

Multilingual Realities and ELT Reform: The Case of Government Schools in Imphal East, Manipur

Laimayum Joyshree Devi
Sujeta Beishamayum

ABSTRACT

This study explores the challenges and opportunities in English Language Teaching (ELT) in government schools of Imphal East, Manipur, integrating theoretical and policy perspectives. Drawing on constructivist, socio-cultural, and behaviorist learning theories, the research examines how these paradigms manifest in classroom practices. National education policies such as the NEP 2020 and NCF 2005 are analyzed, particularly regarding the tension between mothertongue instruction and English-medium objectives. Using a mixed-methods approach (surveys, classroom observations, and policy analysis), the study reveals that while students generally have a positive attitude towards English, they often lack oral proficiency and confidence. Teaching practices remain largely teacher-centered and drill-based (behavioristic), which neglects communicative competence and learners' cognitive engagement. The study recommends a shift toward constructivist and socio-cultural methods, improved teacher training, and locally adapted multilingual policies. Context-specific recommendations include enhanced use of technology for interactive learning, bilingual resource development, and community-based language support. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of ELT in Manipur's government schools and offers actionable strategies for policymakers and educators.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, NEP 2020,
Constructivist pedagogy, Multilingual education,
Imphal east schools, Teacher training

INTRODUCTION

English has become a global lingua franca, and in multilingual India it serves as a key medium for higher education, employment, and international communication. In Manipur – a linguistically rich state in India’s northeast – English proficiency opens doors for youth in higher studies and the job market, given the high value placed on English by families and employers. Government schools are the primary schooling option for many Manipuri children, yet these schools frequently struggle to equip students with English skills. However, ELT in Imphal East government schools faces multiple challenges. Teaching tends to be dominated by teacherfronted lectures and rote exercises, reflecting a behaviorist legacy that treats English as a subject rather than a communicative skill. Meanwhile, students are often multilingual, speaking Manipuri (Meiteilon) at home, and may feel anxious when using English in class. Indian education policies add another layer: the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 now emphasizes mother-tongue instruction in early grades, while still acknowledging English for global connectivity.

The problem statement thus unfolds: **How can ELT be strengthened in government schools of Imphal East District, considering both learning theory and policy frameworks?** This paper addresses this by (1) reviewing literature on ELT challenges in India and Manipur, (2) examining relevant learning theories (constructivist, socio-cultural, behaviorist) and their implications for ELT, (3) analyzing national and regional policies affecting language instruction, (4) conducting empirical fieldwork in Imphal East schools to assess current practices and attitudes, and (5) synthesizing findings to propose context-specific recommendations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of English in India and Manipur. English serves as a “linking and job-oriented language” in India’s multilingual society. Studies emphasize that English proficiency is often seen by families in northeastern states as a pathway to quality education and employment. For example, NCERT (2012) notes that in India English is “one of the main communication languages in a multilingual country” and a “symbol of participation in national and international life”. In Manipur specifically,

English has been institutionalized across school levels, but learning outcomes are uneven.

Challenges in ELT in Indian government schools. A body of research highlights systemic gaps in ELT within Indian public education. A recent NCERT study found that many states introduce English as early as class I, often due to parental demand, but teacher preparation and materials lag behind. Instruction remains heavily exam-oriented. Dutta (2012) reports that most primary English textbooks in India focus on reading and writing, with little emphasis on speaking or listening, resulting in “a diversity of schools and classroom procedures” but uniform exam-centered pedagogy. Yumnam’s (2021) study in Manipur similarly observes that state schools “focus on developing reading and writing skills” while neglecting oral communication. The dominance of traditional (often grammar-translation or audio-lingual) methods means students get few chances for meaningful language practice.

Theoretical perspectives on language learning. To frame our analysis, we consider three major learning theories:

Behaviorist theory (e.g. Skinner) views language as a set of learned behaviors shaped by stimulus-response reinforcement. In education, this translates to repetition, drills, and constant correction. Behaviorists argue that children acquire language by imitating models and receiving positive reinforcement (praise, rewards) for correct usage.

Constructivist theory posits that learners *construct* knowledge by actively connecting new information to prior schemas, rather than passively absorbing content. Constructivists emphasize learner-centered activities, discovery learning, and collaborative projects. For language teaching, constructivism supports methods that engage students in problem-solving, group work, and meaningful communication. For our context, we ask: Are Imphal East teachers employing strategies that let students actively *construct* language knowledge, or is instruction still didactic?

Sociocultural theory (Vygotsky) underscores the social nature of learning. It argues that cognitive development – including language – arises through interaction with more knowledgeable others (teachers, peers) and cultural tools (including language itself). In ELT,

a socio-cultural approach would encourage collaborative dialogues, peer tutoring, and tasks situated in authentic cultural contexts.

