

From Mother Tongue to Global Voice: NEP 2020 and the Future of English Learning in India

Dr. Sandeep Verma

Associate Professor and Head, Department of Humanities, Faculty of Engineering, Teerthanker Mahaveer University, Moradabad, U.P., India

Abstract:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformative moment in India's educational policy, particularly in its approach to language learning. Under the guiding theme "From Mother Tongue to Global Voice," the policy seeks to harmonize foundational literacy in the mother tongue or regional languages with the strategic acquisition of English as a Second Language (ESL). This balance aims to foster cognitive development, cultural rootedness, and global competence among India's vast multilingual student population. This paper critically examines the implications of NEP 2020's language framework on English learning within public schools across North India's Hindi belt states—Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Punjab—which together enroll over 80% of students in the region's government education system. NEP 2020 fundamentally reasserts the importance of mother tongue instruction, mandating it as the medium of teaching at least up to Grade 5 and preferably through Grade 8, while also emphasizing the Three-Language Formula that includes regional languages, Hindi, and English. This multilingual approach is intended not only to enhance literacy and comprehension but also to preserve cultural heritage and identity. Simultaneously, English proficiency is recognized as a gateway to higher education, economic opportunities, and global engagement. The policy also innovatively integrates Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into curricula, seeking to anchor ESL pedagogy within indigenous epistemologies, narratives, and experiential learning frameworks.

The study investigates how these ambitious policy directives are operationalized in North India's public schools, focusing on four critical dimensions: the alignment of policy with classroom practice; the structural capacity and equity challenges in ESL instruction; the deployment of culturally grounded pedagogies and experiential learning methods; and the measurable impacts on student language outcomes and aspirations. By synthesizing policy analysis, quantitative data from educational monitoring agencies (NCERT, DIKSHA, ASER), district-level assessments (NIPUN Bharat), qualitative insights from teacher interviews and surveys, and case studies of pilot programs, the paper offers a comprehensive understanding of NEP 2020's efficacy and limitations in this complex sociolinguistic context. Findings reveal that while NEP 2020's emphasis on mother tongue-based multilingual education aligns with robust cognitive and linguistic theories—such as Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis and Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle—its implementation is uneven and fraught with challenges. In Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, insufficient bilingual resources, abrupt medium-of-instruction transitions, and inadequate teacher training undermine ESL acquisition, leading to comprehension gaps and reduced student engagement. Haryana and Punjab display greater variability: Punjab's promotion of Punjabi alongside English and the presence of relatively better-trained educators facilitate more effective bilingual instruction, while Haryana struggles with rural-urban disparities and inconsistent policy application. Central to the policy's innovation

is the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), which roots English learning in culturally familiar contexts—Ayurvedic medicine vocabulary, folk narratives, artisanal crafts, and local epistemologies—thereby enhancing motivation and cognitive connections. This culturally relevant pedagogy counters the alienation often associated with Western-centric ESL models and promotes epistemological pluralism and decolonial educational practices. Pilot programs incorporating IKS and task-based learning demonstrate positive effects on student fluency, narrative skills, and socio-emotional confidence. However, these approaches remain localized and require systemic scaling.

The paper also highlights persistent socio-economic inequities. English proficiency remains highly correlated with access to private schooling and urban resources, deepening divides between privileged and marginalized learners. Without robust policy mechanisms to address these disparities—such as expanded teacher training, equitable distribution of bilingual materials, and digital resource access—NEP 2020's flexible framework risks reinforcing existing educational inequities and the elite status of English in India. To bridge these gaps, the study advocates for sustained investment in teacher capacity-building focused on multilingual, experiential, and IKS-based ESL pedagogy; the development and dissemination of bilingual, culturally responsive curricular materials; and the institutionalization of accountability frameworks to monitor equitable implementation across states. It further underscores the need for collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, and communities to contextualize NEP's vision within local linguistic realities while maintaining fidelity to its multilingual and global objectives. The paper argues that NEP 2020's aspirational mantra “from mother tongue to global voice” encapsulates a vital, feasible pathway for India's public education system—one that respects linguistic diversity and cultural heritage while equipping students for meaningful participation in the global knowledge economy. Achieving this vision necessitates coherent policy execution, culturally sensitive pedagogy, and an unwavering commitment to equity. This research contributes to the evolving discourse on language policy, multilingual education, and postcolonial pedagogy in India, offering actionable insights for advancing ESL instruction that is both inclusive and empowering. Ultimately, it positions India's multilingual youth as key agents in shaping a plural, dynamic future, fluent in their mother tongues and confident in their global voice.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, English as a Second Language, mother tongue instruction, multilingual education, Indian Knowledge Systems, language policy in India, North India education, multilingual pedagogy, language equity, experiential learning, Three-Language Formula, public school education, postcolonial education, language learning challenges, cultural relevance in education.

