

# Bi-lingualism and the Teaching of English: Lessons from a School in Manipur

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## Abstract

Bilingualism enhances cognitive skills, creates various options for further education, broadens career opportunities and is also more adaptable. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 accounts for using the mother tongue wherever possible at the primary school level and beyond. This study aims to look at how the bilingual method of education can aid in strengthening the process of learning the English language and also nurture and preserve the learner's indigenous cultural knowledge and language. The study was carried out at a school in Imphal, Manipur in North-east India. The materials used for teaching writing skills were festivals, folk songs, folk dances, cultural artefacts, musical instruments and traditional attires of various communities of Manipur. The use of the Manipuri language in classroom practices to learn the English language assisted in enhancing the language learning ability and the cultural knowledge of the students as the learning took place in a natural environment.

**Keywords:** Bilingualism; Cognitive skills; English language; National Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

## Introduction

Bilingualism/ multilingualism can be defined as proficiency in two or more languages. With globalisation, bilingualism has become a relevant phenomenon in the world today. Bilingualism enhances cognitive skills, creates various options for further education, broadens career opportunities and is also more adaptable. It broadens the perspective of reading and comprehending literature of different languages and understanding the huge repository of knowledge available in different languages. India is a land of diverse cultures and languages and this is a pertinent aspect of bilingualism/ multilingualism. The role of school in nurturing bilingual-

ism is a vital feature in the society. So, schools play a key role in planning to develop the Indian languages. It also serves as a means to enhance the engagement of the learner's mother tongue. This aspect is important as it nurtures bilingualism/ multilingualism. Relatedly, students aspire to learn many languages for various factors like better job prospects, appreciating cinemas, travelling and reading books and magazines. Furthermore, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 asserts the importance of using the home language/ mother tongue/ local language/ regional language as the medium of instruction in schools from grade 5 to grade 8 and beyond. It is believed that when learners acquire their mother tongue, they have already developed a language learning system. This existing system can be applied when learning a second or foreign language. As a result, the mother tongue can serve as a tool to enhance their cognitive and creative abilities during the language-learning process. This paper attempts to look at how the bilingual method of education can aid in strengthening the process of learning the English language and also nurture and preserve the learner's indigenous cultural knowledge and language. This research used the Manipuri language to enhance the understanding and critical learning of the English language. The Manipuri language is the mother tongue of the student participants. The study was carried out at a school in Imphal, Manipur in Northeast India.

### **Bilingualism and the Bilingual Method**

Bilingualism assists in developing the three critical aspects of language learning which are clarity, accuracy and flexibility (Ross, 61). Bilingualism plays a key role in enhancing the language-learning process of a learner. Harmer (131) asserts if students are linguistically not quite active in acquiring vocabulary while learning a language, some basic use of L1 (mother tongue) is required to augment the learning process. In a language learning process, translation is a natural process and is believed to improve the language development aspects. So, the learners can use their mother tongue to translate and learn the target language. Consequently, the use of the mother tongue in the English language classroom will improve in acquiring an efficient ability to learn the language. Bilingual learners can effectively balance the development of their two languages and this will lead to their intellectual development too. According to Garcia (12), monolingual education generally limits access and legitimate linguistics practices and asserts that in the present day, bilingual education is the only way to educate children. Research has suggested that bilingualism in the English language classroom would assist in developing the socio-cognitive aspects of the learners. This aspect is a critical part of

the language learning process as it gives confidence to the learners and provides a favourable learning environment. In such a scenario, in an English language classroom, bilingualism can be effectively used to teach vocabulary, language skills, grammar and various other aspects.

The bilingual method of foreign language teaching was developed by C.J. Dodson Wales (1967). This was developed to complement the audio-visual method. In this method, the teacher and the learners can use two languages in learning the target languages. They can use the target language and the mother tongue to achieve proficiency in the target language, English. The teacher reads and for better efficiency, translates into the mother tongue of the learner. The bilingual method is based on the following principles:

1. Learners can understand the target language and learn more efficiently by using their mother tongue.
2. Teaching-learning is simplified in the classroom if the mother tongue is used and the meaning of the words and sentences are easily understandable.
3. This method enables the learner to learn in a natural environment. This saves time and the teacher can use this time to make the learner practice.

Butzkamm et al., (2) assert that in language learning, the mother tongue serves as an important asset. Mother tongue assists in the Language Acquisition Support System and the following are the reasons:

As children grow into their mother tongue, (1) they have learnt to communicate combining body language with language; (2) communicating, they have learnt to articulate and develop their voice; (3) communicating, they have learnt to conceptualize their world and have grasped the symbolic function of language; (4) communicating, they have acquired an intuitive understanding of grammar; (5) they have acquired the secondary skills of reading and writing.

