



Research Paper

Challenges and opportunities of implementing multilingual education in schools: An educational perspective with special reference to Udalguri district, Assam

Dr. Himalinee Bezbaruah

Senior Lecturer, DIET Udalguri, Assam, India

Abstract

Multilingual education has emerged as an important approach to promoting inclusive and equitable quality education in linguistically diverse societies. In India, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises the use of mother tongue and multilingualism in school education. Udalguri District of Assam is characterised by linguistic diversity, where languages such as Bodo, Rabha, Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, Santhali, Sadri, Hindi, Bhojpuri, and English are commonly used. This study explores the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing multilingual education in schools of Udalguri District. The main objectives of the study are 1. To identify the challenges and opportunities faced by the teachers in teaching multilingual students. 2. To explore the opportunities and benefits of multilingual education in the teaching-learning process in a multilingual classroom. And 3. To explore the strategies used by the teachers in teaching a multilingual classroom. The paper highlights a few challenges such as a shortage of multilingual teachers, lack of teaching-learning materials, difficulty in understanding concepts, and language barriers, while also discussing opportunities such as improved learning outcomes, cultural preservation, and enhanced cognitive development. The study concludes that effective implementation of multilingual education requires adequate teacher training, resource development, and supportive educational policies.

Keywords: Multilingual Education, Language Diversity, School Education, Challenges, Opportunities, learning outcomes, cultural awareness, etc.

Received 06 June., 2026; Revised 15 June, 2026; Accepted 17 June., 2026 © The author(s) 2026.
Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. Introduction

India is a multilingual and multicultural nation. In today's rapidly changing and globalised society, multilingualism is widely recognised as both common and valuable. Factors such as education, travel, exposure to the arts, and living in multilingual communities contribute to an individual's multilingual abilities. India's linguistic diversity offers numerous opportunities while also posing significant challenges. In addition to having a large number of languages, India is unique in the number and diversity of language families that are represented in its languages (NCF 2005). 1,652 languages from five distinct language families-Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burmese, and Andamanese-are spoken throughout the nation, according to the 1971 census (GOI, 1971). Language is a tool children use to comprehend and connect the world to their personal experiences (Bashir & Jan, 2023). Language proficiency is an important aspect of any democratic society. Language allows individuals to actively engage in and contribute to all spheres, i.e., the political, social, economic, and cultural.

In the global world, the ability to speak different languages is important. It is an important foundation that connects diverse societies, fosters understanding among individuals, and promotes global harmony. It encourages values such as empathy and respect for diversity, promoting inclusivity and harmonious relations. Multilingualism occurs when people migrate from one place to another and come into contact with people of diverse languages and cultures. India is rich in different cultures and language diversity. There's a balance between the languages and the individual speaker. Multilingual education creates a bridge between societies, home, and school.

NEP 2020 emphasises multilingual education dynamically. The National Educational Policy 2020 also strongly promotes multilingualism in education. It advocates using the mother tongue in early learning and encourages learning multiple languages. The policy has highlighted the importance of understanding various languages, as it enhances cognitive development, problem-solving skills, and cultural understanding. NEP 2020 prefers the three-language formula as a medium of instruction. It focuses on the advantages of the mother tongue or home languages. It also emphasises training teachers to foster multilingualism as a resource in the classroom. It is often said in policy that the power of language lies in multilingualism. In section 4.11, home language, local language or mother tongue, up to class 8. Teachers are instructed to use bilingual teaching and materials. In section 4.12, the cognitive benefits for students and the impact of multilingualism are highlighted. All languages are taught in an enjoyable way.

“The linguistic diversity of India poses complex challenges but also a range of opportunities. India is unique not only in that a large number of languages are spoken here, but also in the variety of language families that are represented in those languages” (NCF 2005), and also concentrates on the advancement of multilingual education in India. In school education, multilingual education aims to develop a command of multiple languages to promote linguistic diversity. Therefore, this study seeks to contribute to future generations by highlighting multilingualism as a valuable resource and examining its educational and societal impacts

II. Objectives

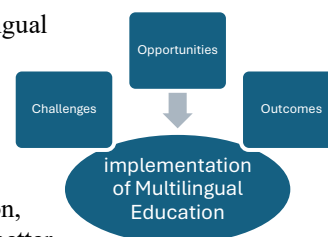
1. To identify the challenges and opportunities faced by the teachers in teaching multilingual students.
2. To explore the opportunities and benefits of multilingual education in the teaching-learning process in a multilingual classroom.
3. To explore the strategies used by the teachers in teaching a multilingual classroom.

