

**Investigating the Linguistic and Pedagogical
Barriers to English Language Learning among
Kannada Learners at
Govinda Pai Memorial Government College
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ABSTRACT:

The multicultural and multilingual landscape of Kasaragod district in Kerala offers a unique context for English language learning among Kannada-speaking students. This study examines the intersection of linguistic identity, cultural plurality, and student engagement in English classrooms at Govinda Pai Memorial Government College, Kasaragod. It explores how the multicultural identity of Kannada-background learners shapes their learning experiences, influences pedagogical strategies, and contributes to a broader understanding of inclusive education in linguistically diverse settings. Drawing from classroom observations, institutional experiences, and a review of relevant literature, the paper highlights the significance of culturally responsive pedagogy and learner-centered practices in promoting engagement and proficiency in English. The findings underscore that English language teaching in multilingual environments must move beyond linguistic competence to embrace cultural sensitivity, identity affirmation, and reflective pedagogy.

KEYWORDS:

Multicultural identity, Kannada students, English language learning, student engagement, pedagogy, bilingualism.

Introduction

Language learning in multilingual societies is not merely an academic pursuit but a cultural negotiation. In regions such as Kasaragod, the northernmost district of Kerala bordering Karnataka, the interplay of multiple linguistic traditions—Kannada, Malayalam, Tulu, Beary, Marathi, and Urdu—creates a rich environment for studying the dynamics of English language learning. English, in this milieu, serves both as a tool for upward mobility and as a site where identities converge and sometimes conflict. Among undergraduate students of Govinda Pai Memorial Government College, Kasaragod, the learning of English is influenced by diverse sociolinguistic factors, including regional identity, home language, and educational exposure. This study investigates how the multicultural identity of Kannada-speaking students affects their engagement with English, both as an academic subject and as a communicative tool.

The central argument of this paper is that English language pedagogy must recognize and build upon the multicultural identity of learners. Rather than perceiving linguistic diversity as a barrier, educators should harness it as a resource that enriches the teaching-learning process. The analysis situates this inquiry within the framework of sociocultural theory, communicative language teaching, and multicultural education, drawing attention to how pedagogical practices can align with the lived realities of learners.

Context and Significance of the Study

The distinctive multilingual profile of Kasaragod sets it apart from other regions of Kerala where Kannada, Malayalam, Tulu, Beary, and Urdu diversify the linguistic landscape along with Marathi and Konkani. Historically part of the South Canara region, Kasaragod continues to maintain strong cultural and linguistic ties with Karnataka. Educational institutions, including Govinda Pai Memorial Government College, reflect this diversity within their student population. Many students come from Kannada-medium schools and enter undergraduate programmes where English

functions as the principal medium of instruction.

This linguistic transition from Kannada to English often presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, English symbolizes access to global knowledge, social mobility, and modernity. On the other hand, it can alienate learners who lack confidence or proficiency, particularly those from rural or Kannada-dominant backgrounds. In the English classroom, therefore, cultural empathy and pedagogical adaptability become essential. Teachers are not only language facilitators but also mediators of identity and inclusion.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to contextualize English language learning within the multicultural reality of Kasaragod, exploring how the Kannada linguistic background of students interacts with pedagogical practices and engagement patterns. It seeks to contribute to the discourse on inclusive education in multilingual contexts, where identity plays a central role in shaping learner motivation and classroom dynamics.

Literature Review

Scholarly discussions on multicultural identity and language learning have emphasized the intricate relationship between language, culture, and self-perception. According to Claire Kramsch, language is “the principal means through which we negotiate our sense of who we are” (Kramsch 9). For Kannada-background learners in Kasaragod, English learning thus becomes a negotiation between regional belonging and global aspiration.

Cummins’ theory of linguistic interdependence suggests that proficiency in a first language supports the acquisition of a second language (Cummins 81). This implies that Kannada-speaking students can draw upon their native linguistic competence to facilitate English learning, provided that pedagogy recognizes and integrates their multilingual background. Similarly, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory underscores the importance of social context

and cultural tools in learning (Vygotsky 56). In multilingual classrooms, peer interaction and collaborative learning can serve as powerful mediators of engagement and comprehension.

Indian scholars such as B. Kumaravadivelu and N. S. Prabhu have also examined language teaching through a postcolonial perspective, arguing that local contexts must inform pedagogical choices. Kumaravadivelu's notion of "post-method pedagogy" (Kumaravadivelu 67) encourages teachers to adopt context-sensitive approaches that respect learners' sociocultural realities. Within the educational system of Kerala, several studies (Menon 2020; Ramesh 2019) have highlighted that students from non-English backgrounds often experience anxiety and alienation in English classrooms. However, inclusive teaching strategies such as code-switching, collaborative projects, and culturally relevant materials have been found to mitigate these challenges.