(Butzkamm et al., 2)

In acquiring their mother tongue, the learners have already constructed the language learning system. These already constructed learning systems can be used in learning a second/ foreign language. Therefore, the mother

tongue of the learners can be used to enhance their cognitive and creative skills in the language-learning process. As they are already in tune with the system of the acquisition of their mother tongue, this can be used to learn the target language. Relatedly, Butzkamm et al., (12), assert that a language cannot be learnt by using another language. In the classroom, the target/ foreign language should be actively used (Butzkamm et al., 12). The mother tongue becomes the foundation of any language learning process as it is a naturally acquired language (Butzkamm et al., 12). In this context, the cognitive potential of the mother tongue should be optimally used in learning the target/ English/ Foreign language (Butzkamm et al., 12). It is further asserted that,

Bilingual techniques can de-foreignize the foreign, can make grammatical functions plain and thus make all the difference. The mother tongue – or another language previously acquired – can be made our most powerful ally. Advocacy for the use of L1 in the foreign languages classroom should not be seen as to replace L2, rather that a skilled use of L1 can be the very thing, the conversational lubricant that allows teachers to maximize their pupils' exposure to the foreign language and help them develop best the skills needed to communicate in the foreign language.

(Butzkamm et al., 12-13)

Therefore, the bilingual method can be engaged in the classroom to construct a language learning mechanism on the basis of the learner's mother tongue (L1) acquisition system. This is also to keep in account that the encouragement of the use of the mother tongue in learning the target/ English/ Foreign language (L2) implies a skilful and maximal use of the target/ English/ Foreign language in the communication process. This will further enhance the language learning process. Furthermore, Tabari et al., (10) stress the various advantages of using students' mother tongue in English language teaching. They further assert that students are more comfortable learning a language when their mother tongue is used (Tabari et al., 10). In an Indian multicultural context, the bilingual method is applicable to enhance the teaching of the English language as people speak various regional languages (Durga, 4). A study (Sipra, 63) indicates that at an intermediate level, bilingualism plays a key role in language teaching and learning. The use of L1 to translate complex ideas, abstract words and phrases assisted in a better understanding of L2 (Sipra, 63). It also assists in enhancing the motivation level of the learners (Sipra, 63). While observing the process of learning the English language using bilingualism,

it was found that the mother tongue became a support system to enhance their language learning process (Anil, 23). It also assists in the linguistic development of the learners (Anil, 23). Therefore, the use of the Bilingual method in the classroom is believed to enhance the student's language learning process.

### **Bilingualism/ Multilingualism and NEP 2020**

The learning effectiveness in young children is believed to be more profound when the mother tongue/ home language is used. According to National Education Policy (NEP) 2020,

“Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/ mother tongue/ local language/ regional language. Thereafter, the home/ local language shall continue to be taught as a language wherever possible. This will be followed by both public and private schools” (National Education Policy 2020, 13).

Therefore, NEP 2020 asserts that in every way possible, the mother tongue will be taught as a language. Efforts will be made for the teaching-learning materials to be available in the mother tongue. In case of the unavailability of the materials in the learner's mother tongue, the language used in the teaching-learning process will be the mother tongue. The use of a bilingual approach and bilingual teaching-learning materials will be encouraged. Equal importance will be given to all languages. Moreover, the use of technology will be encouraged to assist in the language learning process. The rationale for using the mother tongue in the early years of education is that bilingualism/ multilingualism has cognitive benefits. If young learners are exposed to different languages, their cognitive skills are enhanced thereby giving space to improve their learning ability at a faster pace. The enhancement of the cognitive skills in the learners can induce learning to take place in an interactive and enjoyable style. So, reading and writing can be introduced in their mother tongue. Further, other languages can also be taught in the same process. This can enhance the learners' learning capability, thereby preparing them for their future. The central and state governments will also invest in employing language teachers of various regional languages in the country. This is employed to encourage the study of the Indian language across the country. The use of technology in language teaching and in teaching-learning of different languages will also be emphasized. Further, NEP 2020 also states, “the three-language formula will continue to be implemented while keeping

in mind the Constitutional provisions, aspirations of the people, regions, and the Union, and the need to promote multilingualism as well as promote national unity” (National Education Policy, 2020, 14). The three-language formula will be implemented to encourage bilingualism/ multilingualism. It is also mentioned that flexibility will be given to the states and there will be no imposition of languages in the states. It also states that high-quality bilingual books and materials in various subjects will be emphasised so that the learners will be able to comprehend and think in their mother tongue as well as the English language. It is also believed that knowing one’s language, culture and traditions contributes to an overall enhancement of social, educational and technological advancement of the learners. Thus, it is evident that the NEP 2020 recommends the use of bilingualism/ multilingualism in classrooms to enhance the language learning process and also to augment the overall development of the learners.