1. Introduction:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a decisive turn in India's educational philosophy. Unveiled on July 29, 2020, it replaces the 1986 policy and emphasizes foundational literacy, multilingualism, experiential learning, and culturally grounded education (Ministry of Education 2020). Central to this reform is the decision to use the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at least up to Grade 5—and preferably through Grade 8—while also strengthening English as a Second Language (ESL) through the Three-Language Formula. This triadic approach seeks to balance cognitive development, cultural identity, and global opportunity: the mother tongue enriches thought, regional languages connect heritage, and English equips students for the global economy. Inside North India's public-school landscape—spanning Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Punjab—

implementation of NEP 2020's language guidelines is both promising and perplexing. These five states collectively account for over 80% public-school enrollment in the Hindi belt. Here, policy articulation meets ground realities: limited infrastructure, teacher shortages, variable political will, socio-economic disparities, and linguistic heterogeneity. At the same time, English fluency remains a gateway to urban jobs, higher education, and broader horizons—especially for rural and economically marginalized learners. This dual demand shapes the policy's critical tension: how to build ESL capacity without undermining native linguistic identity and early comprehension. Moreover, NEP 2020 uniquely integrates the Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) framework, acknowledging India's ancient traditions in science, philosophy, language, arts, and administration. The policy mandates incorporation of IKS into curricula and encourages pedagogy rooted in local context, whether through tribal agricultural practices, artisanal craft, Sanskrit epistemology, or folk narratives (Ministry of Education, Thematic Session 2024). Leveraging IKS in ESL instruction offers a culturally grounded scaffold—students learn English through familiar cognitive models, traditional story arcs, and indigenous problem-solving practices. This approach promises deep engagement, linguistic confidence, and a sense of belonging—contrasting sharply with the alienation often seen in purely Western ESL methods.

This study critically examines the ESL outcomes of NEP 2020 within North India's public schools through four research lenses:

1. Policy-to-Classroom Alignment: How effectively do policy guidelines translate into coherent instruction—regarding timing, language medium, bilingual scaffolding, and IKS integration?
2. Structural Capacity and Equity: What disparities exist in infrastructure, teacher readiness, and socio-economic access to ESL—especially in rural and marginalized communities?
3. Pedagogical Innovation and Cultural Integration: How have IKS-based pedagogy, cohort bilingual strategies, and task-based learning been deployed, and what are their impacts on ESL acquisition?
4. Learning Outcomes and Aspirations: What evidence exists for student progress—in fluency, comprehension, socio-emotional development, and academic aspiration—stemming from NEP's model?

Addressing these questions is crucial. ESL remains both a necessity and a point of inequity; without clear multilingual pathways, public-school students risk delayed learning, low fluency, and academic setbacks. Yet, ESL learning anchored in IKS and experiential pedagogy can reclaim cultural identity while building global readiness. This research draws on interrelated data sources: NEP policy text and NCFD guidelines; state-level education monitoring from NCERT, DIKSHA, and ASER; district-level assessments via NIPUN Bharat; qualitative feedback from teacher surveys and interviews; and media coverage of policy shifts in the states. It further explores pilot programs (e.g., bilingual storytelling, IKS-language labs, digital resources) to understand their effects on student learning. Moving beyond national rhetoric, the study strives to capture the lived realities of ESL instruction in North India's most resource-constrained public-school environments. It highlights where NEP 2020's vision is meeting reality, where it's missing the mark, and—most importantly—how its promise can be realized through contextualized, culturally sensitive approaches. The paper seeks to demonstrate that “from mother tongue to global voice” is not only an aspirational slogan but a feasible pathway. To achieve it, North India's public-school system must coherently weave together early foundational language, IKS-infused pedagogy, ESL scaffolding, and equitable resource distribution. By doing so, India's multilingual youth can genuinely flourish—rooted in tradition, prepared for global engagement, and capable of shaping the nation's plural future.

2. Theoretical Foundations of ESL Acquisition under NEP-2020:

To understand the philosophical and practical intentions behind the NEP-2020's approach to English as a Second Language (ESL) education, one must unpack its theoretical underpinnings. The policy draws from multiple fields: cognitive linguistics, multilingual education, experiential learning models, and the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS). These strands form a pedagogical framework that recognizes language not just as a skill but as a medium for thought, culture, and identity formation.

2.1 Multilingualism and Cognitive Development:

A major foundation of NEP-2020 is its emphasis on multilingualism, specifically the importance of mother-tongue instruction in early grades. Decades of psycholinguistic and educational research support the notion that learning in one's first language (L1) in early childhood significantly improves cognitive outcomes and academic performance (Benson, 2005). Cummins' Interdependence Hypothesis (2000) posits that proficiency in L1 forms a cognitive and linguistic foundation upon which second-language (L2) acquisition, like English, can build. When children develop strong conceptual understanding in L1, they can transfer those skills to ESL learning more effectively. Cummins also distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). While BICS may develop in a second language relatively quickly, academic language skills (CALP) require time, deep engagement, and structured instruction (Cummins, 2000). This theory directly informs NEP-2020's decision to emphasize strong L1 acquisition before introducing English in a systematic and meaningful way.

2.2 The Three-Language Formula: Continuity and Challenges:

The NEP reaffirms India's longstanding Three-Language Formula: regional language, Hindi, and English (or another modern Indian or foreign language). The intention is to balance regional and national identity with global communication skills (Patel & Singh, 2024). However, the flexibility offered to states—through vague phrases like “wherever possible”—creates inconsistencies in implementation. In states like Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, political and social pressures have led to abrupt transitions between Hindi and English mediums, often without adequate preparation or resources. The effectiveness of the Three-Language Formula depends largely on its structured implementation and alignment with learners' socio-linguistic contexts. Without clear timelines and progression models, there is a risk of introducing English too late or too abruptly, leading to comprehension gaps and cognitive overload.

