

Qualitative Study on Language Influence and Integration of Multilingualism in Teaching and Learning of English Language Studies in Nigeria

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Abstract

The globalised world presents a unique challenge and opportunity for English language classrooms: the inclusion of multilingualism. This paper argues that embracing multilingualism in English language education is not only beneficial but necessary for fostering linguistic and cultural diversity, enhancing cognitive skills, and improving learning outcomes. Multilingual students bring a wealth of linguistic resources that, when effectively utilized, can enrich the learning environment and support the acquisition of English as an additional language. This paper explores the complex dynamics of language influence in multilingual classrooms, examining how students' native languages can positively impact their English learning process. It also discusses the pedagogical strategies that educators can employ to foster an inclusive environment that values and leverages linguistic diversity. Drawing on current research and educational theories, the paper provides recommendations for incorporating multilingualism into English language instruction, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive teaching practices. It argues that the inclusion of multilingualism not only benefits language acquisition but also contributes to broader educational goals, such as promoting social equity and intercultural understanding. The paper concludes by emphasizing the need for teacher training and policy support to fully realize the potential of multilingualism in English language classrooms.

Keyword: Multilingualism, Language Influence, English Language Classrooms, Bilingual Education

Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, multilingualism has become more than just a linguistic phenomenon; it is a vital component of social, cultural, and educational landscapes. The ability to communicate in multiple languages is a significant asset in a globalized society, fostering greater understanding and collaboration across diverse cultural contexts. Within the realm of education, particularly in English Language classrooms, the presence of multilingual students presents both challenges and opportunities. This paper explores the critical role of multilingualism in English Language education and argues that its inclusion is essential for fostering linguistic diversity, enhancing cognitive abilities, and achieving equitable educational outcomes. Historically, English Language education has often been characterized by a monolingual approach, where the use of languages other than English in the classroom has been discouraged or even prohibited. This approach, rooted in the belief that immersion in the target language is the most effective way to learn it, has dominated English Language Teaching (ELT) methodologies for decades (Auerbach, 1993). However, this monolingual bias overlooks the complex linguistic realities of today's classrooms, where students frequently speak multiple languages and bring diverse linguistic resources to their learning experiences. Research has shown that multilingualism can significantly enhance language learning, cognitive development, and academic achievement (Tan & Xun, 2023). For example, students who are proficient in more than one language often demonstrate greater cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and metalinguistic awareness, all of which can contribute to more effective language learning (Bialystok, Craik & Luk, 2012). Moreover, the inclusion of multilingualism in the classroom can promote social equity by validating and valuing the linguistic and cultural identities of all students, particularly those from minority language backgrounds (Garcia & Wei, 2014).

In light of these benefits, there has been a growing recognition of the need to move beyond monolingual approaches to teaching of the English language and embrace the linguistic diversity of students. This shift is not only necessary for improving language learning outcomes but also for fostering a more inclusive and culturally responsive educational environment. Multilingualism, defined as the ability to communicate in more than one language, is a common and natural phenomenon in many parts of the world. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), more than half of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual, and this number is expected to grow as globalisation continues to influence patterns of migration, communication, and education (UNESCO, 2022). In educational contexts, multilingualism can be seen as both a challenge and an opportunity. On the one hand, the presence of multiple languages in the classroom can complicate teaching and learning processes, particularly when students have varying levels of proficiency in the target language. On the other hand, multilingualism can enrich the educational experience by exposing students to diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives, enhancing their cognitive abilities, and promoting intercultural understanding (Grain et al.2022).

