

Breaking Boundaries: Multidisciplinary and Multilingual Pathways in English Language Teaching

Ms. Ashima Singla

Soft Skills Trainer
Management
GLA University

Abstract

University classrooms today are shaped by multiple languages, diverse disciplines, and rapidly changing learner needs. English, often used as both a subject and a medium of instruction, cannot be taught in isolation from these realities. This paper examines how drawing on learners' disciplinary knowledge and linguistic backgrounds can make English language teaching (ELT) more meaningful and inclusive. Using a narrative inquiry approach, it presents accounts of teachers and adult learners who integrated subjects such as history, environmental studies, and media into English lessons while also making space for learners' first languages. The narratives show that such practices improve comprehension, encourage participation, and strengthen learners' confidence, while also highlighting the challenges of institutional expectations, limited teacher preparation, and uneven implementation. The study argues for an approach to ELT that recognizes disciplinary diversity and multilingual practices as strengths, preparing learners for critical and socially relevant communication in higher education.

1. Introduction

The teaching of English in higher education has undergone significant changes over the last few decades. No longer confined to grammar drills, literary appreciation, or basic communicative training, English classrooms are now expected to prepare learners for professional, academic, and intercultural demands in a globalized world. Adult learners, particularly at the university level, bring with them varied disciplinary expertise and linguistic repertoires, which are often left untapped in traditional models of English language teaching (ELT). Treating English as a stand-alone subject ignores the ways in which learners actually use language: to make sense of disciplinary knowledge, to communicate across languages, and to participate in complex social and academic contexts.

Multidisciplinary approaches to ELT recognize the importance of connecting language with content from different fields such as history, media studies, and environmental science. By integrating disciplinary perspectives, English becomes more than a skill to be acquired; it becomes a means of engaging critically with knowledge. For example, analyzing historical speeches develops rhetorical awareness, while discussing environmental issues builds both vocabulary and civic responsibility. Such integration mirrors

the idea that language learning is most effective when tied to meaningful content, a view widely supported in recent scholarship.

Equally important is the recognition of multilingual practices in English classrooms. University learners in India, like in many multilingual societies, routinely draw on their first languages to grasp complex ideas or to frame responses. Rather than treating these practices as hindrances, multilingual approaches see them as valuable resources that enhance comprehension and confidence. Strategies such as translanguaging, code-switching, and bilingual scaffolding allow learners to mobilize their entire linguistic repertoire, making learning more inclusive. These practices are particularly relevant in India, where English coexists with multiple regional and national languages and where learners' linguistic identities are closely tied to their sense of belonging.

Despite the growing acknowledgement of these approaches, many classrooms still operate within rigid disciplinary boundaries and monolingual expectations. This creates a gap between the lived realities of learners and the practices sanctioned by institutions. The present paper addresses this gap by drawing on teacher and learner narratives from university settings. The aim is to explore how English teaching can be enriched when disciplinary connections are foregrounded and multilingual resources are embraced.

By situating English within broader disciplinary and linguistic contexts, the study highlights not only how adult learners engage more meaningfully with the language, but also how teachers reimagine their roles. Ultimately, the discussion argues for an ELT framework in higher education that is flexible, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of 21st-century learners.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Multidisciplinary Approaches in English Language Teaching

In higher education, English is not simply a subject taught for its own sake but a medium that enables learners to access and communicate knowledge across disciplines. A multidisciplinary approach to English language teaching (ELT) emphasizes this connection by embedding language learning within the study of diverse fields such as history, environmental science, media studies, and technology. When students encounter English in contexts that mirror their academic or professional interests, they begin to view the language as a tool for inquiry and critical engagement rather than as an abstract skill to be mastered.

The idea of integrating language and subject matter is not new. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), for example, demonstrates how students can simultaneously acquire disciplinary knowledge and language proficiency (Coyle, Hood, & Marsh, 2010). Similarly, Richards and Rodgers (2014) argue that task-based and project-based pedagogies naturally align with interdisciplinary learning, as they encourage students to draw on knowledge from multiple domains while using English for authentic communication.

Examples of such integration are increasingly visible in university classrooms. Analyzing historical speeches provides insights into rhetoric and persuasive strategies while strengthening linguistic competence. Discussing environmental issues in English classes not only develops vocabulary and critical writing skills but also deepens learners' awareness of social responsibility (Orr, 2011). Likewise,

incorporating media texts such as advertisements or films helps students engage with contemporary cultural narratives while honing analytical and communicative abilities (Thorne, 2016).

