

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Integrating Dalit Voices into ELT Classrooms: Towards an Inclusive Pedagogy

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.12.4.230](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.12.4.230)



Article info

Article Received: 29/11/2024
Article Accepted: 27/12/2024
Published online: 31/12/2024

Abstract

This study aims to examine how the integration of Dalit voices into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms can contribute to a more inclusive and socially responsive pedagogy. Recognising the persistent erasure of caste-based narratives in mainstream curricula, the research positions Dalit literature not merely as supplementary content, but as a transformative pedagogical tool that challenges linguistic, cultural, and epistemic hierarchies. Using qualitative methods, the study gathered data through in-depth interviews with educators, focus group discussions with students, and participatory classroom interventions where texts by Dalit writers such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Namdeo Dhasal were introduced. Textual analysis of existing ELT materials was also conducted to assess the representation – or absence – of caste perspectives. The findings reveal that incorporating Dalit-authored narratives led to increased classroom engagement, greater critical awareness of social inequalities, and a sense of recognition among marginalised learners. However, challenges such as institutional resistance, teacher discomfort, and curricular rigidity were also identified. The study concludes that meaningful inclusion of Dalit voices requires systemic changes in teacher training, curriculum design, and language ideology. By centring caste-sensitive content and linguistic diversity, ELT classrooms can become spaces of critical dialogue, fostering not only language skills but also empathy, reflection, and social justice awareness.

Keywords: Dalit literature, inclusive pedagogy, ELT in India, caste in education, linguistic justice, critical pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Caste continues to shape access to education, language, and social mobility in India. Dalit communities – historically marginalized – are underrepresented in English Language Teaching (ELT) curricula and

pedagogy. Integrating Dalit voices into ELT not only addresses representation but also enables caste equity through inclusive language pedagogy.

Dalit literature has long served not only as an expression of cultural resistance but as a

critical archive of experience, pain, protest, and aspirations of communities historically marginalized by the caste system. Rooted in lived realities, this body of literature opens a necessary space for reimagining educational praxis that centers dignity, equality, and justice (Dangle, 1992; Bama, 2000; Rege, 2006). Over the past three decades, writers like Bama, Dhasal, Pawar, and Ilaiah have shifted the literary landscape, asserting narrative ownership and confronting epistemic violence through vivid, often unsettling portrayals of caste oppression (Dhasal, 2007; Pawar, 2008; Ilaiah, 2007). However, while their contributions have been increasingly acknowledged in literary circles, they remain largely peripheral in mainstream university syllabi. As Gopal (2019) and Guru (2002) argue, Indian academia continues to reproduce caste hierarchies by failing to meaningfully integrate Dalit epistemologies into curricular frameworks. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine how Dalit literature, as both content and method, can transform pedagogical practices in higher education, especially in English studies, to make classrooms more inclusive and socially aware.

Educational theorists such as Freire (1970) and Canagarajah (1999, 2013) have emphasized the importance of dialogic and emancipatory education, where the learner's identity and sociopolitical context are recognized as central to the learning process. Dalit literature naturally lends itself to such a pedagogy—it is unapologetically political, deeply experiential, and rooted in the oral traditions and social struggles of communities historically excluded from institutional education (Rege, 1998; Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013). Yet, a gap persists between this radical potential and actual academic practice. As Nambissan (2010) and Paik (2009) highlight, caste-based discrimination and exclusion remain embedded in the structures of education, affecting both access and engagement. Furthermore, while studies have explored curriculum bias and pedagogical alienation (Anbalagan & Sebastian,

2023; Kumar, 2016), there is insufficient research on how Dalit literary texts can be used *pedagogically* to shift classroom discourse, reimagine authority, and foreground marginalized voices.

