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Literary Theories

Multilingual Minds, Digital Classrooms: Rethinking Rural ELT under NEP 2020

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the evolving nature of English Language Teaching (ELT) in rural Odisha through the framework of Critical Pedagogy, focusing especially on the intersecting factors of language, identity, and access to learning opportunities. In many multilingual and rural settings—particularly in areas like Western Odisha—learners frequently encounter instruction in English that overlooks their linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Utilizing the theories of Paulo Freire, this study critiques conventional pedagogical practices that relegate learners as passive knowledge consumers, placing English in a hierarchy that privileges it over indigenous and regional languages. Alternatively, the paper advocates for a more inclusive and dialogic approach to teaching, embracing learner participation and valuing home languages as a pedagogical resource. This discussion is further grounded in the National Education Policies (NEP) 2020 that underscores the significance of multilingualism, experiential learning, and the integration of technology. The perspective of multilingual practice is seen as a means of enhancing comprehension and bolstering investor confidence, while the domain of digital technologies is critically analyzed for their potential to offer broader access. Conversely, the paper highlights the disadvantages of digital proliferation in rural settings, noting uneven infrastructural development, limited connectivity, and inadequate teacher training. By synthesizing insights from critical pedagogy, multilingual education, and digital learning, the study proposes a set of viable strategies to render ELT more relevant, inclusive, and contextually sensitive. The paper concludes by positing a harmonized ideal that recognizes linguistic diversity in concert with mindful use of technology as a way that can lead to a more equitable and meaningful learning experience for rural Odisha students.

Keywords: Multilingualism, ELT, critical pedagogy, NEP 2020, digital learning, language and identity, rural education, Western Odisha.

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) in postcolonial, multilingual societies is fraught with an intrinsic paradox: while English acts as a conduit to social mobility, higher education, and economic opportunity, its pedagogical placement potentially systematically neglects the linguistic and cultural identities of learners who hail from non-English backgrounds (Canagarajah, 1999). This contradictory circumstance is glaring in rural Odisha—one of India's most linguistically diverse states—where learners routinely walk into classrooms fluent in Odia, Sambalpuri, Ho, Gondi, or other regional languages, confronting English instruction that presumes a monolingual normality that renders their latent competencies invisible. The National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has brought a profound discursive transformation in Indian educational planning that emphasizes the infusion of multilingualism, mother-tongue-based instruction, and the incorporation of digital technology as foundations of a re-envisioned pedagogy (Ministry of Education, 2020). Despite the idealistic discourses of policy statements and the existing realities of classroom practices, there are stark disparities between projected policies and the empirical situations, which are particularly pronounced in rural and tribal belts where infrastructural weaknesses, undereducated teachers, and endemic poverty aggravate the deficits of meaningful language learning. This paper weaves three interlocking frameworks that mediate the pedagogy of English in rural Odisha—Critical Pedagogy as theorized by Paulo Freire (1970), multilingual education research, and digital learning scholarship. The pivotal concept is an argument of true educational transformation that, rather than the adoption of novel technologies or syllabi permutations, posits an essential re-orientation of the pedagogical relation of learning—implying an approach that regards students' linguistic repertoires as assets, that develop critical consciousness, and that utilize digital tools as a means of inclusion as opposed to just efficiency.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Pedagogy and the Dialogic Classroom

Paulo Freire's seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), provides a critical lens on which to situate this paper. Freire's critique of the banking concept of education, in which learners are seen as empty vessels who are to be filled with pre-given knowledge by a hegemonic teacher, is eerily in tune with the structural conditions of ELT in rural India. When English is distributed as a neutral, decontextualized skill that is hived off as distinct to students' lived experiences, it entrenches a set of epistemic violence of de-legitimizing indigenous knowledge systems and silencing subaltern voices (Freire, 1970; Pennycook, 2001).

Freire's alternative model of education—the dialogic approach—emphasizes that education must spring from the learner's own 'generative themes' or existential and social concerns that give meaning to daily life. In the context of ELT, this involves the design of curricula based on topics and texts ecologically relevant for rural learners: such as agriculture, local governance, health, environmental change, and community narratives.