The review of literature thus affirms that multicultural identity and linguistic plurality are not impediments but assets in English language education. Effective pedagogy in such settings must integrate linguistic diversity into classroom discourse, creating space for multiple voices and cultural narratives.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in classroom-based observation and interpretative analysis. The research draws upon experiential data collected over multiple semesters from English language classes at Govinda Pai Memorial Government College, Manjeshwar in Kasaragod district. The participants comprise undergraduate students, predominantly from Kannada-speaking homes, enrolled in Bachelor of Arts (Kannada) and Bachelor of Commerce programmes.

Data sources include classroom observations, informal interviews with students, and reflective teaching notes. The research does not seek to quantify linguistic proficiency but to understand

patterns of engagement, participation, and identity negotiation in the classroom. Ethical considerations were observed by maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of student responses.

The study employs thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns related to multicultural identity and pedagogical impact. The interpretative framework is informed by sociocultural theory and principles of multicultural education, focusing on how language, identity, and pedagogy intersect in real-world classroom settings.

Kannada-speaking students at GPMGC often navigate complex linguistic terrains. While English is perceived as the language of higher education and professional success, Kannada retains deep emotional and cultural value. The engagement of students with English, therefore, is often filtered through their regional identity. Many learners express hesitation to speak English, fearing errors or ridicule, while others exhibit enthusiasm driven by aspirational motives.

Affective Factors and Sociolinguistic Barriers

For many Kannada-speaking learners, the home environment is entirely monolingual, though they resort to multilingualism outside their homes. Such households provide virtually no exposure to natural English speech, limiting the opportunities of the learners to develop foundational listening and speaking skills outside the classroom. In the absence of incidental or informal English input, learners are unable to internalise authentic pronunciation patterns, syntactic structures, or conversational norms. As a result, the learner becomes almost completely dependent on school-based instruction for English acquisition. This restricted linguistic ecosystem strengthens the influence of Kannada as the dominant cognitive frame, thereby increasing the likelihood of mother-tongue interference during English language production.

The lack of parental support due to limited English proficiency further compounds the problem. In many Kannada-speaking homes,

parents are unable to assist children with homework, pronunciation, reading comprehension, or communicative practice. Consequently, English remains confined to the status of a formal school subject rather than a functional language with practical relevance. Without reinforcement at home, learners often forget what is taught in the classroom, and their language development remains superficial and exam-oriented. This reinforces reliance on Kannada syntactic and lexical structures when attempting to express ideas in English, suggesting that parental linguistic capital plays a critical role in shaping the language proficiency trajectories of the learner.

The scarcity of English-speaking role models in the immediate social environment significantly limits their auditory and conversational exposure. Language acquisition research consistently highlights the importance of hearing a language spoken naturally, yet many Kannada learners encounter English primarily through textbooks or teacher-centred instruction. This lack of sustained exposure prevents the development of prosodic competence, including rhythm, stress, and intonation patterns. Without models to emulate, learners cannot intuitively grasp the communicative flow of English, leading them to rely on Kannada phonology and grammar when producing speech. The absence of authentic linguistic input thus reinforces negative transfer and inhibits fluency.

Socio-economic disparities also contribute to unequal access to English-learning resources. Students from lower-income families often lack access to supplementary materials such as graded readers, digital learning tools, English-language media, or private tutoring. Many Kannada-medium schools, particularly in rural or semi-urban regions, treat English largely as a theoretical subject, emphasising rote learning and grammar exercises over communicative competence. With English seldom required for academic survival or everyday communication, learners receive limited exposure and practice. This social environment constrains the development of procedural knowledge in English, causing learners to default to Kannada structures during spontaneous language use.

In predominantly Kannada-speaking communities, daily interactions—from shopping and travel to social gatherings—take place in a multilingual background where English is not used at all. Since English is not necessary for routine communication, learners have few opportunities to practise using the language in authentic contexts. This creates a sharp disconnect between classroom input and real-world application. Without experiential or meaningful use, English remains abstract and rule-bound, encouraging students to translate directly from Kannada when attempting to communicate. Thus, limited real-life exposure perpetuates dependence on mother-tongue schema and inhibits the development of communicative competence.

