LEX LOCALIS-JOURNAL OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT
ISSN:1581-5374 E-ISSN:1855-363X
VOL. 23, NO. S5 (2025)

Decolonising Communication: Integrating Indian Orality and Thought into English Language Pedagogy

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Abstract
English language education in India has long been placed within the bounds of a colonial framework, prioritizing Eurocentric norms of communication, grammar, and fluency over native norms, thereby sidelining India's rich traditions of orality. The colonial teaching framework reduces language acquisition to a skill that favours a certain variety of speakers and rejects others. This paper aims to discuss a decolonised approach to the teaching of the English language, which aims at making language learning a part of the culture in which it is being taught. It centers the reader and his/her worldview in the process, examining whether these traditions can help develop the skills of young postcolonial learners today. The study will reclaim older forms of Indian traditions related to language with a major focus on orality, such as is found in the tradition of *"katha*, *samvāda*, *bhajan*, and shastrartha to assess whether they have stood the test of time and whether they can contribute to developing the skills of postcolonial learners. The term 'post' may signify an end but the effects of colonialism still run through the veins of generations affected by the rule. To dip back into precolonial traditions to gain the ability to become active listeners and critical thinkers is to truly write back to the empire, using their language but colouring it over with Indian soil. This paper will draw upon Indian linguistic theories propounded by Bhartrihari and Panini to highlight India's rich intellectual traditions and their role in shaping communication. It will also seek to universalize Indian theories of Linguistics to find alternative ways to understand words and, through them, consciousness itself. This paper will also offer a critique of current communicative models like the 'LSRW', which often fail to engage with their learners' cultural identity. To help us with this task, the study will cite institute case studies that propose strategies to integrate Indian knowledge systems into the English language, to create an interdisciplinary approach to language teaching. Aligned with the National Education Policy 2020, this approach affirms that reclaiming India's communicative roots is not only possible but essential for fostering confident, reflective, and culturally connected English speakers.

Introduction: The Colonial Legacy in Language Education

"The medium of communication is not neutral. It shapes the way we think, speak, and understand the world." (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 1986)

Language is many things to many people. It is a tool for communication, but its function cannot be limited to this role. Language offers a means of expression and acts as a creative force for people. Creativity is often linked to identity; identity is expressed creatively through the medium of language, and language itself draws from culture, which also shapes identity. These forces are so interconnected that it is nearly impossible to know and study language without drawing on the culture of the place where it is being spoken. The learner's worldview is intensely shaped by his/her identity, which in turn is expressed through language. In India, the teaching of English to natives began with Thomas Macaulay's 'Minute on Indian Education' published in 1835. This document proposed "English to become the language of instruction for the Indian elite, marking out a turning point in history, changing the fate of generations, who would come to see the language as a symbol

of superiority. English was no longer just a language; it became a symbol of power, prestige, and intellectual vigour. In the process, Indian languages and communicative traditions were systematically pushed to the margins." (Deshpande,1993)

