The Role of English in Global Classrooms: Opportunities, Challenges, and Implications for the Internationalisation of Higher Education

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Abstract: As universities around the world cooperate more closely, English has become a shared language in many classrooms and in everyday university life. This paper discusses the part English plays in international higher education with special attention to India, and it also makes short comparisons with other regions. Recent discussions of English as a lingua franca ELF, or bridge language, suggest that English can open doors yet also close them. Recent work shows that English helps students and teachers join research that crosses borders, helps people move between universities in other countries, and raises the chances of finding work in the world job market. At the same time, it widens the gap between those with strong English skills and those without, and it can narrow the space for local knowledge and local languages. English medium instruction EMI has spread and has helped many students feel more at ease in study and discussion that reach across national borders. It can also cause problems for students who struggle with the demands of academic English. Teachers gain from planning courses together and from working with colleagues in other national systems. They still face trouble getting students to join in, trouble making the subject matter simple to follow, and trouble managing classes where many languages come together. The paper draws attention to an ongoing tension between the widespread use of English and the need to guard many languages and cultures. It argues that internationalisation will be meaningful only when policies support the use of more than one language, offer strong training for teachers who work in EMI settings, and treat the presence of many languages as a key strength in higher education.

Keywords: English as Lingua Franca, English Medium Instruction, Internationalisation of Higher Education, Multilingual Education, Language Equity

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Introduction

English has spread far beyond its birthplace and now serves people around the world for learning and speaking (Crystal, 2012; Phillipson, 2018). Schools in every corner of the earth have put English at the heart of what they do. Research teams from different places speak English to understand each other better. Students pick up English skills and head off to study in new places. Teachers everywhere stand in front of classes and explain their topics in English—that is how things work in schools these days.

The world of school learning keeps getting bigger, and English grows with it (Dearden, 2015; Wächter & Maiworm, 2014). The biggest schools must use English in their rooms, their papers, and when they team up with others. Classes full of students who speak many different languages at home meet to learn together in English. They read things from all over and talk about what they find in one shared tongue.

But this way of doing things makes some people nervous about what happens to other languages and ways of life (Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 2018). Sure, English lets lots of people talk about their thoughts, but smaller languages and local research papers might fade away. The big science magazines only want English writing, and people at big meetings only speak English—some people win while others lose out. English opens doors for many but shuts them for others—it helps some climb up while others stay stuck at the bottom. If we want our schools to treat everyone the same, we should spend time thinking this through.

India's experience shows this complexity clearly (Graddol, 2010; Coleman, 2010). English links India's many language communities, and it continues to be the main medium of instruction in most universities and professional institutions. With India's growing international engagement and the goals mentioned in the National Education Policy 2020, English has become central to improving visibility and competitiveness in higher education. At the same time, this strong focus on English brings out differences between English medium and regional medium learners, and these differences often echo long-standing social divides. Heavy dependence on English may reduce the space for regional languages and place pressure on India's multilingual traditions.

The same problems pop up all over the globe (Wächter & Maiworm, 2014; Dearden, 2015). People in Europe wonder what will happen to their own languages as English takes over their schools. China, Japan, and Malaysia want to make their mark worldwide through English but still keep their own way of speaking alive. African schools still deal with the mess left behind by their colonial rulers and their English books. Each place must find its own way to join the world without losing what makes it special.

This article looks at how English keeps changing the way teachers teach—with India as the main example, but other places mixed in too. We want to know how English affects the way schools share ideas and work together, and what it does to local ways of thinking. By looking at studies from around the world, we can see the good and bad parts of teaching everything in English. True, English lets schools join the worldwide club of learning, but we need rules to keep other languages alive and make sure everyone gets a fair shot at learning (Jenkins, 2013). We hope people will see English as a handy tool, but not forget about the smart things written and said in other languages too.

Review of Literature—English as a Lingua Franca ELF / Bridge Language

Research on English as a lingua franca has moved from early debates about definition to

a more practice-based field that looks closely at how English is used when speakers do not share the same first language.

Early work in this area introduced two ideas that continue to guide the discussion. First, ELF is understood in a practical sense: it refers to the use of English between speakers who do not share a first language and who place successful communication above strict native speaker norms (Seidlhofer, 2011). Second, ELF communication often involves accommodation, flexible language use, and adjustments that support mutual understanding rather than rigid adherence to preset rules (Cogo, 2008; Jenkins, 2000).

