



Empowering Literacy Through Language and Culture: The Role of Teacher Development in Multilingual Classrooms of Chhattisgarh

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Abstract:

This research explores the contribution of teachers' professional development in enhancing basic language literacy, particularly in the context of linguistically diverse primary classrooms in the Durg district of Chhattisgarh. The study is grounded in classroom observations and interactions in government primary schools where Chhattisgarhi—a regional language—is the mother tongue for most students, while Hindi functions as the medium of instruction and the school language.

In such multilingual settings, the process of teaching basic literacy is deeply intertwined with the language and culture of the learners. The research highlights how teachers who skillfully integrate local stories, folk songs, traditional idioms, and cultural references into their classroom practices significantly enhance students' reading comprehension, vocabulary development, oral expression, and overall confidence in using the second language (Hindi). These culturally grounded teaching practices promote meaningful engagement, reduce language anxiety, and serve as an effective bridge between the home and school environments.

The study finds that mother tongue-based instruction not only improves learning outcomes in foundational literacy but also plays a crucial role in affirming students' cultural identity and social inclusion. In this process, the professional development of teachers emerges as a critical factor. Teachers require specialized training, contextual resources, and academic support to effectively manage and respond to the complexities of multilingual classrooms.

This research underscores the urgent need to reimagine teacher training frameworks and curriculum design by embedding local language, literature, and cultural knowledge within foundational literacy pedagogy. Aligning with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the National Curriculum Framework for Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022, the paper argues for a comprehensive and context-sensitive approach to professional development, one that empowers teachers to be both literacy facilitators and cultural mediators.

Keywords:

Foundational literacy, multilingual education, mother tongue-based instruction, culturally responsive pedagogy, Chhattisgarhi language, oral traditions in teaching, teacher professional development, local language integration, NEP 2020, NCF-FS 2022.

1. Introduction

India's linguistic diversity is not just a statistical reality—it is a living reflection of the country's rich cultural heritage. With over 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of dialects spoken across its states (Census of India, 2011), this diversity offers both opportunities and challenges for the education system. In multilingual contexts like Durg district of Chhattisgarh, this diversity is especially pronounced. While the official medium of instruction in schools is Hindi, a significant proportion of children entering primary grades speak Chhattisgarhi or various tribal languages as their home language. This disconnect between the language of the home and the language of the school often leads to cognitive overload, reduced engagement, and limited comprehension, especially in early language learning (Mohanty, 2009; NCERT, 2011).

Studies in multilingual education have consistently shown that when children begin their literacy journey in a language they understand and use daily, their conceptual understanding, confidence, and engagement increase significantly (UNESCO, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh, 2012). In the classrooms observed in Durg district, it was evident that teachers who integrated local stories, folk songs, and oral narratives in Chhattisgarhi or tribal dialects created a more meaningful learning environment. Children not only recognized familiar words but were also able to understand and apply them in contextually relevant ways, thereby enhancing both comprehension and language fluency.

The role of the teacher in such settings becomes critical. Teachers are not just facilitators of textbook content—they act as cultural mediators, language bridges, and community connectors. When teachers recognize and value the home language, lived experiences, and social context of their students, they build stronger foundations for literacy. This aligns with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which advocates for the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction, especially in the foundational years (NEP 2020, p. 13). It also aligns with the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS) 2022, which highlights the importance of contextualized pedagogy, inclusive classroom practices, and language-rich environments that are sensitive to children's linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Our field-based observations and teacher interviews in Durg further revealed that where teachers used Chhattisgarhi as a transitional language or scaffolding tool, children were more confident in their speaking, listening, and early reading behaviors. Classrooms that embraced local language and cultural elements saw greater levels of student participation, story engagement, and meaning-making. However, this positive shift does not automatically occur just by changing the language of instruction. It requires teacher preparation, ongoing academic support, and pedagogical confidence.

The professional development of teachers, therefore, is not an optional intervention but a critical enabler for the success of multilingual and inclusive education. Teachers must be trained to understand the pedagogical value of home languages, use them effectively in classroom transactions, and design learning activities that

reflect local culture, folklore, and oral traditions. They also need access to bilingual and multilingual teaching resources, regular peer-learning opportunities, and ongoing mentoring to refine their practice (Mohanty, 2010; National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium, 2013).

This research emphasizes that if we truly aspire for every child to be able to read with meaning, express with confidence, and engage with joy, we must place teachers at the center of the transformation. A teacher's role goes beyond transmitting literacy skills—it involves affirming children's identities, fostering self-esteem, and preserving cultural knowledge. In this lies the most powerful and beautiful form of education: one that is rooted in the child's language, culture, and community, and one that empowers both learners and teachers alike.

2. Review of Literature

A robust body of educational research and policy literature highlights the pedagogical and socio-cultural importance of mother tongue-based teaching, particularly in early grade literacy instruction. Teaching children in their home language not only facilitates conceptual clarity and language acquisition but also plays a pivotal role in strengthening their self-esteem, identity, and cultural continuity (Cummins, 2000; NCERT, 2005; Agnihotri, 2008).