2.3 Task-Based and Experiential Learning:

Another key theoretical pillar of NEP-2020 is experiential learning, rooted in David Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Theory. Kolb describes a four-stage cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. NEP recommends that language instruction follow this model through project work, storytelling, arts integration, and inquiry-based approaches. In ESL education, this could involve students learning English vocabulary and grammar by participating in a role-play, writing reflective journals, or narrating local stories in English. Studies by Tom and Kumar (2021) affirm that such methods not only enhance fluency and retention but also increase learner engagement and confidence. Task-based learning, which emphasizes real-world language use, is also gaining ground in ESL classrooms under the NEP. Instead of rote memorization of grammar rules, students may be asked to complete tasks like writing letters, preparing weather reports, or creating posters—encouraging language use for authentic purposes.

2.4 Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS):

A unique and transformative element of NEP-2020 is its call for the integration of Indian Knowledge Sys-

tems (IKS) into mainstream pedagogy. IKS includes traditional sciences, philosophy, arts, and local languages. The inclusion of IKS in ESL pedagogy presents an opportunity to ground English instruction in familiar, culturally relevant content. For instance, students might learn the English names of herbs used in Ayurvedic treatments or retell local folk stories in English. Such culturally contextualized ESL learning has both motivational and cognitive benefits. When students relate English words and structures to their lived experiences and cultural background, they form stronger associations and understandings (Sharma, 2023). Moreover, this approach aligns with Gandhian ideals of education—rooted in craft, culture, and moral values (Singh, 2023). IKS also facilitates interdisciplinary learning. For example, learning about traditional Indian architecture or astronomy in both local languages and English deepens understanding across domains while strengthening bilingual capacity. Ara (2023) argues that using local epistemologies challenges the colonial residue of English education and fosters greater inclusion and respect for diverse identities.

2.5 Epistemological Pluralism and Decoloniality:

Incorporating IKS into ESL instruction also reflects a shift toward epistemological pluralism. This involves recognizing that knowledge is not solely derived from Western scientific traditions but is also embedded in oral histories, crafts, rituals, and ecological practices (Ara, 2023). By legitimizing these forms of knowing within formal education, NEP-2020 challenges the hegemony of colonial epistemologies and offers students from marginalized backgrounds a sense of pride and ownership in their learning.

In ESL classrooms, decolonial pedagogies could involve translating proverbs, explaining village rituals, or crafting traditional items with instructions in English. These methods not only improve language proficiency but also instill cultural confidence.

2.6 Classroom-Level Implications:

The practical classroom implications of these theoretical models are significant. Teachers need to be trained in multilingual pedagogy, IKS-based content, and experiential ESL methods. Textbooks should be bilingual and include culturally relevant content. Classroom assessments must evaluate not just English vocabulary and grammar but also narrative ability, context comprehension, and cross-linguistic transfer. State initiatives like Odisha's Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and pilot programs in Rajasthan and Punjab already showcase the effectiveness of such approaches. However, for systemic change, these models need to be scaled with appropriate policy support and capacity-building.

2.7 Summary:

NEP-2020's theoretical framework rests on four pillars:

1. Linguistic Interdependence: Emphasizing strong L1 skills to support L2 (English) acquisition.
2. Experiential Pedagogy: Using active, task-based learning rooted in Kolb's cycle.
3. Cultural Relevance through IKS: Making ESL instruction more engaging, contextual, and inclusive.
4. Multilingual Frameworks: Implementing the Three-Language Formula with clarity and consistency.

These theories form the backbone of India's new vision for ESL instruction. However, without adequate implementation, these models remain aspirational. The next sections will evaluate how these principles fare when confronted with real-world challenges in North India's public education systems.

3. Policy Provisions Pertaining to English under NEP-2020:

The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP-2020) presents a comprehensive framework designed to revolutionize language instruction in Indian schools, with particular emphasis on balancing mother-tongue

education and English proficiency. This section critically examines the policy provisions specifically related to English language acquisition, exploring directives on language of instruction, curriculum and textbooks, and teacher recruitment and training, focusing on North Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Punjab. These states' public education systems exemplify the policy's challenges and opportunities in multilingual contexts.

3.1 Language of Instruction: Balancing Mother Tongue and English:

NEP-2020 unequivocally endorses mother-tongue or regional language instruction as the primary medium of education at least up to Grade 5 and preferably up to Grade 8 (Ministry of Education, 2020). This directive reflects global research underscoring the cognitive and academic benefits of initial education in a familiar language (Benson, 2005). However, NEP also recognizes English as a critical global lingua franca essential for higher education and employment, positioning it as an advisory language medium choice beyond foundational years. In North India, where linguistic diversity ranges from Hindi dialects, Punjabi, Rajasthani, Bhojपुरी, and Maithili to others, this multilingual matrix complicates policy implementation. For example, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar's government schools largely use Hindi or regional dialects as the medium in early grades, transitioning to English medium in later years. However, this transition is often abrupt and unsupported by adequate bilingual resources or teacher capacity, leading to learning gaps and student anxiety (Singh, 2023; Kumar, 2022). The policy's language of instruction provisions, while progressive in principle, are deliberately flexible—terms like “as far as possible” allow states discretion but have resulted in inconsistent practices. Haryana and Punjab have seen divergent applications: Punjab's emphasis on Punjabi language instruction coexists with English-medium private schools preferred by socio-economically advantaged groups, whereas Haryana experiences mixed language medium schools with significant rural-urban disparities in access to quality ESL instruction (Gupta & Chatterjee, 2023).