These examples highlight that English, when connected to other fields of study, becomes more relevant, engaging, and transformative. A multidisciplinary perspective thus reframes ELT as an avenue for holistic education—one that cultivates not only linguistic proficiency but also critical thinking, civic awareness, and intellectual curiosity.

2.2 Multilingual Approaches and Translanguaging Practices

In multilingual societies, learners inevitably draw on their full linguistic repertoires when engaging with English. Rather than restricting students to monolingual English classrooms, research increasingly supports the strategic use of learners' first languages. García and Wei (2014) introduce the concept of translanguaging as a pedagogical practice that allows students to move fluidly between languages, enhancing comprehension and participation. Similarly, Cummins (2007) highlights the interdependence hypothesis, which suggests that skills developed in one language can support learning in another.

Indian classrooms provide a particularly rich context for multilingual ELT. With over 22 official languages, learners often navigate multiple linguistic systems daily. Mohanty (2019) argues that ignoring this multilingual reality perpetuates exclusion and disadvantages learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds. On the other hand, multilingual pedagogies can empower learners by affirming their linguistic identities while simultaneously building proficiency in English. Studies on bilingual and multilingual instruction in India (Annamalai, 2004; Heugh, 2021) confirm that incorporating local languages increases engagement and reduces dropout rates, without compromising English competency.

2.3 Teacher Narratives and Pedagogical Shifts

Teachers play a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and practice. Narrative inquiry has emerged as a valuable method for understanding how educators integrate multilingual and multidisciplinary approaches in their classrooms (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Through reflective narratives, teachers reveal how disciplinary integration fosters learner curiosity and how multilingual strategies reduce anxiety in English classrooms. Yet, research also highlights significant barriers: institutional policies often enforce English-only instruction, and many teachers feel underprepared to manage multilingual dynamics (Hornberger & Link, 2012).

Professional development is therefore essential. Freeman and Johnson (1998) contend that teacher education must prepare educators not only in language pedagogy but also in culturally responsive and interdisciplinary practices. In India, initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) underscore the importance of multilingual education and cross-disciplinary learning, but classroom-level implementation remains inconsistent.

2.4 Gaps in the Literature

While existing research demonstrates the benefits of multilingual and multidisciplinary ELT, several gaps remain. First, much of the literature focuses on either multilingual or interdisciplinary strategies in isolation; fewer studies examine their intersection. Second, there is limited empirical work documenting teacher and learner narratives in the Indian context, despite its multilingual reality. Finally, while policies advocate for integrated learning, there is inadequate research on how institutional frameworks and teacher training can support sustainable implementation.

This paper addresses these gaps by presenting teacher and learner narratives that illustrate how multilingual and multidisciplinary practices intersect in real classrooms. By doing so, it contributes to a growing body of scholarship that calls for reimagining ELT as an inclusive, interdisciplinary, and culturally responsive practice.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative narrative inquiry design**, which is particularly suited to exploring how teachers and adult learners in higher education construct meaning from their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry enables an in-depth understanding of personal and professional stories, revealing the dynamic interactions between multilingualism, disciplinary knowledge, and English language teaching (ELT).

Research Context and Participants

The study was conducted in Indian higher education settings where English functions both as a subject and as the primary medium of academic communication. University classrooms provide a particularly rich site for exploring English language teaching (ELT), as they bring together adult learners with diverse disciplinary specializations and linguistic backgrounds. Unlike younger learners, university students approach English with specific academic and career-related goals, often expecting the language to serve as a bridge to disciplinary knowledge and professional growth.

Participants in the study consisted of English faculty members and their undergraduate and postgraduate students. The teachers who contributed to the study experimented with classroom practices that integrated material from disciplines such as history, environmental studies, and media into English lessons. The students represented a wide range of subject backgrounds and varied linguistic repertoires, including regional Indian languages alongside English. While most learners already had some command of English, many relied on their first languages as scaffolding tools when grappling with complex academic tasks.

By including perspectives from both teachers and learners, the study captures the interplay between pedagogical innovation and learner experience in multilingual, multidisciplinary university contexts. This dual focus makes it possible to highlight not only how teachers design and implement such practices but also how adult learners perceive and respond to them in real classroom settings.

Data Collection

Data were gathered from three main sources:

1. **Reflective teacher journals** where instructors documented classroom experiences integrating multilingual and multidisciplinary elements.
2. **Semi-structured interviews** with teachers and adult learners focusing on specific instances where language learning intersected with disciplinary or linguistic diversity.
3. **Learner reflections and essays** that captured adult learners' perspectives on using their first languages, prior knowledge, and disciplinary expertise in English learning contexts.