English language teaching in Indian universities is often based on old colonial ideals, as the universities were mostly founded in the pre-independence era. They carry the colonial legacy of their masters even to this day, often display this legacy in the traditions they maintain. What is forgotten, however, is that India has a legacy of its own; we had plenty of wonderful universities before the British takeover, and unfortunately, we have forgotten our true traditions. Universities mirror the British model in both content and style of teaching, which disconnects the student from his/her surroundings, alienating them from what they already know. They are prescribed textbooks which place emphasis on British grammar, spellings, and 'correct pronunciations', along with "neutral" accents, which clearly ask students to think in a manner that resembles Westerners. These practices appear to aim at creating a homogenous population, which for all intents and purposes will be a copy of Western people. Institutes do not seem to factor in the fact that language shapes thought. It builds the very voice in our head, and students who get taught to mimic English, in a way that it perfectly resembles the English spoken and written by Westerners, with examples borrowed from a foreign context, end up losing their own voice. By striving to adhere to another's rigid structure, the self gets lost in the muddle. "The listening and speaking tasks, which put more focus on formal correctness than cultural relevance or personal expression, fail the student." (Kumar,1991). As a consequence of an effort at mimicry, classrooms turn out students who are afraid of speaking up, afraid of contextualising their experience in the language of a foreign tongue, turning the class into a zone of silence where anxiety is a common side effect. An anxious student is never a good learner. A self-conscious learner is unlikely to participate in class, which takes away from the teacher-learner experience. "This model of language education, still dominant today, carries deep limitations which overlook traditions of oral storytelling, philosophical dialogue, folk performance, and poetic expression, which are all rooted in memory, rhythm, and emotion" (Hibbin,2015). It also overlooks the fact that communication in India has long been dialogic; language has always been the means to express the self, and the rules for that expression have always been flexible to the user. Language is adaptable and a shifting artifact. In the Indian context, it isn't just words spoken that hold value to the listener, but the very use of silence carries weight in conversation. Listeners know how to uncover the hidden and layered meaning behind the silence- whether it be the silence of anger or the respectful silence sometimes maintained by the speaker. The community is joined together through its use of language, which builds 'collective memory', which is a contextualising force. Every member of society associates one meaning with the uttered phrase or idiom as it forms a part of their collective memory. By seeking to tap into western thoughts, we end up losing touch with our own frequencies. This is disadvantageous to the population.

The National Education Policy 2020 places an emphasis on education, now requiring its roots to be connected to Indian culture and proposes the integration of 'Indian Knowledge Systems' with 'modern education.' Both need to go hand in hand to create a well-developed individual. The policy focuses on an effort to rethink how English is taught in Indian classrooms. NEP by no means rejects English, nor does it ask for a return to some bright overly romanticized past. What the policy wants to implement is a broader more worldly approach to language learning that does not restrict itself to one approach.

This paper hopes to place Indian orality and philosophical thought at the centre of its practice. For Indian theorists to use tools available through on-ground research, to humanize and recontextualize English language teaching. This can be done by consciously reconnecting with traditions of *katha*, *samvāda*, *shruti*, and *sabda*, through active teachers who take initiatives to create classroom environments where "language is lived, embodied, and felt meaningfully." In doing so, communication becomes not just a skill to master, but a relationship to nurture.

Understanding Indian Orality and Indigenous Communication Systems

'Orality' cannot be limited to its role as an act of speech. In the Indian tradition, which carries a great multiplicity of meanings, orality is accepted as a rich ritualistic act. Orality involves forces that include facets of memory, calls for active listening, and includes gestures that set a rhythm of body movement, almost ritualistic in frame, and also incorporates silence within its folds. Silence is neither nothingness nor a deficit; it holds rich meaning and demonstrates that orality is more than mere words uttered. Orality is a system of communication preceding all forms of written communication, yet it is easily dismissed these days as unfit for serious communication forms. What this thought fails to realise is that orality is how cultural knowledge and generational systems of understanding are passed on. Storytelling is the most powerful form of knowledge transmission forming ties of kinship among members of a community, sharing emotions, experiences, and values to keep ties strong. 21st-century capitalism has set us on a path away from the tradition of oral transmissions and connection, but it is imperative to build futures on human ties. We have been alienated from each other for far too long, and what will restore balance is the power to listen well and perform sites of connection through orality-a deeply participatory activity. We can shape how stories are told, how they take root in the subconscious, how people pause to listen, absorb information, and repeat it, teaching us how to ask questions and pass understandings across generations. "*Katha* is a powerful format for storytelling; the *katha* blends narrative, music, dance, and philosophy." *Kathas* like the *Ramkatha*, *Harikatha*, or *Kathakalakshepam* offer stories that are more than entertainment; they raise a population, build moral individuals who can work together to uplift society from prejudiced thinking, create safe spaces for emotional release, and help form a collective memory. Similar to *kathas*, *bhajans*, and *Baul* songs combine poems with music to create spaces of devotion, reflection, and community. This tradition does not vary much and is found in many religions; For example, the Buddhist and Jain traditions include the *Jataka* tales and *Panchatantra* stories, which carry forth moral lessons and social values. By crafting themselves in the guise of children's stories with talking animals, these stories use simple language to communicate deeper meanings. Similarly, the "*Vachana"* tradition of Karnataka employs mystic poets who convey spiritual truths in simple, everyday language which is meant to be heard and shared aloud amongst the community of listeners. Here, there is an actual community of listeners to hear the stories.