III. Research Questions

1. What challenges are faced in implementing multilingual education?
2. What opportunities does multilingual education provide for students and teachers?
3. What strategies can improve the implementation of multilingual education in schools?

Conceptual framework:

The conceptual framework is based on the implementation of multilingual education in schools and its associated challenges and opportunities. The central concept is multilingual education in the linguistically diverse Udalguri district, Assam. The study examines various challenges, such as language barriers, limited teaching-learning resources, difficulty in understanding concepts, shortage of multilingual teachers, and pedagogical challenges, etc. it explores the opportunities offered by multilingual education, including improved learning outcomes, enhanced cognitive development, better communication skills, social inclusion, cultural awareness, and holistic development of the students, etc. Thus, the framework highlights the successful implementation of multilingual education and its contribution to quality education in the linguistically diverse district.



Multilingualism: A multilingual person is someone who can speak multiple languages. Many people have the opportunity to read, write, and speak two or more languages. Recent statistics show that approximately 43% of people worldwide are bilingual, and 17% are multilingual. Being multilingual does not imply being fluent in every language. When people move from one place to another, they become multilingual. Every language and its speakers deserve equal importance and opportunities in society. Multilingualism is the capacity of societies, groups, institutions, and individuals to gain proficiency, often in specific areas, using one or more languages used in everyday life. (Aronin and Britta, 2009). According to Biseth (2009), multilingualism is “the usage of two or more languages, referring to the individuals or societies.” The term multilingualism is derived from two Latin words, “multi”, which means many, and “lingua,” which means language. Multilingualism is a teaching resource for language teachers to enhance learning and collaboration. Multilingualism, as a teaching tool, was recognised by the Indian Constitution. It fosters cross-cultural understanding, strengthens cognitive abilities, and opens doors to diverse opportunities. The ability of communities, organisations, and individuals to regularly interact with multiple languages in their daily lives is known as multilingualism (Srivastava, 2024). Multilingualism also encompasses bilingualism, which refers to fluency in two different languages, encompassing the ability to read and write in each. People who migrate to a new country for various reasons often learn the local language, becoming multilingual as they use different languages in new settings. As children grow, they tend to acquire additional languages. The growing importance of multilingualism today can be attributed to factors such as

technological advancements, increased cross-border population movement, and globalisation, all of which influence political, social, and educational spheres (Cenoz, March 2013). India is richly multilingual and home to thousands of mother tongues. Only a few of them are officially taught in schools (Figure 1).

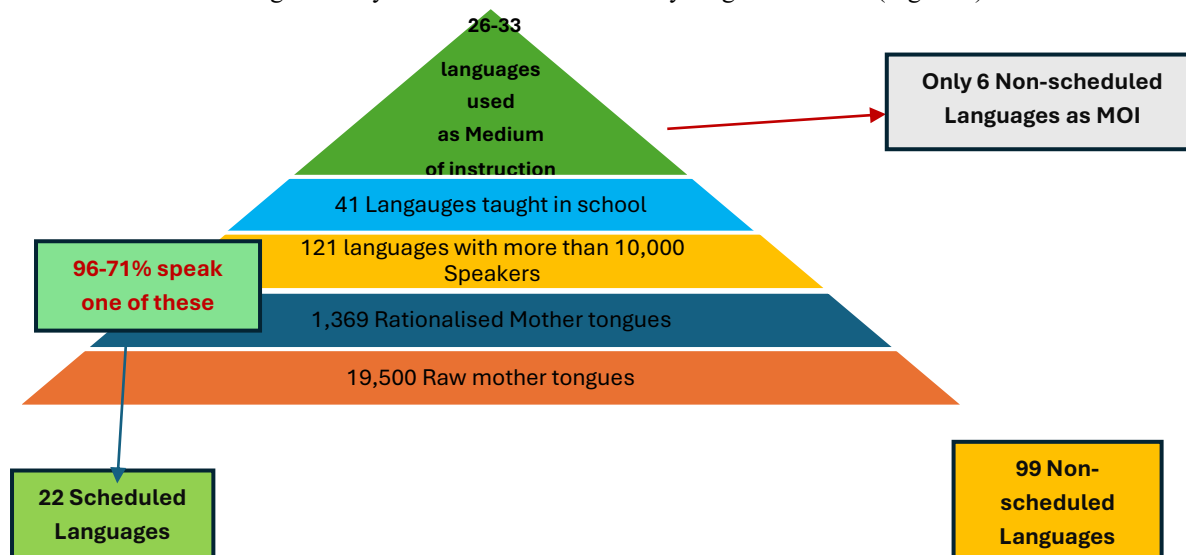


Figure 1: Linguistic landscape of India

IV. Challenges of a multilingual classroom

Multilingual classrooms are considered a resource for schools to enhance students' cognitive and social skills. However, establishing these classrooms presents certain challenges. These challenges include:

Language barriers: In a multilingual classroom, there are some language barriers. Among them is language. Meeting the diverse language barriers is a challenging matter for teachers.