## **Methodology**

### **Objectives:**

1. To examine how the bilingual method of education can aid in strengthening the process of learning the English language
2. To nurture and preserve the learner’s indigenous cultural knowledge and language

This study employed a qualitative approach involving classroom observations. Classroom observations were used to seek answers to the following research questions:

### **Research Questions:**

1. How can the bilingual method of education assist in learning the English language?
2. How can the use of the bilingual method of education nurture and preserve the learner’s indigenous cultural knowledge and language?

The study was carried out at a school in Imphal, Manipur in Northeast India. The participants who took part in the study were English as a Second Language (ESL) students studying in class VI. The number of student participants taken for the study is 56. The class VI students who were of around 12-13 years were taken as this age group represents a pivotal

stage in language and cultural education. This conceptual phase is crucial as the learners begin to engage their creative and critical thinking abilities, which, when guided and nurtured effectively, can greatly enhance their development in both language and culture. Furthermore, the mother tongue of the student participants is the Manipuri language. The sample population was taken as they speak the Manipuri language as their mother tongue. The study employed the bilingual method of education to enhance the learning of the English language.

The Manipuri language was used to enhance the understanding and critical learning of the English language. The syllabus of this course has the English Language as a taught course. As a part of the course and for the study, the student participants were taught the fundamentals of writing skills and how to develop the skills for effective writing. For testing the competency level of the students, a pre-test was done at the beginning of the session and a post-test was conducted towards the end of the session. Some of the topics which were covered to develop Writing skills were:

1. Descriptive writing  
Describing a folksong based on the listening activity
2. Visualisation  
Description of a festival
3. Pictures/ objects  
Research the pictures/ objects, describe and comment
4. Videos  
Research the video and write a critical comment

The above topics were discussed in class. Based on these topics, tasks and activities were designed for the effective implementation of the bilingual method in English Language Teaching (ELT).

### **Findings and Discussion:**

To teach 'Descriptive writing', the student participants were given a listening task. The audio of a Lai Haraoba folksong is played in the classroom. Lai Haraoba is a social festival of the Meitei community of Mani-

pur. It is celebrated to venerate the Sylvan deities. The folksong is in the Manipuri language. After playing the folksong, the teacher describes the Lai Haraoba festival in English. For enhancing the meaning of the folksong, the teacher describes the origin of the song in Manipuri and the English language. Based on the listening activity and the various inputs from the teacher, the student participants are guided to write a brief note on the folksong. During the listening tasks, they are guided to write the important points. Based on these points, they are instructed to introduce the folksong and write about its origin and cultural implications in the English language.

For teaching the English language using 'Visualisation', the teacher narrates the Gang Ngai festival of Manipur. Gang Ngai is a festival of the Zeliangrong community of Manipur. The festival is a post-harvest festival celebrated to revere the ancestors of the community. It also marks the end of the year and heralds the beginning of a new year. It is celebrated for five days during December/ January. Feasting, dance and music are some of the cultural manifestations observed during these celebrations. Firstly, the teacher in detail recounts the origin of the Gang Ngai festival. Then, the teacher narrates and describes the five-day cultural celebrations of the Gang Ngai festival. This includes the descriptions of the traditional attires, the music, the dances, the traditional musical instruments and the feast. All these narrations are done in English and Manipuri language. The class is divided into groups of 7. Based on the narrations of the teacher, the learners are asked to visualise the festival and discuss the vocabulary related to the content in groups. Each group is then asked to write ten lines on the Gang Ngai festival based on their visualisations.

To teach writing skills using 'Pictures/ Objects', the following pictures are shown in the classroom:

1. Kashan and Kachon (traditional attires of the Tangkhul community of Manipur)
2. Pena (a musical instrument of the Meitei community of Manipur)
3. Hiyang Hiren (a boat of the Kings of Manipur)

After showing the pictures to the student participants, they are divided into three groups. The three pictures are assigned to the three groups. The pictures are briefly explained in Manipuri and English language. Each group is asked to research the picture given to them. They are given two days for the research work. After the research, they are instructed to write



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a brief report on their findings.

