



Reclaiming Indian Knowledge Systems in English Language Teaching: An Inclusive Pedagogical Approach for Rural and Tribal Learners

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Abstract

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) constitute a comprehensive, holistic, and culturally embedded body of indigenous wisdom that has evolved in the Indian subcontinent through centuries of lived experience, oral traditions, philosophical inquiry, and community-based practices. These systems emphasize contextual learning, ethical consciousness, collective responsibility, and the inseparable relationship between language, culture, and society. Despite their richness, contemporary English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indian higher education largely follows Western pedagogical models that privilege standardized curricula, monolingual practices, and urban-centric cultural contexts. Such approaches often marginalize indigenous knowledge traditions and alienate rural and tribal learners, particularly first-generation college students who come from linguistically diverse and culturally rich backgrounds.

This research paper examines how the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into English language teaching can create culturally responsive, inclusive, and empowering learning environments for rural and tribal students. Adopting a qualitative and experiential research methodology, the study is grounded in sustained classroom practices, reflective teaching journals, observations, and student interactions in a rural college in Maharashtra, where undergraduate Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students from tribal communities form the primary learner group. The paper explores how folk narratives, oral storytelling traditions, community knowledge, indigenous ethical values, experiential learning, and bilingual pedagogy (English–Marathi) can be systematically incorporated into English classrooms.

The study argues that an IKS-based pedagogical framework enhances learner engagement, reduces language anxiety, and strengthens students' cultural identity while simultaneously facilitating English language acquisition. Rather than positioning English as a replacement for indigenous knowledge, the paper advocates a dialogic approach in which English becomes a medium for articulating local knowledge, lived realities, and social concerns. Reclaiming Indian Knowledge Systems within English language teaching is therefore presented as both a pedagogical necessity and an ethical imperative for achieving educational equity, epistemic justice, and cultural sustainability in Indian higher education.

Keywords

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), English Language Teaching, Rural and Tribal Education, Indigenous Pedagogy, Bilingual Education, Cultural Context, NEP 2020

1. Introduction

Knowledge transmission in the Indian civilizational context has historically been rooted in lived experience, dialogue, observation, and community participation. Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) represent an integrated epistemological framework encompassing language, literature, philosophy, ethics, ecology, medicine, governance, and social organization. Unlike compartmentalized modern education systems, traditional Indian pedagogy viewed knowledge as holistic and interconnected, where language functioned not merely as a tool of communication but as a carrier of culture, values, and collective memory. Learning occurred through oral traditions such as storytelling, reflective dialogue (*samvada*), debates (*shastrartha*), apprenticeship, and experiential engagement within the community.

Language in Indian knowledge traditions was never isolated from social life. Proverbs, folk songs, myths, and oral narratives served as repositories of collective wisdom, moral instruction, and social norms. Knowledge was transmitted intergenerationally, allowing learners to internalize ideas through observation, imitation, and participation rather than rote memorization. This approach fostered deep cognitive engagement and a strong sense of cultural belonging among learners.

The introduction of colonial education in India marked a decisive rupture in these indigenous



modes of knowledge transmission. Western epistemologies were institutionalized, and English was positioned as the dominant language of administration, higher education, and intellectual authority. While English facilitated access to global knowledge systems, modern science, and international mobility, its dominance also resulted in the systematic marginalization of Indian languages and epistemologies. Indigenous ways of knowing were often dismissed as inferior, unscientific, or outdated, leading to a gradual erosion of cultural confidence among colonized populations.

In postcolonial India, English continues to occupy a paradoxical position. On the one hand, it functions as a language of opportunity, enabling access to higher education, professional advancement, and global communication. On the other hand, it remains a source of exclusion, anxiety, and alienation for students from rural and tribal backgrounds. These learners often come from schooling environments characterized by limited English exposure, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, and an overemphasis on examination-oriented learning. Their everyday linguistic practices are rooted in regional or tribal languages, which remain largely invisible in formal English classrooms.

Rural and tribal students enter higher education with rich cultural capital shaped by folk traditions, oral histories, ecological knowledge, community practices, and indigenous ethical frameworks. However, English language teaching at the tertiary level frequently relies on Western literary texts, urban experiences, and monolingual pedagogical practices that fail to recognize or utilize this cultural wealth. As a result, students experience fear of making mistakes, low self-esteem, and reluctance to participate in classroom interactions. Their silence is often misinterpreted as lack of ability, whereas it is more accurately a reflection of linguistic insecurity and cultural dislocation.