Data Analysis

The collected narratives were transcribed, coded, and analyzed thematically using Riesman's (2008) narrative analysis framework. Codes were developed inductively, identifying patterns around key themes such as identity affirmation, disciplinary engagement, language scaffolding, and institutional challenges. The analysis sought to highlight the interplay between teacher strategies and learner agency in adult education settings.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent to share their reflections. Anonymity was ensured by using pseudonyms, and care was taken to represent adult learners' voices authentically. Ethical guidelines emphasized respect for learner autonomy, given their status as adult participants in higher education.

By focusing on narratives from university classrooms, this methodology ensures that findings are grounded in the lived realities of adult learners and teachers negotiating multidisciplinary and multilingual practices in ELT.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents narratives and insights drawn from university-level English classrooms in India, highlighting how multidisciplinary and multilingual approaches influence teaching and learning. The findings are organized into four themes: interdisciplinary integration, multilingual practices, learner engagement and critical thinking, and teacher identity and professional growth. Each theme is supported by participant narratives and connected to existing scholarship in ELT and education.

4.1 Interdisciplinary Integration: Connecting English with Disciplinary Knowledge

Adult learners in universities often approach English learning through the lens of their disciplinary specializations. Narratives revealed that when English was taught not as an isolated subject but as a medium to explore disciplinary knowledge—such as analyzing historical speeches, engaging with

environmental debates, or critiquing media texts—students found the learning process more authentic and purposeful.

One participant, an undergraduate history major, reflected: “When we analyzed Gandhi’s speeches in class, it was not just about English vocabulary, but about connecting the words to the history I already study. That made English learning meaningful for me.” Such experiences resonate with Coyle, Hood, and Marsh’s (2010) argument that integrated content and language learning promotes both subject knowledge and communicative competence.

Teachers reported that embedding interdisciplinary themes helped students see English as a tool of inquiry rather than a hurdle to overcome. For instance, incorporating media studies into writing assignments allowed learners to analyze advertisements and news reports critically, simultaneously strengthening their language skills and media literacy (Thorne, 2016). These practices positioned English classrooms as spaces where language learning intersected with broader academic inquiry.

4.2 Multilingual Practices: Leveraging First Languages in Higher Education

Adult learners consistently drew upon their first languages to scaffold comprehension and expression in English. Far from being a sign of deficiency, learners described this as a resource that gave them confidence in engaging with complex texts. For example, a postgraduate student of economics noted: “I often translate concepts into Hindi first to make sense of them, and then frame my response in English. It helps me structure my thoughts better.”

Teachers also observed that encouraging translanguaging practices improved participation in discussions. García and Wei (2014) contend that translanguaging allows learners to mobilize their full linguistic repertoire, enhancing meaning-making. In the university context, this practice empowered learners to connect disciplinary knowledge in their first languages with English academic discourse.

However, narratives also revealed tensions. Some learners expressed anxiety about institutional expectations of English-only instruction. One student commented: “We are told to use only English, but in reality, I can only think clearly when I first explain it to myself in Tamil.” This reflects the broader policy-practice gap in Indian higher education, where monolingual ideologies persist despite multilingual realities (Mohanty, 2019).

4.3 Learner Engagement and Critical Thinking

Interdisciplinary and multilingual approaches significantly increased learner engagement and fostered higher-order thinking skills. When students were invited to discuss climate change debates in English, drawing from their scientific and social science courses, they demonstrated both linguistic fluency and critical analysis. One engineering student reflected: “Discussing technical issues in English pushed me to find new vocabulary, but it also made me think critically about how science is communicated to society.”

Teachers noted that such activities moved learners beyond rote learning toward critical engagement with texts and ideas. This aligns with Richards and Rodgers’ (2014) argument that task-based and project-based

approaches stimulate learner autonomy and problem-solving. Moreover, by validating multilingual expression, classrooms became spaces of inclusion, where students from varied linguistic and disciplinary backgrounds could contribute meaningfully.

Narratives also highlighted the affective benefits of these approaches. Learners described feeling less anxious when allowed to initially brainstorm in their first language or within their disciplinary comfort zones before expressing themselves in English. This reduced language anxiety has been identified as a crucial factor in adult language acquisition (Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).