To teach how to research and write a critical note, the teacher shows the video of Ekam laam which is a traditional dance of Manipur. Ekam laam (Ekam dance) is a traditional dance of the Monsang community of Manipur performed during the Ekam festival. To quote Monsang et al., "The Ekam festival is the biggest and richest Monsang cultural feast of merit celebrated over a bumper harvest with a series of ceremonial rituals. In the olden days, the Ekam festival was generally hosted during the Tthaar Kumkhuw (spring season) in the month of Khosaam Mhotte (March) or Ttepuw (April) by a rich man or well-off family for three consecutive days (sometimes lasting even up to 5-7 days) to express their deepest gratitude to Thanghang (Almighty God) for his bountiful gift of life and wealth" (252). Various types of Ekam laam are performed during the Ekam festival as a mark of obeisance to the Almighty.

The videos of the various Ekam laam are shown to the students. The teacher then uses the Manipuri and English languages to explain in brief about the dance. The students are asked to research the various forms of Ekam laam and the Ekam festival. They are given two days to finish their research work. After the research is done, they are asked to write a report of their findings. The basic process of critical writing is taught to the students. Based on their understanding, they are asked to write a brief critical note on their findings.

### **Pre-test observations**

Before introducing the designed topics, a pre-test was conducted in the classroom. For the pre-test, the student participants were given a topic titled, 'A rainy day'. It was observed that the students knew the basic knowledge of writing skills. However, they were not able to be effective in their practical applications. The description of the rainy day was visible but the vocabulary they used was minimal. The visualisation of the rainy day was not very clear as the written sentences lacked the visual written elements. It was also observed that the students lacked motivation and confidence.

### **Post-test observations**

In the study, the classroom practices based on the designed topics were found to be more favourable as the teacher employed the bilingual method. And, also emphasis was given to working in groups. In the first activi-

ty to teach 'Descriptive writing' using the folksong of the Lai Haraoba festival, the teacher discusses the folksong in the Manipuri and the English language to augment the learning of the target language, i.e., English. The introduction and the explanation of the folksong in the bilingual approach made the student participants feel at home and comfortable. They are at ease and start responding to the teacher as they are relatable to their own culture and language. The teacher guides them to a little writing in the English language about what they have understood. Some examples of their writing are:

*'Lai Haraoba is a festival of Manipur.'*

*'Folk dances and folk songs is performed during this festival.'* (An error with the subject-verb agreement can be noted, the corrected sentence is, 'Folk dances and folk songs are performed during this festival'.)

*'People wear colourful dresses during this festival'*

*'They also wear traditional dresses'.*

The guidance was in both languages and this enhanced their confidence level. In the initial stages, they started writing in short sentences. The teacher, then, guides them into connecting the sentences. These sentences are then coherently constructed into a paragraph. It was observed that the student participants were clear with their objectives and the content. As they are clear and excited about the content, they have many things to write. However, the vocabulary they used was limited. They tend to use compound sentences which induced them to make grammatical mistakes. The teacher made this observation and guided them to improve in these areas.

In the second classroom practice where 'Visualisation' is used, the student participants found the teacher's narration fascinating. The narration was a visual delight as it was done in a bilingual mode. The use of Manipuri words made it easy to comprehend and visualise the festival. They could visualise the Gang Ngai festival and made wonderful observations. Some instances of their writing are:

*'Gang Ngai is a festival of Manipur.'*

*'It is a grand festival.'*

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‘People perform songs and dances.’

‘The traditional clothes are very beautiful.’

‘Many people come to see the celebration of the festival.’

‘They also enjoy delicious food.’

They could write the sentences clearly. It was observed that the student participants could relate to their cultural traditions in their language. NEP 2020 emphasises that having knowledge of one’s language, culture and traditions contributes to an overall enhancement of social, educational and technological advancement of the learners so the use of the indigenous cultural material of the learners has been found to be effective. This made them comprehend the content in an easy manner and so writing in the English language became easier. The student participants were also excited to work in groups. This made learning more fun and enjoyable.

In the third research activity which uses ‘Pictures/ Objects’, the student participants were focused on their objective. It was a group activity so they were enthusiastic to work on the pictures provided to them. The three pictures provided to them tell stories of the different communities of Manipur. As a bilingual approach was adopted, the student participants explored and researched the topics in a natural environment. During the two-day research activity, they explored their allotted pictures and got the necessary information and inputs from their family members and neighbourhood. This information was used in the classroom group activity where they all came together with their findings. This group discussion also enabled them to enhance their speaking skills in the target language. It was found that the group activity made them come up with an effective piece of writing that describes and brings forth the origin, cultural relevance and beauty of the pictures provided to them.