According to Cummins (2000), literacy development in the mother tongue forms a strong cognitive foundation for learning additional languages, supporting what he terms as the interdependence hypothesis. Children who begin their learning journey in a familiar linguistic environment are better able to transfer these skills when learning a second or third language. This theoretical insight is echoed in the Indian context by the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), 2005, which emphasizes the use of the child's home language as the medium of instruction in early years. It views language as a means of both learning and constructing identity (NCERT, 2005).

Agnihotri (2008) also argues for linguistic diversity as a resource, not a problem. He points out that India's multilingualism, if respected and integrated into classroom pedagogy, can lead to more inclusive and effective education. Jayaram (2008) and Mishra (2024) similarly underscore the pedagogical potential of integrating local oral traditions, folk stories, songs, and proverbs into language instruction, especially in rural and tribal areas.

Field studies have shown that in many government schools, especially in tribal regions, children's home languages are often ignored or viewed as 'incorrect' or 'non-standard', leading to a disconnect between home and school environments (Menon, 2017; Jhingran, 2005). This practice alienates learners from their cultural roots and reduces emotional engagement, often resulting in low literacy achievement and high dropout rates. Jhingran's extensive research (2005, 2012) illustrates the cognitive burden faced by non-Hindi speaking tribal children when they are suddenly introduced to formal learning in Hindi without scaffolding through their own language.

Moreover, Mishra (2024) and Berntsen (2017) have emphasized that teaching tribal children in their mother tongue is not merely an effective pedagogy, but a powerful strategy for inclusion, equity, and cultural preservation. They argue that literacy is not just a set of skills but a deeply social and cultural process, where language functions as a carrier of meaning, tradition, and identity.

The National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage (NCF-FS, 2022) strongly reinforces this approach. It states:

“Children must first be taught to read and write in a language they understand and speak fluently. This lays the cognitive and emotional foundation for further learning” (NCF-FS, 2022, p. 74).

The document goes further to advocate for localized, child-centered pedagogy, rooted in the cultural and linguistic realities of learners, especially in tribal and multilingual areas.

Institutional collaborations like that of the Language and Learning Foundation (LLF) and SCERT Chhattisgarh have demonstrated through pilot programs that recognizing children’s languages in the classroom, developing bilingual teaching materials, and training teachers in contextualized literacy pedagogy can result in significant improvements in foundational reading and writing skills (LLF, 2018; SCERT, 2021). Their joint initiatives in districts like Durg have focused on building teacher capacity to understand the interrelationship between language, culture, and pedagogy, and adapt teaching strategies accordingly.

Despite this growing consensus, a major challenge remains: teachers’ readiness and resource availability. As this study highlights, the successful implementation of mother tongue-based education depends heavily on the attitudes, training, and support systems available to teachers. They must be equipped not only with content knowledge, but also with multilingual pedagogical skills, cultural sensitivity, and contextual awareness—areas that are often under-addressed in pre-service and in-service training programs (Mohanty, 2009; Menon et al., 2017).

Thus, the literature reviewed here strongly supports the central argument of this research: that the professional development of teachers is indispensable for advancing multilingual education and foundational literacy, particularly in tribal, rural, and culturally diverse regions like Chhattisgarh. Without teacher empowerment, policy intentions cannot be translated into effective classroom practices.

3. Research Design

This study is based on qualitative methodology, which aims to understand the use of local languages and teachers' attitudes, strategies and challenges in six government primary schools of Durg district of Chhattisgarh. Chhattisgarhi is the most used language in these districts. Language is the first language of the students, while Hindi language is the language of the medium of instruction in school at the primary education level. The researcher observed 30 classroom sessions in 6 schools in the academic sessions 2022-23 and 2023-24, observing how much the teachers use the mother tongue, how they use poems and stories, how the children participate, and whether they use the home language for oral language development. Field notes and videos of all activities were made. Along with this, the researcher interviewed 12 primary teachers, 4 teacher trainers and 4 cluster coordinators (CACs). The objective was to understand the teachers' motivation behind the use of local language, the strategies adopted, challenges, availability of resources and training.

4. Key Findings and Discussion

This study is based on classroom observations and teacher interviews conducted in six government primary schools located in rural areas of Durg district, Chhattisgarh. The schools were selected to capture the linguistic diversity and cultural richness of the region, where Chhattisgarhi is the dominant home language among

children. The findings reveal multiple dimensions of how local language and culture are used—and sometimes underutilized—in foundational literacy instruction. The following themes emerged from the data:

4.1 Diversity of Use of Local Language in Classroom Teaching : In every observed school, teachers used Chhattisgarhi and other local dialects to communicate with students, simplify instructions, and build classroom rapport. However, this use was mostly informal and spontaneous, not embedded as a structured pedagogical approach. During storytelling or poetry recitation, teachers would often switch to Chhattisgarhi to ensure better engagement. For instance, in one classroom, a teacher introduced letter recognition through the local poem ‘Mor gaadi le milage re’. As the poem echoed local rhythm and vocabulary, children responded with enthusiasm, reciting the lines in chorus, clapping, and associating the sounds with familiar words. This approach created a vibrant and participatory learning environment where even the shyest children joined in. Such examples reflect what Agnihotri (2008) calls the natural multilingualism of Indian classrooms, where fluid language use supports engagement. However, the lack of formal planning in leveraging local language indicates a missed opportunity to integrate multilingual pedagogy systematically.

