

## **Hegemony, Language, and Access in Indian Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

Language is important for speaking, comprehension, and communication, which is essential for learning. Even though English is India's second official language, it dominates all aspects of education today. India has a rich diversity encompassing language, culture, religion, and geographical regions. Political influence, cultural significance, and social status all have an impact on English prestige. Language plays a role in maintaining power dynamics between English-speaking and non-English-speaking communities. Students, particularly non-English speakers, struggle with English in higher education. English dominance in higher education alienates non-English-speaking students from information. In and out of class, dominant language speakers have dominance over other vernaculars. Hindi-medium pupils feel undesired in the group's relational settings despite their equal rational capacity owing to the 'elite' English-speaking group's conscious conduct. Due to these characteristics, Hindi-speaking or other regional medium students stay subservient and excluded from "space." It also inhibits teacher-student and peer-group connections within and outside classrooms. While every language carries emotional and psychological aspects, students who struggle to understand English lectures and readings may feel discriminated against. Discrimination results in either passive or aggressive exclusion, leading to feelings of humiliation and degradation.

**Keywords:** Linguicism, Hegemony, Higher Education, Dominance, Pedagogy

### **Introduction**

Language plays a critical role in shaping English perceptions and interactions with the world around us. English hegemony, where English is prioritised over other languages, can create barriers for those who are not proficient in the language. This can lead to feelings of exclusion and discrimination, impacting their academic and social experiences. It is important to recognise the impact of language discrimination on individual work towards creating a more inclusive environment for all students, regardless of their language proficiency. By promoting multilingualism and valuing diverse linguistic backgrounds, we can help combat the negative effects of English hegemony in educational settings. This can be achieved through providing support and resources for students who may struggle with English, as well as promoting cultural awareness and acceptance. Embracing linguistic diversity can enrich the educational experience for all students and foster a more inclusive learning environment. Experiencing discrimination can take a toll on the mental well-being of those affected. It may result in feelings of not being enough, struggling with self-worth, and potentially experiencing sadness. Moreover, discrimination can pose obstacles to achieving academic success and can impede personal growth and development. Individuals facing stigma and regular discrimination often find themselves struggling with increased psychological distress, depression, and diminished life satisfaction and happiness. The negative effects can also

reach our physical well-being, as ongoing stress from discrimination has been associated with several health problems like high blood pressure and heart disease. Addressing and combating discrimination is crucial for fostering the well-being of every individual in our society. In the classroom, students who are learning in English often take the lead in conversations, guide the discussions, steer the topics, encourage positive behaviour with affirmations, and sometimes interject during discussions. In this context, Hindi-medium students often find themselves falling behind in various aspects of classroom activities. Discriminatory practices are deeply rooted and perpetuated within the English language. A perspective that considers the social psychology of language looks at language itself while also acknowledging its traditional justifications. This illustrates the way power dynamics unfold in the classroom, where the dominant language group holds sway and continues to reinforce inequalities. This viewpoint highlights the importance for educators to recognise these dynamics and work towards creating an inclusive environment in their teaching methods. The way groups interact and communicate is shaped by the language they use, which can lead to discrimination and create power dynamics in various areas of life. This brings us to some important questions about the various ways discriminatory practices arise from linguistic differences. This paper explores the challenges of using language as a medium of instruction in the classroom, with a particular focus on Delhi University. This issue with language is intertwined with aspects of caste, class, and gender as well. How does the language barrier pose challenges for both teachers and students, and in what specific ways does it affect their interactions? In what ways does the prevalence of a single language in the classroom influence a student's life? What are some possible ways to tackle these challenges and foster a more welcoming learning space for every student? These questions bring to light how language barriers connect with various social factors, underscoring the importance of a holistic approach to tackle them. By delving into these complexities, educators can strive to foster a fairer and nurturing educational atmosphere for every student at Delhi University.