Families preoccupied with economic survival or demanding work schedules often cannot prioritise the language practice of their children. In such contexts, the focus is typically on completing basic schooling rather than cultivating higher-order linguistic skills such as English proficiency. The absence of parental encouragement or structured home learning spaces means that learners continue to conduct communication in their regional languages. This restricts the formation of English-language habits and reduces the motivation to engage actively with English, thereby reinforcing mother-tongue interference and limiting fluency.

The widespread belief among learners that English is inherently difficult functions as a psychological barrier to acquisition. Students with minimal exposure from an early age often develop a sense of linguistic inadequacy or fear before they even begin formal instruction. This perceived difficulty heightens anxiety and reduces willingness to engage in experimentation with the language, an essential component of communicative development. Negative attitudes and fear-based learning environments lead learners to rely more on Kannada thought patterns and translation-based strategies, which in turn produce grammatical errors, mispronunciations, and reduced fluency.

Affective factors play a significant role in shaping the English proficiency and performance of Kannada learners. Many students experience an inferiority complex when speaking English, particularly in the presence of more proficient peers or teachers. Fear of being judged for accented speech, inaccurate grammar, or limited vocabulary leads to communication avoidance. This reluctance to speak English reduces practice opportunities, reinforcing dependence on Kannada as the default linguistic framework. Low confidence thus becomes both a cause and consequence of mother-tongue interference, contributing to persistent difficulties in oral communication.

Owing to insufficient spontaneity in English, many learners engage in excessive self-monitoring when constructing sentences. They tend to mentally translate ideas from Kannada to English, checking grammar and vocabulary word by word before speaking. This cognitive overload results in slow, fragmented, or unnatural speech. Overthinking not only disrupts fluency but also increases error rates, as learners struggle to reconcile Kannada syntactic structures with English grammatical norms. The prominence of translation-based processing reflects limited internalisation of English and highlights the need for more naturalistic exposure and communicative practice.

Pedagogical Barriers to Effective Classroom Interaction

Teaching English in a multilingual classroom presents a complex set of pedagogical challenges that extend beyond those encountered in monolingual settings. One of the primary difficulties lies in predicting and addressing common learner errors. Teachers must navigate multiple patterns of mother tongue (L1) interference, each of which affects pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary acquisition in different ways. Since each linguistic group brings its own phonological and syntactic influences, identifying error trends or providing unified corrective feedback becomes more complex.

Traditional approaches such as the bilingual method, which

allow teachers to clarify concepts using the mother tongue of the learner, lose their effectiveness in classrooms where many languages coexist. Consequently, teachers are often compelled to rely exclusively on English as the medium of instruction. While this may benefit advanced learners, it can be discouraging and cognitively taxing for students with lower proficiency levels, who may struggle to grasp new concepts without the scaffolding of their first language. This reliance on English alone can slow comprehension, particularly when students encounter unfamiliar vocabulary or culturally distant concepts. Misinterpretations of texts—whether literary or informational—become more frequent, as learners interpret content through the perspective of their varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Such gaps may also lead to uneven participation and fragmented understanding across the classroom.

Another challenge stems from the tendency of students to form peer groups based on shared languages. Although natural, this clustering reduces exposure to English, limiting opportunities for authentic communicative practice. For teachers, managing interactions across several languages simultaneously is not only demanding but also time-consuming. Classroom discussions, group work, and collaborative tasks become harder to coordinate when learners switch between languages or rely heavily on their mother tongue for comfort. Designing inclusive teaching materials creates further difficulty. Developing resources that accommodate diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds is tough, as examples or contexts that resonate with one group may be unfamiliar or irrelevant to another.

Teachers must constantly adapt content, illustrations, and classroom scenarios to maintain engagement and ensure that no group feels excluded. This also extends to assessment design, where tasks must be culturally neutral and accessible across multiple language backgrounds. Teacher preparation emerges as another significant concern. Many teachers do not possess multilingual competence, and many find it difficult to diagnose mother-tongue-

related learning barriers. Without the knowledge of the specific phonological or grammatical structures of each language represented in the classroom, it becomes challenging to anticipate difficulties, correct errors effectively, or provide targeted remedial support. This limitation may inadvertently widen the learning gap among students. Moreover, multilingual settings often heighten learner anxiety. Students may fear mispronunciation, comparison with peers from different linguistic backgrounds, or misunderstanding instructions. Such affective factors can hinder participation and reduce the willingness to take risks in using English.

Thus, teaching English in multilingual classrooms requires heightened pedagogical sensitivity, flexible instructional strategies, and continuous adaptation. The complexity of linguistic diversity demands innovative approaches that balance inclusivity, comprehensibility, and effective language acquisition.