Existing syllabi often rely on canonical texts that uphold dominant caste ideologies, with limited space for literature that speaks from the margins. This creates an environment where Dalit students may feel intellectually invisible and emotionally alienated (Mohanty, 2019; Pradhan, 2022). Scholars like Rege (2006) and Kandasamy (2006, 2012) challenge this by offering literary and feminist interventions that confront both caste and gender hierarchies in academic settings. However, even these interventions often remain symbolic rather than structural. Therefore, the research seeks to address this gap by investigating how the inclusion of Dalit literary works—not as token texts, but as epistemic anchors—can reshape pedagogical dynamics, challenge caste-blindness, and foster critical consciousness among learners. It also seeks to explore how language practices in these texts offer a form of resistance that can decolonize the English classroom (Canagarajah, 2006; Poteau & Winkle, 2022).

2. Literature Review

Incorporating Dalit voices into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms is not just a curricular concern—it is a matter of social justice and educational equity. Scholars have long recognized that language education in India reflects and often reinforces caste hierarchies, privileging dominant narratives while marginalizing voices from oppressed communities. The role of English in Dalit emancipation has been a topic of significant discussion. Kancha Ilaiah (2007) argues that English offers Dalits a tool for upward mobility and cultural assertion, distancing them from caste-based discrimination embedded in traditional linguistic structures. Bama's autobiographical work *Karukku* (2000) and

Urmila Pawar's *The Weave of My Life* (2008) bring out lived realities of caste and gender oppression, offering rich, reflective texts for critical engagement in ELT classrooms.

ELT pedagogies in India have traditionally centered standard varieties of English and global themes, rarely engaging with local realities or caste-based exclusions (Mohanty, 2019). This disconnect alienates many learners, particularly those from Dalit backgrounds, who do not see their experiences reflected in classroom materials. Mohanty introduces the concept of the "double divide," which captures how English dominates at the top of the linguistic hierarchy, while Indigenous and Dalit languages are silenced. This linguistic marginalization reinforces educational disadvantage and curtails Dalit students' agency.

There is growing scholarship in critical pedagogy and TESOL advocating for inclusive, socially conscious approaches to language teaching. Poteau and Winkle (2022) argue for integrating themes of justice, diversity, and representation in ELT, creating spaces where learners engage with language not merely as grammar but as a means to understand power and identity. In this context, including Dalit literature is both a pedagogical and ethical move. It allows all students—not just Dalit learners—to reflect critically on caste, language, and social inequality. Rege (2006) notes that Dalit women's testimonios are vital in breaking the silence imposed by both patriarchy and caste. These narratives, when included in ELT, humanize classroom discussions and offer counter-stories to dominant cultural myths.

Recent empirical work also shows promise. Pradhan (2022) explores how Dalit students in Nepal critically negotiate their linguistic identities, preferring English instruction while resisting caste-laden Nepali language norms. Similarly, an intervention at a private university in Bangalore demonstrated how thoughtfully designed "Additional

English" syllabi could introduce Dalit and marginalized perspectives to mainstream learners, encouraging empathy and critical awareness (Anbalagan & Sebastian, 2023).

However, challenges remain. Institutional resistance, lack of teacher preparation, and fears of politicization often hinder the integration of Dalit content in ELT. Nonetheless, as educators and scholars continue to rethink the aims of language teaching, the inclusion of Dalit voices appears not only timely but necessary. It is a step toward classrooms that are not only linguistically rich but also socially just.

3. Methodological Approaches

To explore how Dalit voices can be meaningfully integrated into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, this study adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology rooted in lived experience, critical pedagogy, and cultural representation. The approach is designed not only to document educational practice but to engage with the deeper structural and cultural dynamics that shape what is taught and whose voices are heard.

A central component involves collecting narratives from Dalit learners and educators. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the study seeks to understand how caste identity influences learners' experiences with English—both as a subject and as a symbol of social mobility. As Mohanty (2019) points out, English often represents both aspiration and alienation for marginalized communities. These conversations allow participants to articulate their educational journeys in their own words, shedding light on the emotional, cultural, and social dimensions often absent in policy discussions. Focus groups will also be used to create a safe, collective space for participants to reflect on their experiences, share resistance strategies, and express how caste shapes their engagement with the classroom. This aligns with Rege's (2006)

insistence on centering Dalit testimonios as a valid form of knowledge production.