### **The Medium of Instruction in Higher Education**

The choice of medium of instruction in education significantly influences students' learning outcomes and educational experiences. It is directly connected with students' thought processes and social-political value.<sup>1</sup> The language barrier can lead to difficulties in understanding complex concepts, hinder effective communication between teachers and students, and create feelings of exclusion among non-native speakers. Additionally, the dominance of one language in the classroom can perpetuate inequalities by favouring those who are fluent in that language while marginalising those who are not. Each language holds intrinsic value and is intertwined with social-cultural norms, shaping individuals' perceptions and interactions. It gives the way to learn everything about the societal and political knowledge. It is an essential part of a student's journey, allowing them to explore and learn

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<sup>1</sup> Social-Political Value: defined in terms of media of instruction and its status in particular society. In the pre-colonial period *Sanskrit* and *Arabic* was socially and politically considerable language. In the pre-colonial period and now in independent India English becomes a socially and politically more valuable in comparison of other indigenous language. But, in the central university students comes with different language background from across the country. They completed their elementary education in regional language but when they took enrolment in higher education institutions for further study.

about a wide range of topics. It is clear that India is a vibrant tapestry of languages and cultures. Almost all central universities use English as the primary language of instruction, especially in their Master's programs across various courses. This includes institutions like the University of Delhi, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia, Hyderabad Central University, and Ambedkar University, among others. For instance, a large number of students take admission every year to Delhi University in different courses. Most of the students who completed their senior secondary level education in a regional medium or through the state board are opting for the field of social science or arts. While English is the primary language of instruction in other courses like science, business, economics, and sociology. Large percentages of the population of the student comes from the English background and are enrolled in the various so-called reputed courses (science, commerce, economics, sociology, etc.) in comparison to the Hindi or regional language background students.

As Thorat said, "Lower percentages of students use Hindi and state language as their medium of instruction for education. In fact, the share of the students using English as a medium of instruction is nearly double of that in rural areas."<sup>2</sup> He also argues that there is no inequality across genders, but regional inequality is clearly observed in terms of the medium of instruction.<sup>3</sup> A study reveals that 76% of students at Ambedkar University Delhi (AUD) who come from government schools struggle with the English language. This study highlights the significance of caste and class in the use of language as a medium of instruction in academic settings.<sup>4</sup>

### **Languages of Teaching and Learning in the Contexts of Education**

The classroom environment and communication medium are crucial for accessibility and learning. Language barriers can hinder the learning experience for marginalised students, making it crucial for educational institutions to address these issues in order to promote social justice and inclusivity within the campus community. Additionally, providing support and resources for students who may struggle with English language skills can help level the playing field and create a more equitable learning environment. The medium of instruction is an integral part of the classroom, working at every level of the education system. It determines the relationship between student-teacher, student-student (peer group relation), and student-content. Categorically, it plays an important role as a subject thought but through which information is shared between the learner and the teacher.<sup>5</sup> The language chosen as the medium of instruction can either empower or marginalise students based on their proficiency in that language. Therefore, it is crucial for educational institutions to consider the impact of language on social justice and strive for inclusivity in their teaching methods. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Sukhadeo Thorat, "Sukhadeo Thorat Discusses Higher Education in India," India China Institute, October 14, 2019, <https://www.indiachinainstitute.org/2013/10/31/sukhadeo-thorat-discusses-higher-education-in-india/>, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>4</sup> Aranya Shankar, "Ambedkar University Survey: 76% Students from Govt Schools Face Problems with English," The Indian Express, February 3, 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/education/ambedkar-university-survey-76-students-from-govt-schools-face-problems-with-english/>, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Oladotun Opeoluwa Olagbaju and Francis Idowu Akinsowon, "The Use of Nigerian Languages in Formal Education: Challenges and Solutions," *Journal of Education and Practice* 5, no. 9 (2014): 123–27, 3.

especially important in multicultural and multilingual societies where students may come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. By recognising and valuing the linguistic diversity of students, educational institutions can create a more equitable learning environment that promotes academic success for all learners. Furthermore, incorporating culturally relevant and inclusive teaching practices can help bridge the gap between students of different linguistic backgrounds and foster a sense of belonging in the classroom. Ultimately, by embracing linguistic diversity, educational institutions can better support the academic and social development of all students.

There is a disconnect between how things are taught in the classroom and how they're communicated outside of it. The way a teacher presents lectures in the classroom plays a crucial role in capturing students' interest in the subject matter. When teachers conduct lessons in English, students who come from non-English speaking backgrounds may struggle to grasp the material being taught. Alongside the lectures, the teachers in the classroom will suggest reading materials and other resources for the students to explore. This situation highlights how privilege isn't shared equally, with some groups enjoying advantages while others face challenges. The contrasts in the classroom also influence the results of exams and understanding of knowledge.