Despite its potential benefits, the inclusion of multilingualism in English language classrooms is not without its challenges. One of the most significant challenges is the persistence of the monolingual bias in ELT methodologies. Many educators, particularly those trained in traditional language teaching approaches, may feel uncertain or unprepared to address the needs of multilingual students in their classrooms (de Jong, 2011). Additionally, the dominance of English as a global language can sometimes lead to the marginalization of other languages, particularly those spoken by minority or immigrant communities (Phillipson, 1992, as cited in Faiz, 2023). This can create a power imbalance in the classroom, where English is seen as the language of prestige and opportunity, while other languages are devalued or ignored. Another challenge is the lack of appropriate resources and materials for teaching in multilingual classrooms. Many English language textbooks and curricula are designed for monolingual learners and may not address the unique needs of multilingual students. For example, these materials may assume a certain level of proficiency in English or a specific cultural background, which may not be applicable to all students. This can make it difficult for educators to provide meaningful and relevant instruction to all learners, particularly those who are still developing their proficiency in English (García & Lin, 2017). Despite these challenges, there are numerous opportunities for leveraging multilingualism to enhance learning of the English language. One of the most important opportunities is the use of students' native languages as a resource for learning English. Research has shown that students who are able to use their native language as a scaffold for learning English often perform better academically and achieve higher levels of proficiency in the target language (Cummins, 2007). This is because students can draw on their existing linguistic knowledge and skills to make sense of new language concepts, rather than having to learn them from scratch.

Another opportunity is the promotion of translanguaging practices in the classroom. Translanguaging, a pedagogical approach that encourages students to use their entire linguistic repertoire to communicate and learn, has been shown to be highly effective in multilingual classrooms (García & Wei, 2014). For example, students might be encouraged to use their native language to discuss a complex concept with a classmate before presenting it in English. This not only helps to build students' confidence and competence in English but also validates and values their linguistic and cultural identities. In addition to these pedagogical strategies, there is also an opportunity to promote multilingualism through culturally responsive teaching practices. Culturally responsive teaching, which involves recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds and incorporating them into the curriculum, can help to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment (Gay, 2018). For example, educators might incorporate literature, music, and other cultural artifacts from students' native cultures into their lessons, or use examples and case studies that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of their students. This not only enhances students' engagement and motivation but also promotes intercultural understanding and respect. To fully realize the potential of multilingualism in English language classrooms, it is essential that educators receive adequate training and support. This includes professional development opportunities that focus on multilingual pedagogy, as well as access to resources and materials that are designed for use in multilingual classrooms. Additionally, there is a need for policies that support the inclusion of multilingualism in education, such as the development of bilingual or dual-language programs, the provision of language support services for students, and the recognition of multilingualism as a valuable asset in the classroom (Saikham, 2025). Ultimately, the inclusion of multilingualism in English Language classrooms is not just a pedagogical issue but a matter of social justice. By recognizing and valuing the linguistic and cultural diversity of students, educators can help to create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment. This not only benefits individual students but also contributes to the broader goal of promoting intercultural understanding and social cohesion in an increasingly diverse and interconnected world.

The Impact of Learning English on Nigerian Education System

Multilingual students bring a wealth of linguistic resources to the classroom that can significantly impact their English learning process. These resources include not only their proficiency in their native languages but also their cultural knowledge, cognitive skills, and learning strategies. Understanding how these factors influence learning of English is essential for developing effective pedagogical approaches that leverage the strengths of multilingual students while addressing their specific needs.

Cognitive Benefits of Multilingualism among Students in Nigeria

One of the most significant ways in which multilingualism influences English learning is through its impact on cognitive development of students. Research has shown that individuals who are proficient in more than one language often demonstrate greater cognitive flexibility, problem-solving skills, and metalinguistic awareness compared to monolingual individuals (Bialystok, 2001). These cognitive benefits can enhance students' ability to learn and process new information, including the acquisition of a new language. For example, multilingual students often have a heightened awareness of the structure and function of language, which can help them to recognize patterns and make connections between their native language and English. This metalinguistic awareness can facilitate the learning of grammar and vocabulary, as students are able to draw on their existing linguistic knowledge to make sense of new language concepts (Cummins, 2007). Additionally, the cognitive flexibility associated with multilingualism can enable students to switch between languages more easily, which can be particularly beneficial in a classroom where both the native language and English are used for instruction.