This pedagogical approach does not eschew linguistic rigor; rather, it seeks to place language acquisition within a context of critical engagement, which helps students not just to achieve communicative competence but also what Freire called 'conscientisation'—a reflective awareness of the social conditions that inform their lives (Freire, 1970). Subsequent theorists have expanded Freire's apprehensions about language education specifically. For instance, Pennycook (2001) advocates a 'critical applied linguistics' that interrogates the ideological assumptions of language curricula, textbooks, and assessment regimes.

Norton (2000) has introduced the concept of 'investment'—that motivational energies of learners are inseparable from their identity and imaginative sense about futures that language learning might open up. In the rural city Odisha such as the lives of Sambalpur is one against the multiplicity of languages with its symbolic value of English it is both aspirational and alienating to learn the importance to understand the investment of the students to be effective and emancipator.

Multilingual Education Theory

Monolingual fallacy—the assumption that the most effective way to learn a different language is systemic suppression of all other languages—has been thoroughly debunked by several decades of research on bilingual and multilingualism (Baker, 2011; Cummins, 2001; García & Wei, 2014). Interdependence Hypothesis, formulated by Cummins (2001) showed how proficiencies in one language facilitate rather than hinder the progress of another particularly at the level of the academic literacy. Cummins' idea of 'dual iceberg' model conceptualizes how the superficial features of language are dissimilar while the proximal cognitive and academic proficiencies that propel their function is shared.

More recently, García and Wei (2014) have conceptualized 'translanguaging' or the dynamic, fluid interplay of the speaker's full linguistic repertoire as a unitary communicative resource instead of separate and bounded languages. Translanguaging challenges pedagogical insistence on 'English only' classes by acknowledging that code-switching, paraphrased, and making sense of cross-lingual meanings are not symptoms of failure but rather evidence of sophisticated cognitive and communicative agency. In the multilingual classroom in the rural Odisha where students routinely switch between Odia, tribal languages, and English in a single class, translanguaging in this multilingual classroom is theoretically principled and empirically validated as a rationale for conceiving of the fluid language production as opposed to repressing it.

Skutnabb -Kangas (2000) takes a further step forward by representing the systematic exclusion of the minority language from formal education as 'linguistic genocide' (a term albeit highly polemical indicates the material and psychic prices that are paid by the children who make their home languages invisible through the policies of the country). In the context of the tribal majority districts in this Western Odisha (like Sambalpuri, Santali, Munda, Ho, Gondi, etc.) are spoken by trillions of people yet lack its presence in the school curriculum makes this critique pressing and timely.

ELT in Rural Odisha: Sociolinguistic Terrain and Pedagogical Challenges

Odisha has 64 scheduled tribes which account about 22.1 per cent from the total population of Odisha and these are remarkable for the linguistic diversity with dozens of languages spoken in the districts of Odisha (Census of India, 2011). A region of Odisha, Western Odisha (Sambalpur, Bargarh, Jharsuguda, Sundargarh, Bolangir, Sonepur, Nuapada, Kalahandi etc.) are an especially complex sociolinguistic environment where Odia holds the top position, Sambalpuri in the form of Kosli is lingua franc, and many tribal languages are vernaculars of their communities. In the context of government aided primary and secondary schools in this region English is usually introduced at class three but the quality and depth of instruction is highly variable from school to the other. Research on the ELT in the rural schools in India has consistently highlighted an aggregate of interrelated problems like teacher deficits and high level of teacher absenteeism; excess dependence on rote memorization and grammar-translation methods, privileging of written correctness over communicative fluency; dearth of authentic and appropriate English material which were relevant to the lives in the rural context; lack of any systematic process of mother-tongue support provided in the English classroom in the rural context was identified (Kumar, 2010; Mohanty, 2010; Pattanayak, 1981).