Oral traditions did not need formal institutional support because they had the support of *shruti* that which is heard and *smriti* that which is remembered. In Indian philosophy, *shruti* and *smriti* both hold a sacred place. *Shruti* emphasizes the importance of attentive listening, a type of listening that is not passive but actively builds an understanding of the laws of the universe. *Smriti*, on the other hand, depends upon memory, but not the sort of memory required for rote learn. Smriti encourages recollection, which is shaped by repetition. At the core of *smriti* and *shruti* is the "sabda" which simply means sound or word. The word does not limit itself to just speech, though it is an important function ; it most importantly serves as a carrier of truth. This forms the crux of language, which

in Bhartrihari's philosophy is called vāk, "seen as a creative and spiritual force that unfolds reality itself.

Another unique feature of Indian orality is its dialogic nature; it is deeply performative and follows the traditions of *samvāda* (dialogue), *upadesha* (instruction), and *shastrartha* (scriptural debate) which reflect a culture of conversation. The *Upanishads* are composed entirely in the form of dialogues that often took place between teachers and students, similar to the works of Plato and his master Socrates. Philosophers kept the conversation ever flowing with their dialogues that were often open-ended instead of one-sided lectures. The goal was not to win an argument, but to find a certain clarity together.

Understanding past modes of communication for modern audiences can offer new insights into how we should be teaching and learning. In India, the expression of self is not separated from values. You are what you speak, and, how you speak it. You are also judged by how well you listen, how eagerly you try to understand multiple worldviews, and beyond these acts, what is important is to recognise the value of silence. The task is to expand the surface in a search for meaning instead of digging behind the scenes. Overinterpretation can lead to grievous loss, while no interpretation can render you dumb. There needs to be a balance in weightage placed on language learning to incorporate the riches of different cultures- and your own culture most of all. These elements have been largely absent in conventional English language teaching, the application of which holds the potential to transform classrooms into spaces that are more inclusive and in tune with identity politics.

Indian Thought on Language, Meaning, and Consciousness

The modern classroom teaches language as a technical skill where the rules of grammar and syntax rule the mind, which is not a particularly bad thing at first glance, as language does carry rules that are meant to be followed systematically. The problem arises when the student is fed with 'correct' pronunciation and vocabulary lists, which do not seem to preserve his/her cultural integrity. A lack of Indian influence on students only aims to alienate them from the very homes they have grown up in. Language has to be held in greater esteem than merely just a tool for communication. Language reflects thought; you don't express ideas in a language you feel is foreign or superior to your identity. Language, as a force shaping consciousness, forms a bridge between the inner and outer world of the person learning. Its main purpose is to connect the person to the world surrounding him/her. Self-awareness is a key function for any learner acquiring a language, not just English. Any possibility for teaching English has to go beyond treating it as a second language and position it as a language to convey reflective thoughts to a wider social order, the globe itself. Bhartrihari, in his work *Vākya-padiya,* introduced the concept of *sphota,* "meaning does not lie in individual words or sounds, but in the sudden inner burst of understanding that comes when we grasp the whole sentence or idea." This concept encourages the idea that language is not just a spoken set of dialogue but a force in an ever-shifting motion, revealing its flavour slowly-moving from silence and returning to silence. This reminds us that true communication begins in stillness, and depends on the listener and speaker's true presence.

Like *sphota,* the concept of vāk is important to understand the tradition of language in India. "Vāk represents the sacred power of speech- speech is taken to be an energy more than a sound- an energy - that takes birth in the uprising of intention and the depths of truth. The *Rig Veda* speaks of vāk as a divine force that brought the world into being. This belief connects language to the practice of mantra. Repetition of sound is used to align thought to breath and gain control over

emotions. This suggests that the modern-day classroom should do better than drilling vocabulary into a student's brain and instead put efforts into cultivating certain mindful rituals for students to gain confidence in their language ability.