3.2 Curriculum and Textbooks: Emphasizing Bilingual and Activity-Based Learning:

NEP-2020 mandates curriculum reform to integrate bilingual textbooks and experiential learning methods in ESL classrooms (Ministry of Education, 2020). The goal is to foster not only linguistic competence but also cultural sensitivity and practical language use. Activity-based learning includes task-driven projects, storytelling, drama, and digital content that reflect students' socio-cultural realities. In North Indian government schools, however, textbook availability and quality remain major bottlenecks. In Bihar and Rajasthan, many government schools lack adequately bilingual textbooks that seamlessly incorporate local languages alongside English (Jha, 2021). Existing materials often rely heavily on rote learning, with insufficient incorporation of cultural content or communicative language teaching. This leads to reduced engagement and ineffective ESL acquisition. Additionally, cultural integration—one of NEP's unique features—urges the inclusion of local art, folklore, and Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in English curricula to enhance relevance and motivation (Ara, 2023). For example, incorporating Rajasthani folk tales or Punjabi proverbs in English lessons can enrich vocabulary while affirming students' cultural identities. Yet such integration is sporadic and dependent on teacher creativity rather than systemic curriculum design.

3.3 Teacher Recruitment and Training: Building ESL Pedagogical Capacity:

NEP-2020 stresses the critical role of teacher quality in realizing ESL acquisition goals. It advocates for district-level recruitment to ensure local language familiarity, reduced transfers to maintain continuity, and rigorous training in multilingual and experiential ESL pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2020). It also recommends expanding teacher professional development through platforms like DIKSHA and linking

teacher assessment to language proficiency. Despite these recommendations, implementation in North Indian states remains uneven. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar face acute teacher shortages and often employ underqualified staff, limiting capacity for bilingual and task-based ESL instruction (Kumar, 2022). Many teachers lack formal ESL training and struggle with both English proficiency and local dialect fluency (Singh & Sharma, 2023). Training programs are often short-term and theoretical, with limited classroom mentoring. Punjab and Haryana demonstrate somewhat better teacher training infrastructure, but disparities persist between urban and rural schools. Moreover, frequent policy changes and administrative bottlenecks undermine sustained professional development efforts (Gupta & Chatterjee, 2023). Consequently, teachers resort to traditional lecture-based approaches rather than experiential and learner-centered methods recommended by NEP.

3.4 Institutional Autonomy and Flexibility: A Double-Edged Sword:

NEP-2020's flexible policy framework intends to allow states, schools, and local authorities to adapt language instruction according to regional contexts (Ministry of Education, 2020). While this decentralization encourages contextualization, it also creates wide variation in ESL outcomes across North Indian states. For instance, while Punjab actively promotes Punjabi alongside English, Rajasthan experiences slower policy uptake and lacks cohesive bilingual curriculum development (Jha, 2021). Haryana's multiple official languages lead to mixed messaging and confusion among teachers and students regarding medium of instruction. This heterogeneity risks deepening inequities where privileged groups access quality English-medium education in private schools, while government schools lag behind (Gupta & Chatterjee, 2023).

3.5 Socio-Economic Implications:

English proficiency remains a critical determinant of socio-economic mobility in India. NEP-2020's provisions implicitly acknowledge this but lack explicit measures to bridge socio-economic divides in English access. In North India, the urban-rural divide is stark: urban students frequently attend English-medium private schools, while rural students struggle with under-resourced government schools (Singh, 2023). Without targeted equity measures, NEP's flexible language policies risk perpetuating privilege, reinforcing the status of English as a language of the elite (Kumar, 2022). The policy's recommendations for after-school ESL coaching and digital resources need urgent operationalization to ensure equitable ESL acquisition across socio-economic strata.

3.6 Summary:

The NEP-2020 sets a forward-looking agenda for English language education, emphasizing mother tongue-based multilingual instruction, experiential learning, and teacher capacity development. However, in North India's public education systems, these policy provisions face formidable challenges due to infrastructural deficits, inconsistent implementation, teacher preparedness issues, and socio-economic disparities. The policy's flexibility, while context-sensitive, necessitates stronger accountability and resource support to realize its vision of balanced mother-tongue and English proficiency.

4. Structural Capacity and Equity in ESL Implementation:

The success of NEP 2020's ESL goals depends heavily on the existing structural capacity of public schools and equitable access to resources. This section assesses the infrastructural readiness, teacher availability and qualifications, and socio-economic factors that influence ESL acquisition in North India's public education landscape.

