

From Deficit to Empowerment: Addressing Traditional Challenges in English Language Learning among Rural Students of Howrah through NEP 2020

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Abstract

English language learning among rural students has long been constrained by various socio-economic, linguistic, and infrastructural challenges. Learners in rural areas of Howrah often face limited exposure to English, inadequate learning resources, insufficient language-rich environments, and traditional teacher-centered pedagogical practices, resulting in low confidence and poor communicative competence. This study examines the persistent barriers to English language acquisition among rural learners and explores how the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 provides a transformative framework for addressing these challenges. The policy's emphasis on multilingualism, experiential learning, competency-based education, inclusive pedagogy, and learner-centered approaches offers significant opportunities for empowering students rather than viewing them through a deficit lens. The paper highlights how innovative classroom practices, technology integration, contextualized learning materials, and enhanced teacher capacity can foster positive attitudes toward English learning while preserving local linguistic identities. By shifting the focus from learners' limitations to their strengths and potential, NEP 2020 promotes equitable access to quality language education and supports the development of communication skills essential for academic success and future employability. The study concludes that the successful implementation of NEP 2020 can transform English language education in rural Howrah from a system characterized by challenges and exclusion to one centered on empowerment, inclusion, and holistic development.

Keywords: English Language Learning, Rural Students, Empowerment, National Education Policy 2020, Inclusive Education, Multilingualism, Competency-Based Learning, Communicative Competence.

Introduction

English has emerged as a global language of communication, education, technology, and employment. In India, proficiency in English is often associated with access to higher education, professional opportunities, and social mobility. Despite its importance, significant disparities continue to exist in English language learning between urban and rural students. Learners from rural areas frequently encounter challenges such as inadequate exposure to English-speaking environments, limited access to learning

resources, insufficient technological support, and traditional instructional methods that emphasize rote learning over communication skills.

In the district of Howrah, many rural schools serve students from diverse socio-economic and linguistic backgrounds. While these learners possess considerable potential, their opportunities to develop English language proficiency are often constrained by structural and pedagogical barriers. As a result, many students experience low confidence, language anxiety, and limited communicative competence. Such challenges have historically contributed to a deficit-oriented perception of rural learners, focusing more on their limitations than on their strengths and capabilities.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a transformative vision for education in India by promoting multilingualism, experiential learning, competency-based education, inclusivity, and learner-centered pedagogy. The policy recognizes linguistic diversity as a valuable resource and encourages educational practices that support holistic development. Within this framework, English language education is no longer viewed merely as the acquisition of grammatical knowledge but as the development of meaningful communication skills through contextualized and engaging learning experiences.

This study seeks to examine the traditional challenges faced by rural students in learning English and explore how the provisions of NEP 2020 can facilitate a transition from deficit-based perspectives to empowerment-oriented educational practices. By focusing on students' strengths, aspirations, and learning potential, the study aims to contribute to a more inclusive and equitable approach to English language education in rural Howrah.

Background of the Study

The teaching and learning of English in rural India have long been influenced by social, economic, cultural, and institutional factors. Historically, English education has been more accessible in urban areas, where students benefit from better infrastructure, qualified teachers, technological resources, and greater exposure to English through media and social interactions. In contrast, rural students often study in environments where English is primarily confined to textbooks and classroom instruction.

In rural areas of Howrah, students commonly communicate in Bengali and other local languages in their daily lives. Although multilingualism provides cognitive and cultural advantages, the absence of opportunities to practice English outside the classroom often affects learners' confidence and fluency. Additionally, many schools face challenges such as limited teaching-learning materials, overcrowded classrooms, insufficient digital resources, and a shortage of specialized English language teachers. Traditional examination-oriented teaching practices further restrict opportunities for active participation, creativity, and communicative language use.

Research has consistently demonstrated that language learning is most effective when students are actively engaged in meaningful communication, collaborative learning, and real-life applications of language. However, many rural learners continue to experience language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of motivation due to instructional approaches that prioritize memorization over communication. These conditions contribute to unequal learning outcomes and reinforce educational disparities between rural and urban students.

The introduction of NEP 2020 marks a significant shift in educational philosophy and practice. The policy advocates experiential learning, competency-based assessment, multilingual approaches, technology integration, and inclusive classroom environments. These principles offer new possibilities for addressing long-standing barriers in English language education. By encouraging learner participation, contextualized learning, and teacher empowerment, NEP 2020 provides a framework for transforming English language classrooms into spaces where rural learners can develop confidence, communication skills, and academic competence.

