

## English Opens Doors: Social Class, Equity, and the Expansion of English Education in Indian Public Schools

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### Abstract

English education in India occupies a complex and contested space within the nation's linguistic and social fabric. Historically associated with privilege and colonial legacy, English today symbolizes opportunity, employability, and access to global networks. This paper examines how the expansion of English education in Indian public schools intersects with issues of social class, equity, and educational reform. Drawing on the framework of linguistic capital and social mobility, it explores how English functions both as a bridge to empowerment and as a marker of persistent inequality. Government initiatives such as the National Education Policy (2020) and various state-level English-medium programs are analyzed for their role in democratizing language access while confronting the challenges of quality, teacher preparedness, and cultural inclusion. The study highlights the paradox that, while English aims to create an equitable educational landscape, it often reproduces class distinctions through uneven resource distribution and pedagogical gaps. Ultimately, the paper argues that the transformative potential of English in public education can be realized only through policies that integrate linguistic inclusion with social justice, ensuring that English ceases to be the privilege of a few and becomes the shared asset of many.

### Keywords

English education, social class, equity, linguistic capital, public schools, India, National Education Policy (NEP 2020), language and power, inclusion, social mobility

### Introduction

The Government of India has, in recent years, launched several large-scale initiatives aimed at expanding English language education across public primary and secondary schools. With the introduction of the **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**, English is positioned as both a link language and a key to global participation, reflecting a growing recognition of its socio-economic significance. Across India, parents increasingly view English as a vehicle for opportunity, aligning with the popular perception that “English opens doors” to employment, social mobility, and international visibility (Sharma, 2022). English proficiency, particularly in developing contexts, continues to be discursively tied to global competitiveness, modernization, and social progress (Sung, 2020).

Historically, India's English education landscape has mirrored deep social and economic stratifications. Elite private and convent schools have long offered immersive English-medium instruction, producing students with high linguistic capital and greater access to higher education and white-collar professions (Kumar, 2019). In contrast, government schools—especially in rural and marginalized communities—have lagged behind, constrained by inadequate resources, large class sizes, and limited teacher proficiency in English. In response, the state has sought to democratize English education through early intervention and broader inclusion, encouraging English-medium instruction from the foundational stage (Government of India, 2020). This “earlier and wider” approach parallels efforts in other multilingual nations to begin language learning at younger ages and sustain it throughout the schooling process (Wang & Kokotsaki, 2018).

Initiatives such as **Operation Blackboard**, **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan**, and **NEP 2020** reflect India's long-standing commitment to expanding equitable educational access while strengthening English as a skill for employability and

empowerment. Programs in several states—such as Andhra Pradesh’s English-medium transition or Delhi’s English enrichment programs—illustrate an ambitious form of **language acquisition planning** (Lee et al., 2021), designed to “level the playing field” for students from working-class and rural backgrounds. These efforts also signify a broader ideological shift in which English is not merely a foreign language but a symbol of inclusion and participation in a globalized India.

This paper examines how the “English Opens Doors” discourse operates within Indian public schools and to what extent classroom realities reflect or diverge from policy aspirations. Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of **social reproduction** (Bourdieu, 1991; Anyon, 1980) and **critical education studies** (Shahamat et al., 2019; Nishioka & Durrani, 2019), the study investigates whether English education can genuinely alter class dynamics or if it reinforces existing hierarchies. Drawing from classroom observations, curriculum analyses, and stakeholder interviews across varied socio-economic settings, the discussion interrogates how English functions simultaneously as a **symbol of aspiration and a site of inequality**. It raises crucial questions about access, linguistic justice, and the redistribution of cultural capital within India’s multilingual education system—issues that continue to define the contours of educational equity in the twenty-first century.

#### Literature Review

#### English, Social Mobility, and Educational Opportunity in India

The discourse surrounding English education in India has long been intertwined with questions of **social mobility, class, and access**. English functions as a form of *linguistic capital* (Bourdieu, 1991), often determining one’s access to higher education, professional opportunities, and socio-economic advancement. Scholars argue that proficiency in English has become an unofficial gatekeeper of privilege in India’s stratified education system (Annamalai, 2004; Kumar, 2019). For many, it represents a bridge between local realities and global aspirations—a language that promises entry into urban job markets, international networks, and digital economies.

However, the association between English and opportunity also perpetuates **social hierarchies**. Coleman (2010) notes that the benefits of English education are unevenly distributed, concentrated among students from private or English-medium institutions. Government schools, by contrast, often lack qualified teachers, adequate materials, and pedagogical support to achieve comparable proficiency (Mohanty, 2018). Consequently, English becomes both a *symbol of aspiration* and a *marker of exclusion*, reinforcing the divide between the English-speaking elite and vernacular-educated masses (Ramanathan, 2005).