- i. **Resource-based and infrastructure challenges:** Setting up multilingual classrooms is not an easy task. It requires resourceful, trained, and skilled teachers to implement courses using an effective curriculum, textbooks, assessment tools, digital platforms, etc. Many schools in remote areas lack these resources entirely. When learning materials are properly provided, the teaching-learning process can be effective and the classroom environment conducive.
- ii. **Pedagogical challenges:** Incorporating different resources with the existing ones using different new multilingual pedagogies can be a challenge for the teachers. If teachers are not skilled and trained, it will be challenging to teach students using various pedagogies.
- iii. **Teacher training:** Teachers may need additional training to teach in the multilingual classroom using the resources and incorporating the new pedagogies effectively to make the classroom joyful.
- iv. **Creating inclusive materials:** It's a challenge to develop or select the materials accessible and relevant to all the students, regardless of their language background.
- v. **Societal challenge:** Despite the benefits of multilingualism, society can be somewhat biased towards certain languages. It may not emphasise others as much.
- vi. **Curriculum challenge:** Designing an inclusive multilingual curriculum for all students can be challenging. Limited time may hinder the effective practice and learning of multiple languages. Integrating regional languages, mother tongues, and additional languages while maintaining academic standards is a complex and time-consuming process.
- vii. **Anxiety of learners:** Students who struggle with English often become passive listeners. Sometimes they may hesitate to participate in classroom activities. They commonly experience language anxiety affecting their listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills in the second language.
- viii. **Differentiated instruction:** The presence of diverse languages in the classroom can pose challenges for teachers, who must adapt their teaching methods and learning materials to accommodate multiple languages.
- ix. **Assessment:** To design the assessment process, it may be a challenge for teachers because they have to assess the knowledge and skills of the learners.
- x. **Cultural sensitivity:** In the classroom, teachers may have to avoid discrimination in their teaching practices. It may be a challenge for the teachers.

xi. **Teacher’s preparedness.** Many teachers require specialised training in multilingual education to build their capacity. To be effective, teachers need proficiency in multiple languages, which necessitates dedicated and targeted training programs.

Opportunities and Benefits of Multilingual Education:

Multilingual education positively benefits the students. The following are some of the important points:

1. **Academic achievement:** Studies indicate that those who can speak more than one language have good academic performance in the classroom.
2. **Career opportunities:** Speaking multiple languages has a positive impact on students. As language is a means of communication, in today’s global marketplace, knowing multiple languages can provide an individual with an opportunity to choose a better career.
3. **Cognitive development:** Knowing multiple languages can improve one’s cognitive thinking, reasoning, problem-solving skills, creativity, and critical thinking.
4. **Cultural integration:** Integrating cultural education into language learning can enhance students’ understanding of different cultures.
5. **Building language skills:** It can also develop necessary language skills and competencies to participate in different activities related to the curriculum.
6. **Social inclusion:** MLE fosters inclusivity and promote inclusion.
7. **Boost confidence:** Speaking two or more languages can boost confidence and increase self-esteem.
8. **Community involvement:** Engaging communities in the educational process supports school education.
9. **Improve social skills:** Multilingual students develop social skills, improving their ability to lead, manage tasks, and solve problems.

V. Review of related literature

Cummins (1979) stated that students proficient in more than one language can readily develop cognitive skills, such as problem-solving, creativity, and memory retention, which, in turn, influence their academic performance. **Parveen, A. & Dar, A. M, & Jan (2022)** stated in a study on the challenges of multilingual classrooms that classrooms that promote multilingualism help create positive identities connected to their home cultures in addition to boosting academic performance. Students may face various challenges, such as a weak linguistic background, a lengthy syllabus, a lack of trained teachers, monolingual-based assessment, etc. **Muhammad (2022)** studied the linguistic challenges faced by the second generation of Syrian immigrants when communicating with their surrounding population. The study examined the existing strategies employed by the Indian government to address the challenges. The outcomes showed that immigrants in India experienced psychological, economic, linguistic, and cultural barriers. They confronted Indian culture and value system by changing their diet and clothing choices, learning the Indian languages, and celebrating local Indian festivals.

VI. Methodology:

The present study is conducted using the descriptive method.

