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Pandemic, Pedagogy and the Question of English in Indian Higher Education

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a rapid shift to online teaching in Indian higher education which framed primarily as a challenge of continuity. While institutional responses focused on technology, platforms and access, the role of language remained largely unexamined. This paper explores how English shaped pandemic pedagogy and structured participation, visibility and evaluation during emergency teaching. It argues that the pandemic did not create new linguistic inequalities but intensified existing ones by embedding English more firmly within institutional communication, online classroom interaction and assessment practices. Drawing on studies of emergency remote teaching, student experiences of online learning in India and research on the digital divide, the paper examines how students working through English as a foreign language encountered increased linguistic pressure. This pressure often manifested as hesitation and silence rather than overt disengagement. By foregrounding language, the paper moves beyond technological explanations and suggests that English functioned as an invisible infrastructure during the pandemic, shaping academic participation in ways that remain relevant beyond the immediate crisis.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic did not create new inequalities in Indian higher education. Instead, it made existing ones more visible and more difficult to overlook. When universities shifted to online teaching in March 2020, this move was presented in institutional communication and policy documents as a matter of continuity. Teaching had to continue, assessments had to be conducted, academic calendars had to be completed. Speed and adjustment became the dominant concerns. In this process, one question remained largely outside the frame of discussion: the question of language. English has long occupied a central position in Indian higher education (Kumar 2002). It functions as the language of instruction, administration and evaluation, and is often treated as a neutral medium (Pennycook 2017). During the pandemic, however, English became a more visible gatekeeper. Access to online platforms, understanding of institutional instructions, participation in virtual classrooms and even the ability to make oneself heard were mediated through English. These mediations were rarely acknowledged. They were assumed to be unproblematic, even though they shaped everyday academic experience in significant ways.

This paper argues that the pandemic exposed the limits of English as the dominant pedagogical language in Indian higher education. These limits did not emerge only because of technological constraints or lack of infrastructure, although these factors were clearly important. They emerged because English functioned as an institutional language that assumed a particular kind of student and a particular kind of teacher. The student imagined by this system was digitally capable, comfortable in English and able to respond quickly to written instructions. The teacher imagined was similarly fluent, able to move between platforms, policies and pedagogical practices without friction. When teaching moved online, these assumptions became more rigid. The room for negotiation that existed in face-to-face settings was reduced.

For students who were already positioned at the margins, this shift had serious consequences. Exclusion did not always take visible or dramatic forms. More often, it appeared through small and repeated difficulties: uncertainty about instructions, hesitation in speaking during live classes, reluctance to write in public forums and fear of making mistakes in English. These experiences accumulated over time and resulted in silence. Such silence was not necessarily a sign of disengagement. It was frequently a response to linguistic pressure that was intensified in online environments. The language of emergency further contributed to this situation. Institutional advisories, guidelines and notices during the pandemic were almost entirely in English and often written in a formal administrative style. Students were expected to read, understand and act upon these communications within short time frames. For those with limited confidence in English, delays in comprehension translated into missed deadlines or incomplete participation. These difficulties were rarely recognised as linguistic. They were more likely to be interpreted as lack of seriousness or responsibility.

This paper draws on studies of online teaching and learning during COVID-19 in India, early discussions of emergency remote teaching, and research on the digital divide to examine how English shaped pandemic pedagogy. It focuses on three

interconnected areas: institutional communication, classroom interaction in online spaces and assessment practices. Across these areas, English functioned less as a simple medium of instruction and more as a condition for visibility within the academic system. To be present, to be evaluated and to be recognised as participating required a degree of linguistic ease that could not be assumed across a socially and educationally uneven student population. By foregrounding language, this paper moves beyond explanations that rely only on technology or access to devices. While digital infrastructure was uneven, it does not fully explain patterns of participation and exclusion observed during the pandemic. English operated as a form of invisible infrastructure that organised academic life. It shaped who could respond quickly, who could adapt smoothly and who was more likely to fall behind. The pandemic brought this role of English into sharper focus. In doing so, it provides an opportunity to rethink the place of language in higher education pedagogy, not only during times of crisis but also beyond them.

Emergency Teaching and the Language of Continuity

Much of the early literature on teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic described the sudden move to online education as *emergency remote teaching* rather than planned online pedagogy (Hodges et al. 2020). This distinction was important because it recognised the provisional and improvised character of the shift. Teaching practices were not redesigned from the ground up. Instead, existing courses were moved online under conditions of urgency. In the Indian context, this emergency was further shaped by uneven institutional preparedness and wide variation in student access to resources. The language through which this emergency was managed played a central role. Institutional communication framed the situation as one that required continuity above all else. Teaching had to continue, assessments had to be conducted and academic calendars had to be maintained. Circulars, advisories and platform instructions emphasised adjustment and compliance. These communications were overwhelmingly produced in English. English functioned as the language through which continuity was imagined and enforced (Bernstein 2000).