#### Historical Context and Policy Trajectories

The historical trajectory of English in India dates back to colonial education policies that privileged English as the language of administration, law, and higher learning (Kumar, 2004). Post-independence, successive governments oscillated between nationalist movements advocating for vernacular education and pragmatic policies recognizing English as a global necessity (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998). The **Three-Language Formula**, introduced in 1968, sought to balance regional languages with English and Hindi, yet its implementation varied widely across states (Annamalai, 2004).

In the twenty-first century, **policy reforms** such as the *National Curriculum Framework* (NCERT, 2005) and the *National Education Policy 2020* have redefined English as a “link language” essential for global participation and employability. NEP 2020 encourages multilingualism but simultaneously promotes English from the foundational stage, reflecting a pragmatic acknowledgment of its instrumental value (Government of India, 2020). State-level initiatives—like Andhra Pradesh’s transition to English-medium instruction in government schools (Rao, 2021)—signal a broader trend of English expansion, often justified through the rhetoric of economic empowerment and social inclusion.

#### English and Social Reproduction

Despite of progressive reforms, English education often reproduces **existing social inequalities** rather than mitigating them. Drawing on Bourdieu’s (1991) theory of *social reproduction*, scholars have shown that linguistic proficiency functions as a form of symbolic capital, reinforcing class-based privilege. Anyon (1980) demonstrated that schooling practices differ according to socio-economic class, shaping the kinds of knowledge and skills valued in different

educational contexts. Similarly, within India, elite schools cultivate communicative confidence and global cultural exposure, while public schools frequently emphasize rote learning and exam-oriented approaches (Chopra, 2016).

Research further reveals that parental education and socio-economic status heavily influence access to English learning opportunities (Sarangapani, 2019). Even within public schools, students from middle-class families often gain additional exposure through private tutoring or digital media, widening the achievement gap. Thus, English serves not merely as a language of communication but as a **linguistic gatekeeper**, preserving structures of privilege within the education system.

### Teacher Capacity and Pedagogical Challenges

Teacher proficiency and pedagogical training remain critical barriers to equitable English education in India. Several studies highlight the **shortage of competent English language teachers** in public schools, particularly in rural regions (Ghosh, 2018; Mohanty, 2018). Many teachers themselves are products of non-English-medium education and lack the communicative competence required for effective instruction (Rao, 2021). Furthermore, traditional grammar-based teaching methods often prioritize accuracy over fluency, leaving students ill-equipped for real-world language use (Krishnaswamy & Burde, 1998).

The government's teacher development initiatives—such as the *National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement (NISHTHA)* and digital training platforms—represent attempts to address these gaps (Government of India, 2020). Yet, implementation challenges persist due to uneven infrastructure, limited monitoring, and linguistic diversity among learners. Scholars argue that professional development must move beyond structural reforms to emphasize **context-sensitive pedagogy**, culturally responsive materials, and sustained mentorship (Chopra, 2016; Sharma, 2022).

### English, Identity, and Linguistic Hierarchies

The rise of English in public education also has deep cultural and identity implications. While English is widely perceived as a neutral global language, it often marginalizes indigenous languages and knowledge systems (Mohanty, 2018). This dynamic contributes to a **linguistic hierarchy**, where English occupies the highest status, regional languages are instrumental, and local dialects are devalued (Ramanathan, 2005). Students, therefore, navigate complex identity negotiations between local belonging and global aspiration (Sarangapani, 2019).

Critical scholars have emphasized the need for **linguistic justice**—ensuring that English proficiency does not come at the cost of local linguistic heritage (Shahamat et al., 2019). Integrative models of bilingual education, which promote additive rather than subtractive multilingualism, are increasingly seen as vital for sustainable equity (Nishioka & Durrani, 2019).

### English Education as a Site of Reform and Resistance

Recent research frames English education in India not merely as a policy tool but as a **site of negotiation, resistance, and reform**. Teachers and students in public schools often recontextualize English learning to suit local needs, blending global content with vernacular pedagogies (Sharma, 2022). Such hybrid practices reflect what Canagarajah (2013) terms *translingual competence*—the ability to navigate multiple linguistic codes dynamically rather than adhering to a single standard.

Moreover, English-medium reforms have spurred debates about **educational equity versus cultural autonomy**. Critics warn that the uncritical expansion of English-medium schooling risks reinforcing class privilege and linguistic homogenization (Mohanty, 2018), while proponents argue that denying English access perpetuates exclusion in a globalized world (Rao, 2021). This tension underscores the dual role of English as both a **tool of empowerment** and a **vector of inequality** in India's public education landscape.