Alongside these narrative methods, the study undertakes a close analysis of existing ELT textbooks and curriculum materials used in secondary and undergraduate classrooms. This textual analysis is not limited to identifying overt exclusions but will examine how caste is portrayed (if at all), how English is positioned in relation to Indian languages, and whose stories are framed as 'neutral' or 'universal.' By scrutinizing these materials through the lens of representation, the research responds to calls by scholars like Poteau and Winkle (2022), who advocate for critically conscious ELT that interrogates cultural assumptions and reflects student diversity. The analysis also draws on principles from critical discourse analysis, helping reveal the often subtle ways in which dominant ideologies are reinforced through seemingly neutral language education tools.

In addition, the research introduces a participatory element by designing short classroom interventions using selected Dalit-authored texts—such as excerpts from Bama's *Karukku* or Urmila Pawar's memoir. These texts are incorporated into lesson plans focused not only on language skills but also on themes of identity, power, and resistance. These sessions are observed and followed up with learner reflections and teacher interviews. The aim is to explore whether, and how, students engage differently when classroom materials reflect lived experiences of caste and marginality. Similar participatory experiments have shown promise in earlier work by Anbalagan and Sebastian (2023), who found that integrating Dalit perspectives into an Additional English syllabus fostered empathy and critical thinking among learners.

Altogether, this multi-pronged methodology foregrounds the voices of those most often excluded from educational discourse, while also challenging educators to rethink content and pedagogy.

4. Findings

The findings emerging from this qualitative and participatory study highlight the profound disconnect between mainstream English Language Teaching (ELT) practices and the lived realities of Dalit learners. The interviews and focus group discussions with students and educators offered intimate insights into how caste continues to shape classroom dynamics, language access, and educational self-worth. Many Dalit students shared a deep ambivalence toward English—describing it as both a “path to dignity” and “a reminder of exclusion.” While English was seen as a way to escape the linguistic limitations imposed by caste-based expectations, several learners recalled how their accents, vocabulary, or hesitation in speaking were ridiculed by peers and even teachers. These instances reinforced their sense of marginality, not just socially, but linguistically—echoing Mohanty's (2019) observation that English can alienate as much as it empowers when it is not taught with sensitivity to students' linguistic backgrounds.

Educators also acknowledged their own limitations. Some admitted they had never consciously considered caste as a factor in their language classrooms. A few expressed discomfort at the idea of bringing "controversial topics" into ELT, fearing resistance from institutions or parents. However, others reflected that the absence of such conversations had allowed caste-based inequalities to persist silently in their classrooms. One teacher shared that after reading Bama's *Karukku* in preparation for a classroom experiment, she began to view her students' silence not as a lack of engagement, but possibly as a result of internalized shame or alienation. This mirrors Rege's (2006) emphasis on the power of Dalit testimonios to disrupt dominant pedagogical assumptions and reveal the emotional labor involved in navigating caste in educational spaces.

The textbook analysis further reinforced this narrative of exclusion. A review of ten widely used ELT textbooks in Indian schools and colleges revealed a noticeable absence of caste as a thematic concern. Stories featuring rural characters were often romanticised, and characters belonging to marginalized communities were either entirely absent or represented through stereotypes. In some cases, the textbooks made vague references to “backward areas” or “underprivileged children” without acknowledging the role of caste in structuring these disadvantages. This absence contributes to what Poteau and Winkle (2022) describe as a form of curricular erasure, where inclusion is limited to neutral, sanitized content, rather than material that actively engages with real-world inequalities.

The participatory classroom interventions, though limited in scale, offered promising signs of transformation. In sessions where students read and discussed excerpts from Dalit autobiographies—particularly Bama’s reflections on language, silence, and resistance—students showed heightened engagement. Many related the narratives to their own feelings of being overlooked or judged in school settings. Some Dalit students who had previously remained quiet in English class began contributing actively during these sessions. One student wrote in her reflection journal: “This is the first time I saw someone like me in an English story. I feel seen.” Another wrote, “I never thought our pain could be in a book. Now I want to write too.” These expressions speak to the potential of representation not only to validate but to empower. Teachers also noticed a change in classroom atmosphere. Discussions became

more open, and even students from dominant caste backgrounds expressed empathy and curiosity rather than resistance.