The importance of student-teacher interaction is seen in the argument of Tuckman and Monetti, who hold that interaction is an important factor for any social structure. In the classroom context, the interaction can help the teacher to receive feedback from the learners and, in that way, discern the extent to which educational goals and objectives have been reached, hence making necessary adjustments.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes a bilingual teacher is also going to teach a student; the scenario has been different from one language dominant classroom. Every student has been participating without any hesitation in this kind of classroom environment. A positive environment strengthens student confidence and makes an interactive and engaging classroom. Influence of the language is also seen in dialogue, interaction, and making groups and friends inside and outside of the classroom between the students. Here one question arises: who are these students? And why are they not able to understand and use the English language as a medium of instruction? Most of the students come from Hindi medium schools in either rural or urban areas. Their background in education is more important. Space is also an important aspect of education. But caste, class, and gender are more important factors for going to take education in the government school in the era of modernisation and globalisation. Contemporary time, everybody wants to send their children to English school for better education. Because of reputation, market demand for this language.

### **English Language Hegemony in Higher Education**

Hegemony, derived from Greek, means 'to lead'. The notion of hegemony is defined by Gramsci, as he argues that hegemony is established through consent and persuasion via the

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<sup>6</sup> Baraka Manjale Ngussa, "Correlations between Medium of Instruction and Interaction Factors among Teacher Trainees: A Case Study of the University of Arusha- Musoma Centre, Tanzania," *International Journal of Educational Policy Research and Review* 4, no. 1 (January 2017): 1–17, <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.15739/IJEPRR.17.001>, 4.

processes of leadership without force, leadership through legitimisation, and leadership through consensual rule, which are the fundamental processes of hegemony.<sup>7</sup> English dominates education due to its perceived superiority and the opportunities it offers in a globalised context. As a result, many government schools are now incorporating English as the medium of instruction to meet the demands of parents and students seeking better educational prospects. This shift towards English-medium education reflects the influence of hegemony in shaping educational policies and practices. It also highlights the power dynamics at play in determining which languages are privileged in educational settings. Following the Gramscian notion of hegemony, even Debra Suarez explains hegemony as a power relation between dominant and minority groups, particularly the means by which the dominant group or the leading group secures its position.<sup>8</sup> This shift can perpetuate social inequalities by favouring those who are already proficient in English, further marginalising students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Additionally, it may contribute to the erosion of indigenous languages and cultures as English becomes more dominant in educational settings. This dominance of English in educational settings can also lead to a homogenisation of thought and perspectives, limiting diversity and creativity in learning environments. Furthermore, it may hinder the development of critical thinking skills among students who are not proficient in English, as they may struggle to fully engage with the material being taught.

English has become the dominant language in the modern era of globalisation. Most importantly, it is dominant in the educational sphere, and it can be seen in the classrooms of higher educational institutions. Particularly, the classroom scenario of every central university is continuously dominated by English speaking groups, whether they are teachers or students. It is clear that science is fully hegemonies by the English language, but the field of social science is also gradually hegemonies by this language. The field of social science is related to society, but when scholars go to define any society, they ignore their linguistic rights. For a language to hold a leading position, it must connect with political, governmental, economic, and social influence, along with the approval of the community.<sup>9</sup> and emotions and psychology. While most teachers have an English background, the majority of students in the classroom come from regional language backgrounds, such as Hindi medium schools. In comparison to Hindi medium students, a smaller number of English medium students have participated in the classroom. But their class activity participation is higher than that of Hindi medium students because of language hegemony.

### Language of Instruction, Linguistic Power, and Educational Inequality

Allport made the strongest and most persuasive argument that “prejudices become prejudices only if they are not reversible when exposed to new knowledge.” He also says that we

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<sup>7</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York, USA: International Publishers, 1985), 182.