A well-established area of ELF research concerns intelligibility and pronunciation. Jennifer Jenkins Lingua Franca Core suggested that pronunciation teaching should give priority to features that most influence understanding among non-native speakers rather than attempts to copy native accents (Jenkins, 2000). This proposal led to further studies and teaching debates. Supporters argue it makes pronunciation teaching more relevant to international use, while critics warn against narrowing pronunciation instruction too much and overlooking local learning goals. Later research has shown that the features affecting intelligibility differ across settings, and this indicates that ELF does not form a single, fixed variety (Seidlhofer, 2011).

Recent research shows what happens when English rules the classroom. Teachers juggle two roles at once – handling mathematics or science while untangling language confusion. Tests need changes, educators need smarter tools, and we have got to notice the silent ones in the back row who get left behind (Macaro et al., 2019). English does help schools connect worldwide, yet it drains those who started learning it young. Experts say schools must offer real language support plus rethink teaching methods per subject—instead of pretending every student speaks perfect BBC English (Macaro et al., 2019).

Intelligent people watch how English bullies its way around the world. They spot who gets to speak and whose bright ideas catch fire. Pennycook says watch your step—English plays dirty and chooses which research matters and which thoughts travel far (Pennycook, 2017; Phillipson, 2018). Just check out the fancy science mags these days. English bosses the whole show, nobody reads stuff in other languages, and English papers hog all the glory (Pradier et al., 2025).

Some teachers look for new methods to handle classrooms full of children using twenty kinds of English. Experienced instructors aim at crafting sessions that link different mindsets—instead of pushing bland replicas of British or American speech (Jenkins, 2013; Cogao, 2008). Getting ideas through takes effort when each person uses English differently. Still, real hurdles stand in the way. Plenty of teachers were not trained this way, outdated exams demand flawless grammar, and many schools ignore how certain students only require everyday talk among peers (Macaro et al., 2019).

Regional and comparative studies highlight the strong influence of context. Work on Asia and South Asia, including recent reviews, shows that EMI and ELF practices operate within rich multilingual environments and in settings marked by social inequality (Sah, 2022). In such settings, English may support international participation but also serve as a marker of social advantage. Policy responses, therefore, differ across regions, and these responses range from the promotion of English for international engagement to measures that protect and strengthen regional languages in higher education. Comparative studies further point to clear differences in the handling of ELF in Europe, East Asia, Africa, and India.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has reshaped debates on language and global engagement in Indian higher education. The examples that follow show how English-medium instruction has been practised in selected universities since its implementation, highlighting both opportunities and constraints.

English-Medium Instruction in Central Universities after NEP 2020 (2021–2024)

A good example of English growing in Indian universities appeared after 2020, when central institutions launched new efforts. After NEP 2020 took effect, bodies like the University of Hyderabad, along with Jawaharlal Nehru University, enhanced postgraduate courses taught in English to boost worldwide academic links. From 2021 until 2024, science, social science, plus vocational departments gradually shifted toward using English as the main teaching language—especially where programs drew overseas learners or included joint research across countries.

Although this change allowed more involvement in global meetings, student exchanges, or joint research papers, it revealed gaps between learners from varied school systems. Those taught in local-language schools usually needed extra time to adapt to studying, writing, or speaking in class using English. In response, teachers began casually offering lessons in two languages or added language help on the side—showing that teaching in English across India often includes mixed-language methods instead of strict monolingual rules. This case shows how English opens access to worldwide engagement but also calls for teaching adjustments to handle uneven language skills (Government of India, 2020; Sah, 2022).

Gaps and Directions

Recent scholarship calls for closer comparative work that connects interaction-level ELF studies, such as classroom data and corpus research, with institutional and policy studies on internationalisation.

There is also growing interest in research that supports multilingual publishing practices and includes the perspectives of scholars who work outside English-speaking academic systems (Pradier et al., 2025; Sah, 2022). For Indian higher education, there is a need for more empirical studies that investigate classroom practice, assessment, and policy responses to ELF and EMI.

Discussion

English as Both Bridge and Barrier

A major issue in global higher education is that English can help and hinder at the same time. It supports mobility, research links, and access to international academic communities, yet it can also reinforce language-based hierarchies and widen existing inequalities. Jennifer Jenkins notes that universities often call themselves international while they adopt English language policies that overlook the actual language diversity of their staff and students (Jenkins, 2013). She also points out that native speaker norms continue to shape expectations, even when they do not match classroom realities. In the same way, Julie Dearden's survey of EMI across fifty-five countries shows a rapid increase in EMI in places where English is not a majority language, yet there is limited understanding of the teaching-related consequences.