These theoretical lenses provide a framework to interpret our field data. They suggest that moving beyond behaviorism – toward more constructivists and socio-culturally informed ELT – could improve outcomes.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A robust framework guides analysis of ELT approaches. **Constructivism** holds that knowledge is actively constructed by learners through experience. In the classroom, this means students learn best when they are *engaged* in meaningful tasks, not just passive recipients of information. For language learning, constructivist-inspired methods include problem-based learning, content-based instruction, and learner-centered communicative activities.

Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky) stresses that learning is fundamentally social. Vygotsky posited that children develop higher cognitive functions through dialogue and interaction with more knowledgeable peers or adults. In ELT, a socio-cultural approach would favor group work, guided conversation, and use of cultural artifacts (books, media) as mediational tools. An example is scaffolding a storytelling activity where the teacher gradually shifts responsibility to students. This theory implies that teachers should create a collaborative environment in which English is practiced as a living language – echoing constructivist calls for interactive experiences.

By contrast, **Behaviorist theory** (Skinner et al.) treats language learning as habit formation. It underlies methods such as audiolingual repetition drills, where correct utterances are immediately reinforced. Behaviorism would advise much mimicry of correct models and low tolerance for error, with teacher giving immediate praise or correction. While this can build some accuracy, it downplays internal understanding and creativity. In many government schools, including in Manipur, this orientation remains evident: large classes and exam pressures often push teachers to rely on rote practice and model answers.

Relating theory to practice, this study probes how constructivist and socio-cultural methods can replace or augment entrenched behaviorist practices. We analyze whether Imphal East classrooms offer active, student-driven learning (as constructivism suggests) and social interaction (as socio-

cultural theory suggests), or whether they remain teacher-dominated drill sessions (characteristic of behaviorism).

POLICY PERSPECTIVES

English education in India is shaped by evolving policies at national and state levels. Key frameworks include the National Curriculum Framework (NCF), the Right to Education (RTE) Act, and the new National Education Policy (NEP 2020).

NCF 2005. The National Curriculum Framework (2005) guided a shift toward child-centered pedagogy. For languages, NCF emphasized a three-language formula and mother-tongue instruction. Specifically, NCF-2005 “stresses the use of the child’s mother tongue as the medium of learning at the primary level”. The NCF discouraged rote learning and urged materials that connect classroom content to students’ lives.

Right to Education Act (2009). The RTE Act guarantees free and compulsory elementary education for ages 6–14, enforcing inclusive schooling. While RTE does not prescribe language policy, it implicitly mandates that all children have access to schooling in a medium they can understand. The RTE framework also led to initiatives like Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA), which funded English teacher training and material development.

NEP 2020. The NEP 2020 significantly impacts ELT. It explicitly recommends that “the medium of instruction until at least Class 5, but preferably till Class 8, will be the home language/mother tongue/local/regional language”. English is recommended as a subject, but not imposed, in foundational years. The policy calls for a flexible three-language formula, usually implying two Indian languages and one foreign/English. NEP also encourages high-quality bilingual textbooks (English + mother tongue) for STEM subjects. Importantly, NEP recognizes English’s continued importance: it advises that English should be taught effectively so students can access global knowledge and opportunities. However, it cautions against early compulsory English if resources or training are lacking.

In sum, Indian education policy is trying to strike a balance: strengthen mother-tongue foundations and multilingualism, yet ensure English competency for higher education and employment. In Manipur, state

authorities have incorporated these guidelines in varying degrees. However, policy implementation gaps exist.

METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods design was adopted, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative research techniques. Surveys and interviews were conducted with students, teachers, and administrators to gather data on ELT practices. Classroom observations and document analyses further supplemented the study. This comprehensive approach allows both breadth (quantitative attitudinal trends) and depth (qualitative insights into classroom dynamics and policy interpretation).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

STUDENT ATTITUDES AND PROFICIENCY

The student survey (N=300) showed strong interest in English learning, echoing Ratna Devi & Devi (2024). **Over 75%** of students agreed or strongly agreed that they *enjoy* learning English and see it as useful for their future. However, confidence was lower: ~60% reported feeling anxious or lacking confidence when speaking English in class. Focus-group discussions revealed that students appreciate English songs and media, but worry about making mistakes publicly. This mirrors which found high motivation alongside significant anxiety among Manipuri students. Most students attributed their anxiety to limited practice opportunities.

Proficiency assessment (based on basic reading and speaking exercises) indicated uneven skills: older students (grades 9–10) could decode simple texts, but many struggled with pronunciation and spontaneous speaking. Teachers corroborated this: one commented, “They read well by class X, but cannot form sentences when asked to speak.” Observers noted that 80% of classes predominantly practiced reading and writing, with minimal oral drills. This suggests classrooms emphasize literacy over communicative competence, as NCERT had earlier documented.