Such a structure of language was also explored by Panini, whose text *Ashtadhyayi* is one of the most advanced grammars ever written. Panini's grammar surprisingly does not limit to giving rules about correctness but directs attention to the inner logic of sound and structure. His book aimed to train the mind in discipline. In today's terms, we might say that Panini's work looks at language learning as a way to sharpen cognitive skills, which are useful out in the world, while also helping the learner remain rooted in his/her own cultural terrain.

All these theorists demonstrate that language can go beyond grammar- an idea largely unheard of in Western traditions. Indian philosophy portrays language to be linked to consciousness. Vāk has four essential parts: *para (transcendental)*, *pashyanti (visionary)*, *madhyama (mental)*, and *vaikhari (spoken)*, which set it apart from how language is perceived in the modern age. Bharaithari's model invites teachers and learners to slow down and reflect on what lies beneath the surface of speech and to recognize silence for what it does for thought and emotion. Bringing these ideas into the English classroom does not mean replacing grammar with spiritualism, it actually means there is an open space where learners can engage with awareness, creativity, and grow cultural pride. It means allowing English to be taught not just as a superior foreign language, but as a medium that may have to carry Indian ways of thinking, feeling, and being.

Colonial Constructs in Current English Language Pedagogy

While English is recognised as a global language, the way it is taught often carries the legacy of colonial hierarchy and its accompanying cultural exclusion, which creates shame. The concept of "standard English" is associated with British vocabulary and grammar norms, setting up a binary. Students are trained to sound "native-like," as if their natural voice is not good enough. This creates pressure, anxiety, and the belief that success depends on imitating someone else's language. Regional variations of English and mother-tongue influences are seen as errors rather than unique forms of expression. As a result, students often lose confidence in their voice before they've even found it.

The LSRW model also presents problems in how language is taught. LSRW stands for Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. It might sound like a practical method of teaching a language, but the issue is that it is often applied extremely mechanically, without attention to cultural context. Listening becomes passive note-taking, speaking becomes scripted dialogue, reading is reduced to deciphering comprehension passages, and writing focuses more on form than meaning. Open-ended and curious dialogue is prevented; a lack of clear conversation is felt, the energy of storytelling is missing, and the silence of reflection is rarely a part of the lesson plan. During colonial times, rigid structures of grammar were taught to produce clerks, not thinkers. Communication was seen as a skill for reporting, not relating; for following, not questioning.

English, thus got to be treated not as a subject but as a status symbol and a privileged language. Fluency in English, especially with the right accent, is a marker of intelligence and social status. This reinforces existing inequalities and discourages learners who come from non-English backgrounds. The classroom, instead of being a space of discovery, often becomes a stage for performance and comparison. This chapter argues that by bringing orality and thought into play we begin to shift the focus from correctness to connectedness.

Pedagogical Strategies for Integrating Indian Orality in ELT

To move from theory to practice, English language teaching in India must reimagine the classroom as a space where communication is not only learned but lived. Indian oral traditions offer a rich resource to make language learning more engaging and culturally meaningful. Instead of focusing solely on textbooks, teachers can draw from storytelling, song, dialogue, and practices rooted in India's heritage. The simplest strategy that can be applied here is to reintroduce storytelling as a central tool for developing speaking and listening skills. Traditional forms such as *katha*, *panchatantra*, or regional folktales can be adapted to suit various language levels. Students can take turns narrating stories or reinterpreting them through role-play. This builds fluency, vocabulary, and imagination while reinforcing values and cultural memory.

Similarly, the use of oral poetry and musical forms like *bhajans*, *Baul* songs, or *abhangs* can transform pronunciation and rhythm practice. Chanting a verse repeatedly, paying attention to its emotion, can help students internalize sounds more naturally than mechanical repetition. It also makes the learning process more enjoyable, participatory, and mindful.