The sociolinguistic dimension of the problem is often underestimated as a person like Sambalpur when people who are speaking and reading in Sambalpur is Sambalpuris and if he reads the English through Odia version text book which is designed for the urban people then she meets two languages rather than one which is both the language of her teacher may be incapable of meeting. The affective implications (shame, disengaged, feelings of cognition inadequacy) of this challenge is addressed in the ethnographic research on the minority language learners in the Indian schools (Mohanty, 2010) being supportive and resonates with symbolic violence identified by Bourdieu (1991) where the symbolic gaze of the dominant culture is absorbed as a natural, inherent evaluation of the self's value.

The structural condition for the rural schools adds to the challenges. According to Annual report of status education report (ASER 2022) only a minority of rural children in India who are reading at class 8 level are able to understand a simple paragraph in English. Tpr in single teacher schools continue to pose a problem and the turnover of trained English teachers in remote parts of the country are high. Finally, all this culminates in a pedagogical arena in which English is simultaneously prescribed as essential yet made practically inaccessible—a process that reproduces the entrenched hierarchies of caste, class, and language reemphasizes rather than subverts.

NEP 2020: Multilingual Imperatives and Digital Ambitions

The National Education Policy 2020 represents the most substantial revision of India's educational framework since the National Policy on Education of 1986. Among its most significant provisions are its commitments to multilingualism, the use of the home language or mother tongue as the medium of instruction through at least Class 5 (and preferably Class 8), and the integration of digital technology across all levels of schooling (Ministry of Education, 2020).

NEP 2020's multilingual commitment is grounded in a pedagogical rationale broadly consistent with the research discussed above. The policy explicitly states that 'children learn and grasp non-trivial concepts more quickly in their home language' and calls for the development of 'high-quality textbook and learning materials' in regional and tribal languages (Ministry of Education, 2020). It envisions a 'three-language formula' in which English is taught as a subject while instruction in substantive areas proceeds in the mother tongue or regional language, with a gradual transition to English as learners develop foundational literacy.

The policy also places considerable emphasis on digital infrastructure, proposing a National Educational Technology Forum (NETF) and a suite of digital initiatives—including DIKSHA (Digital Infrastructure for Knowledge Sharing), PM eVIDYA, and e-content development in regional languages—as mechanisms for expanding educational access, particularly in underserved rural areas (Ministry of Education, 2020). The aspiration is to leverage technology not merely as a delivery mechanism for existing content, but as a platform for interactive, personalised, and experiential learning.

Critically, however, NEP 2020 has been received with both enthusiasm and scepticism by scholars of language education in India. Proponents argue that its multilingual provisions represent a long-overdue recognition of India's linguistic reality and align with international best practices in inclusive education (Agnihotri, 2020). Critics point to a number of tensions and ambiguities: the policy's simultaneous advocacy for mother-tongue instruction and its reaffirmation of English as the primary language of higher education and competitive examinations arguably reproduces the very hierarchies it claims to dismantle (Mohanty, 2021). Moreover, the gap between policy aspiration and implementation capacity is particularly pronounced in states like Odisha, where the infrastructure, trained personnel, and institutional will require to enact meaningful multilingual education reforms remain unevenly distributed.

Digital Learning in Rural ELT: Possibilities and Pitfalls

The Promise of Digital Tools

The potential of digital technologies to transform ELT in rural settings is real and increasingly documented. Interactive digital platforms can provide learners with access to authentic English-language materials—audio recordings of native and non-native speakers, video content, and communicative practice tools—that would otherwise be unavailable in resource-poor schools. Tools such as WhatsApp-based learning communities, YouTube instructional channels in regional languages, and gamified vocabulary applications have shown promise in supplementing formal instruction, particularly in contexts where teacher quality is inconsistent (Warschauer & Healey, 1998; Kukulska-Hulme, 2009).

The COVID-19 pandemic provided an involuntary experiment in remote digital learning that yielded mixed but instructive results for rural India. While the shift to online and blended instruction exposed the depth of the digital divide, it also catalysed innovation: grassroots networks of teachers developed low-bandwidth audio content, community radio was repurposed for educational broadcasting, and teacher WhatsApp groups became informal professional learning communities (UNESCO, 2020). In Odisha specifically, the state government's 'Ghare Ghare Pathashala' (a school in every home) initiative during the pandemic attempted to leverage community radio and television for educational continuity, offering lessons for lower grades in Odia and tribal languages alongside English (Government of Odisha, 2020).