While examining Kashan and Kachon of the Tangkhul community of Manipur, the students could bring about their cultural relevance and its rich textile heritage. They also briefly explored the culture of the Tangkhul community. It was also observed that the student participants were excited and motivated to learn about the culture of the various communities of Manipur. The origin of the musical instrument, pena was examined. They found out that pena was still used in the Lai Haraoba festival. They also brought a video where pena was performed in the Lai Haraoba festival. The students also explored the boat, Hiyang Hiren and its relevance in the present cultural context of Manipur. They also started a comparative anal-

ysis of the different pictures given to them. The activity made the learners enhance their motivation, creativity and cognitive skills thereby augmenting their learning of the English language.

In the fourth activity, where they had to write a critical note on the Ekam laam and the Ekam festival, the participants received the instructions well and the teacher used the bilingual method. The students found the activity interesting as it pertains to the culture of one of the communities of Manipur. As it was an individual activity, they got the information from their family members, neighbours and the internet. In the class, they could write a brief report on the dance and the festival. Some examples of their descriptive writing are:

*'Ekam dance is a beautiful dance form of the Monsang community of Manipur.'*

*'It is performed during the Ekam festival.'*

*'It is harvest festival and celebrated to show gratitude to God'* (An error can be observed here as the article, 'a' should be used before harvest, i.e., 'It is a harvest festival and celebrated to show gratitude to God'.)

*'The Ekam dance shows the beautiful culture of the Monsang community.'*

After they were done with the descriptive writing, they started analysing the dance and the festival. In writing the critical note, the students started observing the dance and the festival in the context of the culture of the Monsang community. Some instances of their critical writing are:

*'Culture show the life of people'* (An error with the subject-verb agreement can be noted, the corrected sentence is, 'Culture shows the life of people'.)

*'The beginning of the Monsang community is told through the Ekam dance and the festival'* (Instead of the word 'beginning', 'origin' can be appropriately used in this context).

*'Some similarities and differences are found with the dances and festivals of other communities of Manipur.'*

In this activity, it was observed that the students were more concerned

with the contents of their writing rather than the grammar and vocabulary. They started reading about culture, traditions and festivals in general. After this, they relate it to the Ekam dance and festival of the Monsang community. This observation shows that the students have understood the concept of critical writing. They have cognitively taken in the concept of culture and shown it by analysing the relevance of Ekam dance and festival. The use of the bilingual method also made the learners enhance their understanding of the concept of culture and use it in critically examining the dance and festival. The use of the Manipuri language and the cultural material of Manipur in the classroom made the students feel at ease. This improves their motivation and greatly assists in learning the target/ English language.

The study, therefore, has indicated that the use of the bilingual method in the classroom assisted the learners to comprehend the concepts more clearly. As language can be acquired by continued practice, the use of bilingualism can help develop the cognitive skills of the learner thereby inducing them to use the language effectively. In the study, the use of their mother tongue, made the learners feel at ease. This allows a natural language learning process in acquiring the English language. Furthermore, NEP 2020 recommends using the mother tongue wherever possible at the primary school level and beyond. In the above classroom practices, the use of the Manipuri language to learn the English language assisted in augmenting the language learning process of the learners. Relatedly, the use of indigenous cultural material also adds to this natural language learning environment. As the materials used for teaching writing skills were festivals, folk songs, folk dances, cultural artefacts, musical instruments and traditional attires of various communities of Manipur, the learners' comprehension levels are enhanced so effective use of the English language is visible.

## **Conclusion**

The enhancement of the cognitive skills in the learners can induce an effective language-learning process. The use of the bilingual method is believed to enhance cognitive skills as they can be engaged in the classroom to construct a language learning mechanism based on the learner's mother tongue acquisition system. In the preceding classroom practices where the bilingual approach was adopted to enhance the language learning process, it is observed that there are some important pedagogical implications drawn from the study. The use of the bilingual method assisted the learners to augment their motivation level, creativity and cognitive skills.

NEP 2020 accounts for using the mother tongue wherever possible at the primary school level and beyond. The use of the Manipuri language in the above classroom practices to learn the English language assisted in enhancing the language learning ability of the students as the learning took place in a natural environment. The learner's comprehension of the content was enhanced due to the use of their mother tongue. The materials used for teaching writing skills were festivals, folk songs, folk dances, cultural artefacts, musical instruments and traditional attires of various communities of Manipur. In the course of the teaching process, the Manipuri and the English languages were used. The use of the mother tongue made them comfortable to learn the target/ English language. The research also enhances the cultural knowledge of the students thereby contributing to preserving and nurturing their culture. The activities used in the classroom provide a space where the students can exercise their cognitive skills and creativity in learning the target/ English language. This clearly shows the various benefits of bilingualism in language education.

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