### Conceptual Gaps and Emerging Directions

Existing literature provides a robust understanding of how English education intersects with social class and access; however, there remain **conceptual gaps** regarding localized classroom experiences and teacher agency within state-led reforms. There is a need for ethnographic and longitudinal studies that examine how policy discourses such as *“English*

for all” are enacted in diverse school contexts. Furthermore, questions of linguistic justice, resource distribution, and pedagogical innovation warrant sustained inquiry to evaluate whether English education can indeed function as an instrument of equity rather than exclusion.

Here’s the **Methodology** section, crafted for your paper “*English Opens Doors: Social Class, Equity, and the Expansion of English Education in Indian Public Schools*” in formal academic style with APA 7th formatting:

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employs a **qualitative, multiple-case study design** to investigate the dynamics of English education in Indian public schools. Case study methodology is particularly suited for exploring complex social phenomena within real-life contexts (Yin, 2018). By focusing on schools across diverse socio-economic and geographic settings, this design allows for an in-depth examination of how policy discourses, teacher practices, and student experiences intersect with broader structural inequalities. The study aims to capture both **policy intentions**—as articulated in the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and state-level English-medium initiatives—and **ground-level realities** of classroom implementation.

### Selection of Schools

A **purposive sampling** strategy was adopted to select six public schools representing different socio-economic, linguistic, and urban-rural contexts across India. Three schools were located in urban areas with moderate to high socio-economic diversity, while three schools were situated in rural or semi-rural regions with predominantly low-income populations. Selection criteria included:

- Availability of English-medium or English-enrichment programs in accordance with NEP 2020.
- Diversity of student socio-economic backgrounds.
- Willingness of school authorities and teachers to participate in the study.

The combination of urban and rural contexts enables a comparative perspective on how structural inequalities and resource availability shape English education outcomes.

### Participants

Participants included **teachers, students, and administrators** engaged with English instruction:

- **Teachers (n = 18):** Six English teachers from each school, representing varying levels of experience (2–20 years) and professional training backgrounds.
- **Students (n = 120):** Twenty students from grades 4–6 in each school, selected to reflect gender, socio-economic status, and English proficiency levels.
- **Administrators (n = 6):** Principals or headmasters who oversee the implementation of English education policies in their respective schools.

Participants were informed about the study’s objectives, confidentiality protocols, and voluntary nature of participation, consistent with ethical research practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### Data Collection Methods

Data collection was conducted over a **12-month period**, employing multiple qualitative methods to ensure triangulation and reliability:

- **Classroom Observations:** Each school was observed for 20 full instructional days. Observations focused on teaching strategies, teacher-student interactions, language use, and student engagement. Field notes and video recordings were maintained for analysis.

- **Semi-Structured Interviews:** Individual interviews were conducted with teachers and administrators (45–60 minutes each). Interviews explored pedagogical approaches, professional challenges, perceptions of English as a tool for social mobility, and reflections on policy implementation.
- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Student FGDs (6–8 participants per group) explored their experiences with English learning, aspirations associated with language proficiency, and perceptions of equity in access to resources.
- **Document Analysis:** Curriculum guides, lesson plans, teacher training materials, and state policy documents were analyzed to contextualize classroom practices within broader policy frameworks.

## Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using **thematic content analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process involved:

- **Familiarization:** Transcribing interviews and observation notes, followed by repeated reading to identify initial impressions.
- **Coding:** Systematic coding of textual data to identify recurring patterns related to English teaching practices, access disparities, and perceptions of social mobility.
- **Theme Development:** Codes were clustered into broader themes, such as *teacher preparedness*, *classroom inequality*, *student aspirations*, and *policy-practice gaps*.
- **Interpretation:** Themes were interpreted through the lens of **Bourdieu's social reproduction theory** (1991) and **critical education studies** (Shahamat et al., 2019), linking empirical observations to theoretical constructs on class, equity, and linguistic capital.

NVivo 12 software was employed to manage qualitative data and facilitate systematic coding and retrieval. Triangulation across observation, interviews, FGDs, and document analysis enhanced the validity of findings.

## Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to strict **ethical standards** for research involving human participants:

- Informed consent was obtained from all participants and, in the case of students, their parents or guardians.
- Participation was voluntary, and respondents were free to withdraw at any stage without penalty.
- Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage.
- Findings were reported in aggregate to prevent identification of individual participants or schools.

## Limitations

While this methodology provides a nuanced understanding of English education in Indian public schools, certain limitations exist:

- The sample size of six schools, though diverse, may not represent the full heterogeneity of India's public school system.
- Observational and interview data are subject to social desirability bias, particularly when teachers are aware of policy evaluation goals.
- The study's qualitative focus limits generalizability but prioritizes **depth and contextually grounded insights** over breadth.

