PEDAGOGIC VALUE OF MOTHER TONGUE SCAFFOLDING IN RURAL ESL CLASSROOMS

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Abstract:

This article argues that structured use of the mother tongue supports effective English learning in rural ESL classrooms. Informed by bilingual and socio-cultural theories and learner data from Government Degree Colleges in SPSR Nellore District, it shows that Telugu influence on English is unavoidable and can be pedagogically guided. The study critiques translation-heavy practices and proposes L1-based scaffolding, micro-strategies, and everyday cultural tasks to support communicative competence. A *mirchi bajji*–based classroom model demonstrates how familiar contexts can enable gradual, meaningful English acquisition**.**

Introduction

If a frog is dropped suddenly into hot water, it jumps out at once. But when it is placed in cool water and the temperature is raised slowly, it adjusts comfortably and continues to remain there. This familiar example illustrates the principle of accommodation: progress happens best when change is gradual and within the zone of comfort. Learning any skill follows this pattern, and English learning is no exception.

For many learners, especially in rural contexts, English has little presence at home, in school interaction, or in public life. When such learners are pushed directly into English-only settings, the experience often feels like entering "hot water." The result is usually forced memorization, nervous speech, and short, strained fragments of language rather than natural communication. A supportive learning space, therefore, must begin from what learners already know and trust.

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This article argues that familiar resources - mother tongue, local cultural texts, and simple, adoptable technologies—can gently guide learners into English in a gradual and meaningful way. Among these, the scaffolding role of the mother tongue (Telugu) occupies a central place. Although theory often discourages the use of L1 in the classroom, real classrooms reveal its constant presence. Instead of rejecting or overusing it, the present study proposes a balanced framework that fits learners lived realities.

Theoretical Perspectives on L1 Use in Second Language Acquisition

Research in bilingual education shows that language learning is not separated into rigid compartments in the human mind. Languages interact cognitively, and skills developed in one language can support learning in another. This understanding challenges the belief that the mother tongue blocks English acquisition.

Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development explains that learners perform better when guided by a knowledgeable person or tool. In language classrooms, the mother tongue functions as such a tool. It helps learners grasp ideas quickly, reduces confusion, and allows them to focus on new English forms without losing meaning. Bruner's (1978) idea of scaffolding supports this view, which emphasizes temporary support that is gradually removed as learners gain confidence and control.

Cummins' (1991) theory of Common Underlying Proficiency provides a strong cognitive explanation for positive language transfer. He argues that languages share a common base of thinking skills. While surface features such as pronunciation and vocabulary differ, deeper abilities such as reasoning, concept formation, and learning strategies remain shared. His Dual Iceberg Model shows that knowledge developed in the mother tongue strengthens learning in the second language.

Cook's (2001) idea of multi-competence views bilingual ability as an integrated system rather than two separate languages. Both languages support each other in thinking and communication. Selinker's interlanguage theory further explains that learners naturally use existing language knowledge while building a new language system. This process is normal and productive when guided properly. In classroom practice, these theories suggest that the mother tongue should be used as a temporary learning support rather than as a replacement for English.

Empirical Evidence Supporting Mother Tongue Use in English Classrooms

The theoretical view that the mother tongue supports second language learning is strongly supported by classroom-based research. Studies conducted across different linguistic and educational contexts show that planned use of learners' first

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language improves comprehension, vocabulary learning, grammatical accuracy, and learner confidence.

Shahidan and Shahrom (2021) observed Malaysian secondary school learners and found that selective code-switching helped students understand vocabulary and grammar more clearly and reduced learning anxiety. Learners participated more actively when difficult ideas were briefly explained in the familiar language before practicing in English.

Teh (2020), working with Mandarin-speaking learners, applied contrastive grammar teaching. Learners who compared first language and English structures showed better control of grammatical errors. This indicates that guided comparison supports analytical understanding of language form.

Indian studies report similar benefits. Pathak (2013) found that Assamese-speaking learners transferred reading strategies from their mother tongue to English when parallel texts were used. Udaya (2022) demonstrated that Telugu-speaking learners achieved higher vocabulary retention when bilingual glossed materials were used instead of English-only texts.

These findings confirm that the mother tongue functions as a useful scaffold rather than an obstacle in English learning.

Field Realities: Learner Perspectives from Rural ESL Classrooms

While research supports the positive role of the mother tongue in English learning, classroom realities in rural contexts reveal a strong and continuing dependence on the first language. An ESL survey (Prasad, 2025) conducted across six Government Degree Colleges in SPSR Nellore District involved 200 undergraduate students from varied social and educational backgrounds. The questionnaire focused on learners' perceptions of language influence, classroom preferences, and learning difficulties.

The findings show that first language influence is unavoidable in English learning. Nearly half of the respondents (46%) reported that Telugu affects their English grammar and sentence formation. Another 25.8% noticed its impact on pronunciation, while 16.7% observed influence on vocabulary choice. Only 11.4% felt that Telugu had minimal effect on their English learning. These patterns confirm that language transfer operates most strongly in structural and phonological areas.

