



Training for inclusion: An empirical study of pre-service teacher's learning of linguistic otherness and pedagogical adaptation

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Abstract

Otherness refers to the process through which individuals construct identity by distinguishing themselves from others within social contexts. Factors including race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic status, religion, and language often shape such differentiation. Among these dimensions, language-based difference, known as linguistic otherness, is particularly relevant in multilingual and multicultural societies like India, where language significantly shapes identity, social hierarchy, and access to power. Within educational settings, linguistic differences can affect student engagement, classroom participation, and learning outcomes. As a result, effective pedagogy requires teachers to acknowledge students' diverse linguistic backgrounds and to adopt inclusive, culturally responsive, and empathetic instructional approaches. Addressing linguistic diversity is especially important during Pre-Service Teacher Learning (PSTL), as this stage is formative in shaping teachers' professional beliefs and classroom practices. The present study investigates primary school teachers' understanding of linguistic otherness and their perceptions of its impact on their instructional methods. Data were collected from 50 primary school teachers using a structured, randomly administered questionnaire. The survey examined teachers' views on the relationship between linguistic diversity and classroom dynamics, as well as their approaches to modifying curriculum and teaching strategies to meet varied linguistic needs. The study emphasizes the importance of incorporating awareness of linguistic otherness into teacher education programs to promote equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: Teacher learning, linguistic diversity, pedagogies, inclusiveness, identity

Introduction

Otherness refers to the condition of being perceived as different. Individuals define their identities in relation to others, and through this process, they develop a sense of self. People often associate themselves with particular racial, ethnic, gender, and social class, linguistic, religious, or cultural groups. This identification creates a sense of belonging, shapes self-understanding, and simultaneously distinguishes them from those they perceive as different. In this sense, otherness emerges from the recognition of similarity within a group and difference from another group. It is important to distinguish othering from prejudice, discrimination, or racism. Othering does not necessarily involve claims of biological inferiority or explicit segregation. Instead, it operates through processes of categorization that separate people into social groups. These categorizations influence how individuals perceive themselves and others. According to Teun A. van Dijk, othering plays a significant role in reproducing inequality because language and discourse subtly reinforce social hierarchies. Some groups become labelled as "others," meaning they are viewed as not belonging to the dominant social category [1].

Similarly, othering often appears through binary oppositions such as "us" and "them." Language represents these divisions, sometimes unintentionally, and normalises distinctions between groups. These linguistic patterns shape attitudes, expectations, and institutional practices [2]. As a result, othering extends beyond individual bias and becomes embedded in everyday communication and social structures. Linguistic otherness specifically refers to differences rooted in language, dialect, accent, or communication style. In a multilingual and multicultural country like India, language

strongly influences social identity and power relations. People often attach prestige to specific languages while marginalizing others. These hierarchies affect access to education, employment, and social mobility. Therefore, educators and policymakers must recognize the importance of valuing linguistic diversity and encouraging communication across language boundaries. Respect for multiple languages not only strengthens social cohesion but also affirms the identities of learners from diverse backgrounds [3].

Otherness directly shapes pedagogy and classroom practice. Teachers and students enter the classroom with varied social, cultural, and linguistic experiences. Each learner carries a unique identity that influences participation, confidence, and academic performance. When educators acknowledge these differences, they create inclusive environments that promote empathy and intercultural understanding. Conversely, when schools ignore or undervalue linguistic variation, students may feel excluded or marginalized. Researchers such as Halldór Benediktsson [4] and Sukhmani Gill [5] emphasise that teachers must recognise and appreciate the diverse language resources students bring to the classroom. By doing so, educators can design instruction that builds on existing linguistic strengths rather than treating differences as deficits. An inclusive classroom does not merely tolerate variation; it actively integrates students' language abilities into learning activities. Pre-Service Teacher Learning (PSTL) plays a critical role in preparing educators to address otherness effectively. Teacher education programs must train future teachers to understand how language, culture, and identity intersect in educational settings. Prospective teachers need practical strategies to adapt instruction for varied learning

styles and language proficiencies. Without such preparation, teachers may unintentionally reproduce exclusionary practices. This paper explores the necessity of integrating discussions of otherness into Pre-Service Teacher Learning. This small-scale study examines school teachers' awareness of linguistic and social otherness and evaluates how well teacher preparation programs equip them to address these issues. By analyzing teachers' perspectives, the study seeks to highlight the importance of systematic training that fosters inclusive, reflective, and socially responsive educators.