Dialogic formats like *samvāda* (dialogue) and *shastrartha* (debate) can offer valuable models for developing speaking confidence and critical thinking. Students, in this way, are introduced to how to respectfully disagree rather than engage in debating competitions. This approach fosters philosophical questioning and encourage shared inquiry. Paired discussions, group reflections, and teacher-student dialogues can all be reshaped in this spirit, encouraging learners to speak from their experience while listening deeply to others.

Further, an important implementation involves observing silence as part of classroom communication. Silence is not nothingness, but a form of preparation, attention, and being present. A short moment of quiet before or after a speaking activity can help students collect their thoughts, listen more attentively, and speak with clarity. This is especially valuable for students who may feel anxious about speaking English.

Pronunciation practice, too, can benefit from Indic approaches. Mantras and verses can be used not just for memorization, but for training breath control, articulation, and stress patterns. Unlike the pressure to adopt a Western accent, these exercises encourage students to feel their voice, connect it to meaning, and speak with authenticity. Teachers can also encourage students to find their voice by designing the learning material with localised context, giving examples of local idioms and community stories to help students grasp an understanding of what it is to read and write well. This approach aligns with NEP 2020's call for multilingualism and Indian Knowledge Systems as part of mainstream education.

These strategies do not reject conventional methods but expand them. They invite teachers to go beyond worksheets and assessments, to see language as a living force shaped by emotion, culture, and imagination. English classrooms can become places where we teach students not only to communicate in a foreign language, but also to develop authentic confidence.

Towards a Decolonised Classroom: Praxis and Policy

A call for transforming the English language classroom is a creative endeavour necessary for those of us who are trying to shift toward inclusivity and give students a sense of belonging. However, for this change to take root, it has to move beyond the class into educational policy. A decolonised education is not simply about adding local content to an existing syllabus; it calls for a reimagining of the very way we perceive language. One of the first steps to follow in this attempt at transformation is the 'creation of cultural learning materials.' Textbooks and resources often

privilege Western narratives, characters, and examples, while Indian voices and stories are either underrepresented or stereotyped.
Second, teacher preparation is critical. Many educators themselves have been trained in colonial models of English teaching. To move toward a decolonised classroom, teachers need exposure to Indian communication theories. This can be done through workshops, collaborations with scholars of Indian philosophy, literature, and linguistics.
Third, changes at the institutional level are needed. Collaboration with Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) centers can create interdisciplinary opportunities and spaces for collaboration, helping bridge the gap between academic theory and lived cultural practice.
Fourth, the National Education Policy 2020 has opened the door for innovative techniques in teaching-learning. NEP promotes multilingualism and the integration of traditional knowledge into mainstream education. Assessment patterns can also evolve to include creative expression through presentations, and community engagement.
This would help build up a strong, confident learner who is comfortable embodying his/her cultural identity and is provided with ample space to express himself/herself.

Case Examples and Pilot Initiatives
These case examples illustrate how educators, institutions, and learners are beginning to decolonise communication in practice.

Case 1: Storytelling Pedagogy at Azim Premji Schools (Multiple States)
"Azim Premji Foundation schools employ oral storytelling to include regional folktales, panchatantra, and devotional songs, helping students connect with their roots. Children begin their English lessons not with textbook grammar, but with teachers narrating stories that deeply engage the listeners." Later, they are encouraged to retell the tales in their own words or organise skits and sometimes translate the stories across languages. The result has been a significant improvement in the learner's confidence in the language.

Case 2: Gurukul-Model Communication Labs at Sri Sri University (Odisha)
Sri Sri University has created an IKS curriculum that combines English learning with classical Indian traditions. They use the Pancha Kosha framework (five layers of self-awareness from Vedantic philosophy) to design their HR and communication courses. Students learn to speak and listen by doing tasks that are aligned to this model which ask them to slow down. Classroom rituals include silence before discussion and proper conversations around Indian texts which have been translated into English.

Case 3: Kabir Project in English Classrooms (Ahmedabad and Bangalore)
Inspired by the Kabir Project (run by Shabnam Virmani) several liberal arts colleges have piloted English seminars focused on Bhakti poetry as a medium of dissent. Students listened to folk singers from Rajasthan or Kutch, read English translations of Kabir's dohas, and explored the poetic form as a mode of critical thinking and self-expression. Classroom discussion encouraged bilingual explorations, translation as interpretation, and rhythm-based reading aloud. These were deeply rooted in Indian culture but taught through English. (Virmani, 2003–Present).

