The ELT Vibes: International Peer Reviewed e-journal for Research in ELT

Website: https://www.eltvibes.in **E-ISSN**: 2395-0595

Volume: 12 | Issue: 4 | October 2026

Between Pedagogical Aspirations and Classroom Reality: English Language Teaching under NEP 2020 in the Middle-Stage Schools of Sonitpur and Biswanath Districts of Assam

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Abstract

NEP 2020 calls for a significant change in classroom teaching, with greater emphasis on experiential, learner-centred, multilingual, competency-based and technology-supported learning. For English Language Teaching at the Middle Stage, these expectations have important implications for the methods teachers adopt and the kinds of learning experiences provided to students. This paper examines how far the pedagogical directions envisaged in NEP 2020 are reflected in the teaching of English in selected provincialised schools of Sonitpur and Biswanath districts of Assam. The two districts are considered together as a single field of study rather than as separate units for comparison. The study draws on questionnaire data collected from 60 English teachers and 180 students of Classes VI–VIII across 30 schools. The data are examined within a theoretical framework that takes into account the changing course of English Language Teaching, particularly the movement from grammar-translation and teacher-dominated instruction towards communicative, task-based, collaborative, experiential and context-sensitive approaches. Particular attention is given to classroom methodology, including teacher explanation, grammar teaching, learner interaction, multilingual practices, use of teaching-learning materials and technology, and methods of assessment. The paper seeks to understand the extent to which present classroom practices correspond with the pedagogical expectations of NEP 2020 and to identify the factors that influence their implementation. In doing so, it attempts to locate the areas where policy expectations and everyday classroom realities meet, as well as those where a gap still remains.

Keywords: *NEP 2020; English Language Teaching; Teaching Methods; Middle Stage; Policy–Practice Gap; Multilingualism*

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Introduction

Method has always been a basic concern in English Language Teaching. Every major approach to ELT has, in one way or another, answered familiar classroom questions: What should the teacher do? How should grammar and vocabulary be taught? How much should students speak? What place should translation, activities, technology and assessment have in a language class? These questions have acquired fresh importance after NEP 2020, because the policy expects change not only in the structure of school education but also in the way teaching and learning take place. At the Middle Stage, covering Classes VI-VIII, NEP 2020 combines subject-based learning with activity, exploration and learner participation. It gives importance to experience, discussion, critical thinking, conceptual understanding, multilingualism, technology and competency-based assessment. In an English class, this would mean that students should not remain mainly listeners who copy notes, learn rules and reproduce textbook answers. They also need regular chances to speak, listen, ask questions, work with classmates and use English for purposes that make sense to them. The theoretical framework of this study helps to place these expectations in the longer history of ELT. Earlier approaches such as the Grammar-Translation Method gave the teacher a dominant role: rules were explained, passages translated, vocabulary taught directly and accuracy in reading and writing received most of the attention. Communicative Language Teaching changed the emphasis by treating communication as the purpose of language learning and by bringing pair work, group discussion, role-play, games and problem-solving into the classroom. Task-Based Language Teaching went further by organising learning around meaningful tasks. Contemporary ELT does not, however, require teachers to follow one method mechanically. It allows them to choose and combine procedures according to learners, language backgrounds and classroom conditions.This development in ELT has much in common with the direction proposed by NEP 2020. Inquiry, discussion, discovery, experiential learning and multilingualism sit more comfortably with communicative and participatory teaching than with a classroom based almost entirely on one-way explanation and written reproduction. The main concern of this paper is to examine how far have these pedagogical expectations found a place in the methods actually used for teaching English.The evidence collected from selected provincialised Middle-Stage schools in Sonitpur and Biswanath districts of Assam offer the basis for assessing the distance between the classroom envisaged in NEP 2020 and the classroom students commonly experience.

Theoretical and Policy Framework: From Transmission to Participation

Changes in ELT methods have also changed what is expected of the teacher. Under the Grammar-Translation Method, the teacher was the chief source of knowledge and classroom authority. Rules were explained directly, vocabulary was memorised, texts were translated and written accuracy was given priority. Such procedures fitted examination-oriented classrooms reasonably well because they offered a direct route to textual understanding and written correctness.