From a global viewpoint, EMI offers entry into international academic circles. Students from non-English speaking regions can join global networks, publish their work more widely, and collaborate across borders. Dearden's report shows that many institutions adopt EMI to strengthen their international standing. However, EMI can also disadvantage students with low English proficiency, limit deeper subject learning due to in-

creased mental load, and place local languages and methods at the margins.

In India and other parts of the Global South, this mixed effect becomes even more visible. English supports Indian students in reaching global scholarship and improves their chances in international job markets. At the same time, English medium instruction can widen what R. K. Mohanty calls the double divide, and this phrase refers to the gap between English-speaking groups and those educated in regional or tribal languages (Mohanty, 2008). This pattern reinforces social inequality rather than reducing it.

EMI in Practice: Pedagogical and Institutional Realities

Putting EMI into practice brings many challenges. Dearden's global survey shows that EMI often enters systems without matching support for lecturers' language skills, without adjusted teaching materials, and without bilingual or multilingual teaching methods.

According to the Oxford definition, EMI requires teaching, interaction, materials, and assessment to take place in English in settings where English is not the main community language. In such contexts, several practical issues arise: Teacher language competence: Subject specialists may lack sufficient English ability or confidence, and this may lead to simplified teaching or frequent switches to the local language.

- Student comprehension: Students who are still developing academic English face a higher mental load when they process lectures and learning materials. Research shows that comprehension falls further when lecturers themselves struggle with English.
- Subject depth: Classroom time and attention may shift from the subject itself to language management, and this shift reduces deeper engagement with ideas.
- Institutional support: Many institutions do not create strong language support services or training for teachers, and assessment often fails to recognise the added language challenge.

ELF, Multilingualism and Language Policy in International Universities

While EMI focuses on English as the medium of instruction, ELF broadens the lens by looking at communication among non-native English speakers.

Jenkins (2013) argues that universities should move away from expectations of strict native norms and instead recognise the reality of ELF communication, where clarity, adjustment, and practical strategies matter more.

This shift has important policy implications. True internationalisation requires institutions to value multilingual ability, code switching, and trans lingual practices (Canagarajah, 2013). Students and staff bring multiple languages to the classroom, and these languages can support understanding and open up different ways of thinking.

In many parts of the Global South, looking at English through an ELF-informed and multilingual lens helps push back against its dominance and make space for regional languages in teaching, research, and knowledge sharing. As Saroj Kumar (2024) points out, using regional languages in education comes with both resource and identity challenges, yet it also opens the door to fairer linguistic practices. Without active support for local languages, linguistic advantages become unevenly spread, and knowledge starts to drift away from local intellectual roots.

English, of course, still carries real benefits—it can unlock better job prospects and make

one's work more visible. Neely (2015), for instance, found that in major companies, employees often need English proficiency to move up the career ladder. Universities show a similar pattern: studying in English tends to bring more chances for academic growth, collaboration across borders, and access to global job markets.

But the story that English automatically leads to success leaves out some hard truths. Children who grow up speaking other languages often face barriers when achievement in school or at work depends on flawless English. In India, for example, speaking polished English is still seen as a sign of privilege and wealth, mirroring deep social divides.

The publishing world paints an even bleaker picture—talented researchers in less wealthy regions often have to write in English or risk being overlooked. In the process, they may leave behind their native languages or shy away from studying issues rooted in their own communities. Over time, academic knowledge starts to flow mainly through English, while other perspectives and ways of understanding the world gradually fade from view.

English in Practice: Situated Experiences from Indian Higher Education

The place of English in Indian colleges gets more obvious when looking at actual university actions and newer educational rules. After the release of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, institutions started offering more programs in English, especially for master's and job-focused studies, aiming to boost recognition abroad and attract wider attention (Government of India, 2020). From 2021 until 2024, state-run universities in regions like Telangana, Karnataka, and Maharashtra launched fresh courses taught in English—covering fields such as engineering, business, and science—to meet learner interest alongside worldwide shifts in learning.