Research design:

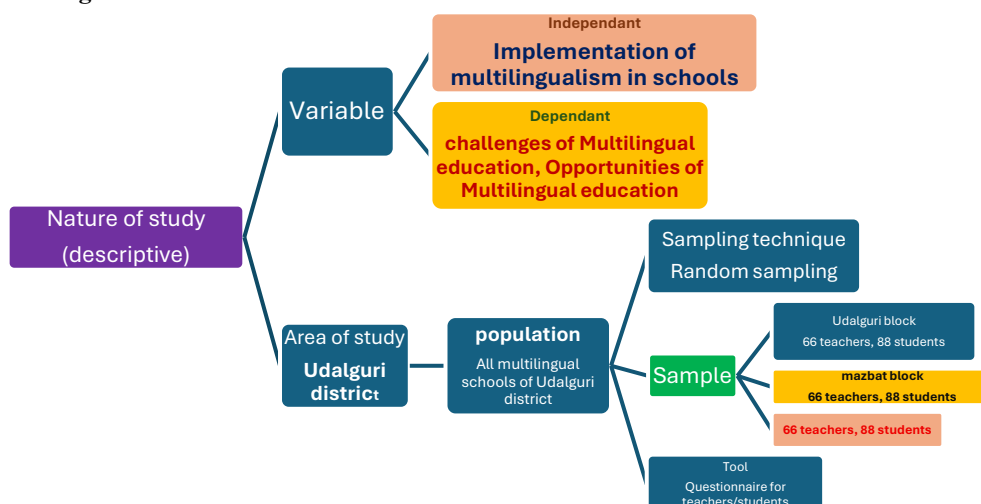


Fig: 2 Research design

Population: The population of the present study comprises all the Government elementary schools and students of the three education blocks of Udalguri district.

Sample and sampling techniques:

Among the three education blocks, 22 schools were randomly selected. An equal number of both lower primary (LP) and upper primary (UP) schools from each block formed the sample. The study's sample size comprises 264 students and 198 teachers, as detailed in Tables 1, 2, and 3. A simple purposive stratified random sampling technique was used to select the sample. It was taken from the multilingual schools of three education blocks of Udalguri district. In the study, the strata are based on teachers and students of the selected schools of the three blocks.

Table No 1: A stratified sample of schools

District	Blocks	Total Schools			
		LP	UP	Total Number of schools	Total teachers from each school
Udalguri	Mazbat	11	11	22	3
Udalguri	Khoirabari	11	11	22	3
Udalguri	Udalguri	11	11	22	3
Total number of schools		66			

Table 2: A stratified sample of teachers

District	Blocks	Teachers			
		LP	UP	Total number of teachers from each school	Total teachers
Udalguri	Mazbat	33	33	3	66
Udalguri	Khoirabari	33	33	3	66
Udalguri	Udalguri	33	33	3	66
Total number of teachers		198			

Table 3: A stratified sample of Students

District	Blocks	Students		Total number of students from each school	
		LP(11)	UP(11)	From each school	Total
Udalguri	Mazbat	44	44	4	88
Udalguri	Khoirabari	44	44	4	88
Udalguri	Udalguri	44	44	4	88
Total number of students		132	132	4	264

N.B.: The number of schools is given in brackets

Tools used for data collection:

The following tools are used for data collection in the present study:

- Questionnaire for teachers (developed by the investigator)
- Questionnaire for students (developed by the investigator)

Statistical technique: Graphical representation of data with percentages.

I. Analysis of data:

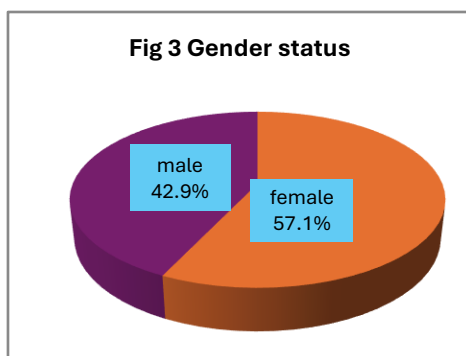
General Information of Teacher Respondents

Area: 198 teacher respondents hail from the three education blocks of Udalguri

Table 4: Number of respondents:

Location	Number of respondents	%
Udalguri block	66	33.33
Khairabari block	66	33.33
Mazbat block	66	33.33
Total	198	100

Gender Table 5: Gender status of respondents



1. Challenges faced by the teachers in teaching multilingual students in the schools

Table 6: Challenges faced by the teachers

Particulars	Options	Number of Respondents	%
Challenges in teaching students	1. Language barriers	27	13.6
	2. Cultural differences	33	16.7
	3. Limited resources	40	20.2
	4. Difficulty in understanding concepts	48	24.2
	1,3	12	6.1
	2,3,4	22	11.1
	1,2,3	16	8.1