4.1 Infrastructure and Learning Environment:

Effective ESL instruction requires conducive learning environments equipped with appropriate materials and technological aids. However, many government schools across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Punjab face infrastructural deficits that hamper NEP 2020's vision. Surveys by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER, 2023) reveal that a significant proportion of rural schools lack basic classroom facilities such as functional blackboards, adequate seating, and electricity, which are essential for interactive ESL activities. Digital resources recommended by NEP, including language labs and multimedia content, are scarce or underutilized in these settings. For example, less than 25% of surveyed schools in Bihar and Rajasthan have access to digital ESL learning tools, limiting exposure to varied English language inputs. Moreover, textbook and learning material distribution remains uneven. In Punjab, a relatively better-resourced state, textbooks often reach schools late in the academic year, delaying curriculum delivery and causing gaps in ESL progression. This logistical challenge is compounded in more remote districts where transport and supply chain issues are persistent.

4.2 Teacher Availability and Qualifications:

Teacher shortages and qualification gaps constitute one of the biggest obstacles to quality ESL instruction under NEP 2020. North Indian public schools report vacancy rates of up to 30% for language teachers in some districts (Kumar, 2022). Even where teachers are present, many lack specialized ESL training or adequate proficiency in English. Interviews with district education officers in Haryana and Uttar Pradesh indicate that teacher recruitment often prioritizes local language fluency over English competence, reflecting community preferences but limiting ESL instruction quality. Additionally, in-service teacher training programs are sporadic and underfunded, resulting in pedagogical practices that emphasize rote learning rather than experiential, IKS-based, or task-driven approaches advocated by NEP. Teacher absenteeism remains a concern, particularly in rural schools, further reducing instructional time for ESL. This absenteeism often correlates with poor working conditions, low pay, and inadequate professional support.

4.3 Socio-Economic Barriers and Equity Concerns:

Socio-economic disparities critically shape ESL learning opportunities. Children from economically marginalized families in rural areas frequently attend poorly resourced government schools with limited ESL exposure. Conversely, children from more affluent or urban backgrounds benefit from private English-medium schools, after-school coaching, and access to digital learning platforms. This divide is stark in states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, where over 60% of the rural population lives below the poverty line. Many students face additional challenges such as child labour, malnutrition, and lack of parental literacy, which compound difficulties in language acquisition. Moreover, caste and gender intersect with economic status to affect ESL outcomes. Scheduled Caste (SC) and Scheduled Tribe (ST) students, especially girls, often have less access to quality English instruction and face higher dropout rates. NEP's equity objectives highlight the need for targeted interventions, yet state-level initiatives remain nascent and insufficiently scaled.

4.4 Policy and Administrative Support for Capacity Building:

While NEP 2020 underscores the importance of structural strengthening, the translation into actionable state and district plans varies considerably. States like Punjab have launched teacher mentoring programs and digital resource hubs, showing initial promise in building ESL capacity. In contrast, Bihar's efforts remain hampered by fiscal constraints and administrative inertia. The decentralization of education governance under NEP places increased responsibility on district-level administrators. However, many

districts lack trained personnel capable of designing, monitoring, and adapting ESL interventions effectively. This capacity gap undermines policy implementation coherence and accountability.

4.5 Summary:

The structural and equity landscape of ESL implementation in North India's public schools presents a complex mix of challenges and emerging opportunities:

- Infrastructure gaps limit the availability and quality of ESL learning environments.
- Teacher shortages and inadequate ESL training reduce instructional effectiveness.
- Socio-economic inequities perpetuate disparities in English language acquisition.
- Policy decentralization requires enhanced administrative capacity to ensure consistent and equitable ESL outcomes.

Addressing these structural and equity issues is vital to realize NEP 2020's vision of inclusive, mother-tongue-rooted, yet globally relevant ESL education.

5. Pedagogical Innovation and Cultural Integration in ESL Classrooms:

Pedagogical reform is one of NEP 2020's most transformative goals. In the context of ESL instruction, the policy urges a departure from rote-based grammar translation methods toward activity-rich, culturally anchored, and learner-centered approaches. This section explores how pedagogical innovations—especially those integrating Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), bilingual strategies, and experiential learning—are being deployed across North Indian public schools, and how these practices impact student engagement and language acquisition.

5.1 Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) as Pedagogical Anchors:

The NEP explicitly calls for embedding IKS into every facet of education, including language learning. In ESL instruction, this integration serves both cognitive and cultural purposes—using familiar epistemologies to teach unfamiliar language structures. Examples of IKS-based ESL pedagogy include:

- Retelling Panchatantra stories in English, promoting narrative structure, vocabulary development, and moral reasoning.
- Describing traditional crafts or agricultural practices in bilingual formats, enriching both technical vocabulary and conceptual understanding.
- Exploring Ayurvedic herbs, local festivals, or folk songs through guided English writing and oral exercises.

Pilot programs in Rajasthan and Haryana have begun incorporating folk narratives and proverbs into ESL lessons. According to a 2023 survey by the Azim Premji Foundation, students participating in these culturally contextualized ESL modules reported higher engagement, stronger retention of new vocabulary, and greater willingness to speak in English, particularly in group settings.

5.2 Bilingual and Cohort-Based Strategies:

Bilingual scaffolding—where English instruction is supported by the use of the mother tongue or regional language—is central to NEP 2020's multilingual framework. In practice, however, its success depends on teacher skill and classroom language dynamics. Several district education offices in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh have initiated cohort bilingual models, where students are grouped based on L1 proficiency and taught ESL using both English and Hindi (or a regional dialect) in calibrated phases. Teachers use code-switching as a strategy to explain complex grammar, introduce new vocabulary, and facilitate classroom discussions. While research (Patel & Singh, 2024) shows that such approaches improve early ESL comprehension and reduce learner anxiety, implementation remains inconsistent. In many classrooms,

bilingualism is used informally rather than strategically, often reverting to Hindi as the dominant medium and diminishing English language exposure. Without clear instructional planning, the bilingual advantage risks being diluted.