TEACHING PRACTICES AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Observations confirmed a **behaviorist-dominated approach** in most classes. In 90% of lessons, teaching was teacher-centered: the teacher lectured or read from the textbook, students copied notes, and then

completed written exercises. Drill-based activities (e.g. chorus repetition of phrases, grammar exercises) were common. Student speaking was rare; even in language lab-equipped schools, most sessions ended with silent seatwork. This is consistent with Yunnam's finding that "English teaching methods are still dominated by the behaviouristic approach". One teacher frankly admitted, "I know communicative activities are ideal, but with 50 students, I rely on lecture and chalk-and-talk to cover the syllabus."

Mother tongue use. In line with socio-cultural theory, use of students' home language (Manipuri) plays a significant role. All observed teachers switched fluidly between English and Manipuri. Often, a new English word was introduced in English and then immediately translated into Manipuri. Instructions were given in Manipuri if students seemed confused. This bilingual code-switching helped comprehension, but also meant that full English immersion rarely occurred. For example, when practicing dialogues, the teacher would model in English but allow students to respond partly in Manipuri for clarity. This finding aligns with the socio-cultural notion that scaffolding in L1 can aid L2 learning (Vygotsky's "more skilled other"). However, it also reflects policy balance: while NEP encourages mother-tongue support, an overreliance might slow English fluency.

Classroom resources. Most schools lacked any audio-visual aids or dedicated language labs. Only 2 of 12 had functional projectors or computer-assisted language tools. Most blackboards had teachers' handwritten notes; textbooks (mostly state board) were used, but often students had only one textbook per household to share. This scarcity can hinder interactive learning. On the plus side, some teachers creatively used local stories and pictures to teach vocabulary (e.g. showing village scenes and naming objects in English). Yet, these ad-hoc localizations were exceptions.

TEACHER BACKGROUND AND TRAINING

Many of English teachers had at least a Bachelor's degree in English, but only 25% had formal training in language pedagogy (like a B.Ed or diploma). In-service training in communicative methods was rare: only 10% had attended any workshop on modern ELT in the past five years. This mirrors national findings that many ELT teachers lack exposure to applied linguistics.

Correspondingly, teachers' own attitudes were mixed. In the survey, 85% of teachers agreed that English is crucial for students' futures (a view supported by national policy). However, 60% felt unprepared to teach speaking skills, and 70% said they default to traditional lecture methods due to class size or exam pressure. In interviews, teachers commonly cited "lack of time" and "curriculum demands" as constraints. One principal noted: "The State board exam rewards grammar and writing; so we focus on that." Indeed, state examinations emphasize written English (essay, grammar, comprehension), which reinforces a behaviorist approach.

POLICY AWARENESS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Awareness of NEP policies was low among teachers: only 30% had actually read any part of NEP 2020 or attended a briefing on its recommendations. None of the schools had explicitly changed medium-of-instruction plans in response to NEP; English remained a subject, and Hindi/Manipuri often served as main teaching languages. Even so, principals and teachers appreciated NEP's focus on multilingualism. One academic coordinator observed, "We already teach Math and Science in Manipuri for early grades, so NEP's suggestion of mother-tongue up to Grade 5 isn't new to us, but it helps justify our practice." At the same time, some teachers saw potential pitfalls: "If we go too slow with English, students worry they won't catch up later," said an 8th-grade teacher.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

In summary, the data reveal: **(a)** Students value English and are motivated, but lack confidence and oral practice opportunities. **(b)** Classrooms remain heavily teacher-centered and text-focused (characteristic of behaviorism), with little constructivist activity. **(c)** Teachers are committed but often undertrained in communicative pedagogy. **(d)** State and national policies (NCF, NEP) promoting mother-tongue education are partially reflected, but there is limited pedagogical innovation to realize constructivist ideals.

DISCUSSION

Our results resonate with and extend existing literature. The positive yet anxious student attitudes we found mirror Ratna Devi & Devi (2024). Like them, we observe that most students in Manipur's government schools want to learn English and enjoy aspects of it, but many lack confidence.

This suggests that motivation – a strong intrinsic factor – is not fully translating into proficiency, likely due to teaching limitations.

The prevalence of behaviorist methods aligns with prior studies. Yumnam (2021) noted that Manipuri classrooms “focus on developing reading and writing skills” and are largely lecturebased. Our classroom observations confirmed this pattern: few activities required creative language use. This is consistent with national critiques: the NCERT English study found state textbooks at early levels emphasize reading/writing and little on listening/speaking. Behaviorist pedagogy, emphasizing repetition and memorization, thus remains deeply embedded. Such methods can yield short-term test gains but fail to build communicative competence. This may explain why students “are still not confident to use English”, despite years of schooling in English.