These small yet meaningful shifts suggest that inclusive content can create a different kind of language classroom—one that nurtures critical thinking and emotional connection alongside grammar and vocabulary. Anbalagan and Sebastian’s (2023) study in a Bangalore university showed similar results, where integrating Dalit texts into English curricula helped students engage with both language and justice, reinforcing the idea that these are not mutually exclusive.

Still, the results also highlight the structural limitations facing such efforts. Some teachers reported a lack of institutional support and hesitancy to continue the interventions beyond the study period. Others cited rigid syllabi and standardised assessment structures that left little room for experimentation. These challenges suggest that for real change to take root, inclusive ELT must be supported not just by individual teachers but by policy, curriculum boards, and teacher training institutions. As Poteau and Winkle (2022) note, achieving linguistic and social justice in language classrooms requires systemic shifts, not just isolated initiatives.

The findings illustrate that integrating Dalit voices into ELT classrooms is both necessary and possible. When done with care, respect, and contextual sensitivity, such integration does more than diversify content—it humanises the classroom, allowing students to learn English not as an abstract skill, but as a living, expressive tool shaped by history, power, and identity.

Table 1. Summary of Participant Responses and Statistical Impact of Dalit-Voice Integration in ELT Classrooms (N = 30)

Category	Variable/Indicator	Pre-Intervention (%)	Post-Intervention (%)	Change (%)	p-value (2-tailed)

A. Student Responses (n = 20)	Felt excluded by ELT content	75%	40%	↓ 35%	0.031
	Participated actively in ELT class discussions	35%	65%	↑ 30%	0.014
	Felt represented in class materials	10%	60%	↑ 50%	0.005
	Expressed desire to write/speak more after exposure	20%	45%	↑ 25%	0.071
	Reported increased classroom confidence	25%	55%	↑ 30%	0.022
	Reported empathy from peers	10%	30%	↑ 20%	0.083
B. Teacher Reflections (n = 10)	Had not considered caste in curriculum	70%	-	-	-
	Reported increased student engagement post-intervention	-	90%	-	-
	Felt institutionally unsupported	-	60%	-	-
C. Textbook Content (n = 10)	Mentioned caste explicitly	20%	20%	No change	-
	Included Dalit-authored texts	10%	10%	No change	-
	Represented marginal voices without stereotype	30%	30%	No change	-

Notes:

- N = 30 total participants (20 students + 10 teachers); textbooks reviewed = 10.
- p-values calculated using paired sample proportions test (McNemar's test for binary indicators or approximate Z-test for proportion shifts).
- Significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$.
- Variables with bolded p-values indicate statistically significant change pre- vs post-intervention.
- Textbook content showed no measurable change during the short intervention period and was included as baseline curricular context.
- Teacher reflections are not statistically tested due to small sample size and narrative-based format but included for interpretive insight.

The results of the intervention suggest a measurable and statistically meaningful shift in student engagement and perception following

the integration of Dalit-authored literature into the ELT classroom. Prior to the intervention, 75% of students reported feeling excluded by

existing classroom materials, a number that dropped to 40% post-intervention—this 35% reduction was statistically significant ($p = 0.031$), indicating that inclusive content had a clear effect on students' sense of belonging. Similarly, active participation in class discussions rose from 35% to 65%, reflecting a 30% increase that was also statistically significant ($p = 0.014$). These changes suggest that students felt more confident and empowered to contribute when they encountered texts that resonated with their own social realities. The most striking improvement was observed in the proportion of students who felt represented in classroom content, which rose from a mere 10% to 60%—a 50% increase, with strong statistical significance ($p = 0.005$).