5.3 Experiential and Task-Based ESL Learning:

Task-based language teaching (TBLT), grounded in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), emphasizes learning through doing. Under NEP 2020, ESL classrooms are encouraged to replace drill-based grammar instruction with real-world tasks that promote communication and critical thinking. Examples include:

- Role-playing as shopkeepers or journalists to practice functional English.
- Creating posters or digital slideshows on environmental themes in English.
- Writing reflective journals or personal stories, blending self-expression with structured writing.

In Rajasthan and Bihar, select schools have experimented with ESL through crafts, where students learn process vocabulary (e.g., cut, weave, fold) while engaging in traditional arts. Similarly, "Language Through Environment" projects—where students document local flora and fauna in English—have shown promise in strengthening contextual vocabulary and presentation skills. However, scaling these innovations is constrained by rigid timetables, lack of training, and minimal resource support. Many teachers express uncertainty about how to design and evaluate such tasks within conventional assessment frameworks (Singh & Sharma, 2023).

5.4 Digital Tools and ESL Pedagogy:

To aid experiential learning and bridge resource gaps, NEP promotes the use of digital tools like DIKSHA, e-Pathshala, and state-specific learning platforms. These offer ESL modules with interactive games, bilingual videos, and story-based learning paths. In Punjab and Haryana, mobile-friendly ESL apps have been piloted in rural schools with moderate success. When supported by teacher facilitation, digital storytelling and vocabulary-building games enhance pronunciation, listening comprehension, and self-paced learning. However, in poorer districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, digital access remains low due to infrastructure limitations and low smartphone penetration, especially among girl students (ASER, 2023).

5.5 Teachers as Cultural Mediators:

A key insight from field studies is that teachers function not just as language instructors, but as cultural mediators. Those with strong local knowledge and community ties are better able to connect English content to students' lives—e.g., linking English verbs to daily farming activities, or translating local idioms into English expressions. Training programs that equip teachers to recognize and harness this dual role are rare. Where they do exist—such as in Punjab's "English for Life" initiative or Haryana's district-level bilingual resource hubs—they have led to increased classroom participation and stronger home-school language bridges. However, these are exceptions, not the norm.

5.6 Summary:

Pedagogical innovation under NEP 2020 holds immense potential to transform ESL learning in North India's public schools. The integration of IKS, bilingual scaffolding, task-based learning, and digital tools has yielded promising outcomes in isolated cases. However, the broader picture reveals the need for:

- Systematic curriculum design that embeds IKS and task-based modules into mainstream ESL materials.
- Scalable teacher training programs focused on experiential, bilingual, and culturally anchored pedagogy.
- Greater flexibility in assessment to recognize creativity, comprehension, and cross-linguistic transfer—not just grammar accuracy.

Without these supports, pedagogical innovation risks being localized and unsustainable. But with the right investment, it can form the bedrock of an inclusive, engaging, and effective ESL ecosystem in North India.

6. Learning Outcomes and Aspirations: Evaluating ESL Impact under NEP 2020:

While NEP 2020 outlines ambitious frameworks for English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction, its ultimate success must be measured by tangible learning outcomes and shifts in student aspirations. This section evaluates empirical and anecdotal evidence of ESL progress in North Indian public schools—across dimensions of linguistic proficiency, academic performance, socio-emotional development, and future aspirations.

6.1 Measuring ESL Proficiency Gains:

Assessing ESL learning in public schools has traditionally relied on rote-based exams focused on grammar and vocabulary recall. NEP 2020 urges a shift toward competency-based assessment, which emphasizes comprehension, usage, fluency, and communicative ability. Pilot assessments conducted under the NIPUN Bharat Mission in Uttar Pradesh and Haryana (2022–2024) show modest improvements in reading comprehension and oral fluency among Grades 3–5 students exposed to bilingual, task-based ESL instruction. For instance:

- In districts using bilingual storytelling modules, average English sentence construction scores improved by 18% over one academic year.
- Students with consistent exposure to English through local context-based tasks (e.g., labeling market items, describing festivals) demonstrated better vocabulary retention and contextual usage than peers in rote-focused classrooms.

However, systemic assessment tools for ESL remain underdeveloped. Many schools still lack baseline language diagnostics or longitudinal tracking of student progress, making it difficult to evaluate policy impact comprehensively.

6.2 Socio-Emotional and Identity Outcomes:

ESL learning under NEP is not just a linguistic challenge but also a socio-emotional journey—especially for students from marginalized communities who may associate English with urban elite privilege or classroom anxiety. Field interviews in Bihar and Rajasthan indicate that IKS-integrated ESL activities—such as narrating folktales or describing local customs in English—build learner confidence and reduce alienation. Teachers report that students feel more “seen” when their cultural identities are affirmed in language lessons, leading to increased class participation and willingness to speak English, even if imperfectly. In contrast, abrupt language transitions (e.g., switching from Hindi to English medium in Grade 6 without support) often lead to withdrawal, fear of ridicule, and drop in academic performance—especially among first-generation learners and girls (Singh & Sharma, 2023).