The use of English in this context was largely taken for granted. Institutional directives assumed that students and teachers would be able to read, interpret and act upon written instructions without difficulty. The linguistic demands of this process were rarely acknowledged. Yet in a higher education system marked by linguistic diversity and unequal schooling backgrounds, this assumption was significant. English was not simply the medium through which information was conveyed. It shaped how emergency teaching was experienced at the level of everyday academic practice. Research on institutional responses to COVID-19 in higher education notes the speed with which universities adopted digital platforms and revised teaching and assessment practices in order to maintain continuity (Babbar & Gupta 2021). These studies focus primarily on policy decisions and administrative measures (Selwyn 2010). What they leave less examined is how the language of these measures structured participation. Instructions regarding class schedules, platform use and assessment formats were communicated through dense written texts. Understanding these texts required not only digital access but also a degree of confidence in English.

For students, the language of continuity became a constant presence. Participation in emergency teaching required regular engagement with English-language communication, often under conditions of uncertainty. Notices were revised frequently as institutions experimented with different platforms and procedures. Students were expected to keep track of these changes and respond within short time frames. Studies of online learning during the pandemic in India report confusion and difficulty in adapting to these modes, particularly when instructions were unclear or inconsistent (Muthuprasad et al. 2021). While such difficulties are often described as stress or adjustment problems, they were also linguistic in nature. The digital divide further intensified these challenges. Research documenting online education in India during the pandemic shows that access to devices and stable internet connectivity was uneven, with students from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds facing greater difficulties (Khan & Mohakud 2020). However, access to technology alone did not ensure meaningful participation (Warschauer 2004). Navigating learning management systems, understanding platform interfaces and responding to institutional communication required sustained engagement with English. For students working through English as a second language, this added another layer of difficulty to an already fragile learning situation.

Emergency teaching also altered the relationship between institutional language and classroom practice. In face-to-face settings, continuity is often supported through informal pedagogical strategies. Teachers repeat instructions, clarify expectations and sometimes draw on regional languages to support understanding. Online teaching reduced the scope for such mediation. Written instructions became the primary reference point. Clarification was uneven, especially for students

who could not attend live sessions because of connectivity issues. English remained the stable but demanding medium through which continuity was maintained. The emphasis on continuity shaped how difficulty was interpreted. When students failed to submit assignments on time or remained silent in online classes these actions were often interpreted as lack of interest on the students part. The possibility that students were struggling to interpret instructions in English was less visible. The language of continuity prioritised compliance and timely response. It left limited space for recognising linguistic hesitation or delayed comprehension as legitimate difficulties.

Seen in this way, emergency teaching during the pandemic relied on a particular linguistic arrangement. English functioned not only as the language of instruction but as the language through which continuity itself was organised. The assumption that English could serve this role smoothly obscured the uneven effort required to work through it as a second language. Exclusion did not take the form of explicit denial of access. Instead, it occurred through repeated moments of misunderstanding, hesitation and silence that were rarely recognised as linguistic. The pandemic did not create this dependence on English, but it intensified it. By framing teaching primarily in terms of continuity, institutions narrowed the space for pedagogical negotiation. English became more firmly embedded in digital systems and institutional procedures. Understanding emergency teaching therefore requires attention not only to technology and policy but also to the language through which continuity was sustained.

English, Platforms, and Pedagogical Silence

The shift to online teaching during the pandemic altered the conditions of classroom interaction in significant ways. Digital platforms became the primary spaces through which teaching and learning took place. These platforms were not neutral containers. They structured how participation was possible and how it was perceived. Language played a central role in this structuring, particularly in contexts where English functioned as the main medium of instruction but was not the first language for most students. In physical classrooms, students with limited confidence in English often rely on a range of informal strategies to support participation. They observe peers, seek clarification after class, or rely on gestures and contextual cues to follow discussion. Such strategies allow students to remain partially engaged even when they are hesitant to speak. Online platforms reduced many of these possibilities. Interaction was mediated through microphones, chat boxes and written responses. Participation became more visible and, at the same time, more exposed.