Learners' classroom preferences further reflect this dependence. A majority of students (65.6%) stated that Telugu helps them understand English lessons better,

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while 18.9% supported limited and careful use of Telugu. Together, more than eighty-five percent of learners require some level of mother tongue support for meaningful comprehension.

Perceptions about the relationship between Telugu and English also support this view. About 60.7% of learners believed that the two languages are connected and support each other, whereas only a small group (10%) perceived them as obstructing each other.

Interestingly, even students from English-medium schooling (36.9%) expressed preference for Telugu support in ESL classrooms which indicates gaps in early exposure and instructional quality. Nearly ninety-five percent of respondents reported beginning serious English learning after early childhood, which increases reliance on the mother tongue for conceptual clarity.

Overall, these findings indicate that in rural learning environments, complete withdrawal of the mother tongue is neither practical nor effective. Instead, structured and guided use of L1 is necessary to support steady progress in English.

Why Grammar Translation Practices Fall Short in Rural ESL Classrooms

While the mother tongue has the potential to support English learning, this potential is often weakened by the way the Grammar Translation Method is practiced in rural classrooms. Translation frequently becomes the primary mode of instruction, with teachers explaining content almost entirely in Telugu and learners responding in the same language. As a result, learners depend on translation rather than developing the ability to process meaning and construct sentences directly in English.

A further limitation lies in the lack of progression. Translation support is rarely reduced as learners gain familiarity with English, and classroom practice shows limited movement from explanation to application. Speaking, listening, and interaction receive minimal attention, which restricts fluency development. Assessment practices reinforce this pattern by rewarding memorization of rules and meanings instead of communicative use.

Thus, the limitation does not lie in the use of the mother tongue itself, but in the absence of structured scaffolding. When Telugu replaces English rather than supporting it, learner dependence increases and communicative competence remains underdeveloped.

Resourceful Use of Mother Tongue Knowledge in ESL Learning

A resourceful ESL teacher can use learners' mother tongue as a meaningful learning support. When Telugu and English are placed side by side, clear

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phonological and grammatical links emerge. These links help learners avoid common errors and reduce confusion, especially in rural classrooms.

A frequent problem among Telugu-speaking learners is the use of the indefinite articles *a* and *an*. Learners are often guided by vowel letters rather than vowel sounds, which results in errors with words such as *unicorn* and *one*. Telugu offers a clearer sound–symbol system that can serve as a reference. Learners are encouraged to imagine the English word in Telugu script and identify its initial sound. If the word begins with a Telugu vowel sound (అ, ఇ, ఎ, ఉ, ఒ), *an* is used. If it begins with a consonant sound such as య or వ, *a* is used, even if the English spelling starts with a vowel. Thus, *unicorn* (యూనికార్న్) takes *a*, and *one* (వన్) takes *a*. This approach shifts learners from spelling-based guessing to sound-based understanding.

Pronunciation development is also supported by phonemic similarities between Telugu and English. Consonants such as క /ka/, ట /ṭa/, ప /pa/, and మ /ma/ closely match English sounds in words like *cat*, *table*, *pen*, and *man*. Simple Telugu vowels such as అ /a/, ఇ /i/, and ఉ /u/ resemble English short vowels. Recognizing these similarities helps learners speak with confidence and reduces hesitation.

Another common error relates to third person singular verbs in the simple present tense. A Telugu-based technique helps learners understand agreement naturally. After confirming that the verb is in its base form, learners mentally translate the sentence into Telugu. If the Telugu verb ends with "డు (du)" or "ది (dhi)", the English verb usually takes 's' or '*es*'. In other cases, the base form remains unchanged. This familiar pattern helps learners internalize grammar without rote learning.

English spelling often obscures syllable boundaries because of silent letters and irregular sound patterns. Telugu, with its transparent sound system and awareness of *laghuvu* (light syllable) and *guruvu* (heavy syllable), offers useful support. By mentally mapping English words into Telugu sounds, learners can identify syllables and stress more accurately. Words such as *daughter*, *available*, and *strength* become easier to segment, supporting better pronunciation and rhythm.

Structured Mother Tongue Scaffolding: Classroom Strategies with Examples

Effective use of the mother tongue differs from routine translation. In structured scaffolding, Telugu is used briefly to support understanding, while English remains the language for practice and output. Support is gradually reduced as learners gain confidence and control. The following classroom strategies illustrate how this balance can be achieved.

1. Reading Support

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The teacher introduces the theme or difficult idea briefly in Telugu. Key vocabulary is clarified only when necessary. Students then read the passage in English and answer comprehension questions in simple English. Pair discussion may begin in Telugu for idea clarity but ends with English sentence formation.

2. Grammar Clarification

A short Telugu comparison helps learners grasp the rule. Practice occurs only in English.

Example: After explaining past tense meaning through Telugu comparison, students practice orally: "I ate idli", "She ate fruits."

3. Speaking Preparation

Students plan ideas in Telugu during brainstorming. Final speaking or dialogue must be in English. Sentence frames are provided for support.

4. Concept Clarification before Language Practice

Abstract ideas are explained briefly in Telugu before English usage.

Example: While teaching "democracy," the teacher explains the idea using a familiar village example, then students form English sentences.