<sup>8</sup> Abolaji Samuel Mustapha, “Linguistic Hegemony of the English Language in Nigeria,” *Ikala, Revista de Lenguaje y Cultura* 19, no. 1 (January 1, 2014): 57–71, <https://doi.org/10.17533/udea.ikala.15315>, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Sheila M. Shannon, “The Hegemony of English: A Case Study of One Bilingual Classroom as a Site of Resistance,” *Linguistics and Education* 7, no. 3 (January 1995): 175–200, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0898-5898\(95\)90022-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0898-5898(95)90022-5), 176.

emotionally resist evidence that contradicts our prejudices, unlike that which occurs with ordinary prejudgments. Thus, we have a third key ingredient of prejudice—resistance to new knowledge.<sup>10</sup> He defines prejudice as “prejudice is an antipathy based upon a faulty and inflexible generalisation.” It can be experienced or communicated. It can be aimed at an entire group or at a specific person simply because they belong to that group.”<sup>11</sup> Ehrlich defines prejudice in his 1973 book *The Social Psychology of Prejudice* as “an unfavourable attitude directed toward others because of their membership in a particular group.”<sup>12</sup> Harold D. Fishbein defines prejudice as “an unreasonable negative attitude toward others because of their membership in a particular group.”<sup>13</sup> Prejudice can manifest in various forms, such as discrimination, stereotypes, or even violence. Recognising and addressing prejudice is crucial for promoting equality and understanding among individuals and groups. Individuals can contribute to creating a more inclusive and harmonious society by acknowledging and confronting prejudice. Educating ourselves and others about the harmful effects of prejudice is essential for fostering empathy and respect for all individuals, regardless of their group membership.

Discrimination, according to Allport, involves denying ‘individuals or groups of people equality of treatment which they may wish.’<sup>14</sup> Jones defined discrimination as ‘those actions designed to maintain own-group characteristics and favoured position at the expense of the comparison group’.<sup>15</sup> Prejudice and discrimination are often rooted in stereotypes and can lead to harmful behaviours such as exclusion or violence. It is important to address these biases through education, awareness, and promoting empathy towards others. By recognising and challenging our own biases, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for all individuals. It is crucial to foster a culture of acceptance and understanding in order to combat prejudice and discrimination.

With regards to the emotions that are aroused in an individual towards an outgroup, weaker emotions imply only mild forms of discrimination, such as avoidance, but stronger emotions imply stronger forms, such as movement against the outgroup, and these latter emotions could be used to justify outgroup harm that extends beyond in-group benefit.<sup>16</sup> Discrimination is a type of behaviour that creates and maintains the advantage for a particular group and its members over other groups and their members. It is important to recognise and address these biases in order to promote equality and reduce harm caused by discrimination. By understanding the mechanisms behind discrimination, we can work towards creating a

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<sup>10</sup> Harold D. Fishbein, *Peer Prejudice and Discrimination: The Origins of Prejudice* (Mahwah, USA: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Harold D. Fishbein, *Peer Prejudice and Discrimination: The Origins of Prejudice* (Mahwah, USA: Taylor and Francis, 2014), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 4-5.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (London, United Kingdom: Longman Higher Education Publisher, 1954), 51.

<sup>15</sup> James M. Jones, *Prejudice and Racism* (Boston, USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1972), 4.

<sup>16</sup> M. B. Brewer, “Ingroup Identification and Intergroup Conflict: When Does Ingroup Love Become Outgroup Hate?” essay, in *Social Identity, Intergroup Conflict, and Conflict Reduction: Rutgers Series on Self and Social Identity*, ed. Richard D. Ashmore, Lee Jussim, and David Wilder (London, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2001), 17–41, 27.

more inclusive and just society for all individuals. This includes challenging stereotypes, promoting diversity and inclusion, and actively working to dismantle systems of oppression. Individuals play a crucial role in educating themselves about the impact of discrimination and actively engaging in efforts to combat it within their communities.

Discrimination, as we have seen above, refers to an overt behaviour towards a member of a particular group or the whole group, while prejudice and stereotypes operate intrapsychically. Traditionally, it was regarded that prejudice and stereotypes were explicit responses—beliefs and attitudes people know they hold, subject to deliberate (often strategic) control in their expression. There is a growing consensus in the discipline based on research that implicit attitudes and stereotypes exist. Implicit prejudices and stereotypes can influence our perceptions and judgements without our conscious awareness, leading to biased decision-making. This highlights the importance of addressing and challenging these implicit biases in order to promote more fair and equitable interactions among individuals. Increasing awareness of our implicit biases empowers us to mitigate their influence on our thoughts and actions, fostering personal growth and positive change. This can ultimately lead to a more inclusive and understanding society where individuals are judged based on their actions and character rather than preconceived notions.