From a critical pedagogical perspective, digital tools are most valuable not when they replicate the transmission model of teaching in a new medium—replacing the blackboard with a screen and the lecture with a pre-recorded video—but when they create spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and student-generated content. Digital storytelling projects, for instance, can enable rural learners to author multimodal narratives in their own languages and communities, which can then become the basis for structured language development activities in English (Kress, 2003). Such approaches align with Freire's insistence that education must begin with the learner's own world.

Infrastructure, Equity, and the Digital Divide

The transformative potential of digital ELT is, however, severely constrained by infrastructure realities in rural Odisha. According to TRAI data (2023), internet penetration in rural Odisha remains significantly below the national average, with large parts of tribal-majority districts in the state's interior experiencing intermittent or no mobile connectivity. Electricity supply is unreliable in many villages, making the consistent use of device-dependent learning tools impractical. The National Sample Survey (NSS, 2021) found that fewer than 10 per cent of rural households in Odisha possessed a computer, and while smartphone ownership has grown rapidly, the quality of access—screen size, data affordability, shared devices—limits its pedagogical utility. Teacher preparedness is an equally significant constraint. Studies of digital literacy among government school teachers in rural India suggest that while younger teachers may possess basic smartphone skills, the capacity to design technology-enhanced language lessons, evaluate digital content critically, or troubleshoot technical difficulties in real time remains limited (UNESCO, 2023; Kumar & Sharma, 2019).

Teacher training programmes, where they exist, have often emphasized technical operation over pedagogical integration, producing teachers who know how to use a projector but not how to design a lesson that exploits its affordances for dialogic language learning. There is also a subtler ideological dimension to the digital turn in ELT that critical scholars have identified. The enthusiasm for 'edtech solutions' in development discourse can function as a form of what Selwyn (2014) terms 'digital determinism'—the assumption that the introduction of technology is, in itself, transformative, regardless of the pedagogical, institutional, and social contexts in which it is deployed. This framing tends to locate the 'problem' of educational inequality in deficits of hardware and connectivity rather than in structural inequalities of class, caste, and language, and can divert attention and resources from the harder work of teacher development, curriculum reform, and community engagement that durable educational improvement requires.

Towards an Inclusive ELT Framework for Rural Odisha

Dialogic, Multilingual Pedagogy

A synthesis of the frameworks discussed above suggests a set of principles for ELT in rural Odisha that is simultaneously grounded in research, responsive to NEP 2020's aspirations, and realistic about on-the-ground constraints. The first and most fundamental principle is the legitimation of students' full linguistic repertoires as resources for learning rather than obstacles to be overcome. Concretely, this means adopting translanguaging as a deliberate pedagogical strategy: allowing students to use Odia, Sambalpuri, or tribal languages to discuss, clarify, and negotiate meaning in English-language tasks; designing bilingual glossaries and reading supports; and training teachers to deploy code-switching strategically rather than prohibiting it.

The second principle is dialogic engagement. Following Freire, ELT lessons should be organised around generative themes drawn from students' lived realities—local environmental issues, health practices, livelihoods, cultural festivals—that provide genuine communicative purposes for language use. This does not require the abandonment of standard syllabi, but rather their supplementation with locally authored texts, community interviews, and project-based learning tasks that connect language development to critical inquiry. Research in Indian multilingual classrooms has demonstrated that such approaches can significantly improve both engagement and learning outcomes, particularly for students from marginalised linguistic communities (Mohanty, Panda, & Pal, 2010).

The third principle concerns teacher education and professional development. Effective implementation of a dialogic, multilingual ELT approach requires teachers who are not only linguistically competent but also pedagogically reflective—able to recognise and challenge the ideological assumptions embedded in their own practice. Pre-service and in-service training programmes must therefore incorporate sustained engagement with the principles of critical pedagogy, multilingual education theory, and culturally responsive teaching, alongside practical guidance on lesson planning, materials development, and formative assessment.