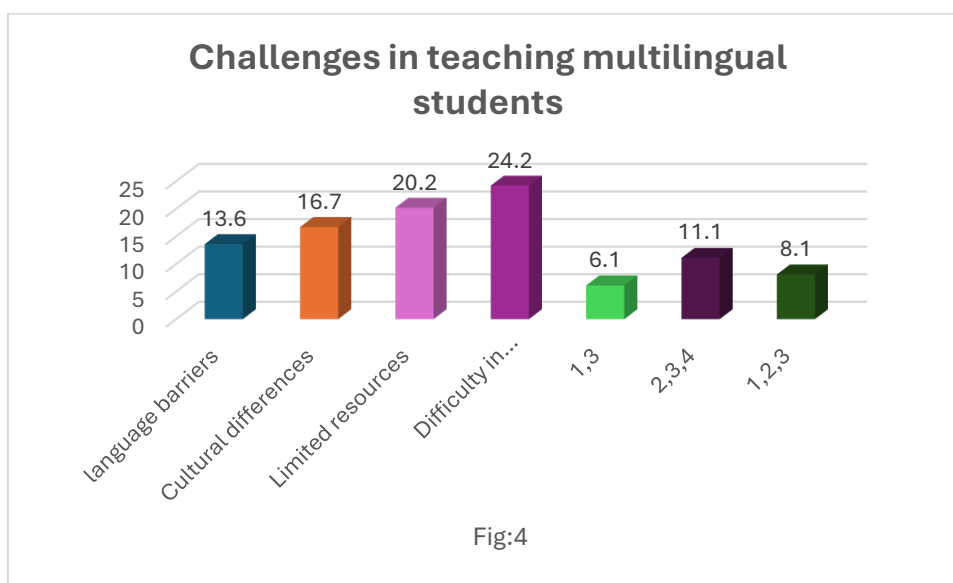


Fig:4

The following information about challenges and opportunities faced by teachers in instructing multilingual students can be gathered from the teachers:

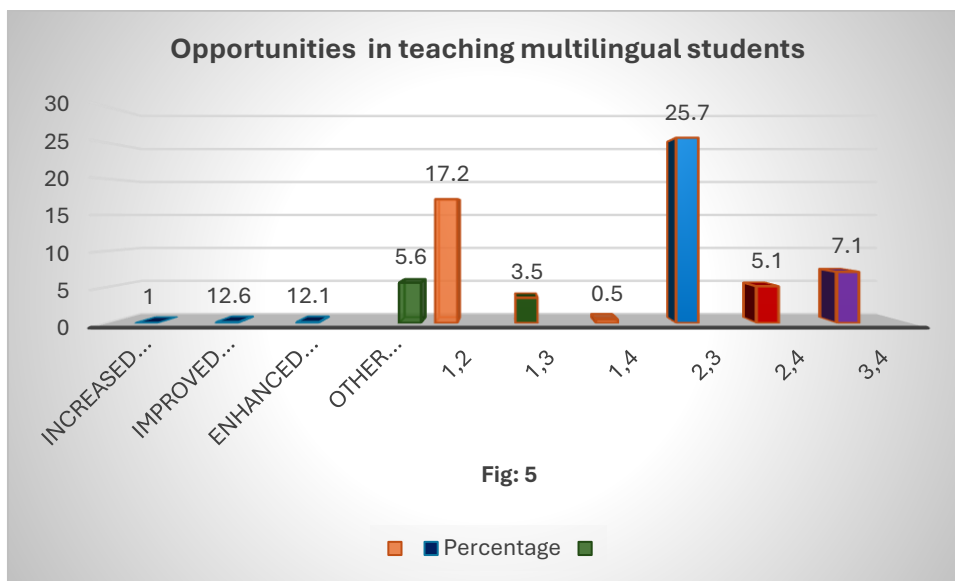
i) With respect to challenges faced by the teachers in teaching multilingual students, it is found that 13.6% need to face a language barrier; 16.7% need to face cultural differences; 20.2% need to face problems with limited resources. 24.2% of students have difficulty in understanding concepts. The remaining 25.3% of the teachers expressed mixed (two or three) responses (vide table 6, fig 4).