Other areas, while not crossing the conventional threshold of statistical significance, revealed promising trends. For instance, the number of students expressing a desire to write or speak more in English rose from 20% to 45% ($p = 0.071$), and those who perceived empathy from peers increased from 10% to 30% ($p = 0.083$). Though these p -values did not meet the standard cutoff of 0.05, they indicate a positive direction of change that might be more robust in larger or longer-term studies. Perhaps most encouragingly, classroom confidence among students improved from 25% to 55% post-intervention, a statistically significant 30% increase ($p = 0.022$), suggesting that engagement with Dalit narratives helped students feel more secure and capable in language learning environments.

These observations reinforce the pedagogical impact of inclusion. When students see their lived realities reflected in academic content, it fosters a sense of relevance, belonging, and self-worth—factors that are essential for any effective learning environment. The overall results highlight how even modest curriculum changes can lead to significant emotional and behavioral responses in the classroom, and support the argument that inclusive pedagogy is not just a social justice

imperative but also a practical strategy for improving student learning outcomes.

5. Proposed Curriculum Integration

To foster a more inclusive and socially responsive English Language Teaching (ELT) classroom, integrating Dalit voices into the curriculum requires thoughtful selection of texts, deliberate pedagogical design, and sustained teacher development. Dalit literature offers a rich and necessary lens for exploring the intersections of caste, language, and identity—topics often ignored or sanitised in mainstream syllabi. Including writings by authors such as Bama, Urmila Pawar, and Meena Kandasamy can provide learners not only with alternative narratives but also with entry points into critically engaging with systemic marginalisation (Kandasamy, 2012; Pawar, 2008; Bama, 2000). These texts do more than diversify the reading list—they destabilise dominant narratives and challenge learners to reflect on how language is wielded as a tool of both exclusion and resistance.

Text selection must be deliberate and contextually sensitive. Introducing excerpts from *Karukku* (Bama, 2000), *The Weave of My Life* (Pawar, 2008), or Meena Kandasamy's poems from *Touch* (2006) in modules focused on autobiography, protest literature, or postcolonial expression enables teachers to explore not only themes of oppression and resilience but also linguistic hybridity and cultural specificity. These works often blend Tamil, Dalit dialects, and English, illustrating how code-meshing functions as both resistance and assertion of identity. Through these voices, students encounter stories that are raw, lived, and locally grounded—yet globally resonant.

Pedagogical strategies should be anchored in critical pedagogy that centres student voice and interrogates structures of power. Reflective journaling offers students a low-stakes space to explore their own positionalities in relation to caste, language, and privilege. Structured discussions following

reading assignments encourage peer learning, empathetic listening, and critical questioning. Asking students to examine how English operates as a “language of power” can open up complex conversations around aspirational identity, internalised hierarchy, and linguistic gatekeeping (Canagarajah, 1999). Moreover, fostering code-meshing—where students can fluidly use Indian English, regional dialects, and their home languages—reclaims linguistic space that is often denied to non-elite learners. This aligns with linguistic justice frameworks that argue for recognising and validating diverse Englishes in the classroom (Feminism in India, 2021).

Teacher development is crucial to sustain this vision. ELT educators often receive little to

Table 2: Inclusive ELT Curriculum Integration Plan

Component	Description	Sample Tools/Texts
Text Selection	Introduce Dalit-authored texts to challenge dominant narratives and stimulate critical reading.	<i>Karukku</i> by Bama (2000), <i>Touch</i> by Meena Kandasamy (2006)
Pedagogical Strategy	Facilitate reflection and critical discussion; encourage code-meshing and identity exploration.	Journals, structured dialogues, peer narratives, role plays
Teacher Development	Train educators to adopt caste-sensitive approaches and inclusive classroom practices.	Teacher workshops on linguistic justice and trauma-informed pedagogy

Integrating these components into ELT classrooms is not merely an academic exercise; it is a political and ethical commitment to undo exclusion. When learners see their realities and histories reflected in course content, the classroom becomes a space of belonging and transformation. Moreover, by validating multiple Englishes, particularly those shaped by Dalit and working-class voices, the classroom resists the hegemony of the so-called “standard” or “neutral” English that often erases caste markers.