In classrooms, research from Indian universities shows English teaching is usually adapted to fit specific situations instead of following a strict all-English rule. This approach matches real-life teaching conditions in diverse-language settings, where understanding and student involvement matter more than fixed language rules. These methods particularly help learners from local-language schools who have a solid grasp of subjects but less experience with formal English.

Studies from universities in southern India following NEP 2020 show consistent trends. According to Sah (2022), learners often feel reluctant to speak up in class when sessions are held in English. Yet, with proper guidance—like foundation modules, tutoring in writing skills, or peer coaching—they begin gaining self-assurance quickly. As a result, their involvement increases noticeably over time. Research by Saini (2024) also reveals that teaching methods embracing multiple languages lower stress levels while boosting interaction in lessons, although English remains central for communication.

The connection between English ability and employment opportunities highlights regional differences across India. However, in urban areas such as Hyderabad, Bengaluru, or Pune, proficiency in English offers access to international careers—particularly within technology, education, and offerings (Neeley, 2015). Yet this advantage often increases divides - learners from English-language schools often outperform institutions using native tongues - yet outcomes depend on resources instead of language alone; similarly, student engagement plays a critical role across both systems. Mohanty (2008) points out that this leads to a "dual gap," as language merges. Income and social position shape chances for jobs or studies. Combined, these cases from India show English isn't simply helpful or harmful by itself. Outcomes rely on teaching methods, school rules, and access to language help. Seeing this context supports the idea: real global

integration in universities needs approaches that value many languages instead of seeing English as the only sign of success.

Challenges and Tensions: Equity, Epistemic Justice, and Linguistic Diversity

When English takes over classrooms around the world, it raises tough questions—who gains the most, who gets left behind, and what kinds of local wisdom might slowly disappear in the process? Take India, for example, where dozens of languages jostle for space every day. Here, English and indigenous languages are often caught in a complicated struggle for visibility and value (Mohanty, 2008). Sure, English connects people across borders, but it can also pull young learners away from their mother tongues and make them feel distant or even ashamed of their linguistic roots.

The push for a one-size-fits-all EMI model doesn't really match the realities on the ground. It often overlooks how local institutions function, what kinds of language backgrounds students bring with them, and how different subjects may call for different linguistic approaches. In everyday practice, many EMI classrooms already rely on a mix of languages to make learning work—but official policies rarely acknowledge or support this.

That is precisely why multilingualism should take centre stage in any plan for internationalisation. Universities that want to be genuinely inclusive need to design teaching methods that embrace multiple languages, allow code-switching, support translanguaging, and actively integrate regional languages where possible. Students' mother tongues should be seen as sources of insight and intellectual richness, not as obstacles to overcome.

Universities need to watch out—they should not push English-heavy norms while claiming to go global. That English is widespread does not mean ideas from the English-speaking areas should automatically be highly valued. True global reach means room for different knowledge systems, along with respect for local languages in teaching, publishing, and research.

Implications

Policy Implications: Towards Linguistic Equity in Internationalised Higher Education

English is rising fast in universities worldwide—so we must reconsider how countries and schools manage language choices. Moving beyond seeing English as the only path for sharing knowledge is crucial now. It is crucial to value how various languages can open doors, making education fairer for everyone. When universities treat going global as just switching to English, they ignore rich linguistic diversity; worse, they might repeat outdated power imbalances from history, according to Jenkins (2013).

In countries such as India, where many languages shape who people are, school rules need to mix worldwide standards with fairness for native speech. The NEP 2020 shifts focus to multi-lingual teaching, but scholars such as Saini (2024) point out that without solid financial support, bilingual instructors, and official support for certain languages, change would not stay. Supporting regional speech in higher education is not mere nostalgia; rather, it is tied to access and fairness when spreading ideas.

Government agencies and certification organisations might support research in multiple languages. Could there be a single approach? This could include publishing papers in native dialects or providing funding to translate community-based findings that hold global significance. Such steps could help ideas travel further while keeping them connected to their original contexts.

Pedagogical Implications: Rethinking Classroom Practices and Teacher Preparation

The everyday challenges of English-Medium Instruction need fresh teaching approaches. Since Dearden (2014), along with Doiz et al. (2013), points out, mismatches between language ability, classroom techniques, and grading can cause problems in EMI settings. Teachers usually have a hard time keeping lessons deep in subject matter while also being clear for learners who speak varying levels of English. For this reason, training should build not just an understanding of language but also comfort across languages.