2. Opportunities in teaching multilingual students: Table 7

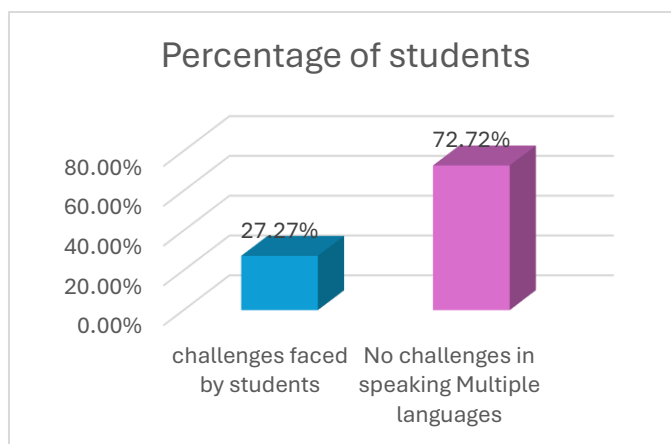
Opportunities	Options	Number	%
Opportunities	1. Increased cultural awareness	2	1.0
	2. Improved language skills	25	12.6
	3. Enhanced creativity and problem-solving	24	12.1
	4. Other opportunities such as inclusive learning environment, preservation of local languages and cultures, peer learning opportunities	11	5.6
	1,2	34	17.2
	1,3	7	3.5
	1,4	1	.5

	2,3	51	25.7
	2,4	10	5.1
	3,4	14	7.1

Regarding opportunities in teaching multilingual students, 1% of teachers reported increased cultural awareness; 12.6% reported improved language skills; and 12.1% reported enhanced creativity and problem-solving. The remaining 74.3% of the teachers expressed mixed responses. (vide table 7, fig 5)



3. Challenges faced by the students in multilingual education



The following information has been found from the data regarding challenges

- From the data, it is found that 27.27% of the students face challenges in speaking multiple languages, and 72.72% of them do not face any challenges in speaking multiple languages. (Fig: 6)
- For better support from the school for multilingual students, students need resource materials and a learning environment. 66.66% of the students needed available multilingual resource materials, and 33.33% of them need a learning environment for a multilingual classroom.

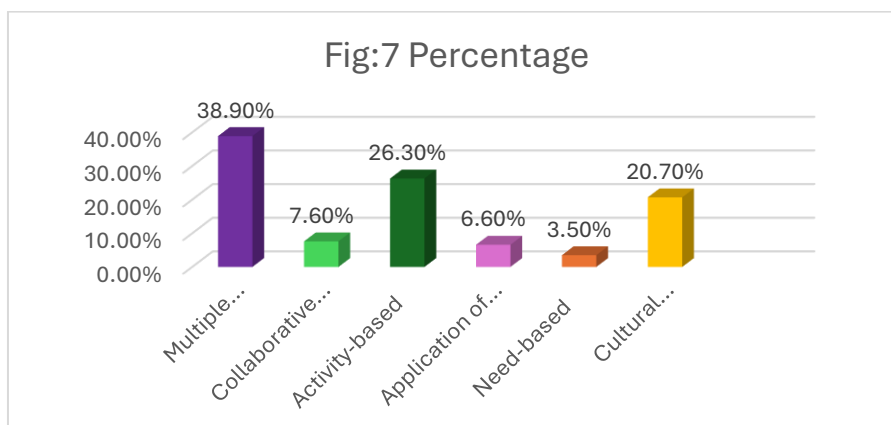
Opportunities for students: Being multilingual, students enjoy the multiple languages and different cultures. All enjoy experiencing new languages, communicating with others, forming emotional connections, learning opportunities, and a sense of belonging.

4. Strategies used by teachers to overcome certain challenges

Table 8: Strategies used by teachers to overcome challenges

Dimensions	Strategies	No. of Teachers
Multilingual Pedagogy	Using native language, using multilingual resources	7
	Try to understand their native language	2
	Promoting linguistic diversity	11
	Using the home language, discussion with the students	1
	Use of new pedagogies	11
	Use of multilingual resources	16
	Use of multilingual resources, observation of festivals	3
	developing multilingual resources	11
	multilingual books	13
	use of the mother tongue	2
Collaborative work	work in a group, peer support, use of resources	1
	use of multilingual charts, visual aids, and group work	3
	use of multilingual resources, observation of festivals	2
	language support, practice, peer work	1
	use of visual aids, peer collaboration, and clear communication	2
	help to learn a new language by working in a group	1
	use new methods, peer talk, discussion, games	3
	use of visual aids, collaboration, and communication	1
	help to learn a new language by working in a group	1
Activity-based	motivational activity, engaging activity	1
	motivating activity, use of pictures of festivals	3
	use role play, quiz, singing, and recitation	1
	use of oral and written tests	1
	use of role play, recitation, and singing	2
	role play using toys	1
	using multilingual words, using toys	1
	use of sports-based and toy-based pedagogy	4
	use of drama, role play	12
	extempore speech, competitions of reading	1
	group discussion, outdoor activities	16
	using group project work	4
	quiz competitions	2
using rhymes, songs, etc.	3	
Application of Material Resources	TLM, new teaching methods, and visual aids	1
	use new materials, resources, and an exchange program	2
	use of audio-visual aids	2
	charts, audio, video	4
	screening movie, drama	3
	screening a movie in a different language	1
Need based	Priorities given to the students' needs, help with talking	1
	Shift of methods, practice work orally	6
Cultural Reflective Pedagogy	Cultural exchange program	6
	Using multilingual words, using a cultural program	2
	Use of storytelling and toy-based pedagogy	13
	Language exchange program	12