4.4 Teacher Identity and Professional Growth

Teacher narratives underscored the transformative impact of adopting multidisciplinary and multilingual strategies. One faculty member reflected: “Earlier, I believed teaching English meant sticking to grammar and literature texts. But when I started integrating topics from my students’ disciplines, I realized English became a bridge rather than a barrier.” Such reflections illustrate how teachers’ professional identities evolve when they shift from being transmitters of language rules to facilitators of interdisciplinary and multilingual learning.

At the same time, teachers reported institutional and professional challenges. Policies enforcing English-only classrooms often conflicted with the reality of student needs. Moreover, many teachers felt underprepared to implement multilingual pedagogy effectively. This echoes Hornberger and Link’s (2012) observation that while translanguaging is powerful, it requires teacher training and institutional support.

Despite these challenges, teachers described personal growth as they experimented with new methods. Engaging in reflective practice allowed them to view themselves not only as language instructors but also as cultural mediators and knowledge facilitators. Such shifts align with Freeman and Johnson’s (1998) call to reconceptualize teacher education as preparing educators for dynamic and socially situated classrooms.

4.5 Discussion

Taken together, these narratives illustrate that multidisciplinary and multilingual approaches enrich English learning for adult learners in universities by:

1. Connecting English to disciplinary knowledge, making it relevant and applied.
2. Validating linguistic diversity, thereby empowering learners and reducing anxiety.
3. Enhancing engagement and critical thinking, essential skills in higher education.
4. Redefining teacher roles, promoting reflective practice and professional growth.

Yet, challenges persist in the form of rigid institutional policies, limited teacher training, and lingering monolingual ideologies. These findings reinforce existing literature while also extending it by highlighting the intersection of multidisciplinary and multilingual practices specifically within Indian higher education. The narratives emphasize that English classrooms cannot be divorced from learners lived realities; instead,

they must become inclusive spaces where disciplinary knowledge and linguistic diversity are harnessed as strengths.

5. Challenges and Limitations

While the narratives illustrate the transformative potential of multidisciplinary and multilingual approaches in English language teaching (ELT) at the university level, several challenges emerged that limit their consistent adoption and impact. These challenges can be grouped into institutional, pedagogical, and policy-related barriers.

5.1 Institutional Resistance and Monolingual Ideologies

A recurrent theme in teacher narratives was the tension between actual classroom practices and institutional expectations. Many universities continue to promote an “English-only” ideology, rooted in the belief that exclusive exposure ensures proficiency. While intended to build fluency, such policies often marginalize learners who rely on their first languages for comprehension and critical reflection. Teachers noted that, despite recognizing the value of translanguaging, they hesitated to formally endorse it due to administrative restrictions. This reflects what Mohanty (2019) identifies as the policy-practice gap in Indian higher education, where multilingual realities are acknowledged but not fully legitimized.

5.2 Teacher Preparedness and Professional Training

Although teachers demonstrated creativity in integrating disciplinary themes and multilingual practices, several admitted to feeling underprepared for systematic implementation. University English faculty are often trained in literature or linguistics but may lack formal exposure to multilingual pedagogy or interdisciplinary teaching methods. As one teacher observed: “I knew how to analyze texts, but I had no framework for weaving in environmental issues or managing discussions that switch between English and regional languages.” This lack of structured professional development echoes Hornberger and Link’s (2012) findings that teachers require sustained support to effectively use translanguaging strategies in higher education.

5.3 Balancing Depth and Breadth in Interdisciplinary Teaching

Teachers also expressed concerns about balancing linguistic objectives with disciplinary content. While integrating history, media, or science themes enriched discussions, some feared that language learning goals risked being overshadowed. One faculty member commented: “At times, I felt we spent more time on the disciplinary issue than on the language itself.” This tension highlights the challenge of ensuring that language learning remains central, even as it engages with multidisciplinary content (Coyle et al., 2010).

5.4 Learner Challenges and Unequal Participation

Although many learners reported increased engagement through multilingual and multidisciplinary approaches, disparities also surfaced. Students from stronger English backgrounds sometimes dominated

discussions, while those reliant on first-language scaffolds remained hesitant to participate fully in English. Additionally, some learners struggled to transfer knowledge from their disciplinary fields into English discussions, creating uneven participation patterns. This suggests that without careful facilitation, these approaches may inadvertently reinforce inequalities within the classroom.