Cross-Linguistic Transfer in Teaching and Learning of English Language in Nigerian

Another important aspect of language influence in multilingual classrooms is the concept of cross-linguistic transfer, which refers to the process by which knowledge and skills from one language are transferred to another. This transfer can occur at various levels, including phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic, and can significantly impact the learning of a new language (Saikham, 2025). For example, a student who is proficient in Spanish may find it easier to learn English vocabulary that is similar to Spanish, such as "information" and "información," due to the similarities between the two languages. Cross-linguistic transfer can also occur in the opposite direction, where students apply English language structures or vocabulary to their native language. While this transfer can sometimes lead to errors or interference, it can also provide valuable insights into the similarities and differences between languages, enhancing students' overall language learning experience. For example, a student who is learning English as a second language may begin to recognize the similarities between English and their native language in terms of sentence structure or word order, which can help to reinforce their understanding of both languages.

Challenges of Language Influence in Teaching and Learning of English Language in Nigeria

While the cognitive benefits and cross-linguistic transfer associated with multilingualism can enhance English learning, it is important to recognize that language influence can also present challenges. One of the most common challenges is language interference, where the structures or rules of the native language interfere with the learning of English. For example, a student who is a native speaker of a language with a different word order than English may struggle with sentence structure or grammar, leading to errors or confusion. Another challenge is the potential for negative transfer, where students apply rules or patterns from their native language to English inappropriately. For example, a student who speaks a language that does not differentiate between certain sounds or phonemes may have difficulty with English pronunciation, leading to misunderstandings or miscommunication. Negative transfer can also occur at the syntactic level, where students may apply the sentence structures or word order of their native language to English, resulting in errors or awkward phrasing. To address these challenges, it is essential for educators to be aware of the potential for language interference and negative transfer in multilingual classrooms and to provide targeted support to help students overcome these obstacles. This may include explicit instruction in the differences between English and the students' native languages, as well as opportunities for practice and feedback to reinforce correct language use.

Strategies for Incorporating Multilingualism into the Classroom in Nigeria

To fully realize the benefits of multilingualism in English language classrooms, it is essential for educators to adopt pedagogical strategies that value and leverage students' linguistic diversity. This section explores a range of strategies that can be used to incorporate multilingualism into the classroom, including translanguaging, culturally responsive teaching, and the use of students' native languages as a resource for learning English.

Translanguaging as a Pedagogical Strategy in Nigeria

One of the most effective strategies for incorporating multilingualism into the classroom is the use of translanguaging, a pedagogical approach that encourages students to use their entire linguistic repertoire to communicate and learn. Translanguaging recognises that multilingual students do not simply switch between languages but rather use all of their linguistic resources in an integrated and dynamic way (García & Wei, 2014). This approach can be particularly beneficial in

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multilingual classrooms, where students may have varying levels of proficiency in English and their native languages. For example, in a translanguaging classroom, students might be encouraged to use their native language to discuss a complex concept with a classmate before presenting it in English. This not only helps to build students' confidence and competence in English but also validates and values their linguistic and cultural identities. Translanguaging can also be used to scaffold learning, where students use their native language to support their understanding of new English language concepts. For example, a teacher might provide bilingual glossaries or translation exercises to help students make connections between their native language and English vocabulary.

Culturally Responsive Teaching of English Language in Nigeria

Another important strategy for incorporating multilingualism into the classroom is culturally responsive teaching, which involves recognizing and valuing students' cultural backgrounds and incorporating them into the curriculum. Culturally responsive teaching is based on the idea that students learn best when they feel that their cultural identities are recognized and respected in the classroom (Gay, 2018). This approach can help to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment, particularly for students from minority language backgrounds. For example, educators might incorporate literature, music, and other cultural artifacts from students' native cultures into their lessons, or use examples and case studies that reflect the diverse experiences and perspectives of their students. This not only enhances students' engagement and motivation but also promotes intercultural understanding and respect. Culturally responsive teaching can also involve the use of students' native languages as a resource for learning English, such as by encouraging students to draw on their cultural knowledge and experiences when discussing or writing about topics in English.