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Strategies used by teachers to overcome certain challenges in teaching multilingual students are varied. These challenges are grouped into certain dimensions:

Multilingual Pedagogy – 38.9% of the teachers expressed a variety of means in the form of native language, multilingual resources, use of new pedagogies, and so on (vide table 8, Fig 7).

Collaborative Work – 7.6% of teachers reported participating in group work, multilingual materials, discussions, communication, peer work, collaboration, and similar activities.

Activity-based: 26.3% of teachers expressed using motivating activities, engaging activities, multilingual words, toys, outdoor activities, project work, literary competitions, and similar methods.

Application of Material Resources- 6.6% of the teachers expressed this in the form of new teaching methods, audio-visual aids, movies, drama, etc.

Need-based - 3.5% of teachers expressed willingness to prioritise students' needs, change methods, and adapt practices.

Cultural Reflective Pedagogy - 20.7% of the teachers expressed their interest in cultural exchange programs, storytelling, art-integrated pedagogy, language exchange programs, and similar initiatives.

Additional support is required for the teacher to teach multilingual students:

Table 9:

Dimensions		No. of Teachers
	Additional support	
Adoption of Mother tongue	Teachers should try to learn the students' language	10
	Adopting the home language of the students' aids	9
	TLM: adopt home language	6
	Help in talking, communicating with others	13
	group discussion	3
	pair work	1
	develop communication skills	1
	multilingual dictionary	8
	multilingual resources, TLM, adopt home language	13
	translating different languages	3
	Resources like TLM, audio aids, etc.	1
Twinning Program	school twinning, exchange program, indigenous toys	2
	twinning of schools, exchange program	4
Technological Aid	visual aids and assess language proficiency	4
	pictures, books, video	6
	visual aids, inclusive pictures	1

	gamification in language	8
	screen movie	1
	audio-visual aids	1
Activity oriented	incorporating activities, games	5
	indigenous toys	3
	language exchange program, competitions, recitation	1
	developing multilingual resources	9
	cultural competitions, literary competitions, storytelling competitions	16
	role play in the native language	4
	cultural competitions, traditional dress competitions	2
	language game	4
	pair work, outdoor activities	9
	different tasks as class work	1
	activities in a group	3
	singing rhymes and songs	1
	action in dialogue competitions	1
	drama in a different language	1
	workshop among teachers on different languages	10
	field visit, outdoor project in a mixed group	1
	Integrated pedagogy	using storytelling and art materials
vocabulary chart, word stickers		15

The additional supports which are needed to teach multilingual students are varied. These additional supports are grouped into certain dimensions

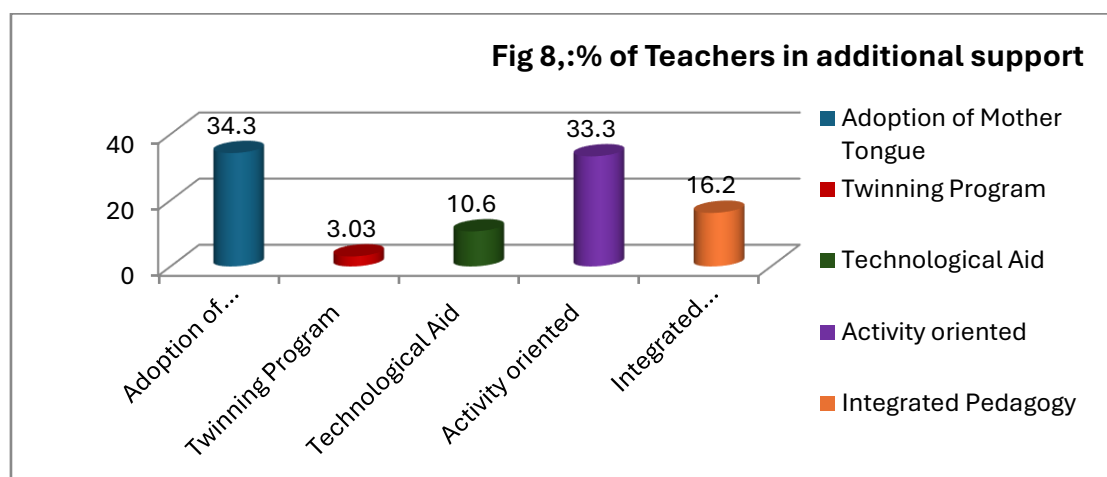
Adoption of Mother Tongue – 34.3% of the teachers expressed the need to learn students' language, including aids, dictionaries, and TLM resources (Table 9).