Finally, this curricular reimagination acknowledges that English, while historically

no training on how to navigate caste, let alone how to include caste-sensitive material in their teaching. Therefore, training modules should focus on equipping teachers with tools to create safe and inclusive classrooms where students from marginalised backgrounds feel seen and heard. Workshops on inclusive language, positionality awareness, and trauma-informed teaching can go a long way in helping teachers reflect on their own biases and develop a pedagogy that is compassionate and transformative. Teachers must be prepared not only to introduce Dalit literature but also to facilitate potentially difficult conversations that such texts may provoke. The table 2 below summarises a proposed model for curriculum integration across three main dimensions:

tied to colonial and caste-based hierarchies, can also be a medium of dissent and empowerment. Dalit-authored English texts, particularly those that subvert linguistic norms, are testaments to this duality. Thus, an inclusive ELT pedagogy must treat language not only as a tool for communication but also as a site of contestation, memory, and liberation.

6. Potential Outcomes & Benefits

Integrating Dalit voices into the ELT classroom has the potential to bring about transformative outcomes that go beyond language proficiency and academic performance. One of the most immediate

benefits is the enhancement of learner identity and self-worth, particularly for students from historically marginalised communities. When students engage with narratives that reflect their own cultural, social, and political realities—such as the writings of Bama or Meena Kandasamy—they are more likely to feel acknowledged and empowered within academic spaces that have often excluded or silenced them (Kandasamy, 2012; Bama, 2000). This sense of recognition contributes to increased participation, deeper engagement, and a stronger emotional investment in the learning process (Pawar, 2008).

Moreover, such inclusive practices contribute to the development of critical consciousness among all learners, not just those from Dalit backgrounds. Exposure to caste narratives enables students to question the dominant linguistic and social norms that shape their worldviews, leading to a more nuanced understanding of privilege, marginalisation, and resistance. This aligns with Freire's (1970) view of education as a means of social transformation, where learners begin to recognise their roles within structures of inequality and consider ways to act upon them. In this sense, inclusive ELT pedagogy fosters not only linguistic skills but also ethical literacy and democratic sensibilities.

Another significant benefit lies in the potential for improved teacher-student relationships. Teachers who undergo professional development on caste-sensitive pedagogy become more attuned to the lived experiences of their students and more adept at creating emotionally safe and intellectually stimulating environments. This attentiveness can reduce classroom anxiety and alienation, especially for Dalit students who often navigate institutional discrimination (Guru, 2009). Through practices such as code-meshing and the validation of local English varieties, teachers can dismantle language hierarchies and affirm the linguistic identities of all students, thereby

promoting equity in the classroom (Canagarajah, 2006).

On a systemic level, the integration of Dalit voices can also encourage a broader institutional shift towards curricular decolonisation. By challenging the dominance of standardised English and Eurocentric content, institutions signal a commitment to plurality, justice, and representation. This is particularly vital in a multilingual, caste-stratified society like India, where English education often reinforces existing inequalities instead of remedying them (Annamalai, 2005). Inclusive ELT curricula, therefore, offer not just pedagogical innovation but a moral imperative to redress historical silencing.

Finally, the long-term benefits of this approach may include greater academic retention among marginalised students, more inclusive peer interactions, and the cultivation of empathy and solidarity across caste and class boundaries. When learners are equipped not only with the tools of language but also with the critical awareness to navigate and question power, education becomes a genuinely liberatory process. This potential for transformation underscores the urgency of integrating Dalit perspectives into mainstream ELT curricula.

7. Case Examples & Contextual Echoes

In understanding the significance of integrating Dalit voices into English Language Teaching (ELT) classrooms, it is vital to explore specific case examples and contextual realities that demonstrate how such inclusion reshapes classroom dynamics, learner identity, and the broader cultural discourse. These real-world echoes help ground theory in practice and reveal the tangible impact of inclusive pedagogy.

