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Dialect as a Barrier to Reading Comprehension in English

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Abstract

Dialect significantly influences reading comprehension in English, particularly among ESL learners whose home dialects differ from Standard English. This study examines how phonological, syntactic, and morphological differences create barriers to decoding and meaning construction during reading. Using reading comprehension tasks and classroom-based analysis, the research identifies dialectal mismatch as a key factor affecting fluency, accuracy, and interpretation of academic texts. The findings indicate that students experiencing greater dialect divergence demonstrate lower comprehension levels, while those exposed to dialect awareness and code-switching strategies show improved reading outcomes. The study argues against viewing dialect differences as linguistic deficits and advocates for dialect-sensitive pedagogical practices. By foregrounding linguistic diversity, this paper contributes to inclusive approaches to English reading instruction and emphasizes the need for culturally responsive literacy education.

Keywords: Dialect, reading comprehension, ESL learners, Standard English, code-switching

Introduction:

Reading comprehension in Indian ESL classrooms is profoundly shaped by the multilingual and multidialectal realities of learners. Students approach English not as an isolated linguistic system but through the phonological, syntactic, and orthographic frameworks of their home languages. These frameworks significantly influence how learners decode, interpret, and construct meaning from English texts. In everyday classroom interactions, this influence becomes particularly visible. For example, learners commonly address teachers using the term *"Madam,"* yet produce multiple spelling and pronunciation variants such as *"maydom," "medam," "medom," "maydum," "medem,"*"madem" "madom" and abbreviated forms like *"mam."* Such variations, though

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seemingly trivial, reflect systematic dialectal interference rather than random or careless errors.

These deviations are largely attributable to the phonological characteristics of regional languages, particularly Telugu, where vowel length, stress patterns, and certain consonantal distinctions differ markedly from those of Standard English. When learners rely on familiar sound systems to decode English words, these patterns are transferred into reading and writing tasks. This process of phonological and orthographic transfer affects word recognition, decoding accuracy, and reading fluency, thereby influencing overall comprehension.

In states such as Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, Telugu functions as the dominant home language, while English is primarily acquired through formal education. This creates a linguistic gap between learners' everyday language practices and the Standard English used in academic texts. Telugu, a Dravidian language with distinct phonological, syntactic, and morphological structures, shapes how learners perceive, process, and interpret English texts. During reading, Telugu-speaking ESL learners often subconsciously map English sounds, sentence patterns, and grammatical structures onto Telugu linguistic frameworks—a phenomenon commonly described as language or dialectal transfer. While such transfer may occasionally facilitate comprehension, it frequently poses challenges in decoding and meaning construction.

Despite extensive research on second language reading, the impact of dialectal mismatch between learners' home language and Standard English remains underexplored in the Indian ESL context. Reading difficulties are often attributed to lack of proficiency or effort, resulting in deficit-oriented interpretations that overlook the systematic role of mother-tongue influence. This study situates itself within Indian ESL classrooms and examines how Telugu linguistic features influence English reading comprehension among undergraduate learners. By analyzing classroom-based evidence and reading comprehension outcomes, the study argues for the adoption of dialect-sensitive and culturally responsive pedagogical practices to enhance reading proficiency and academic performance.

Research on reading comprehension in Indian ESL contexts consistently highlights the persistent influence of the mother tongue on English literacy development. Cummins' (1979) theory of linguistic interdependence posits that cognitive and academic skills acquired in the first language can transfer to the second language. However, when structural differences between the two languages are significant, such transfer may result in interference rather than facilitation.

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Studies focusing on Indian learners (Mohan, 2007; Annamalai, 2011) indicate that Dravidian languages such as Telugu differ substantially from English in terms of word order, tense marking, and phonological organization. Telugu follows a Subject–Object–Verb (SOV) syntactic structure, whereas English follows a Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) structure. This syntactic divergence often leads to misinterpretation of complex English sentences during reading, particularly those involving passive constructions, embedded clauses, and relative pronouns.

Phonological research reveals that Telugu-speaking learners encounter difficulty distinguishing certain English sounds absent in Telugu, such as /v/ and /w/, /θ/ and /t/, and /ð/ and /d/. Consonant clusters also pose significant challenges, resulting in epenthetic vowel insertion, as in *school* pronounced as *iskool* or *street* as *istreet*. Such phonological deviations directly affect word recognition and slow down reading fluency, increasing cognitive load during comprehension.