In contrast, constructivist and socio-cultural elements are weak. Very few classrooms employed group work, projects, or learner discovery. This contrasts with Buffalo’s constructivist principle that “students learn best when engaged in learning experiences rather than passively receiving information”. Similarly, Vygotsky’s socio-cultural claim that “human learning is largely a social process” did not fully translate into practice: interactions were mostly teacher–student lecturing, not student-to-student scaffolding. Thus, the rich multilingual potential of Manipur’s classrooms is underutilized as a learning resource.

Policy implications emerge from these comparisons. The NEP’s push for mother-tongue instruction up to Class 5 seems consonant with classroom reality; most schools already use Manipuri or bilingual approaches in early grades. However, NEP also urges experiential, language-rich pedagogy, which our study shows is lacking. Thus, policy alone is insufficient without teacher capacity-building. Likewise, NEP’s endorsement of English to access global opportunities is echoed by local aspirations, but the policy’s intended curriculum reforms (e.g. richer textbooks, activities) have not permeated the actual practices. This gap is highlighted in our data: for example, while schools had Manipuri-science programs aligning with NEP, English classes did not feature the suggested integrated, life-skills approach (contrary to NCERT’s recommendations).

One unexpected finding was the high degree of code-switching observed. While some literature views code-switching as a hindrance, our observations suggest it played a positive scaffolding role. Students frequently engaged when teachers explained concepts in Manipuri before attempting English. This points to an opportunity: instead of lamenting code-switching, pedagogy could explicitly leverage bilingualism (a socio-cultural approach) to build bridges to English.

Lastly, the role of ICT and innovation was minimal in practice, despite advocacy in some research. Teachers and students expressed interest in multimedia resources, but infrastructure and training were barriers. By aligning classroom reality with both policy aspirations and learning theory, stakeholders can better address the stagnating status of English learning in Manipur.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and analysis, we propose the following context-specific recommendations for strengthening ELT in Imphal East government schools:

1. **Enhanced Teacher Training and Professional Development.**

- Provide **in-service workshops** focusing on communicative language teaching and constructivist strategies. For instance, training could cover role-play, group dialogue activities, and project-based learning in English. Ongoing mentorship (peer observation and feedback) can help teachers apply these methods.
- Integrate **language pedagogy modules** into existing teacher education programs (DIETs,
- B.Ed institutes) with emphasis on ELT innovations.
- Encourage teacher participation in online communities or MOOCs on ELT to expose them to global best practices (as recommended by the British Council's emphasis on debate and innovation in ELT).

2. **Curriculum and Material Development.**

- **Bilingual/Multilingual Resources:** Develop materials that blend English with Manipuri contexts. For example, create illustrated readers featuring local stories with English explanations, aligning with students' life experiences as NCERT suggests.

- **Use of Local Culture:** Embed Manipuri culture in English lessons (folk tales, songs), to leverage socio-cultural relevance and build on students' background knowledge.

3. **Enhanced Use of Technology.**

- Equip schools with **low-cost ICT tools** (e.g., speakers, projectors, educational apps on tablets) and train teachers to use them for interactive language practice. For example, playing short English videos and discussing them can stimulate listening comprehension and discussion.
- Use **mobile learning:** Encourage teachers to use smartphones (widely owned) as part of lessons—for instance, English-learning apps or online story audio during free periods.

4. **Increased Speaking Opportunities.**

- **English Immersion Days:** Designate certain periods or activities where only English is used (with manipulation to maintain comprehension). For example, an “English Corner” in the library or an assembly presentation in English. These create zones of English use and motivate practice.

5. **Community and Policy Engagement.**

- Sensitize **parents and community leaders** about ELT goals. Workshops or PTA meetings can explain why both mother tongue and English proficiency matter.
- Promote **language policy awareness** among teachers so they understand NEP guidelines (three-language flexibility, mother tongue emphasis) and can implement them logically (e.g. segregating some subjects by language).

By taking these steps, stakeholders can move toward the ideal of a learner-centered, communicative, and culturally grounded English education in government schools. These recommendations are grounded in the local context of Manipur: for instance, using Manipuri folktales in English readers leverages students' existing knowledge; focusing on practical speaking skills addresses the expressed anxiety of learners.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the critical need and potential strategies for strengthening English Language Teaching in Imphal East District's government schools. Through empirical investigation, we found that while students are motivated to learn English, existing pedagogical practices which is largely behaviorist and lecture-based inhibit their communicative development. Theoretical analysis suggests that adopting more constructivist and socio-cultural approaches (active learning, peer interaction) could better harness students' enthusiasm. Policy analysis indicates that India's NEP and NCF frameworks support multilingual, child-centered education, but their implementation remains uneven in this region.

In summary, strengthening ELT in Manipur's government schools requires concerted effort on multiple fronts like theoretical, practical, and policy-driven. By embracing learner-centered pedagogies and supporting teachers and students with appropriate resources, the goal of high quality English education which is envisioned by policymakers and sought by communities can become more attainable.

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