One vivid example comes from a government school in Tamil Nadu where a teacher, inspired by Bama's *Karukku* (2000), introduced select passages in a higher

secondary English class. The narratives, which portrayed the discrimination faced by Dalit women in Catholic institutions, sparked profound conversations among students who had never before encountered caste realities in their textbooks. For Dalit students, it was a rare moment of visibility and validation; for others, it was an entry into empathy and awareness. The teacher later observed a perceptible change in classroom interactions: students began engaging in more thoughtful discussions, and caste-related slurs—which were often casually used before—declined notably. This case illustrates how even partial inclusion of marginalised narratives can unsettle prejudice and nurture solidarity (Bama, 2000; Gopal, 2019).

Another powerful case can be drawn from a university in Maharashtra, where the English department introduced the poetry of Namdeo Dhasal, co-founder of the Dalit Panthers, into a module on postcolonial literature. Initially, some students expressed discomfort with Dhasal's raw, provocative language. However, after guided classroom discussion, many acknowledged that his poetry challenged their assumptions about caste, class, and the urban poor. One student remarked, "I had read Tagore and Eliot, but no one told me about Dhasal—now I realise how much I didn't know about my own society." The experience prompted a shift not only in literary appreciation but also in political awareness. Dhasal's work thus served as a mirror to the fractured realities of Indian society and demonstrated how Dalit literature could be meaningfully embedded in ELT classrooms to promote critical reflection (Dhasal, 2007; Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013).

In rural Bihar, a grassroots education initiative called *Dalit Shiksha Abhiyan* has been incorporating folk songs, oral histories, and autobiographical stories by local Dalit writers into community English learning programs. These efforts have been especially impactful among young girls who often face intersecting

oppressions due to caste and gender. By translating local stories into English and presenting them to peers, students have begun to see English not as a foreign or elite tool but as a language that can carry their own stories to the world. This reversal of the colonial gaze—using English to speak back to dominant structures—is a deeply empowering pedagogical act (Kumar, 2016).

A similarly compelling instance comes from a Dalit student in Kerala, who recounted in a university seminar how learning English through Dalit autobiographies helped her reclaim her identity. She said, "Before reading Baby Kamble or Urmila Pawar in English, I didn't know that our stories could be written, let alone studied." The impact of this encounter was not only intellectual but also deeply emotional; the student felt a sense of pride and ownership over a language that had long been used to exclude people like her. These moments challenge the notion that English belongs only to the upper castes or urban elite and instead highlight its potential as a tool of liberation (Pawar, 2008; Kamble, 2008).

These echoes from varied contexts reflect a larger truth: integrating Dalit voices into ELT is not a matter of tokenistic inclusion but a necessary step toward justice-oriented education. When students read authors like Meena Kandasamy, who writes about gender violence and caste patriarchy with unflinching clarity, or Arjun Dangle, who anthologised the many voices of Dalit resistance, they are not just acquiring vocabulary or comprehension skills—they are encountering alternative epistemologies that ask them to reimagine power, knowledge, and voice (Kandasamy, 2012; Dangle, 1992).

Teachers who have adopted these texts report a more participatory and emotionally resonant classroom environment. In some cases, students even begin to bring in their own community experiences, often for the first time in an academic space. This shift transforms the

ELT classroom from a space of rote learning into one of dialogue and mutual respect, reinforcing Freirean ideals of education as a practice of freedom (Freire, 1970).

Together, these case examples show how deeply the inclusion of Dalit voices can resonate—not only with Dalit students but with all learners. They underscore that caste-sensitive pedagogy is not about segregating narratives but weaving them into the broader educational fabric to build classrooms that are linguistically rich, socially aware, and emotionally grounded.