Their limitation, from a communicative point of view, is that students can spend much of the lesson receiving language rather than using it. NEP 2020 places a different set of expectations before the Middle-Stage classroom. It gives space to experiential learning, projects, critical thinking, exploration, discussion and analysis, while continuing to stress learner-centred teaching. Its treatment of multilingualism is also important for language classrooms, since learners' languages can be used as resources for understanding rather than viewed only as obstacles. Assessment, too, is expected to pay greater attention to understanding and competence. Technology is encouraged as a support for learning, although access to it is uneven. Taken together, these ideas provide a useful policy benchmark for examining actual English teaching methods.

Objectives of the Study

The study has four closely related objectives: (i) to identify the principal methods and classroom practices used by English teachers at the Middle Stage; (ii) to examine the extent to which these practices reflect the learner-centred, experiential, communicative, multilingual and technology-supported orientation associated with NEP 2020; (iii) to analyse the relationship between teacher-reported methodology and students' experience of English teaching; and (iv) to identify the major constraints that contribute to the gap between policy aspirations and classroom practice.

Methodology

The study uses questionnaire data from 30 provincialised schools. The respondents were 60 English teachers and 180 students of the Middle Stage. Two English teachers were included from each school, while six students were selected from Classes VI, VII and VIII, two from each class. Since the purpose of this paper is to examine the overall methodological pattern, the responses from Sonitpur and Biswanath are pooled. Percentages are calculated on the combined teacher sample (N=60) or student sample (N=180), depending on the item.

The teacher questionnaire covers teaching aims, changes noticed after NEP 2020, methods used in class, teaching-learning materials, student participation, assessment, professional preparation and difficulties faced in adopting different practices. The student questionnaire looks at the same classroom from the learner's side: explanation through the blackboard, visual aids, pair or group work, storytelling, grammar teaching, digital tools, opportunities to use English, assessment and common learning difficulties.

Findings and Discussion

Pedagogical aspirations have entered teachers' objectives

The teachers' answers suggest that their aims are not confined to grammar or examination preparation. Of the 60 teachers, 46 (76.7%) selected helping students to read and understand English texts, and the same number selected improving speaking and writing.

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Grammar and vocabulary for correct usage were selected by 39 (65.0%), while 33 (55.0%) selected examination preparation and 33 (55.0%) developing interest and confidence in using English in daily life. Communication, then, is clearly present in what teachers say they want their students to achieve, although more conventional aims remain important as well. Teachers also report changes that they associate with the period after NEP 2020. Thirty-one (51.7%) mention greater attention to communication skills, 27 (45.0%) experiential or activity-based learning, 38 (63.3%) greater integration of local languages and culture, 28 (46.7%) increased use of digital tools, and 22 (36.7%) a movement from examination-oriented teaching towards understanding. The figures suggest that the newer pedagogical vocabulary is familiar to many teachers and has influenced the way they think about English teaching.

What teachers value, however, is not always what becomes routine in class. A teacher may support activity-based or communicative teaching without being able to organise it regularly. This difference between intention and everyday practice is where the policy-practice gap becomes most visible.

Explanation remains the dominant classroom mode

The teacher questionnaire shows that 45 of 60 teachers (75.0%) regularly explain lessons while students listen and take notes. By comparison, 28 (46.7%) report hands-on activities or tasks, 25 (41.7%) encourage students to share views and interact, 17 (28.3%) involve learners in acting out real-life situations, and 25 (41.7%) use digital tools. The student questionnaire makes the pattern still clearer. A combined 151 of 180 students (83.9%) report that the teacher explains lessons using the blackboard or whiteboard. Direct teaching of grammar rules and vocabulary is reported by 100 students (55.6%). Visual aids are reported by 61 (33.9%), group or pair activities by only 29 (16.1%), and storytelling or dramatization by 26 (14.4%). Read together, the two sets of responses show a clear imbalance. Explanation and direct teaching of grammar and vocabulary are much more common than pair work, dramatization or other forms of learner-to-learner activity. Teacher reports show more use of interactive practices than student reports do, but even in the teacher data explanation remains the most frequently reported classroom procedure. The classroom has therefore not ceased to be teacher-led, even though newer methods have begun to appear alongside older ones.

Grammar teaching shows the strongest continuity with traditional method

Grammar teaching shows this continuity particularly clearly. When the student responses from both districts are combined, 'giving rules and asking us to learn them' receives 169 selections, while 'giving examples and explaining the rules' receives 153. Textbook grammar exercises receive 93 selections and correction of grammar in speaking or writing 88. Grammar through games or fun activities receives only 14 selections.

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Since students could select more than one option, these figures describe the spread of practices rather than separate groups. Even so, they show that rules, explanation and textbook exercises remain much more common than activity-based grammar work.

