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**Mother Tongue–Based English Language
Learning and Knowledge Tradition in the
Context of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS)****Dr. Monal Kanubhai Desai**Adhyapak Sahayak
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Language lies at the centre of cognitive development and cultural identity, making mother tongue–based pedagogy crucial for effective learning in multilingual societies. In India, the Indian Knowledge System (IKS) recognises languages as carriers of philosophical worldviews, cultural memory and indigenous epistemologies. This paper explores how teaching English through the foundation of the mother tongue enhances conceptual comprehension while ensuring continuity of traditional knowledge systems. Instead of positioning English as a competing linguistic system, the study argues that mother tongue–supported English learning enables students—especially from rural and tribal backgrounds—to access global knowledge without cultural alienation. The integration of bilingual explanations, context-based vocabulary and comparative grammar allows learners to develop linguistic competence while preserving cultural memory. This approach aligns with the National Education Policy (NEP 2020), which advocates multilingual education and promotes English as an additive rather than substitutive linguistic resource. Mother tongue–based English learning thus emerges as a transformative model that connects global communication skills with India’s deep-rooted intellectual and cultural traditions.

Keywords:

Mother tongue; English language learning; Indian Knowledge System (IKS); multilingual pedagogy; cultural identity; indigenous knowledge; NEP 2020; cognitive development; bilingual education.

1. Introduction:

In the era of globalisation, English has become an indispensable language for higher education, professional mobility and international collaboration. However, in India, where linguistic diversity is foundational to identity and knowledge transmission, pedagogical questions arise regarding the role of English in relation to regional languages and indigenous knowledge. The **Indian Knowledge System (IKS)** emphasises holistic education, experiential learning and preservation of cultural heritage. These values are deeply embedded in linguistic

traditions, and therefore knowledge and language cannot be separated in the Indian context. The rise of English-medium education has created a linguistic tension: learners require English for academic success, yet direct English instruction—especially among rural and tribal learners—may cause cognitive load, alienation and cultural disconnect. Mother tongue-based English language learning provides a balanced solution, enabling access to global knowledge without undermining local epistemologies.

2. Theoretical Foundations: Language, Cognition and Culture:

Learning in any unfamiliar language increases cognitive effort because the learner must simultaneously process linguistic decoding and conceptual interpretation. Conversely, the mother tongue allows immediate cognitive association between language and meaning. Research in educational linguistics and cognitive psychology confirms that conceptual understanding established in the mother tongue transfers to additional languages through *common underlying proficiency*. This aligns with the IKS principle of learning *from the known to the unknown*, a process historically seen in Gurukul learning, apprenticeship models and oral storytelling. Therefore, when English is introduced through the mother tongue, it supports—not hinders—cognitive development. It reduces fear and linguistic insecurity, especially for first-generation learners, while enhancing literacy, creativity and problem-solving skills.

3. English Learning in the Mother Tongue Framework:

Mother tongue-based English education positions the learner's first language as a foundation rather than an obstacle. Classroom strategies include bilingual explanations, translation-based tasks, comparative grammar, code-switching, dual-language reading, and contextual vocabulary based on local experiences. Such a pedagogical model views English not as a replacement but as an addition to existing linguistic resources. For example, a student from a tribal region may describe farming practices, folklore, seasonal rhythms or Pithora painting traditions in English. This process builds English fluency without losing cultural embeddedness. Simultaneously, metalinguistic awareness develops as students compare sentence patterns, idioms, tenses and pragmatic uses across languages. Thus, mother tongue support enhances the learner's command of English more effectively than monolingual instruction.

4. Mother Tongue, IKS and Preservation of Knowledge Traditions:

Language is a carrier of cultural memory, philosophical values and local ecological wisdom. Regional and tribal languages transmit knowledge through songs, myths, riddles, rituals, oral narratives, medicinal practices, agricultural calendars and community ethics. If English education replaces rather than supports the mother tongue, this heritage risks erasure. However, when English is taught through the mother tongue, it can play a protective role:

1. learners first internalise cultural knowledge through their own language, and
2. then translate, describe or document that knowledge in English for academic or global communication.

Instead of cultural displacement, the result is cultural amplification. For instance, documenting Bhil or Rathwa traditions, herbal medicine or indigenous environmental practices in English strengthens research visibility and creates opportunities for intercultural dialogue. In this manner, English becomes a tool for retaining and sharing the Indian Knowledge System rather than eroding it.

5. Alignment with NEP 2020:

The **National Education Policy (NEP 2020)** advocates early schooling in the mother tongue and positions English as one among multiple academic languages. It rejects the colonial hierarchy that places English above Indian languages and supports multilingual competence as a form of knowledge empowerment. NEP aligns with the IKS vision by recognising Indian languages as repositories of intellectual heritage. It views English as an enabling skill to supplement but not replace the mother tongue. This approach seeks to reduce dropout rates, increase conceptual learning and promote inclusive education for learners from rural and tribal backgrounds. The policy represents a paradigmatic shift: the integration of English into a mother tongue-based knowledge system rather than forcing English-medium dominance.

6. Challenges and Sociolinguistic Realities:

Despite its academic and policy support, mother tongue-based English learning faces challenges. Aspirational perceptions of English as a status marker influence parental preferences for purely English-medium instruction. Additionally, the availability of bilingual textbooks, culturally relevant reading materials and trained teachers varies across regions. Linguistic diversity further complicates classroom planning in areas where students speak multiple mother tongues. These practical difficulties underline the need for systemic planning rather than abandoning the mother tongue approach. Teacher training programs, community involvement, locally produced materials and multilingual pedagogic research are essential for sustainable implementation.

7. Recommendations for Classroom and Curriculum:

To integrate mother tongue-based English learning effectively within the IKS framework, the following pedagogical directions are recommended:

- Begin literacy in the mother tongue while gradually introducing English through oral communication, bilingual storytelling and dual-language picture books.
- Use translation-based activities and comparative grammar to link conceptual understanding across languages.
- Incorporate local cultural materials—folklore, songs, festivals and indigenous ecological knowledge—into English reading and speaking tasks.
- Encourage bilingual or multilingual assessment practices that evaluate conceptual understanding rather than rote memorization.

- Create institutional ecosystems for multilingual learning through libraries, cultural clubs and community participation.

These measures ensure that English learning does not merely provide linguistic skill but enriches cultural literacy.

8. Conclusion:

Mother tongue-based English language learning strengthens the intellectual, cultural and emotional foundation of learners while preserving the richness of the Indian Knowledge System. Instead of viewing English as a linguistic threat, this approach positions it as a medium through which local knowledge can enter global spaces. Multilingual pedagogy rooted in cultural identity allows learners to develop world-class communication skills without losing social belonging, memory or tradition. As India embraces rapid globalization, it is crucial that English language teaching does not alienate learners from their heritage but empowers them to express that heritage on global platforms. The future of Indian education depends not on choosing between the mother tongue and English, but on integrating both responsibly.

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