5. Story Retelling with Language Shift

Stories are understood and discussed in Telugu but retold in English.

L1-Based Strategies for Developing Micro-Skills

Micro-scaffolding focuses on small, frequent classroom supports that address common learner errors caused by first language influence. Instead of correcting mechanically, teachers guide learners to notice patterns using familiar Telugu structures.

1. Word Order Awareness

Telugu follows Subject–Object–Verb order, while English uses Subject–Verb–Object.

Strategy: Highlight the position of the verb through short contrast practice.

Example:

Telugu: నేను పుస్తకం చదివాను

English: I read a book.

2. Article Sensitivity

Telugu does not use articles.

Strategy: Use object identification practice with visuals: *a book* (any book), *the book* (specific book).

3. Preposition Mapping

Direct Telugu equivalents often mislead learners.

Strategy*:* Teach prepositions through location tasks rather than translation.

Example*:* "The pen is on the table."

4. Tense Meaning Anchoring

Telugu time markers clarify tense meaning.

Strategy: Link English tense to Telugu time reference briefly, then practice only in English.

These micro strategies reduce confusion, build accuracy, and strengthen learner confidence without increasing dependence on translation.

Every day Practices as Pedagogic Content: *Mirchi Bajji*

Every day practices supported by the mother tongue strongly shape learner engagement and comprehension. When familiar local activities are transformed into language tasks, learning becomes natural and accessible. This model uses a short Telugu YouTube video(Siri,2018,Sep.23) with unpolished English sub titles on preparing *Mirchi Bajji* to design graded English learning activities for basic, intermediate, and advanced learners. The example shows how even a four-minute local video can generate multiple skill-based classroom tasks.

A Classroom Worksheet Model:

Activity Type A – Basic Level

Sentence Comparison (Meaning Building):

Learner's match Telugu cooking instructions with their English equivalents from the video.

Example:

మిరపకాయలకిని నిలువుగా గాటు పెట్టండి → Slit the chilies lengthwise.

Lexical Expansion:

Learners produce simple synonyms for key verbs and apply them in new sentences.

Example: slit – cut / slice; flip – turn.

Sentence practice: Slice the onions. Turn the paper.

Grammar in Context:

Learners observe verb and adjective forms through translation-based comparison.

Example: Chop the onions. / Add chopped onions to the bajjis.

Vocabulary Building:

Ingredient names are matched with Telugu equivalents.

Example: Besan – శనగపిండి; Carom seeds – వాము.

Guided Speaking:

Learners practice short self-introductions using a model.

Example: "Hello, I am Sowmya. Today I will show how to prepare an egg omelette."

2. Activity Type B – Intermediate Level

From Code-Mixed to Complete English:

Learners first express meaning using Telugu–English mix and then rewrite the sentence in full English.

Example:

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Code-mixed: Bajji making కి తక్కువ spice ఉన్న mirchi వాడతాం.

English: Less spicy chilies are used for making bajjis.

Sequencing Instructions:

Learners arrange jumbled steps logically and rewrite them clearly.

Example: Wash the chilies → slit them → Dip in batter → Fry in oil.

Using Discourse Markers:

Learners connect steps into a short paragraph using connectors.

Example: First, wash and slit the chilies. Next, dip them in batter. Then fry them until golden.

3. Extension – Advanced Level

Subtitling:

Learners prepare brief English subtitles for short segments of the Telugu video.

Example: Crack the eggs. Beat well. Pour into the pan. Flip and serve hot.

Dialogue Writing:

Learners write short informal cooking dialogues.

Example:

"Amma, teach me how to prepare lemon rice."

"First fry peanuts, then add lemon juice and mix well."

JAM Speaking:

Learners deliver a one-minute talk on a favourite dish.

Example: My favourite dish is dosa because it is easy to prepare and healthy.

The Mirchi Bajji worksheet shows that no everyday activity is disqualified from becoming an engaging language task. However, a conventional teacher may handle the same material in two predictable ways. First, the focus may shift to identifying faulty English in the subtitles and pointing out grammatical errors. Second, students may be asked to memorize word meanings and learn sentence patterns by heart. Both approaches restrict communicative competence (Hymes,1972) and weaken the natural process of language learning. In contrast, this model encourages meaningful use of language through familiar experiences, and allows learners to build confidence and fluency in a natural way.

Final Reflections

A delegate once attended a conference where he experienced both highly impressive presentations and extremely boring lectures. When asked what he had learned, he replied that he had learned what makes a good lecture and what makes a bad one—both equally important for becoming an effective presenter. In the same way, every classroom situation can become a valuable opportunity for English acquisition if it is thoughtfully used. The issue is not the overuse or underuse of the mother tongue in English classes, but the direction from which the teacher operates.

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Even traditionally unhelpful bilingual methods, especially the Grammar Translation Method, can produce positive outcomes when applied with a pedagogical shift. As observed by Larsen-Freeman (2000) in *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, appropriate classroom techniques can bring meaningful improvement in foreign language learning. This article therefore concludes by proposing the following guiding ESL principles.

"Teachtolearn.

Traintoperform.

Interact to acquire."

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