Institutional discrimination arises from the biases and stereotypes held by individuals and manifests in policies that unfairly limit the opportunities available to certain groups of people. These laws and policies support beliefs that explain and validate the practices we see today. While personal biases and stereotypes can lead to actions like backing certain laws and policies, these can create institutional discrimination that functions separately from individual acts of discrimination. Institutional discrimination can occur even without individuals actively supporting it, intending to discriminate, or being aware that certain practices lead to discriminatory outcomes. It's true that many individuals fail to see the reality of institutional discrimination, as laws—often viewed as just and ethical—and established customs appear to be the norm. Moreover, beliefs—whether openly biased or masking bias (for instance, by implying that if discriminatory outcomes are unintentional, there is no 'issue')—support the status quo. Discussions in the media and among the public frequently overlook the possibility of biases within institutions. Institutional discrimination can often be subtle and not always a result of deliberate actions by individuals. It frequently needs to be understood through the different outcomes experienced by various groups, which can be linked to policies that may seem unrelated to group identity. These effects can show up in various aspects of life, such as in our economy, education, or job opportunities.<sup>17</sup>

Though many states have a policy of promoting the 'exclusive' use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction, in actual practise, many students experience a shift in language medium at one or another stage of their educational career, depending on the context, domain, and channel.

Passive and active medium: The student listens to lectures in one language and writes answers in another. This language shift can have a significant impact on the student's

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<sup>17</sup> Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York, USA: Routledge Publication, 2006), 24.

academic performance and overall learning experience. It is important for educational institutions to consider the implications of language medium shifts on students' success and provide appropriate support. To address the challenges of language shifts, schools can implement targeted strategies such as language support programs and bilingual education to assist students in navigating these transitions successfully. Ultimately, ensuring that students have the necessary resources and tools to excel academically regardless of the language medium will contribute to a more inclusive and supportive learning environment.

### **Medium of Instruction: A Conceptual and Comparative Analysis**

Formal and informal medium: formal teaching in the classroom is conducted in one language, but informal explanations are provided in another language. This approach allows students to better understand complex concepts and terminology, leading to improved academic performance. Additionally, incorporating both languages in teaching can help students develop proficiency in multiple languages, enhancing their overall communication skills. Providing resources and tools in multiple languages not only caters to diverse student populations but also fosters a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for all. This inclusive approach not only supports academic success but also fosters cultural appreciation and understanding among students.

Multi-tier medium: elementary education is initiated through mother tongue as the preparatory medium, but when a student moves upward in the education ladder, he has to shift to a more cultivated medium.<sup>18</sup> Offering resources in multiple languages can bridge gaps and ensure equal access to education for all students. The provision of educational materials in multiple languages enables schools to cultivate a more inclusive and supportive learning environment for students hailing from diverse linguistic backgrounds. This approach not only boosts academic performance but also fosters a more culturally rich and interconnected community within the school environment. Furthermore, incorporating multilingual resources can also help students develop a deeper appreciation for different cultures and languages. This can result in heightened empathy, deeper understanding, and mutual respect among students, nurturing a more inclusive and harmonious school community.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, embracing linguistic diversity in education can lead to a more positive and enriching experience for all students involved. By promoting inclusivity and understanding, schools can create a welcoming environment where students feel valued and respected for their unique backgrounds. Ultimately, this can contribute to a more united and harmonious school community that celebrates diversity and promotes unity. By fostering an environment that values linguistic diversity, schools can prepare students to thrive in a globalised world where multicultural competence is increasingly important. Embracing different languages and cultures in education not only benefits individual students but also enriches the entire school community by promoting tolerance and appreciation for diversity. Furthermore, encouraging linguistic diversity can also help students develop empathy and understanding towards others

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<sup>18</sup> Lachman Khubchandani, "Languages of Instruction in Plurilingual India," *International Review of Education* 24, no. 3 (1978): 375–80, <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00598053>, 379.

who may come from different backgrounds. This can lead to a more inclusive and welcoming school environment for all students, regardless of their cultural or linguistic differences. Incorporating multicultural perspectives into the curriculum can also help students develop critical thinking skills and broaden their worldview. By fostering an environment that celebrates diversity, schools can better prepare students to succeed in an interconnected and diverse society. Overall, promoting linguistic diversity in schools can have a positive impact on students' social and academic development. It can also help students appreciate the richness of different cultures and languages, fostering a sense of global citizenship.

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