The situation becomes more complex for students enrolled in professional courses such as Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), where English is not merely an academic subject but a functional skill required for documentation, report writing, fieldwork, and professional communication. Social work education emphasizes engagement with marginalized communities, ethical responsibility, and social justice. Teaching English in such a context demands a pedagogy that connects language learning with lived realities, social concerns, and indigenous value systems. Conventional ELT models that prioritize grammatical accuracy over meaningful communication often fail to meet these needs.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a significant paradigm shift by explicitly advocating the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems into curricula across disciplines. The policy emphasizes multilingualism, experiential learning, cultural rootedness, and the validation of indigenous knowledge traditions within formal education. NEP 2020 challenges educators to move beyond content transmission and adopt learner-centered approaches that respect linguistic diversity and cultural plurality. This policy framework provides a crucial opportunity to reimagine English language teaching, particularly in rural and tribal contexts.

Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems into English language teaching does not imply rejecting English or limiting learners' global opportunities. Instead, it involves contextualizing English within familiar cognitive and cultural frameworks, enabling learners to approach the language with confidence rather than fear. When students are encouraged to draw upon their indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and community experiences, English learning becomes meaningful and relevant. Such an approach lowers affective barriers, enhances participation, and fosters a sense of ownership over the language.

This paper emerges from the reflective classroom practice of an Assistant Professor of English teaching undergraduate BSW students in a rural and tribal college in Maharashtra. It seeks to examine how English language teaching can be transformed through the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems, bilingual pedagogy, and experiential learning strategies. By situating English within indigenous epistemologies, the study argues for a pedagogy that is inclusive, empowering, and socially responsive.

2. Review of Literature

Scholarly engagement with Indian Knowledge Systems has gained momentum in recent years, particularly in response to policy initiatives such as NEP 2020. Researchers argue that IKS offers alternative epistemological frameworks that prioritize context, ethics, sustainability, and collective

well-being. Sharma emphasizes that education rooted in Indian Knowledge Systems fosters holistic development by integrating intellectual, moral, and cultural dimensions of learning, thereby countering the fragmentary nature of modern education.

Mohanty's work on multilingual education highlights the cognitive and emotional consequences of excluding tribal languages and indigenous knowledge from formal schooling. According to Mohanty, when learners' mother tongues and cultural knowledge are ignored, education becomes alienating, leading to linguistic insecurity, identity erosion, and diminished academic performance. These insights are particularly relevant to English language teaching in rural and tribal contexts, where students often experience a disconnect between home knowledge and school knowledge.

In the field of second language acquisition, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis underscores the role of emotional factors such as anxiety, fear, and motivation in language learning. Krashen argues that high affective filters prevent linguistic input from being internalized, a phenomenon commonly observed among first-generation English learners. This theoretical framework helps explain why rural and tribal students, despite exposure to English instruction, often struggle to develop communicative competence.

García and Wei's theory of translanguaging challenges monolingual ideologies by advocating pedagogical practices that allow learners to draw upon their entire linguistic repertoire. Translanguaging recognizes indigenous languages as cognitive resources rather than obstacles, thereby affirming learners' identities and enhancing comprehension. Cummins' interdependence hypothesis further supports this view by suggesting that strong foundations in the first language facilitate second language development.

Policy documents published by NITI Aayog and the Ministry of Education emphasize the need to integrate Indian Knowledge Systems into higher education to counter epistemic dominance and promote inclusive growth. However, despite growing theoretical and policy-level support, there remains a lack of practitioner-based research demonstrating how IKS principles can be operationalized within English language classrooms. The present study addresses this gap by offering an experiential, classroom-based perspective rooted in rural and tribal realities.