5.5 Limitations of the Study

As a narrative inquiry, the study reflects the lived experiences of a limited group of university teachers and learners. The findings are context-specific and may not be universally generalizable across all Indian higher education institutions. Further, narratives rely on self-reported experiences, which may be shaped by participants' perceptions and biases. Nonetheless, these accounts provide valuable insights into the complexities of real classrooms, offering directions for broader empirical studies.

5.6 Summary

In sum, while multidisciplinary and multilingual approaches enhance language learning and critical engagement, their implementation in universities is hindered by institutional policies, insufficient teacher training, and learner inequalities. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is essential if higher education institutions are to genuinely transform English classrooms into inclusive spaces that reflect the multilingual and interdisciplinary realities of learners' lives.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The narratives presented in this paper reaffirm the potential of **multidisciplinary and multilingual approaches** to enrich English language teaching (ELT) in university classrooms. For adult learners, English is not simply a subject to be mastered, but a medium for academic inquiry, professional preparation, and intercultural communication. By drawing on learners' disciplinary knowledge and linguistic repertoires, English classrooms can become inclusive spaces where knowledge is co-constructed rather than transmitted.

6.1 Key Insights

Findings from teacher and learner narratives highlight four central insights. First, **interdisciplinary integration** makes English learning more authentic, as learners engage with content relevant to their fields of study. Second, **multilingual practices** empower students by validating their identities and reducing the anxiety associated with monolingual instruction. Third, these approaches enhance **learner engagement and critical thinking**, encouraging active participation and deeper reflection. Finally, adopting such practices also transforms **teacher identity**, shifting roles from language instructors to facilitators of intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue.

Despite these benefits, challenges persist in the form of **institutional resistance, limited professional training, and policy–practice gaps**. Unless these barriers are addressed, the adoption of innovative pedagogies will remain fragmented.

6.2 Pedagogical Recommendations

For teachers, the study underscores the importance of **flexible classroom practices**. Encouraging translanguaging, designing interdisciplinary tasks, and integrating students' disciplinary expertise can foster both language growth and critical thinking. Teachers should also engage in **reflective practice**, documenting their experiences and challenges to build a repertoire of strategies that can be adapted across contexts.

6.3 Institutional and Policy Recommendations

Universities need to move beyond English-only policies and recognize **multilingualism as a resource**. Institutional support through **teacher training programs, curriculum redesign, and resource development** is essential. Policies such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) already emphasize multilingual education and interdisciplinarity; however, successful implementation requires aligning administrative practices with classroom realities. Collaborative platforms where teachers share experiences can also strengthen professional capacity.

6.4 Future Directions

Further research is needed to examine the long-term impact of multilingual and multidisciplinary ELT on learners' academic performance, employability, and intercultural competence. Large-scale empirical studies across different regions of India would provide richer evidence to inform curriculum development and teacher education.

6.5 Closing Note

In conclusion, **breaking boundaries**—both disciplinary and linguistic—is not just a pedagogical innovation but an educational necessity. English language teaching in higher education must reflect the multilingual, multicultural, and interdisciplinary realities of learners' lives. When classrooms embrace these dimensions, they do more than teach a language: they prepare learners for meaningful participation in a complex, interconnected world.

References

1. Annamalai, E. (2004). Nations, languages and globalization. Routledge.
2. Clandinin, D. J., & Connelly, F. M. (2000). Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research. Jossey-Bass.
3. Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). CLIL: Content and language integrated learning. Cambridge University Press.
4. Cummins, J. (2007). Rethinking monolingual instructional strategies in multilingual classrooms. *Canadian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 10(2), 221–240.
5. Dewaele, J. M., & MacIntyre, P. D. (2014). The two faces of Janus? Anxiety and enjoyment in the foreign language classroom. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 4(2), 237–274.

6. Freeman, D., & Johnson, K. E. (1998). Reconceptualizing the knowledge-base of language teacher education. *TESOL Quarterly*, 32(3), 397–417.
7. García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.
8. Heugh, K. (2021). Multilingual education and sustainable development in the Global South. *International Review of Education*, 67(1), 1–21.
9. Hornberger, N. H., & Link, H. (2012). Translanguaging and transnational literacies in multilingual classrooms. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 15(3), 261–278.
10. Mohanty, A. K. (2019). *Multilingual education in India: Policy and practice*. Multilingual Matters.
11. Orr, D. W. (2011). *Hope is an imperative: The essential David Orr*. Island Press.
12. Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2014). *Approaches and methods in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
13. Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Sage.
14. Thorne, S. L. (2016). Language learning, ecological validity, and digital media. *Linguistics and Education*, 34, 1–9.