Case 4: Community-Oriented English Teaching by Ekal Vidyalayas

The Ekal Vidyalaya movement has taken root in tribal regions, teaching English alongside preserving tribal traditions. Here, children learn through songs, riddles, and games, many of which are first explained in the mother tongue, then built upon using English. This code-switching approach respects cultural identity while introducing learners to global language tools. Unlike formal grammar-first instruction, this method reduces fear and supports intuitive learning.

Case 5: Experimental Rasa Theory Workshops in ELT (Delhi NCR)

A group of educators at private universities in Delhi NCR have run pilot workshops aligning *Rasa* theory with speaking exercises. Each session focuses on a specific *rasa* (emotion), such as *karuna* (compassion) or *veera* (courage), and students are invited to perform monologues, narrate memories, or read poetry while exploring the emotional tone. This practice enhances pronunciation, modulation, and confidence, while also introducing students to Indian aesthetic concepts.

These case studies suggest a shift in how language learning in India is beginning to reflect its traditions.

Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Bringing together Indian knowledge with English language teaching would open up possibilities for great innovation, but it does not come without challenges. Reform of teaching must account for many complexities. Teachers and policy makers face difficulties because of social and institutional resistance to change. One major obstacle is the resistance shown by educational institutions towards decolonising the curriculum. Many university departments and boards continue to cling to inherited colonial modes of teaching in the name of keeping tradition alive, reinforcing the linguistic notion of correctness. Efforts to bring in local traditions through Indian languages and non-Western theory are met with mockery. Teachers and students alike hesitate to embrace approaches that do not align with conventional, exam-oriented methods of learning. Curriculum design in most Indian universities is rigid and centrally controlled. Even when policies like NEP 2020 advocate for Indian Knowledge Systems, the actual process of integrating these into syllabi can be slow, uneven, and bureaucratic. Teachers themselves lack access to relevant training in Indian knowledge systems and face similar anxiety as their students do when they hear about this change.

Additionally, people all over heavily romanticize tradition which can be a barrier to implementing necessary changes in the education system. While Indian oralities are wonderfully innovative, they should still be approached with critical engagement and without nostalgia. Not all traditional practices are inclusive and many are outdated and exclude people based on caste, gender, or region. Educators must be mindful not to present tradition as a fixed ideal, but an unbiased learning environment is hard to cultivate, though it is imperative. Inclusivity is needed to sustain any long-term change. India is so diverse in regions and cultures that there is no single “Indian” way of speaking or storytelling. What works in one region or language may not resonate elsewhere. Care must be taken to ensure that orality does not become another standardized or homogenized model. Instead, local forms should be honoured for their specificity and allowed to coexist in pluralistic classrooms.

Lastly, one must ask oneself, *'Who gets to select which traditions are used?' 'Whose voice gets amplified?' 'How do we avoid turning cultural practices into content, rather than treating them as living knowledge systems with depth and dignity*?' These are questions that must be addressed. Despite these challenges, we are moving towards including Indianness in English language.

Conclusion

Communication is not just for the sake of exchange of information; it also demands the sharing of self with another, sharing of culture, and gives a space to create meaning. In India, oral traditions have long shaped the rhythms of learning and human connection. The teaching of English, if it is to continue in the postcolonial era, must move beyond colonial structures to reflect the truth buried underneath the glamour. Reclaiming forces of storytelling, inventing dialogue, and interpreting the silence which again does not mean turning away from English, but instead transforming how the language can be taught and felt. A decolonised approach does not reject the modern but repositions it within local practices. By drawing from Indian philosophy and linguistic traditions, educators may nurture learners who are not only fluent in English but also confident in their cultural voice and rooted in their social realities.

In this new space, the learner is not just a rote learner pressured by exams or employment all year round, but a person who learns to communicate with purpose. Not a mere speaker but a storyteller.

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