Review of Literature

Scholars have long examined the concept of the "other" in philosophy and sociology. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel first articulated the idea as a central element of self-consciousness. He argued that individuals develop self-awareness only when they recognise another self-conscious being^[6]. In his view, the self depends on the presence of the "other" for definition and reflection. Without this encounter, individuals cannot fully understand themselves. Hegel explained in *Phenomenology of Mind* that a person sees the self-most clearly through another self-conscious individual, who acts as a mirror for identity formation. Thus, the "other" creates both tension and possibility: it may generate feelings of alienation, yet it also enables self-realization. Edmund Husserl further developed this idea through his theory of inter subjectivity. Connecting to this line, Husserl described the "other" as an alter ego, another self who exists alongside one's own consciousness. He argued that people construct meaning through relationships with others. Human interaction, therefore, shapes knowledge, understanding, and social life^[7].

Together, Hegel and Husserl laid an intellectual foundation for later discussions about identity, difference, and recognition in educational contexts. Educational scholars have applied these philosophical insights to issues of diversity and social justice. In 1999, Marilyn Cochran-Smith and her colleagues published influential work on teacher education and social justice in the United States. They responded to growing evidence that public schools failed to serve many children who did not belong to dominant cultural groups^[8]. Researchers such as James A. Banks and others called for systemic reform in schooling and teacher preparation^[9]. These scholars argued that education should not simply reproduce existing social inequalities; instead, it should promote equity and transformation. They emphasized that teachers must enter the profession with a commitment to social change rather than to maintaining traditional practices that disadvantage marginalized students. Cochran-Smith and Susan L. Lytle also explored the relationship between teacher knowledge and effective practice. In their 1999 publication in the *Review of Educational Research*, they examined what it means to "know more" and "teach better." They identified three central conceptions of teacher learning^[10].

Firstly, they described knowledge-for-practice, which includes formal subject knowledge, educational theories, and conceptual frameworks. Teachers apply this professional knowledge to improve classroom instruction. This conception assumes that expert knowledge, often produced in universities, guides effective teaching.

Secondly, they defined knowledge-in-practice as the practical wisdom teachers develop through experience. Educators refine this knowledge by analyzing classroom dilemmas, observing expert colleagues, and reflecting on

their instructional decisions. Teachers exercise judgment, interpret student responses, and adjust strategies in real time. This form of knowledge recognises teaching as an active, thoughtful craft.

Thirdly, they proposed knowledge-of-practice, which positions teachers as researchers of their own classrooms. In this model, teachers systematically investigate their work, generate local knowledge, and connect their findings to broader social and political contexts. They treat theory as a resource for critical reflection rather than a fixed authority. Through collaborative inquiry communities, teachers construct understanding about what counts as knowledge and how schools distribute power. This perspective expands the teacher's role from that of a practitioner to a knowledge producer.

In 2009, Cochran-Smith advanced a contemporary theory of teacher education for social justice. She organized the theory around three interconnected dimensions: a theory of justice, a theory of practice, and a theory of teacher preparation. The theory of justice emphasizes fairness, equity, and critical awareness of structural inequalities. The theory of practice frames teaching as a blend of knowledge, interpretive frameworks, instructional strategies, and advocacy for students and communities. The theory of teacher preparation focuses on how programs cultivate educators who can sustain justice-oriented work over time. They identified three key principles within this framework. Firstly, she highlighted equity of learning opportunity, which requires educators to challenge policies and practices that create unequal outcomes. Teachers must actively confront classroom assumptions and labels that reinforce disadvantage. Secondly, she emphasized respect for social groups, urging schools to recognize diverse racial, cultural, and linguistic traditions. Educators should integrate marginalized knowledge systems into curriculum and instruction. Thirdly, they addressed the importance of acknowledging and dealing with tensions. Teachers inevitably encounter conflicts between competing definitions of justice. Rather than ignoring these contradictions, they must engage them thoughtfully and ethically. Despite these theoretical advances, research continues to show persistent inequalities in education. Studies indicate that some groups of learners consistently receive greater advantages within school systems than others. Factors such as cultural background, first language, socioeconomic status, geographic location, gender, and family structure influence educational pathways and outcomes. Scholars such as Martin Mills and others have documented how structural conditions shape students' access to opportunity^[11]. Researchers, including Susan Groundwater-Smith, Amanda Keddie, and Leonard Rowan, have further analysed how demographic and cultural diversity affects schooling contexts^[12]. These studies reveal that students may experience marginalization even when they do not belong to a statistical minority group. Schools often privilege dominant cultural norms, language practices, and social identities. As a result, some learners feel excluded or minoritised within mainstream classrooms. Literature, therefore, underscores the importance of preparing teachers who understand diversity not as a challenge to eliminate, but as a resource to value.

