schooling in India*. Routledge, 2022.

15. Kirkpatrick, Andy, and Anthony J. Liddicoat, editors. *The Routledge International Handbook of Language Education Policy in Asia*. Routledge, 2019.

16. Kudale, Kaniphnath Malhari, Rositta Joseph Valiyamattam, Rupesh Kotte, and G. Veerya Nayak, editors. *Teaching and Learning English Language and Literature in India: Existential Humanities in the 21st Century Classroom*. Springer, 2026.

17. Kumar, Krishna, editor. *The Routledge Handbook of Education in India: Debates, Practices, and Policies*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 2022.

18. Mahanta, Banibrata, and Rajesh Babu Sharma, editors. *English Studies in India: Contemporary and Evolving Paradigms*. Springer, 2018.

19. Phillipson, Robert. *Linguistic Imperialism*. Oxford UP, 1992.

20. Skutnabb-Kangas, Tove. *Linguistic Genocide in Education—or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Lawrence Erlbaum, 2000.

21. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 66–111.

22. Sridhar, M., and Sunita Mishra, editors. *Language Policy and Education in India: Documents, Contexts and Debates*. Routledge India, 2019.