Using Native Languages as a Resource for English Language Teaching in Nigeria

One of the most powerful ways to incorporate multilingualism into the classroom is by using students' native languages as a resource for learning English. Research has shown that students who are able to use their native language as a scaffold for learning English often perform better academically and achieve higher levels of proficiency in the target language (Cummins, 2007). This is because students can draw on their existing linguistic knowledge and skills to make sense of new language concepts, rather than having to learn them from scratch. There are several ways that educators can use students' native languages as a resource in the classroom. One approach is to provide bilingual materials, such as bilingual glossaries, dictionaries, or texts, that allow students to see the connections between their native language and English. Another approach is to encourage students to use their native language when working on assignments or projects, particularly in the early stages of learning English. For example, students might write a draft of an essay in their native language before translating it into English, or they might discuss a complex topic in their native language before presenting it in English. In addition to these strategies, educators can also use students' native languages to support the development of academic language skills in English. For example, a teacher might introduce new vocabulary words in both English and the students' native language, or provide explanations of complex concepts in both languages. This not only helps students to understand the material more fully but also reinforces their native language skills, which can support their overall academic achievement.

Challenges of Incorporating Multilingualism into the Classroom in Nigeria

While there are many benefits to incorporating multilingualism into the classroom, it is important to recognize that this approach is not without its challenges. One of the most significant challenges is the lack of appropriate resources and materials for teaching in multilingual classrooms. Many English language textbooks and curricula are designed for monolingual learners and may not address the unique needs of multilingual students. For example, these materials may assume a certain level of proficiency in English or a specific cultural background, which may not be applicable to all students (García & Lin, 2017). Another challenge is the persistence of the monolingual bias in ELT methodologies. Many educators, particularly those trained in traditional language teaching approaches, may feel uncertain or unprepared to address the needs of multilingual students in their classrooms (De Jong, 2011). This can lead to a reluctance to incorporate students' native languages into the classroom or to adopt pedagogical strategies that value and leverage linguistic diversity. To address these challenges, it is essential for educators to receive adequate training and support in multilingual pedagogy. This includes professional development opportunities that focus on the use of translanguaging, culturally responsive teaching, and other strategies for incorporating multilingualism into the classroom. Additionally, there is a need for the development of resources and materials that are designed specifically for use in multilingual classrooms, as well as policies that support the inclusion of multilingualism in education.

The Role of Policy and Teacher Training in Supporting Multilingual Education in Nigeria

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The successful incorporation of multilingualism into English language classrooms requires more than just the adoption of new pedagogical strategies; it also requires the support of policies and teacher training programs that recognise and value linguistic diversity. This section explores the role of policy and teacher training in supporting multilingual education and provides recommendations for how educators and policymakers can work together to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

The Role of Policy in Supporting Multilingual Education in Nigeria

Policies that support the inclusion of multilingualism in education are essential for creating an environment where linguistic diversity is valued and leveraged as a resource for learning. One of the most important policy initiatives in this area is the development of bilingual or dual-language programs, which provide instruction in both the students' native language and English. These programs have been shown to be highly effective in promoting academic achievement and English language proficiency, particularly for students from minority language backgrounds (Saikham, 2025). In addition to bilingual programs, other policy initiatives that support multilingual education include the provision of language support services for students, such as English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, and the recognition of multilingualism as a valuable asset in the classroom. For example, some schools and districts have implemented policies that allow students to earn credit for proficiency in a language other than English or that offer special recognition or awards for multilingual students. Another important policy consideration is the need for equitable funding for multilingual education programs. In many cases, schools and districts that serve a high number of multilingual students receive less funding than those that serve primarily monolingual students, which can limit their ability to provide the necessary resources and support. To address this issue, it is essential for policymakers to ensure that funding is allocated equitably and that schools have the resources they need to support multilingual students.

Teacher Training and Professional Development in Promoting Multilingual Education in Nigeria

Teacher training is another critical component of supporting multilingual education. Educators who are trained in multilingual pedagogy are better equipped to address the needs of multilingual students and to create a classroom environment that values and leverages linguistic diversity. This training should include both pre-service and in-service professional development opportunities, as well as ongoing support and resources for educators. One of the most important areas of teacher training is the development of cultural competence, which involves recognizing and valuing the cultural backgrounds and experiences of students. This includes understanding the role of language in shaping cultural identity and being able to incorporate students' cultural knowledge and experiences into the curriculum. Additionally, educators should be trained in the use of pedagogical strategies that support multilingualism, such as translanguaging and culturally responsive teaching. Another important area of teacher training is the development of language proficiency in the students' native languages. While it is not always possible for educators to be proficient in all of the languages spoken by their students, it is important for them to have a basic understanding of the students' linguistic backgrounds and to be able to provide support and resources in the students' native languages. This may include training in the use of bilingual materials, translation tools, and other resources that can help to bridge the language gap between English and the students' native languages.