6.3 Academic and Cross-Subject Gains:

Several case studies suggest that ESL improvement correlates with gains in other academic subjects, particularly where English is used as a support language in science, social studies, and mathematics. In Punjab, interdisciplinary ESL projects—like writing environmental essays in English or explaining agricultural processes—have shown positive spillovers in science achievement. This supports Cummins’ theory of cross-linguistic transfer, where conceptual understanding in the mother tongue facilitates L2 application in academic contexts. However, where English is introduced too early without L1 scaffolding, students often struggle with conceptual comprehension across subjects, leading to shallow learning and

rote memorization. Hence, the timing and method of ESL introduction play a critical role in ensuring positive academic outcomes.

6.4 Aspirational Shifts: Language and Life Chances:

English proficiency continues to be linked with higher education access and job mobility in India. NEP 2020's balanced language vision seeks to democratize this access by grounding ESL in early multilingual education.

In semi-urban areas of Haryana and Punjab, where NEP-aligned ESL reforms have been better resourced, students express stronger aspirations toward higher education and careers requiring English—such as teaching, IT, or nursing. They also report a higher sense of linguistic agency, saying they “believe they can learn English” and use it beyond school. In contrast, students from rural or underserved districts in Bihar or eastern Uttar Pradesh often perceive English as a barrier. Many are still unaware of or disconnected from the language-focused support provisions of NEP. Bridging this aspiration gap requires more inclusive ESL outreach, including parental engagement, localized success stories, and visible career pathways enabled by English proficiency.

6.5 Equity in Outcomes: A Persistent Challenge:

Despite NEP 2020's inclusive ethos, learning outcomes remain uneven across regions, gender, caste, and economic background. Girls in SC/ST households, particularly in remote areas, continue to face the highest barriers to ESL achievement: lack of textbooks, limited digital access, low parental literacy, and competing domestic responsibilities. Efforts like community ESL clubs, peer-to-peer learning circles, and after-school support programs show promise in narrowing these gaps but remain limited in scope and funding. Without systemic, scalable interventions, NEP's equity promises risk remaining symbolic.

6.6 Summary:

Learning outcomes under NEP 2020 reveal a mixed but instructive picture:

- ESL proficiency is improving modestly in areas with bilingual, IKS-integrated, and experiential instruction.
- Socio-emotional engagement and identity affirmation are strongest when ESL pedagogy honours local context and cultural relevance.
- Academic cross-transfer benefits are visible, but only when ESL is introduced with sufficient L1 support.
- Aspirational shifts are real but stratified—access to ESL-driven opportunity still correlates with geography, gender, and class.

NEP's vision of “from mother tongue to global voice” is beginning to materialize—but only where resources, pedagogy, and systemic support align. Future reforms must focus not just on policy rhetoric, but on measuring, sustaining, and equalizing ESL outcomes across the educational spectrum.

7. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 envisions an inclusive, culturally rooted, and globally competitive education system—one in which multilingualism and foundational literacy serve as springboards for future learning. Nowhere is this vision more tested than in the public schools of North India, where linguistic complexity, infrastructural limitations, and social inequities intersect. This study has examined how the NEP's approach to English as a Second Language (ESL)—anchored in mother tongue instruction, Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS), and experiential pedagogy—is playing out in classrooms across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Rajasthan, and Punjab.

7.1 Summary of Findings:

Across the four research lenses outlined in the introduction, several patterns emerge:

- Policy-to-Classroom Alignment remains fragmented. While states have made progress in embracing bilingual education and delaying English-medium transitions, inconsistencies in execution, teacher training, and resource availability hinder uniform adoption.
- Structural Capacity and Equity continue to pose significant challenges. Rural and marginalized learners, especially girls and SC/ST students, face systemic disadvantages in ESL access, ranging from teacher shortages to digital exclusion.
- Pedagogical Innovation and Cultural Integration show promising results. When ESL instruction is grounded in local stories, crafts, and traditions, students demonstrate higher engagement, comprehension, and self-confidence. However, such approaches are localized and lack broader curricular and institutional support.
- Learning Outcomes and Aspirations reflect cautious optimism. ESL gains are evident where experiential and bilingual teaching methods are employed. Yet disparities in performance and aspiration remain closely tied to socio-economic status and geographic location.

The policy's flexible structure—while sensitive to regional diversity—has also enabled uneven application. In the absence of robust monitoring, clear timelines, and targeted support, NEP 2020's transformative potential in ESL instruction remains underrealized.

7.2 Policy Recommendations:

To advance the NEP 2020 vision and ensure equitable, effective ESL learning in North India, the following actionable strategies are proposed:

7.2.1 Strengthen Teacher Training in Multilingual and IKS-Based ESL Pedagogy:

- Institutionalize long-term, practice-based training for ESL teachers that includes bilingual instruction methods, culturally relevant content design, and experiential learning.
- Leverage platforms like DIKSHA and NISHTHA to include modules on IKS integration and cohort-specific strategies (e.g., for first-generation learners or tribal communities).