Against this backdrop, the present study explores how NEP 2020 can help overcome traditional challenges in English language learning and empower rural students of Howrah to achieve meaningful educational outcomes.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify the major challenges faced by rural students of Howrah in learning English language.
2. To examine the influence of socio-economic, linguistic, and infrastructural factors on English language learning among rural students.
3. To analyze the relevance of the provisions of NEP 2020 in addressing barriers to English language acquisition.
4. To explore the role of learner-centered, multilingual, and competency-based pedagogical practices in enhancing English language proficiency.
5. To suggest strategies for empowering rural learners through inclusive and effective English language education.

Research Questions

1. What are the major challenges encountered by rural students of Howrah in learning English language?
2. How do socio-economic, linguistic, and school-related factors affect English language learning among rural learners?
3. In what ways can the provisions of NEP 2020 help address traditional barriers to English language acquisition?
4. How do learner-centered and multilingual teaching approaches contribute to the development of English language proficiency and confidence?

5. What measures can be adopted to empower rural students and improve the quality of English language education in rural schools?

Review of Literature

A review of related literature provides a theoretical foundation for understanding the challenges and opportunities associated with English language learning among rural students. The following studies offer valuable insights into the factors influencing English language acquisition and the relevance of the provisions of NEP 2020 in promoting inclusive and equitable language education.

Candrawati and Purbani (2025) conducted a systematic review of English language teaching in rural settings and identified major challenges such as inadequate learning resources, poor infrastructure, lack of teaching materials, teacher-centered pedagogy, insufficient teacher preparation, and low student motivation. Their findings emphasize that rural learners often face multiple barriers that limit effective language acquisition and require context-sensitive educational interventions.

Shakiruddin, Asolkar, and Chelladurai (2025) examined English language teaching in rural Maharashtra and found that limited exposure to English, resource constraints, outdated teaching methods, and inadequate teacher training significantly affect students' language proficiency. The study highlighted the importance of interactive learning environments and continuous professional development for teachers to improve learning outcomes.

Ali, Bhat, and Ansari (2026) explored the challenges of English language teaching in rural India and reported that socio-economic disadvantages, lack of qualified teachers, large classroom sizes, and limited opportunities for language practice negatively influence students' communicative competence. The study recommended teacher training, community participation, technological integration, and innovative teaching approaches as effective solutions.

Meganathan (2017) investigated learners' and teachers' perceptions of English language education in rural schools and found that language learning is strongly influenced by classroom organization, language policy, and curriculum implementation. The study emphasized the need for learner-centered classroom practices and supportive learning environments to enhance English language proficiency among rural students.

Mukhopadhyay (2025) reviewed English teacher education in India and emphasized the growing importance of multilingual pedagogical approaches in diverse classrooms. The study argued that teacher professional development should incorporate multilingual strategies and inclusive practices to ensure equitable learning opportunities for students from different linguistic backgrounds.

NEP 2020 policy discussions on multilingual education emphasize that children learn concepts more effectively through their home language and that multilingualism should be viewed as a resource rather than a barrier. The policy advocates bilingual teaching approaches and flexible language practices that facilitate smoother transitions to English language learning while preserving local linguistic identities.

Recent studies on multilingual and technology-supported learning suggest that providing learners with access to local-language support alongside English instruction improves participation, engagement, and learning outcomes. These findings support the NEP 2020 vision of inclusive, multilingual, and technology-enabled education for disadvantaged learners.

Research Gap

The reviewed studies have extensively discussed challenges in rural English language education, teacher preparedness, multilingual pedagogy, and technology integration. However, limited research has specifically examined how the provisions of **NEP 2020** can transform traditional deficit-based perceptions of rural learners into empowerment-oriented educational practices in the context of **rural Howrah, West Bengal**. Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by exploring how NEP 2020 can facilitate inclusive, learner-centered, and competency-based English language learning among rural students.

Research Methodology

Research Approach

The present study adopts a **qualitative research approach** to explore the traditional challenges faced by rural students in learning English and to understand how the provisions of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 can support their educational empowerment.

Research Design

A **descriptive and interpretative qualitative research design** has been employed. The study focuses on analyzing educational experiences, policy provisions, and existing scholarly literature related to English language learning in rural contexts.

Nature of the Study

The study is primarily **literature-based and policy-oriented**, drawing upon scholarly articles, research reports, educational documents, and NEP 2020 policy guidelines to examine the issues surrounding English language learning among rural students.