Early studies of student experience during online learning in India report a preference for recorded lectures over live sessions, particularly among students who found real-time interaction demanding (Muthuprasad et al. 2021). Recorded content allowed students to listen repeatedly and process information privately. Live sessions, by contrast, required immediate response. Speaking in English, often without visual feedback or peer support, increased the fear of making mistakes. For students working through English as a second language, this fear was not incidental (Petrovic & Olmstead, 2001). It shaped decisions about whether to speak at all. Silence became a prominent feature of online classrooms (Jaworski 1993). Teachers frequently encountered muted microphones and minimal verbal response. This silence was often interpreted as disengagement or lack of interest. However, such interpretations do not fully account for the linguistic conditions of participation. Online platforms foreground speech and writing as primary modes of interaction (Wells 1999). Both demand a level of confidence in English that cannot be assumed across a diverse student population.

The design of platforms also contributed to this dynamic. Chat boxes and discussion forums required students to write in English in spaces where messages were visible to peers and, in some cases, permanently recorded. Unlike spoken classroom interaction, written errors could not be easily corrected or forgotten. This increased the perceived risk of participation. For students who were uncertain about grammar or vocabulary, remaining silent became a way of avoiding public exposure. Language anxiety in online settings was further shaped by the absence of informal reassurance. In face-to-face classrooms, students can gauge reactions through facial expressions or tone. Online teaching often limited these cues. Cameras were frequently switched off, either because of bandwidth constraints or lack of private space. Without visual feedback, students found it harder to judge whether their contributions were welcome or appropriate. The pressure to speak correctly in English, without such feedback, discouraged participation. Research on online learning during the pandemic also points to the uneven distribution of participation. Students with greater confidence in English were more likely to speak during live sessions and engage actively in discussion forums (Muthuprasad et al. 2021). Their visibility reinforced the impression that online teaching was functioning smoothly. At the same time, the silence of others was normalised. Linguistic difficulty remained largely unacknowledged as a factor shaping classroom dynamics.

This pattern produced a subtle form of exclusion. Students were not prevented from attending classes. They were present in virtual rooms, logged into platforms and counted as participants. Yet their presence was often silent. Pedagogical interaction increasingly favoured those who could perform fluently in English under digital conditions. Silence functioned as a form of withdrawal, but it was also a rational response to heightened linguistic risk. The emphasis on participation as verbal or written contribution further complicated matters. Online teaching often relied on interaction as evidence of engagement. Attendance, participation marks and informal evaluation were tied to visible activity on platforms. For students hesitant to speak or write in English, these measures created additional pressure. Silence was not only a communicative choice but a potential academic liability.

Understanding pedagogical silence in online classrooms therefore requires attention to language. Silence cannot be read simply as disengagement or passivity. In the context of emergency teaching, it was often a response to the conditions under which participation was organised. English, mediated through digital platforms, shaped who could speak easily and who chose to remain quiet. The pandemic did not introduce silence into classrooms, but it altered its meaning. Online platforms made silence more visible and more consequential. For students working through English as a second language, this visibility intensified existing insecurities. Examining pedagogical silence through the lens of language allows for a more careful understanding of how participation and exclusion were produced during pandemic teaching.

Assessment, Evaluation and Linguistic Risk

Assessment practices during the COVID-19 pandemic were reshaped under conditions of urgency (Black & Wiliam 1998). Online examinations, written assignments and open-book tests were introduced as practical solutions to ensure continuity when face-to-face evaluation was not possible. These formats were adopted quickly and often with limited opportunity for reflection. While they were presented as flexible and inclusive alternatives, they also introduced new forms of pressure, particularly in relation to language. Online assessment relied heavily on written communication. Instructions regarding format, deadlines, submission procedures and evaluation criteria were communicated through detailed written guidelines, almost always in English. For students working through English as a second language, understanding these instructions required careful reading and repeated interpretation. Small misunderstandings could have significant consequences, such as incorrect submission or failure to meet formal requirements.

Research on institutional responses to the pandemic notes concerns about maintaining academic standards and fairness in online assessment (Babbar & Gupta 2021). These discussions focus primarily on issues of integrity, reliability and standardisation. Less attention is given to the linguistic demands placed on students. Writing answers in English under time constraints increased the risk that language proficiency would be conflated with conceptual understanding. In face-to-face settings, assessment often allows for informal clarification. Students may ask questions before or after examinations, and teachers can explain expectations orally. Online assessment reduced these opportunities. Instructions were fixed in written form, and clarification was unevenly available. Students who were unable to attend live sessions because of connectivity problems or shared domestic responsibilities missed explanations that might otherwise have supported understanding.