7.2.2 Develop Region-Specific ESL Curricula and Materials:

- Create bilingual and trilingual textbooks that integrate local dialects, folk literature, and real-life tasks to support early English acquisition.
- Establish district resource hubs to co-create culturally grounded ESL materials with teachers, artisans, and local knowledge holders.

7.2.3 Improve Monitoring and Assessment Systems:

- Implement competency-based ESL assessments focused on listening, speaking, and contextual use—especially in Grades 3 to 8.
- Establish state-level ESL proficiency benchmarks and track student progression longitudinally to guide targeted interventions.

7.2.4 Invest in Digital Infrastructure with Localized ESL Content:

- Expand access to offline ESL resources (e.g., language games, local story recordings) for low-connectivity areas.
- Support development of mobile apps and audio-visual content in regional languages, with scaffolded English instruction.

7.2.5 Promote Community-Based Language Programs:

- Initiate after-school ESL clubs led by trained local volunteers, focusing on spoken English, storytelling, and interactive games.
- Engage parents through multilingual language awareness workshops to reduce social distance from English and encourage home-based support.

7.2.6 Institutionalize IKS as a Pedagogical Framework:

- Ensure IKS is not merely decorative but structurally embedded in ESL curriculum design, learning objectives, and teacher evaluations.
- Encourage cross-disciplinary IKS-ESL linkages, such as teaching ecological concepts or historical narratives in English through traditional knowledge systems.

7.3 Final Reflection: From Vision to Reality:

The NEP 2020's vision—of enabling every child to move "from mother tongue to global voice"—is both aspirational and achievable. But it demands more than policy rhetoric. It calls for strategic investments in human capital, material resources, and pedagogical innovation rooted in local context. For North India's public-school students, especially those from disadvantaged communities, ESL is not just a subject—it is a bridge to opportunity, identity, and voice. By grounding ESL education in cultural relevance, linguistic empathy, and experiential rigor, India can ensure that no child is left linguistically behind in the journey toward a plural, inclusive, and globally connected future.

8. Appendix:

8.1 Sample Bilingual ESL Lesson Plan: Grade 4 (North Indian Context):

Topic: Local Folk Tales – “The Clever Crow”

Languages Used: Hindi (primary), English (target language)

Duration: 40 minutes

Learning Objectives:

- Identify and use simple English verbs and adjectives
- Retell a folk story in English with support
- Make connections between cultural stories and language learning

Materials Needed:

- Printed story in Hindi and English
- Flashcards (characters, actions, key vocabulary)
- Chalkboard and markers

Activities:

1. Storytelling (10 mins) – Teacher narrates the story in Hindi, then again in simple English.
2. Vocabulary Match (10 mins) – Students match English words (e.g., “clever,” “thirsty,” “stones”) with images.
3. Group Retelling (10 mins) – In groups, students retell the story in a mix of Hindi and English.
4. Creative Extension (10 mins) – Students draw their favourite scene and write 1–2 sentences in English.

Assessment:

Informal oral checks, observation of participation, vocabulary matching accuracy.

8.2 Sample Interview Questions for Teachers:

Used in qualitative research across five states.

Theme: ESL Implementation under NEP 2020

1. What challenges have you faced in using both the mother tongue and English in the classroom?
2. Have you received any training on using Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in English teaching? If so, please describe it.
3. How do your students respond to bilingual storytelling or culturally rooted content in English lessons?
4. What kind of support would help you better implement NEP's ESL goals?

8.3 Excerpt from a District Report Card (Bihar, 2023):

Source: NIPUN Bharat Baseline Assessment – English Proficiency (Grade 3)

| Skill Assessed | % Students Proficient |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Recognizing English Letters | 64% |
| Basic Word Identification | 48% |
| Sentence Comprehension | 23% |
| Oral Reading Fluency | 19% |

Key Observation: Students performed significantly better in schools where Hindi-English bilingual materials were used, even if teachers were not fluent in English themselves.

8.4 Glossary of Key Acronyms (linked from Appendix):

| Acronym | Full Form |
|---------|--|
| NEP | National Education Policy |
| ESL | English as a Second Language |
| IKS | Indian Knowledge Systems |
| BICS | Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills |
| CALP | Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency |
| DIKSHA | Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing |
| NIPUN | National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy |

9. Glossary:

BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills): Everyday conversational language skills acquired relatively quickly by second language learners, enabling social communication but not sufficient for academic success.

CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency): The ability to understand and use language in academic contexts, involving abstract and complex language skills, which typically develop over a longer period.

DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing): An Indian government platform for teacher training and educational resources designed to enhance pedagogy and curriculum delivery.

ESL (English as a Second Language): Instructional programs designed to teach English to non-native speakers, focusing on language skills for social and academic use.

IKS (Indian Knowledge Systems): Traditional Indian bodies of knowledge encompassing ancient sciences, arts, languages, and cultural practices integrated into modern curricula.

NEP (National Education Policy): India's overarching education reform policy issued in 2020, aimed at transforming educational structure, content, and delivery across the country.

NIPUN Bharat (National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy): A government-led program focused on ensuring foundational literacy and numeracy by Grade 3 in Indian schools.

Three-Language Formula: A language policy framework in India that advocates the teaching of three languages: typically, the regional language, Hindi, and English (or another modern Indian or foreign language).

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