Recommendations for Supporting Multilingual Education in Nigeria

To fully realize the potential of multilingualism in English language classrooms, it is essential for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to work together to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. This includes the development of policies and programs that support the inclusion of multilingualism in education, as well as the provision of training and resources for educators. One of the most important recommendations is the development of bilingual or dual-language programmes that provide instruction in both the students' native language and English. These programmes have been shown to be highly effective in promoting academic achievement and English language proficiency, particularly for students from minority language backgrounds. Additionally, it is important to ensure that these programs are adequately funded and supported, with access to appropriate resources and materials. Another important recommendation is the provision of professional development opportunities for educators that focus on multilingual pedagogy. This includes training in the use of translanguaging, culturally responsive teaching, and other strategies for incorporating multilingualism into the classroom. Additionally, it is important to provide ongoing support and resources for educators, including access to bilingual materials, translation tools, and other resources that can help to bridge the language gap between English and the students' native languages. Finally, it is essential to promote a broader recognition and appreciation of multilingualism as a valuable asset in the classroom. This includes the development of policies and programs that recognize and reward multilingual students for their language proficiency, as well as efforts to raise awareness of the benefits of multilingualism for all students.

Conclusion

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The inclusion of multilingualism in English language classrooms is not merely a pedagogical choice; it is a fundamental necessity for fostering linguistic diversity, enhancing cognitive abilities, and promoting social equity. In today's increasingly globalized world, where multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception, educational practices must evolve to reflect the linguistic realities of the student population. This paper has explored the various ways in which language influence and multilingualism can be incorporated into English language classrooms, highlighting the benefits of a multilingual approach and offering strategies for educators and policymakers to support this inclusion. One of the central arguments presented in this article is that multilingualism should be seen as a resource rather than a challenge. Students who speak multiple languages bring a wealth of linguistic and cultural knowledge to the classroom that can enrich the learning experience for everyone. By leveraging these resources through strategies such as translanguaging and culturally responsive teaching, educators can enhance students' English language acquisition while also promoting a more inclusive and supportive learning environment. However, the successful integration of multilingualism into English language education requires more than just the adoption of new teaching strategies; it also necessitates systemic changes in policy and teacher training. Policies that support bilingual education and provide adequate resources for multilingual students are essential for creating an environment where linguistic diversity is valued and leveraged as a resource for learning. Additionally, teacher training programs must be designed to equip educators with the skills and knowledge needed to address the unique needs of multilingual students and to create a classroom environment that values and respects linguistic diversity. The challenges associated with incorporating multilingualism into English language classrooms should not be underestimated. The persistence of the monolingual bias in ELT methodologies, the lack of appropriate resources and materials, and the need for adequate teacher training all represent significant obstacles to the successful integration of multilingualism. However, these challenges are not insurmountable. With the right support and resources, educators can overcome these obstacles and create a learning environment that is not only inclusive of multilingualism but also celebrates and leverages it as a valuable asset. Ultimately, the inclusion of multilingualism in English language classrooms is about more than just language learning; it is about promoting social equity and intercultural understanding. In a world where linguistic and cultural diversity are increasingly valued, it is essential for educational practices to reflect and support these values. By recognizing and valuing the linguistic diversity of students, educators can help to create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment that benefits all students. This article concludes with a call to action for educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders to take bold and decisive steps to support the inclusion of multilingualism in English language education. This includes the development of policies and programs that support bilingual education, the provision of professional development opportunities for educators, and the promotion of a broader recognition and appreciation of multilingualism as a valuable asset in the classroom. By working together, we can create a learning environment that is not only inclusive of multilingualism but also celebrates and leverages it as a powerful tool for learning and growth.

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