Contextually Appropriate Digital Integration

The integration of digital tools into rural ELT should be guided by what might be called a 'contextually appropriate technology' principle: the selection and deployment of tools calibrated to the actual infrastructure, device access, and teacher capacity available in specific school contexts, rather than to idealised 'smart classroom' scenarios. In practice, this means privileging low-bandwidth, audio-based, and SMS-compatible resources over data-heavy video platforms; prioritizing content in regional and tribal languages alongside English; and investing in community-level digital hubs—such as school computer labs with solar power backup or mobile tablet libraries—that can provide shared access in contexts where household device ownership is limited.

Community radio remains a substantially underutilised resource for ELT in rural Odisha. Drawing on the precedent of successful programmes in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America (UNESCO, 2020), state and district education authorities could commission structured English learning broadcasts in Odia and Sambalpuri, incorporating oral storytelling, phonemic awareness activities, and simple dialogues contextualized in rural daily life. Such broadcasts can reach learners beyond school hours, engage parents and community members in the learning process, and reinforce classroom instruction without requiring reliable internet access. The DIKSHA platform, which NEP 2020 identifies as a cornerstone of its digital strategy, holds real potential as a repository for multilingual, locally produced educational content. However, realising this potential requires deliberate investment in the production of Odia- and tribal-language content by local educators and communities, rather than the simple translation of centrally produced Hindi and English materials. Community-based content creation initiatives—in which teachers, students, and community members collaborate to produce and share digital texts, audio recordings, and video lessons—can simultaneously enrich the DIKSHA repository and build local digital literacy and ownership.

Policy Implementation and Structural Support

Finally, the pedagogical reforms outlined above cannot be sustained without structural support at the institutional and policy level. NEP 2020's multilingual commitments require implementation mechanisms that are currently underdeveloped: robust systems for teacher recruitment and retention in remote areas; dedicated funding streams for the production of multilingual teaching materials; and assessment frameworks that recognise and reward the full range of communicative and cognitive competencies that multilingual learners develop, rather than measuring achievement exclusively through standardized English-language tests.

The development of Local Language Resource Centres—district-level repositories of multilingual teaching materials, audio-visual content, and pedagogical guidance—has been proposed by scholars of multilingual education in India as a cost-effective and contextually appropriate strategy for supporting teachers in linguistically diverse regions (Mohanty, 2010; Agnihotri, 2020). Such centres could also serve as sites for teacher professional learning communities, regular peer observation, and collaborative curriculum development, fostering the kind of sustained reflective practice that one-off training workshops cannot provide.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the transformation of ELT in rural Odisha requires a convergence of three commitments: a critical pedagogical orientation that challenges the epistemic hierarchies embedded in conventional language teaching; a genuinely multilingual approach that treats students' home languages as cognitive and cultural assets rather than deficits; and a contextually grounded integration of digital tools that serves inclusion rather than merely modernization. NEP 2020 provides a significant policy opening for this transformation, but its aspirations will remain unrealized without commensurate investment in teacher education, material development, community engagement, and infrastructure. The multilingual, digitally connected classrooms envisioned by the policy are not destinations to be reached through the purchase of hardware or the roll-out of platforms; they are ongoing projects of institution-building, relationship-making, and critical reflection that unfold over years and decades. For students in Western Odisha whose daily lives are woven from multiple languages, whose aspirations encompass both local rootedness and global mobility, and whose educational futures are currently constrained by structural inequalities that no technology can dissolve alone, the stakes of getting this right are not abstract.

A pedagogy that honours their linguistic complexity, engages their critical intelligence, and equips them with the communicative resources to navigate an increasingly multilingual world is not a luxury; it is a condition of genuine educational justice. Future research should pursue longitudinal classroom-based studies in rural Odisha schools to assess the efficacy of multilingual and dialogic ELT approaches under NEP 2020 conditions; participatory action research that centres student and community voices in curriculum design; and critical evaluations of digital learning initiatives that attend to questions of equity, access, and pedagogical quality alongside metrics of reach and engagement.

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