Learner interaction and experiential activity remain limited

A communicative classroom depends on students having chances to use language, not only hear it. Yet only 25 teachers (41.7%) say that they regularly encourage students to share views and interact, and 17 (28.3%) report acting out real-life situations. The student responses are lower: 29 of 180 (16.1%) report group or pair activities, and 26 (14.4%) report storytelling or dramatization. These figures do not mean that interaction is absent, but they do suggest that it has not become a regular organising feature of most English classes.

Responses about games and enjoyable activities point in the same direction. Only 14 students say that teachers always encourage such activities; 60 say sometimes, 64 rarely and 42 never. In other words, 106 of 180 students (58.9%) place games and fun activities in the 'rarely' or 'never' categories. This matters because students themselves ask for more conversation, group work, quizzes, word games, stories and role-play. Their suggestions are close to the participatory classroom envisaged in NEP 2020.

Multilingual practice: between translation and strategic scaffolding

Multilingualism presents a more complicated picture. Thirty-eight teachers (63.3%) identify greater use of local languages and culture as a change associated with NEP 2020, and students often say that difficult English becomes easier when the teacher explains it in Assamese. In these classrooms, a familiar language can clearly help students enter the lesson. But multilingual teaching should not be reduced to translating the whole English text. Used carefully, Assamese or another familiar language can clarify a difficult point, activate prior knowledge or prepare students to respond in English. The important methodological question is whether the familiar language becomes a bridge to English use or replaces it for most of the lesson.

Materials and technology: aspiration exceeds regular classroom access

The choice of teaching materials also tells us something about method. Every teacher in the sample reports using the textbook. By comparison, 12 (20.0%) report supplementary books, 39 (65.0%) visual aids such as charts or flashcards, and 27 (45.0%) digital content such as videos, slides or applications. The textbook is therefore still the one resource shared by all teachers, while other materials are used less consistently. Teachers also explain why wider use of materials is difficult. Thirty-three (55.0%) report limited access to digital tools, 29 (48.3%) lack of training in preparing or using materials, and 16 (26.7%) lack of preparation time. These figures are a reminder that a change of method depends on more than willingness. A teacher cannot make digital or resource-rich teaching routine without reasonable access, time and practical training.

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Assessment continues to pull methodology towards written performance

Assessment has a strong influence on classroom method because teachers naturally give time to what students will be assessed on. All 60 teachers report written tests. Creative assignments are also widely reported (57 teachers, 95.0%), but oral presentations are reported by only 21 (35.0%) and peer review by 3 (5.0%).

The skills receiving attention in assessment are similarly uneven. Grammar and vocabulary are selected by 52 teachers (86.7%), writing by 49 (81.7%), reading comprehension by 45 (75.0%), and critical thinking and expression by 35 (58.3%). Speaking and listening are selected by only 19 (31.7%). Students confirm the continuing importance of conventional assessment: 171 of 180 (95.0%) report class tests or written examinations, while 131 (72.8%) report oral questions and answers. If speaking and listening remain less visible in assessment, it is understandable that they also struggle to claim regular classroom time.

Conditions that sustain the policy-practice gap

The teachers' responses also show the conditions under which methodological change is being attempted. Forty-three of 60 teachers (71.7%) identify inadequate resources as a difficulty, 42 (70.0%) language barriers, 24 (40.0%) large classes and 24 (40.0%) limited professional development. Only 7 (11.7%) select resistance to new methods. The pattern is significant because teachers themselves locate the main difficulties in the conditions of implementation rather than in an unwillingness to change.Students describe many of the same difficulties. Of the 180 students, 105 (58.3%) report insufficient materials or teaching tools, 96 (53.3%) say that many students find English difficult to understand, and 87 (48.3%) identify overcrowded classes. The agreement between teacher and student responses gives these constraints particular weight when the policy-practice gap is interpreted.

Overall Methodological Pattern: Partial Transition Rather than Replacement

It is useful to judge methodological change by what students actually get to do in a lesson rather than by the name given to a method. A worksheet can be called an activity and still require little more than mechanical completion. On the other hand, a blackboard lesson can become genuinely interactive if students are asked to predict, question, compare, discuss and apply what they learn. The key issue is whether students have sustained opportunities to understand and use English, not whether a lesson carries a fashionable methodological label. For that reason, the findings should not be described as complete non-implementation of NEP 2020. Elements of newer pedagogy are present, but they have not yet changed the basic organisation of the classroom. Occasional use of a video, a group task or a role-play is a beginning; it becomes a methodological shift only when such practices recur often enough to shape students' normal experience of learning English.The contrast between intention and routine is visible in the figures. On the one hand, 51.7% of teachers identify greater attention to communication, 45.0% experiential or activity-based learning, 63.3% integration of local languages and culture, and 46.7% increased use of digital tools.