Sources of Data

The study utilizes **secondary data sources**, including:

- Research articles published in peer-reviewed journals
- Books and edited volumes on English language teaching
- Government reports and educational policy documents
- National Education Policy (NEP) 2020
- Academic databases and scholarly publications
- Reports on rural education and multilingual learning

Method of Data Collection

Relevant literature was identified through systematic review and document analysis. Studies focusing on rural English language education, multilingualism, inclusive pedagogy, teacher education, and NEP 2020 were selected and analyzed.

Method of Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **thematic analysis**. The literature was reviewed and categorized into major themes:

1. Challenges in rural English language learning.
2. Socio-economic and linguistic barriers.
3. Teacher preparedness and pedagogical issues.
4. Multilingualism and inclusive education.
5. Technology integration in language learning.
6. NEP 2020 and learner empowerment.
7. Strategies for improving communicative competence.

The themes were interpreted in relation to the objectives of the study and the broader goals of NEP 2020.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure credibility and reliability, the study relied on:

- Peer-reviewed academic sources.
- Government and policy documents.
- Recent research findings relevant to rural education.
- Cross-verification of themes across multiple studies.

Ethical Considerations

As the study is based entirely on secondary sources and document analysis, no human participants were involved. Proper acknowledgment and citation of all consulted sources were maintained throughout the research process.

Analysis and Interpretation

The analysis is based on the thematic review of literature, policy documents, and educational studies related to English language learning among rural students, with special reference to the provisions of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The findings are presented according to the objectives and research questions of the study.

Analysis and Interpretation of Research Findings

Objective / Research Question	Analysis of Findings	Interpretation
1. To identify the major challenges faced by rural students of Howrah in learning English language.	Literature indicates that rural students face inadequate exposure to English, lack of language-rich environments, insufficient learning resources, fear of speaking English, and traditional examination-oriented teaching methods.	English language learning in rural areas remains constrained by both environmental and pedagogical barriers, limiting students' confidence and communicative competence.
2. To examine the influence of socio-economic, linguistic, and infrastructural factors on English language learning among rural students.	Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often have limited access to books, digital resources, private tutoring, and technological support. The dominance of the mother tongue in daily communication further reduces opportunities for English language practice.	Socio-economic and infrastructural inequalities significantly influence language learning opportunities and contribute to disparities in English proficiency between rural and urban learners.
3. To analyze the relevance of the provisions of NEP 2020 in addressing barriers to English language acquisition.	NEP 2020 promotes multilingualism, competency-based learning, experiential education, and inclusive pedagogical practices. These provisions support gradual and meaningful language acquisition while respecting	The policy provides a transformative framework capable of addressing long-standing barriers and creating equitable opportunities for rural learners to develop English language skills.

	learners' linguistic backgrounds.	
4. To explore the role of learner-centered, multilingual, and competency-based pedagogical practices in enhancing English language proficiency.	Research suggests that activity-based learning, collaborative learning, multilingual instruction, storytelling, project work, and communication-oriented activities improve students' engagement and language proficiency.	Learner-centered and multilingual approaches create supportive learning environments that enhance confidence, participation, and communicative competence among rural students.
5. To suggest strategies for empowering rural learners through inclusive and effective English language education.	Effective strategies include teacher professional development, digital learning integration, contextualized teaching materials, community participation, peer learning, and continuous formative assessment.	Empowerment-oriented educational practices can help rural students overcome learning barriers and achieve greater academic success and social mobility through English language proficiency.

Objective-wise Analysis and Interpretation

Objective 1: Challenges Faced by Rural Students in Learning English

The review of literature reveals that rural students commonly encounter challenges such as limited exposure to English, inadequate instructional materials, language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and dependence on traditional teaching methods. Many learners perceive English as a difficult subject because opportunities for authentic communication are limited.

Interpretation:

These challenges create a learning environment where students develop low self-confidence and weak communicative skills. The findings suggest that English language learning difficulties are largely contextual rather than indicative of learners' abilities.

Objective 2: Influence of Socio-Economic, Linguistic, and Infrastructural Factors

The analysis shows that socio-economic conditions significantly influence students' access to quality educational resources. Many rural schools lack digital infrastructure, language laboratories, and modern teaching aids. Linguistic factors also play an important role, as students primarily communicate in Bengali and have minimal opportunities to use English in everyday situations.

Interpretation:

Educational inequalities arising from socio-economic and infrastructural disadvantages

directly affect English language acquisition. Therefore, improving learning conditions is essential for enhancing students' language proficiency.