Overall, the literature review demonstrates that philosophical theories of recognition, combined with contemporary research on teacher education and social justice, provide a strong conceptual foundation for inclusive practice. Scholars consistently argue that educators must acknowledge difference, question inequitable structures, and

generate knowledge through reflective inquiry. Although challenges persist, this body of research offers guidance for building educational systems that respect diversity and promote equitable learning opportunities for all students.

Policy Instruments Advancing Inclusivity in India's Education Framework

India's education policy promotes learning for all and actively supports equitable and inclusive education. It ensures that every child receives equal opportunities to participate and learn, regardless of mental or physical ability. The Kothari Commission first addressed issues of access and participation between 1964 and 1966. It strongly recommended a standard school system that would remain open to all children, irrespective of caste, creed, community, religion, economic background, or social status ^[13]. The Official Language Act laid the foundation for India's linguistic framework ^[14]. Later, the National Education Policy introduced the Three-Language Formula to promote multilingualism and preserve linguistic diversity. This policy required government schools to teach three languages: the mother tongue or regional language, Hindi, and English ^[15]. The Indian Constitution recognizes 22 Scheduled Languages under the Eighth Schedule. Policymakers revised the education policy in 1986 and again in 1992 with minor modifications ^[16]. States adopted different versions of the Three-Language Formula based on regional needs, administrative decisions, and local linguistic contexts. However, many state governments faced challenges in implementing the formula effectively due to limited resources. The National Education Policy of 2020 ^[17] provides a comprehensive framework to strengthen the implementation of the Three-Language Formula. The key provisions include:

1. States, regions, and students can choose three languages, provided that at least two languages are native to India.
2. Schools must priorities early childhood education in the mother tongue or regional language.
3. Institutions should offer a wide range of language options to promote linguistic diversity.
4. Authorities must train teachers in multilingual education and recruit educators proficient in local languages.
5. Institutions should develop online resources and instructional materials in Indian languages.
6. Schools should use the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language as the medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, and preferably until Grade 8 or beyond.
7. The policy continues the Three-Language Formula while promoting national unity and strengthening multilingual competence across the country.

Research Methodology

This study collected data from fifty school teachers using a random sampling method. The researcher asked participants to complete an objective questionnaire consisting of ten questions, along with an open-ended section that allowed them to share their own strategies and beliefs. The study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives on how linguistic diversity influences their teaching practices and how they adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of students from varied linguistic backgrounds. By selecting participants randomly from both government and private schools, the researcher ensured a broad range of experiences and viewpoints.

Table 1: The Interview Questions with participants' answers in numbers and percentage

	Questions	Responses			
1	Do you believe that linguistic diversity among students impacts classroom dynamics?	Yes. 44, 88%	No. 6, 12%		
2	Have you encountered challenges in communicating with students who have limited proficiency in the primary language of instruction?	Yes. 50, 80%	No. 10, 20%		
3	Do you actively incorporate students' native languages or dialects into your teaching strategies?	Yes. 42, 84%	No. 8, 16%		
4	How often do you promote inclusivity and respect for linguistic diversity within your classroom environment?	Rarely. 3, 6%	Occasionally. 9, 18%	Frequently. 13, 26%	Always. 25, 50%
5	Do you believe that embracing linguistic otherness enhances overall learning outcomes and promotes critical thinking among students?	Yes. 39, 78%	No. 5, 10%	Not Sure. 6, 12%	
6	What resources or support do you believe are necessary to better address linguistic diversity in teaching and learning?	Professional development. 7, 14%	Multilingual resources. 38, 76%	Support staff. 4, 8%	Other (please specify). 1, 2%
7	How do you approach curriculum adaptation to accommodate the linguistic needs of students with diverse language backgrounds?	Modify materials. 11, 22%	Provide language support. 17, 34%	Encourage peer collaboration. 22, 44%	Other (please specify). 0
8	How effective do you believe teacher training and professional development are in preparing educators to address linguistic otherness in the classroom?	Very effective. 36, 72%	Somewhat effective. 9, 18%	Not very effective. 5, 10%	Not effective at all. 0
9	In what ways do you encourage students to embrace linguistic diversity in the classroom?	Group discussion. 14, 28%	Language exchange activities. 16, 32%	Collaborative projects. 19, 38%	We don't do that in class. 1, 2%
10	How do you support students who are reluctant to communicate due to language differences?	Provide additional language support. 19, 38%	Pair them with a language buddy. 20, 40%	Offer alternative forms of expression. 10, 20%	Other (please specify). 1, 2%