Twinning Program – 3.03% of the teachers expressed the need for twinning of schools, toys, and the conduct of the exchange program.

Technological Aid - 10.6% of the teachers expressed the need for visual aids, pictures, books, language games, screen movies, audio-visual aids, and similar activities.

Activity-based -33.3% of the teachers expressed the need for games, indigenous toys, conducting literary competitions, conducting role plays, language games, singing, workshops, outdoor projects, field visits, and similar activities.

Integrated Pedagogy - 16.2% of the teachers expressed the need for art materials, a vocabulary chart, and word stickers.



II. Findings of the study:

- With respect to challenges faced by the teachers in teaching multilingual students, it is found that 13.6% need to face a language barrier; 16.7% need to face cultural differences; 20.2% need to face problems with limited resources. 24.2% of students have difficulty in understanding concepts. The remaining 25.3% of the teachers expressed mixed (two or three) responses (vide table 6, fig 2).

- With respect to opportunities observed in teaching multilingual students, it is revealed that 1% of the teachers found increased cultural awareness; 12.6% of them found improved language skills; 12.1% found enhanced creativity and problem-solving. The remaining 74.3% of the teachers expressed mixed responses.

- Regarding making use of culturally responsive teaching practices, it is found that 29.3% of the teachers always make use of them; 51% of them use them often; 19.7% make use of them sometimes only; 38.9% of the teachers expressed a variety of means in the form of native language, multilingual resources, use of new pedagogies, and so on, 7.6% of teachers participate in collaborative work, multilingual materials, discussions, communication, peer work, collaboration, and similar activities, 26.3% of teachers expressed using motivating activities, engaging activities, multilingual words, toys, outdoor activities, project work, literary competitions, and similar methods.

- 6.6% of the teachers expressed interest in the forms of new teaching methods, such as audio-visual aids, movies, drama, etc., 3.5% of teachers expressed willingness to prioritise students' needs, change methods, and adapt practices, 20.7% of the teachers expressed their interest in cultural exchange programs, storytelling, art-integrated pedagogy, language exchange programs, and similar initiatives, 34.3% of the teachers have additional needs for materials, 3.03% of the teachers expressed the need for twinning of schools, toys, and the conduct of the exchange program, 10.6% of the teachers expressed the need for visual aids, pictures, books, language games, screen movies, audio-visual aids, and similar activities, 33.3% of the teachers expressed the need for games, indigenous toys, conducting literary competitions, conducting role plays, language games, singing, workshops, outdoor projects, field visits, and similar activities, 16.2% of the teachers expressed the need for art materials, a vocabulary chart, and word stickers; 70.7% of the teachers expressed a variety of enjoyable experiences and resources; 29.3% of the teachers expressed challenging experiences.

- For better Support of multilingual students at the school, students need resource materials and a learning environment. 66.66% of the students need access to multilingual resource materials, and 33.33% need a multilingual classroom environment.

III. Discussion and conclusion:

The results show that multilingualism is not just a linguistic benefit but also an educational and socio-cultural resource. This will enrich our diverse cultures. 'Multilingualism is not a barrier; it is a bridge connecting minds, cultures, and hearts.' The schools in Udalguri district face several challenges in implementing multilingual education; the potential benefits are substantial. It supports academic achievement, cognitive development, cultural preservation, and social harmony among children. A multilingual student is active and can understand better not only in the classroom but also on the playground and during other activities. It was also noted that multilingual classrooms promote inclusive learning environments. Therefore, multilingual education should be encouraged. The study also reveals challenges and barriers for some learners and cultural barriers for others. The study concludes that effective implementation of multilingual education requires adequate teacher training in new strategies and approaches, resource development and supportive educational policies.

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