Morphological differences further complicate reading comprehension. Telugu does not employ articles (*a, an, the*) or prepositions in the same manner as English. Consequently, learners often omit or misinterpret these grammatical markers, leading to difficulties in understanding definiteness, specificity, and spatial relations in English texts. For instance, sentences such as *"The student submitted the assignment"* versus *"A student submitted an assignment"* are frequently interpreted as having identical meanings.

Recent Indian classroom-based studies emphasize dialect awareness, contrastive analysis, and translanguaging as effective strategies for improving reading comprehension. Rather than discouraging the use of the home language, these approaches encourage strategic comparison between languages, fostering metalinguistic awareness without devaluing learners' linguistic identities.

The present study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine the impact of dialectal differences on ESL learners' reading comprehension. The participants consisted of undergraduate students from Telugu-speaking regions enrolled in English courses at a government degree college.

Quantitative data were collected through standardized reading comprehension tests measuring decoding accuracy, reading fluency, and interpretative ability. Descriptive statistics were used to compare performance across learners exhibiting varying degrees of dialectal influence.

Qualitative data were gathered through classroom observations, reading-aloud sessions, and semi-structured interviews. These data were thematically analyzed to identify recurring patterns related to phonological, syntactic, and morphological transfer, as well as learners' perceptions of reading difficulty.

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The analysis revealed that Telugu linguistic influence played a significant role in shaping students' English reading performance. Phonological transfer was most evident during oral reading. Learners frequently mispronounced words containing consonant clusters and unfamiliar vowel combinations. Words such as *through, thought, world, clothes,* and *strength* caused hesitation and repeated self-correction, disrupting reading fluency and comprehension.

Syntactic influence emerged prominently in sentence-level interpretation. Students often misinterpreted passive constructions and complex clauses, reordering sentence meaning according to Telugu SOV patterns. For example, sentences such as *"The experiment was conducted by the students"* were often misunderstood as *"The students were experimented on,"* indicating confusion arising from unfamiliar passive structures.

Morphological challenges included the omission or misinterpretation of articles and prepositions. Learners struggled to differentiate between *"in the room"* and *"into the room,"* affecting comprehension of narrative movement and spatial relationships. Similarly, confusion between *few* and *a few*, or *much* and *many*, led to inaccurate interpretation of quantitative information in academic texts.

However, learners who received dialect-awareness instruction demonstrated measurable improvement. When teachers explicitly contrasted Telugu and English structures—for instance, explaining differences in sentence order or article usage—students showed increased accuracy, confidence, and engagement during reading comprehension tasks.

The findings confirm that Telugu linguistic structures significantly influence English reading comprehension in Indian ESL classrooms. Rather than viewing these influences as errors, they should be understood as natural outcomes of bilingual cognition. Dialectal mismatch affects decoding speed, grammatical interpretation, and meaning construction, particularly when instructional practices ignore learners' linguistic backgrounds.

Based on the findings, the following pedagogical strategies are recommended:

◆ Integrating contrastive analysis between Telugu and English sentence structures during reading lessons
◆ Using bilingual explanations selectively to clarify complex syntactic constructions
◆ Encouraging code-switching as a transitional strategy rather than penalizing it
◆ Designing reading activities that explicitly address phonological differences, such as consonant clusters and stress patterns
◆ Training teachers to recognize mother-tongue influence as a normal and productive aspect of ESL learning

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Such practices promote inclusive classrooms and enhance reading comprehension without undermining students' linguistic identities.

This study highlights the significant influence of dialect on reading comprehension among ESL learners in Indian classrooms. Phonological, syntactic, and morphological differences between Telugu and Standard English can create barriers to decoding and meaning-making. However, these barriers are neither permanent nor deficit-based. Through dialect-sensitive pedagogy and informed instructional practices, teachers can transform linguistic diversity into a resource for learning.

By rejecting deficit models and embracing multilingual realities, English language education in India can move toward more equitable and inclusive literacy practices. Future research may explore longitudinal effects of dialect-aware instruction across educational levels and examine similar patterns among learners from other linguistic backgrounds.

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