4.2 Role of Vernacular Literature and Oral Traditions: Interviews with teachers revealed that children were more attentive and expressive when exposed to local folktales, proverbs, riddles, and songs. One teacher narrated the local story of “*Siyari Bai*”, a folk character known to children, to teach sentence formation. Children responded by relating the story to their lived experiences, asking questions, and retelling parts of it in their own words. Another teacher used local riddles during a vocabulary-building session, encouraging children to guess and explain meanings.

These practices not only enhanced vocabulary but also fostered higher-order thinking such as inference and prediction. As Jayaram (2008) and Mishra (2024) have noted, the use of oral literature enables deeper cognitive engagement and builds on cultural familiarity.

4.3 Need for Teacher Training and Professional Development: While many teachers recognized the value of using home language and culture in their teaching, they also expressed lack of training and confidence in doing so. Most had never received formal instruction on integrating multilingual or culturally responsive pedagogy into their lesson plans. One teacher mentioned, “We know children enjoy local stories, but we don’t know how to connect them with the curriculum objectives.”

This finding aligns with Menon et al. (2017) and Mohanty (2009), who argue that the gap between teacher beliefs and classroom practice is often due to inadequate training. NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022 advocate for including multilingual education and context-based pedagogy in professional development frameworks. However, operationalizing this vision requires structured training modules, academic mentoring, and supportive supervision.

4.4 Improving Student Participation and Self-Expression: In classrooms where teachers actively used local languages and narratives, children’s participation was notably higher. They not only responded to questions but also initiated stories, extended narratives, and related classroom content to home experiences. For example, after a storytelling session, one child narrated how a similar event had happened in her village, sparking a lively discussion.

This aligns with Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism, where learning is a dialogic and contextual process. The mother tongue, in such cases, became a tool for both communication and cognition. It provided students with the confidence to express their thoughts and take ownership of their learning.

4.5 Need for Improvement in Curriculum and Content: Teachers appreciated the inclusion of a few Chhattisgarhi words in state textbooks but felt that the content still leaned heavily on formal Hindi. Many suggested that workbooks, language textbooks, and teacher guides should include more localised materials, such as regional games, stories, poems, and daily-life examples.

One teacher shared, "If our teacher guides included Chhattisgarhi stories with activities, we would feel more confident and connected while teaching." This resonates with the findings of SCERT Chhattisgarh (2021) and LLF (2018), which advocate for contextualised materials development to support multilingual classrooms.

These findings reinforce the idea that multilingual and culturally responsive pedagogy significantly enhances foundational literacy outcomes. However, to scale these practices, three essential conditions must be met:

1. Continuous professional development for teachers focused on integrating language and culture.
2. Development of bilingual and locally contextualised teaching materials.
3. Curricular flexibility that allows space for local adaptations and creativity.

When children see their language and culture reflected in their learning environment, they experience affirmation of identity. As this study shows, such affirmation translates into increased motivation, engagement, and learning gains. Ultimately, it is not just about what is taught but how and in whose language it is taught—a message central to NEP 2020 and echoed by every effective classroom observed in this study.

5. Policy-Level Recommendations

The findings of this study clearly indicate that there is a need to use children's home languages as a resource in teaching in multilingual areas. This is not just a means of enhancing literacy through language but also a powerful pedagogical intervention towards maintaining students' identity, confidence and cultural pride. In this background, the following recommendations are made:

1. **Emphasis on making home language the primary medium of instruction :**

Mother tongue or local language of the children should be formally made the medium of instruction from Class 1 to 3 as per the provisions given in the education policy and curriculum documents, especially in those areas where Hindi is the second language.

2. **Development and inclusion of local language content :**

State Textbook Boards and SCERTs should develop reading materials and workbooks incorporating stories, poems, games and folk literature related to local communities.

3. **Inclusion of local languages and activities in Teacher's Guide (TG) :**

All teacher guides should include bilingual teaching methods, use of local literature, and strategies for incorporating home language into the classroom.

4. **Making multilingual teacher training compulsory :**

"Mother tongue based multilingual teaching" should be made a compulsory subject in state level training programmes. Teachers should be taught how to use children's home language in the classroom and develop literacy in it.

5. Enhancing society and community participation :

Local community elders , folk artists and parents should be involved in school literacy activities so that children get an opportunity to learn about their cultural heritage.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that incorporating children's home language—particularly Chhattisgarhi—in literacy teaching in Durg district of Chhattisgarh not only enhances reading and writing skills but also strengthens children's confidence and cultural connections. When teachers teach folktales , poems, and stories in the local language , the classroom becomes more inclusive and effective. The study also shows that teachers need special training , resources, and strategies for teaching in such multilingual classrooms. As the National Education Policy 2020 and NCF-FS 2022 prioritize mother tongue-based teaching , the need of the hour is to compulsorily include local language and culture in teacher training and curriculum. This will not only improve literacy outcomes but will also ensure preservation of cultural identity.

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