Results

The findings show that educators actively implement inclusive and practical strategies to support all learners. Teachers combine multiple instructional methods to design engaging classroom environments that respond to students' linguistic needs. They adjust their teaching styles, simplify explanations, encourage peer interaction, and occasionally use bilingual communication to ensure better understanding. These actions reflect their conscious effort to make learning accessible and meaningful for every student. Most teachers demonstrate awareness of linguistic diversity and acknowledge its importance in the teaching process. However, they report that the majority of their students come from Hindi- and Urdu-speaking backgrounds. Because of this linguistic similarity, they experience limited variation in linguistic needs within their classrooms. Although they understand the broader concept of multilingual diversity, they believe that their immediate teaching context does not present significant language-related challenges. Overall, the results highlight teachers' readiness to adopt inclusive practices despite encountering relatively moderate linguistic diversity.

Conclusion and Discussion

A curriculum that reflects students' cultural values and identities strengthens their interest in learning and deepens their sense of belonging. When students see their languages, traditions, and lived experiences represented in classroom content, they participate more confidently and engage more actively. Educators and stakeholders must recognize this connection to create inclusive learning environments that nurture every learner's potential. Teachers need to acknowledge differences in language proficiency, communication styles, and learning preferences, and they must design instruction that responds directly to these variations. Effective inclusive practice requires deliberate planning. Teachers should implement differentiated instruction through personalized learning plans that address individual strengths and challenges. They can adapt textbooks and classroom materials, incorporate multilingual resources, and provide structured language support where necessary. Language exchange activities encourage peer learning and mutual respect among students from different backgrounds. Educators should also allow alternative forms of expression, such as visual presentations, storytelling, or project-based tasks, so that students can demonstrate understanding in diverse ways. By integrating culturally relevant materials into lessons, teachers make learning meaningful and relatable. Bilingual education programs play a significant role in this process. Such programs strengthen students' language skills while promoting respect for linguistic diversity. When schools value more than one language, they validate students' identities and broaden cultural awareness within the classroom. As a result, bilingual education enriches the academic experience and prepares learners to participate in an increasingly interconnected society. The broader aim of education is to create an environment where every student feels respected and included, regardless of background. To achieve this goal, teacher preparation programs must encourage educators to view themselves as participants in cultural diversity rather than neutral observers. However, many teacher education programs still struggle to prepare teachers who feel confident addressing issues of inclusion and

equity. Institutions must therefore prioritize the preparation of inclusive educators as a central objective of teacher education reform. While all students deserve equal support, teachers must provide different forms of assistance based on individual needs. Equity in education requires responsive, not uniform, practices. An effective teacher understands each learner's individuality and shapes instructional strategies accordingly. Despite ongoing research, scholars have made limited progress in fully understanding how personality influences teaching and learning processes. Nevertheless, successful teaching rests on two essential foundations: strong subject knowledge and instructional skills grounded in sound research. Recruitment and retention policies should also reflect inclusive values. Schools should diversify their teaching workforce by including teachers from diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. At the same time, they should select candidates whose beliefs and experiences align with principles of social justice. As noted by Cochran-Smith and Lytle, teacher education programs must integrate subject knowledge, pedagogy, culture, language, and the social context of schooling to promote justice-oriented practice. This study also presents certain limitations. Most participating teachers did not work with highly linguistically diverse student populations. Although the sample included educators with varied experience, the relatively small number of participants limits the generalizability of the findings. The study offers valuable insights, but future research should examine actual classroom practices in greater depth to develop a more comprehensive understanding of inclusive education. "The problem is not how to eliminate differences, but how to build unity while preserving those differences."—Rabindranath Tagore This quote highlights the idea that diversity should not be erased or suppressed. Instead, societies and educational institutions should value differences and create harmony by respecting and embracing them.

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