Teachers ought to learn how to share facts as well as guide learners in connecting ideas through different languages. Canagarajah's (2013) take on mixing languages gives a solid starting point. This view encourages instructors to try methods such as switching between speech codes, blending speech styles, or using native language support now and then. As an example, bringing in a student's mother tongue during difficult lessons might sharpen clarity while still keeping English part of the mix.

Colleges could also set up language hubs, giving custom English classes - helping learners and teachers alike. These spots would focus on teamwork and progress instead of just fixing mistakes. Programmes like these might shift fluency from a barrier into a bridge - opening doors, and building links.

Institutional Implications: Redefining Internationalisation

Universities today often treat internationalisation as almost the same as the wider use of English in branding, curriculum, and research dissemination. True internationalisation, as Lasagabaster, (2022) suggests, does not rest on one language alone, and it depends on meaningful exchange of knowledge, where many languages and perspectives share the same academic space.

Institutions should therefore design inclusive models of internationalisation that value multilingual communication and local knowledge systems. They might, for example, allow bilingual course delivery, develop glossaries of technical terms in regional languages, or introduce co-teaching arrangements between English medium and regional language faculty. Such steps can enrich both teaching and research.

Universities might want to let staff and students speak different languages when sorting out paperwork or hanging around campus. This would make more people feel at home—think about places like India, where loads of tongues mix up in everyday life.

Partnerships between universities across countries should be linguistically reciprocal. Why limit everything to English? Institutions could publish in two languages, host meetings where participants use the languages they are most comfortable with, and ensure that valuable ideas are translated and shared widely. Such practices would make international collaboration more genuine and inclusive—adding a human touch to cross-border work while preventing English from dominating the academic space.

Socio-economic and Employability Implications

English helps people get jobs worldwide (Neeley, 2015), but it blocks some people while waving others through. We need new school rules to help everyone learn English without discarding the other languages they know. Mixing English with native languages in work practice, letting young people start university even if their English needs work, and finding jobs where speaking two languages counts for something—these methods could help students from local schools join

the big world of work and study. If bosses saw speaking many languages as a plus point when hiring, it might change how we think about what makes someone good at their job. Big firms work with many languages these days—graduates who know their way around more than one language land the best jobs worldwide. Schools must stop seeing different languages as problems to fix and start seeing them as gold mines worth digging.

Knowledge and Fair Play

It is a fact that English rules the classroom, not only changing how students study but also shaping what is seen as real knowledge. Almost all academic work now moves through English channels, so ideas from English-speaking regions usually dominate. Scholars such as Kumar (2024) and Mohanty (2008) argue that this sidelines homegrown insights and deep-rooted schools of thought, leaving them more ignored than they should be.

From an ethical perspective, universities have a responsibility to protect linguistic diversity as part of their academic integrity. Supporting research and publishing in regional languages, translating key works, and valuing indigenous knowledge systems shouldn't be treated as token gestures—they are essential acts of intellectual decolonisation.

Looking ahead, a fairer approach to internationalisation calls for a more inclusive kind of English—one that serves as a shared means of communication rather than a rigid standard that overshadows other languages. Only under such conditions can English function as a genuine global bridge instead of a cultural gatekeeper.

Conclusion

English has become an important part of higher education around the world. It helps students and teachers connect across countries, share research, and take part in global academic work. At the same time, its growing presence through English Medium Instruction (EMI) and English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) has also created new challenges. English supports international mobility, but at the same time, it can also limit participation for those who are not confident in the language. This mixed role of English shows the ongoing tension within internationalisation.

The discussion in this paper has shown that real internationalisation cannot depend only on using English in classrooms. It must include respect for many languages and ways of learning. Jenkins' (2013) argument for recognising ELF highlights the need to accept different forms of English used by international speakers. Indian scholars such as Mohanty (2008) and Kumar (2024) also point out that multilingualism is a strength. It helps protect cultural knowledge and ensures that higher education remains open to students from different linguistic backgrounds.

The earlier sections of this paper have suggested that universities should avoid an English-only approach. Instead, they should create conditions where English and local languages can support each other. This includes developing policies that allow bilingual teaching, offering language support for students and teachers, and encouraging teaching methods that make space for more than one language.

The place of English in global classrooms needs to be viewed with balance. English should serve as a shared tool for communication, not as a measure of superiority. The future task for universities is to maintain the benefits that English offers while also protecting local languages and knowledge systems. Only through such an approach can higher education become truly international in both practice and spirit.

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