Multicultural Classroom Dynamics

The classrooms at GPMGC mirror the linguistic mosaic of Kasaragod. Kannada, Malayalam, Tulu, and Beary speakers share the same space, bringing diverse cultural frames of reference. Such diversity can initially create communication barriers but eventually fosters intercultural sensitivity. Group activities that encourage collaborative learning help bridge linguistic divides, enabling students to appreciate cultural plurality.

Pedagogical strategies that emphasize peer learning and task-based communication have shown positive results. For instance, mixed-language groups discussing English texts can produce deeper cross-cultural understanding. The teacher's role becomes that of a facilitator who balances linguistic equity while maintaining English as the instructional medium.

Despite these advantages, several challenges persist. Many Kannada-background students come from schools where English exposure was limited to textbook reading and grammar translation.

Consequently, they often struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary, and spontaneous expression. The psychological barrier of “English anxiety” (Horwitz 1995) also affects participation. In such contexts, the pedagogical challenge lies in addressing both linguistic and affective needs. Teachers must design lessons that scaffold comprehension while gradually building confidence. Contextualized teaching materials such as texts reflecting local themes or bilingual glossaries can make English learning more relatable and less intimidating.

An essential dimension of multicultural pedagogy is identity affirmation. When classroom discourse validates the native languages and cultural practices, learners experience a sense of belonging. Activities that invite students to share regional stories or translate local idioms into English encourage linguistic creativity and intercultural appreciation. In such classrooms, English ceases to be an alien imposition and becomes a bridge connecting local and global worlds. This aligns with the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris 2012), which advocates for teaching methods that sustain rather than suppress cultural identities.

English teachers working in multilingual settings like Kasaragod must adopt flexible pedagogical frameworks that acknowledge linguistic diversity as an educational resource. The reflective practice of teachers plays a central role in this transformation. By observing classroom interactions and adapting strategies based on learner response, teachers can create more inclusive and engaging learning environments.

Several pedagogical implications emerge from this study:

- Contextualized Curriculum Design: Syllabi should include texts and themes reflecting local culture and multilingual identity to make learning relevant and relatable.
- Collaborative Learning: Peer learning in mixed-language groups enhances intercultural understanding and communicative

competence.

- Code-Switching as a Pedagogical Tool: Rather than discouraging the use of native languages, controlled code-switching can serve as a bridge to English comprehension.
- Reflective Teaching Practice: Teachers should engage in continuous reflection on how classroom dynamics align with the cultural identities and linguistic strengths of the learners.
- Identity-Inclusive Assessment: Evaluation methods should consider communicative growth and cultural expression, not merely grammatical precision.

Through reflective pedagogy, teachers can mediate between English as a global language and Kannada as a cultural anchor, enabling students to inhabit a multilingual identity confidently. This approach resonates with the call for “context-sensitive pedagogy” that transcends formulaic methods (Kumaravadivelu 74).

Classroom observation reveals that engagement increases when the teacher acknowledges linguistic backgrounds of the students by allowing code-switching during discussions or referencing cultural contexts familiar to them. When students perceive English as an extension rather than a replacement of their identity, participation and motivation improve significantly. This aligns with Kramersch’s argument that language learning must accommodate the “symbolic dimension of experience” (Kramersch 12).

Conclusion

The study underscores that English language learning among Kannada students in Kasaragod is deeply intertwined with issues of identity, culture, and pedagogy. The multicultural context of Govinda Pai Memorial Government College provides both challenges and opportunities for English teachers. Recognizing the multilingual backgrounds of students not as deficits but as assets allows educators to design pedagogical experiences that resonate with the cultural

realities of learners. English language teachers seeking to enhance learner engagement and promote inclusive classrooms can effectively adopt collaborative teaching practices. Collaboration with Kannada language teachers enables English teachers to gain deeper insights into the linguistic backgrounds and mother-tongue-related difficulties of the learners. Such interdisciplinary cooperation helps in identifying sources of learner anxiety, particularly those arising from language interference and comprehension gaps. Moreover, sustained teacher collaboration plays a crucial role in bridging the pedagogical and linguistic gap between the first language and English, thereby fostering confidence, participation, and improved learning outcomes.

In multilingual societies like India, English education must evolve from a colonial legacy to a democratic space for intercultural exchange. The findings of this study advocate for a pedagogy that integrates linguistic diversity, nurtures identity, and empowers learners to use English meaningfully within their own sociocultural frameworks. Ultimately, the resonance of multicultural identity in the English classroom at GPMGCM reflects a broader vision of education—one that celebrates plurality, dialogue, and shared learning.

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