3. Objectives of the Study

The present study is guided by the following objectives, which are aligned with the broader goals of inclusive education and culturally responsive pedagogy:

1. To examine the pedagogical relevance of Indian Knowledge Systems in English Language Teaching within rural and tribal higher education contexts.
2. To identify the linguistic, cultural, and psychological challenges faced by rural and tribal learners in conventional English classrooms.
3. To analyze the effectiveness of integrating indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, and community-based experiences in enhancing English language learning.
4. To explore the role of bilingual pedagogy (English–Marathi) in reducing language anxiety and promoting learner participation.
5. To propose inclusive, learner-centered ELT strategies rooted in Indian Knowledge Systems that align with the vision of the National Education Policy 2020.

These objectives aim to bridge the gap between theory, policy, and classroom practice by foregrounding the lived experiences of rural and tribal learners.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study adopts a **qualitative, descriptive, and experiential research design**. This approach is suitable for examining pedagogical practices, classroom interactions, and learner responses in natural educational settings. Rather than relying on numerical data, the study emphasizes meaning-making, reflection, and contextual understanding.

4.2 Research Context and Sample

The research was conducted in a rural college located in Maharashtra, catering primarily to students from tribal and economically marginalized backgrounds. The sample comprised undergraduate **Bachelor of Social Work (BSW)** students, many of whom were first-generation learners with limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected over two academic semesters using the following methods:

- **Classroom observations** focusing on student participation, response patterns, and engagement levels
- **Informal group discussions** to understand learners' perceptions of English
- **Reflective teaching journals** maintained by the researcher
- Analysis of student oral narratives, role-plays, and written reflections

4.4 Research Tools

Observation schedules, reflective notes, and activity-based assessments were used as research tools. Ethical considerations such as anonymity and voluntary participation were strictly maintained.

5. Challenges in Teaching English to Rural and Tribal Learners

The study identified multiple interrelated challenges affecting English language learning:

5.1 Cultural Alienation

English textbooks often present urban, Westernized contexts that are unfamiliar to rural and tribal students. This cultural disconnect leads to disengagement and passive learning.

5.2 Language Anxiety and Fear

English is perceived as a language of power and elitism. Fear of making grammatical mistakes inhibits participation and oral communication.

5.3 Marginalization of Indigenous Knowledge

Students' oral traditions, folk narratives, and community wisdom are rarely acknowledged, resulting in a loss of cultural confidence.

5.4 Overemphasis on Rote Learning

Conventional pedagogy prioritizes memorization over communication, limiting functional language use.

5.5 Limited Exposure and Practice

Students have minimal opportunities to use English outside the classroom, affecting fluency development.

These challenges underscore the urgent need for culturally grounded and inclusive pedagogical approaches.

6. Integrating Indian Knowledge Systems in English Language Teaching

6.1 Folk Narratives and Oral Traditions

Local folk tales, tribal legends, and moral stories were used as reading and speaking materials. Students narrated stories in simple English, promoting confidence and fluency.

6.2 Bilingual Pedagogy (English–Marathi)

Key concepts were explained bilingually, allowing students to relate English expressions to indigenous proverbs and cultural references.

6.3 Community-Based Learning

Students described village life, festivals, agricultural practices, and social rituals in English, transforming lived experiences into linguistic resources.

6.4 Value-Based Language Learning

IKS values such as *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, *Seva*, and *Ahimsa* were integrated into discussions, comprehension passages, and writing tasks.

6.5 Experiential and Activity-Based Learning

Storytelling circles, role plays, and reflective writing encouraged collaborative learning and reduced performance anxiety.

7. Findings and Discussion

The findings indicate that IKS-based pedagogy significantly enhanced learner engagement and confidence. Students displayed increased willingness to speak, improved vocabulary usage, and better comprehension skills. Cultural familiarity lowered affective filters, enabling effective language acquisition.

The integration of indigenous knowledge validated students' identities, transforming the



English classroom into a space of cultural affirmation. These findings align with Krashen's and García & Wei's theoretical frameworks and reinforce the relevance of NEP 2020's pedagogical vision.

8. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that reclaiming Indian Knowledge Systems in English Language Teaching offers a transformative pedagogical pathway for rural and tribal learners. By contextualizing English within indigenous epistemologies, educators can create inclusive learning environments that promote linguistic competence without cultural erasure.

Integrating IKS does not diminish the global relevance of English; rather, it humanizes the language and makes it accessible. The paper advocates curriculum reform, teacher training, and institutional support to systematically embed Indian Knowledge Systems in English education.

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