The emphasis on written submission also altered how errors were perceived. In online assessment, written responses created permanent records of language use. Grammatical mistakes, awkward phrasing, or limited vocabulary were more visible than in spoken interaction. For students with limited confidence in English, this visibility increased anxiety. Fear of making linguistic errors often accompanied the pressure to demonstrate academic competence. Early studies of student experience during online learning in India report confusion and stress related to assessment formats and expectations (Muthuprasad et al. 2021). While these studies do not always foreground language explicitly, they point to difficulties in adapting to new modes of evaluation. For students working through English as a second language, adaptation involved not only learning new platforms but also adjusting to intensified linguistic scrutiny.

Assessment during the pandemic also reinforced existing hierarchies. Students who could write fluently in English were more likely to be perceived as adapting successfully to online learning. Their responses aligned more closely with institutional expectations of clarity and coherence. Students who struggled linguistically risked being read as unprepared or disengaged, even when their conceptual understanding was adequate. In this way, assessment practices reproduced familiar patterns of advantage and disadvantage. The language of evaluation further shaped these dynamics. Feedback, grading criteria and evaluative comments were communicated in English and often in formal academic registers. Understanding feedback required additional interpretive work for students with limited proficiency. Opportunities to seek

clarification were uneven, particularly in large online classes. As a result, assessment became a site where linguistic confidence directly affected academic outcomes.

Assessment practices introduced during emergency teaching were not designed to discriminate linguistically. However, their reliance on written English under conditions of stress increased the cost of linguistic error. For students working through English as a second language, assessment involved both demonstrating knowledge and managing language risk. This dual burden remained largely unacknowledged in institutional discussions of fairness and standards. Examining assessment during the pandemic through the lens of language highlights a central tension. Measures introduced to preserve continuity also intensified existing inequalities. English functioned not only as the medium of evaluation but as a filter through which competence was judged. Understanding this role of language is essential for evaluating the pedagogical consequences of emergency teaching.

Rethinking Pandemic Pedagogy

Discussions of pandemic pedagogy in higher education often end with calls for improved infrastructure (UNESCO 2020), better training in digital tools and more flexible teaching models. These concerns are important, particularly in contexts where access to technology remains uneven. However, the analysis in this paper suggests that such responses are incomplete if they do not address the linguistic conditions under which teaching and learning take place. The pandemic demonstrated that English cannot be treated as a transparent or neutral medium in Indian higher education. It functions as a structuring force that shapes participation, evaluation and visibility. Emergency teaching brought this role of English into sharper focus. The language of continuity framed institutional responses and justified rapid transitions to online modes. While this language helped sustain academic routines, it also narrowed the space for pedagogical negotiation. English became more firmly embedded in institutional communication, digital platforms, classroom interaction and assessment practices. For students and teachers working through English as a second language, this embedding increased the effort required to remain present and recognised within the academic system.

Rethinking pandemic pedagogy therefore requires attention to language as part of educational infrastructure. Language shaped how instructions were understood, how participation was enacted and how competence was judged. The difficulties encountered by students were not only technical or motivational. They were also linguistic. Silence in online classrooms, hesitation in assessment, and delayed responses to institutional communication were often seen as lack of motivation or interest. This paper suggests that such interpretations overlook the pressures created by English-dominant pedagogical arrangements under emergency conditions. Recognising the limits of English does not imply rejecting its role in higher education. English remains an important academic language and a source of opportunity for many students. However, the pandemic revealed the uneven labour demanded by English-only pedagogy, particularly in moments of crisis. Informal strategies that often support multilingual classrooms were less available online. Digital systems required standardisation and written compliance, leaving limited space for linguistic flexibility.

The experience of emergency teaching offers an opportunity for reflection. If continuity was achieved during the pandemic, it came at a cost that was not evenly distributed. Students with greater linguistic confidence were more visible and more easily recognised as adapting successfully. Others remained present but unheard. Attending to these dynamics does not require radical restructuring. It requires a willingness to acknowledge language as a pedagogical issue rather than a background condition. In conclusion, the COVID-19 pandemic did not transform the language politics of Indian higher education, but it exposed them. English emerged as a central organising force in pandemic pedagogy, shaping who could participate, who could comply and who could be evaluated with ease. Understanding this role is essential for interpreting the educational experience of the pandemic period. It is also necessary for thinking about future moments of disruption. Without reflection on language, responses to crisis risk reproducing familiar patterns of exclusion under new technological forms. Taking language seriously, as part of pedagogy rather than apart from it, remains a central task for higher education beyond the pandemic.

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