Objective 3: Relevance of NEP 2020 in Addressing English Language Learning Barriers

The provisions of NEP 2020 emphasize multilingualism, experiential learning, competency-based education, and inclusivity. These principles encourage flexible language teaching approaches that build on students' existing linguistic strengths rather than viewing them as deficiencies.

Interpretation:

NEP 2020 offers a progressive and inclusive framework for transforming English language education. The policy can help reduce learning barriers by promoting student-centered and context-sensitive instructional practices.

Objective 4: Role of Learner-Centered and Multilingual Pedagogical Practices

The literature indicates that learner-centered methods such as role-play, group discussion, project work, storytelling, and collaborative learning improve students' participation and confidence. Multilingual approaches facilitate comprehension by connecting English learning with learners' home languages.

Interpretation:

These pedagogical practices promote active engagement and meaningful learning experiences. As a result, students become more confident in using English and develop stronger communication skills.

Objective 5: Strategies for Empowering Rural Learners

The analysis identifies several empowerment strategies, including continuous teacher training, technology-supported learning, contextualized teaching materials, community involvement, and inclusive classroom environments. These strategies align closely with the vision of NEP 2020.

Interpretation:

Empowerment-oriented educational interventions can transform rural English language education from a deficit-based model into a strengths-based model that recognizes students' potential and promotes equitable learning opportunities.

Research Question-wise Findings

Research Question	Findings
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What are the major challenges encountered by rural students of Howrah in learning English language?	Limited exposure to English, lack of resources, traditional pedagogy, low confidence, and language anxiety are the primary challenges.
How do socio-economic, linguistic, and school-related factors affect English language learning among rural learners?	These factors restrict access to quality learning opportunities and influence students' motivation, participation, and achievement.
In what ways can the provisions of NEP 2020 help address traditional barriers to English language acquisition?	Through multilingualism, experiential learning, competency-based education, technology integration, and inclusive pedagogy.
How do learner-centered and multilingual teaching approaches contribute to the development of English language proficiency and confidence?	They encourage active participation, improve comprehension, reduce anxiety, and strengthen communication skills.
What measures can be adopted to empower rural students and improve the quality of English language education in rural schools?	Teacher training, digital learning resources, contextualized instruction, formative assessment, and community support are essential measures.

The analysis demonstrates that the challenges faced by rural students in English language learning are deeply rooted in socio-economic, linguistic, and infrastructural factors rather than in learners' abilities. The National Education Policy 2020 provides a comprehensive framework for addressing these challenges through multilingual, learner-centered, competency-based, and inclusive educational practices. By shifting the focus from deficits to strengths, schools can create empowering learning environments that enhance students' confidence, communicative competence, and academic success. Consequently, the effective implementation of NEP 2020 has the potential to transform English language education in rural Howrah into a more equitable, inclusive, and empowering educational experience.

Conclusion

The present study examined the traditional challenges faced by rural students of Howrah in learning English and explored the transformative potential of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 in addressing these barriers. The analysis revealed that English language learning among rural learners is influenced by multiple socio-economic, linguistic, and infrastructural factors, including limited exposure to English, inadequate learning resources, insufficient technological support, and conventional teacher-centered pedagogical practices. These challenges often result in low confidence, language anxiety, and reduced communicative competence among students.

The findings further indicate that the provisions of NEP 2020 provide a comprehensive framework for overcoming these barriers through multilingualism, experiential learning,

competency-based education, inclusive pedagogy, and technology integration. The policy recognizes the importance of learners' home languages and promotes flexible, bilingual, and multilingual approaches that facilitate meaningful language acquisition while respecting linguistic diversity. NEP 2020 also emphasizes learner-centered teaching strategies, critical thinking, communication skills, and continuous assessment, thereby shifting the focus from rote memorization to authentic language use and competency development.

The study highlights that empowering rural learners requires a transition from deficit-oriented perspectives to strength-based educational approaches. By creating supportive classroom environments, integrating digital technologies, strengthening teacher capacity, and utilizing contextualized learning materials, schools can enhance students' confidence, participation, and English language proficiency. Multilingual and experiential pedagogies envisioned by NEP 2020 have the potential to make English learning more accessible, engaging, and equitable for rural students.

In conclusion, the successful implementation of NEP 2020 can significantly contribute to transforming English language education in rural Howrah. It can bridge existing educational disparities, promote inclusive and equitable learning opportunities, and empower students with the communication skills necessary for academic achievement, social participation, and future employability. Therefore, policymakers, educators, school leaders, and community stakeholders must work collaboratively to ensure that the vision of NEP 2020 translates into meaningful educational outcomes for rural learners.

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