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On the other hand, 75.0% say that they regularly explain while learners listen and take notes, and only 28.3% report role-play or real-life enactment. The student responses sharpen the contrast: 83.9% experience blackboard or whiteboard explanation, while only 16.1% report group or pair work. Taken as a whole, the data suggest an eclectic classroom rather than the use of one fixed method. Explanation, grammar and textbook work exist alongside interaction, activities, digital resources and multilingual support. Such a mixture is not necessarily a weakness; contemporary ELT often requires teachers to adapt to context. The concern is the balance within that mixture. In the schools surveyed, teacher-fronted procedures are still much more visible than learner-to-learner communication and sustained experiential use of English.

Major Findings

Five findings stand out from the combined data. Teachers' aims have broadened to include communication, activities, multilingualism and technology, but routine classroom practice has changed more slowly. Explanation and direct grammar teaching remain prominent. Pair or group work, role-play, storytelling and games are present, though reported much less often. Textbooks and written assessment continue to shape teaching, while supplementary resources, regular digital use and assessment of speaking and listening are less common. Finally, teachers and students both point to resources, language difficulties, large classes and limited professional support as obstacles to methodological change. The picture is therefore one of partial transition: newer ideas have entered the classroom, but they work within older habits and difficult institutional conditions.

Pedagogical Implications and Recommendations

The findings point to a need for practical, classroom-based support rather than another layer of general policy orientation. ELT training should show teachers how an ordinary textbook lesson can be opened up through pair tasks, short projects, role-play, reading circles, information-gap work, contextual grammar and integrated listening-speaking activities. Such training will be useful only if it also addresses the realities of large classes and limited resources. The aim should not be to tell teachers simply to become 'facilitators', but to give them workable ways of combining explanation with participation and language use. Assessment also needs to move in the same direction as teaching. Written tests will continue to have a place, but they can be supplemented by short oral presentations, pair conversations, listening tasks, reading with comprehension, projects, portfolios, peer feedback and practical writing. When speaking, listening and participation are recognised in assessment, teachers have a stronger reason to make them a regular part of classroom work. Conclusion. The combined responses of 60 English teachers and 180 Middle-Stage students show an English classroom that is changing, but slowly. NEP 2020 expects learning to be more experiential, communicative, multilingual, technology-supported and competency-oriented.

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The history of ELT has moved in a similar direction, away from exclusive dependence on teacher authority, translation and rule learning towards interaction, tasks, collaboration and reflective teaching. The questionnaire data, however, show that everyday method has not changed at the same pace. Three out of four teachers say that they regularly explain lessons while students listen and take notes, and more than four out of five students report blackboard or whiteboard explanation as a usual classroom practice. Direct grammar teaching is common; rule-based grammar is reported far more often than grammar through games or activities; group and pair work and dramatization are comparatively limited; textbooks are used by every teacher; and written assessment remains the most common form of evaluation. Together, these figures point to a classroom in which newer practices have been added, but have not yet displaced the older instructional pattern.

This should not be taken to mean that teachers have rejected NEP 2020. Their own responses show interest in communication, experiential learning, multilingual support, technology and professional learning. Students, too, recognise supportive explanation, feedback and some interactive practices. The more convincing interpretation is that teachers are trying to change within conditions that often favour familiar methods: limited resources, linguistic diversity, large classes, uneven professional development and an assessment culture that still gives considerable weight to written performance. A workable response is therefore not to replace every established practice overnight. Explanation, explicit grammar teaching and the careful use of familiar languages can remain useful, especially at the Middle Stage. What needs to change is what happens around them. Explanation should lead to questions and use; grammar should move into context; multilingual support should help students towards English expression; and assessment should recognise speaking, listening and participation as well as writing. In this sense, the English teacher envisaged after NEP 2020 is not simply a lecturer or a passive facilitator, but a knowledgeable teacher who can explain, organise communication, design manageable tasks, use more than one linguistic resource intelligently, assess different abilities and respond to the actual learners in the room. The distance between policy and practice will narrow only when teachers are given the conditions and professional support needed to do this regularly.

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