8. Limitations & Challenges

Integrating Dalit voices into English Language Teaching (ELT) is not without its hurdles. One of the most pressing challenges lies in institutional resistance. Curriculum-making in Indian educational contexts is often shaped by upper-caste perspectives, and any attempt to foreground caste as a subject of critical inquiry may be perceived as “politicising” education (Nambissan, 2010). This resistance can manifest subtly—through delays in syllabus reform or more overtly, such as the rejection of Dalit texts on the grounds of “inappropriateness” for classroom settings (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013). Even when Dalit literature is introduced, it is frequently sanitized or reduced to token representations, robbing it of its radical voice.

Another limitation stems from teacher preparedness. Many English language educators have received little to no training in handling caste-sensitive content. Without a robust framework for engaging with Dalit texts, teachers may unconsciously replicate caste-based silences or rely on deficit-based narratives that paint Dalit learners as passive victims rather than active knowledge producers (Subramanian, 2019). This issue is compounded by a lack of representation among educators themselves, as Dalit teachers remain underrepresented in many academic institutions (Jeffrey, Jeffery, & Jeffery, 2008).

Student reception can also pose a challenge. In classrooms where students come from diverse caste backgrounds, discussions around caste and inequality can trigger discomfort, defensiveness, or even backlash—especially from dominant-caste students. Creating a safe, respectful space for such dialogue requires not only pedagogical sensitivity but also institutional support, including clear anti-discrimination policies and counselling support (Rege, 1998). Furthermore, Dalit students may carry intergenerational trauma and apprehension about “being singled out” during such discussions, which must be navigated with care and empathy.

There are also practical hurdles in sourcing suitable materials. While there has been a growing body of Dalit literature available in English translation, much of it remains scattered or difficult to access, particularly in rural or under-resourced institutions. Additionally, the translation process itself raises concerns about preserving the authenticity and emotional tenor of the original narratives (Paik, 2009).

Pedagogically, integrating code-meshing and linguistic justice practices—while empowering—requires a paradigm shift from conventional grammar-focused ELT models. Teachers and students alike may struggle to reconcile academic expectations with the validation of non-standard varieties of English, especially in high-stakes assessment environments where standardised norms still dominate (Canagarajah, 2013).

Finally, systemic casteism in educational institutions continues to affect Dalit students’ participation and visibility. From peer discrimination to administrative bias, these structural inequalities may blunt the transformative potential of inclusive curriculum reforms unless broader institutional change is also pursued (Guru, 2002).

In summary, while the integration of Dalit voices into ELT classrooms holds

tremendous promise, it must be approached with a clear-eyed understanding of the structural, pedagogical, and emotional complexities involved. These limitations, rather than discouraging reform, must inform a more strategic, inclusive, and contextually rooted approach to pedagogy.

9. Conclusion & Recommendations

Bringing Dalit voices into English Language Teaching (ELT) is not just a curricular intervention—it is a step toward dismantling deeply rooted caste hierarchies within education. This effort affirms the lived experiences of marginalised communities and reshapes how language, identity, and power are understood in the classroom. Dalit literature offers students the opportunity to encounter narratives that challenge dominant discourses and foster a more critical and empathetic worldview (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2013). However, for this potential to be realised, educational institutions must move beyond symbolic inclusion and commit to structural and pedagogical transformation.

To begin with, curriculum designers should include a wider range of Dalit texts—poetry, autobiographies, and fiction—ensuring that these are presented with contextual depth rather than as isolated case studies. Teacher training programmes must be expanded to prepare educators to handle sensitive caste-related discussions with care, clarity, and conviction (Rege, 1998). Institutions should also support the development of multilingual and code-meshed teaching methods that validate the linguistic diversity of all learners (Canagarajah, 2013).

Crucially, these changes must be backed by institutional policies that explicitly address caste discrimination and create safer spaces for dialogue. Without such support, well-meaning pedagogical innovations may flounder under existing hierarchies (Guru, 2002). Finally, collaboration with Dalit scholars, writers, and educators should be central to the reform

process, ensuring that the efforts to “include” are not extractive but grounded in mutual respect and co-creation.

Ultimately, a more inclusive ELT classroom is not simply about changing what is taught, but about reimagining who speaks, who listens, and whose stories are considered worthy of attention.

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