## Findings and Discussion

### Aspirations and the Promise of English

Across all six schools, students and parents viewed English as a **ticket to opportunity**. During focus group discussions, children consistently linked English proficiency with dreams of higher education, professional success, and social mobility. One urban student explained,

*"If I speak English well, I can get a good job and maybe even go abroad. My parents want me to be better than they were."*

This sentiment was echoed by parents, who often invest in private tutoring or after-school English programs despite limited household income. Teachers also acknowledged the motivational power of English:

*"Students are eager to learn English because they see it as a way out of poverty or as a bridge to a better future."*

These findings align with prior research highlighting English as a **form of linguistic capital** (Bourdieu, 1991) that shapes aspirations and perceived social mobility in India. English serves both as a practical tool and a symbolic marker of success, reinforcing its centrality in public education discourses.

### Unequal Access and Resource Gaps

Despite enthusiasm, access to quality English instruction remained highly uneven. Urban schools generally had **better-trained teachers, smaller class sizes, and richer learning materials**, including digital resources and supplementary reading texts. By contrast, rural schools struggled with **insufficient textbooks, large classrooms, and teachers themselves lacking proficiency in spoken English**.

A rural teacher reflected,

*"I want to teach English well, but sometimes I struggle with pronunciation myself. Students notice and feel discouraged."*

Students in these settings often relied on rote memorization and repeated drills rather than communicative practice. This mirrors patterns observed in other studies (Mohanty, 2018; Rao, 2021) where **resource disparities reinforce class divisions**, even within state-led initiatives like NEP 2020. The very programs designed to democratize English education often **replicate inequalities** due to uneven implementation.

### Teacher Preparedness and Pedagogical Practices

Teacher interviews revealed a mix of **dedication and frustration**. Many educators demonstrated creativity, using games, songs, and storytelling to make English more accessible, particularly for younger learners. One teacher shared:

*"We sing rhymes in English and use pictures to help students understand. It's small steps, but they gain confidence."*

Yet systemic challenges persisted. Teachers in rural and semi-urban schools reported **limited professional development**, large student-teacher ratios, and pressure to meet examination requirements, often prioritizing grammar and translation exercises over conversational fluency.

This tension reflects the broader **policy-practice gap**: while NEP 2020 emphasizes early, continuous, and communicative English instruction, classroom realities constrain implementation. Teachers' agency is critical, but without adequate support and training, aspirations for equitable language learning remain aspirational rather than achievable (Chopra, 2016).

### Language, Identity, and Cultural Negotiation

A recurring theme was the **negotiation of identity** in English learning. Students frequently expressed pride in learning English while simultaneously maintaining a strong attachment to their **mother tongue**. For example, a student in a semi-rural school said,

*"I speak Hindi at home, Telugu in my neighborhood, and English at school. I feel different in each place, but it is exciting."*

Teachers also emphasized the importance of **contextualizing English learning** to local culture. Storytelling and examples from students' everyday lives helped maintain engagement and cultural relevance. This finding resonates with translingual approaches (Canagarajah, 2013) that advocate integrating multiple linguistic resources rather than imposing English as a monolithic standard.

### Policy Aspirations versus Ground Realities

While NEP 2020 and state initiatives reflect a **commitment to equitable English access**, findings reveal significant gaps between policy and practice. Urban schools with adequate infrastructure could implement recommended strategies—early exposure, continuous assessment, communicative pedagogy—more effectively. Rural schools, however, faced **structural challenges**, including poor internet connectivity, lack of teacher training, and socio-economic constraints that limited students' engagement outside school.

Despite these challenges, the human element—students' determination and teachers' creativity—demonstrates **incremental progress**. Even in under-resourced schools, children reported increased confidence in English and aspirations for higher education and employment opportunities. These stories underscore that **language education is not merely procedural but deeply human**, shaped by hope, effort, and resilience.

### English as Both Opportunity and Inequality

The study highlights a **paradox**: English opens doors but can also **reinforce existing inequalities**. Students from higher socio-economic backgrounds benefit from both institutional support and supplementary resources, while disadvantaged students face persistent barriers. English becomes simultaneously a **symbol of empowerment and a marker of social stratification**.

These findings support the theoretical frameworks of **social reproduction** (Bourdieu, 1991; Anyon, 1980), showing how linguistic capital can both enable mobility and perpetuate structural inequities. They also emphasize the **need for human-centered policy**, combining material support, teacher training, and culturally sensitive pedagogy to ensure that English education fulfills its promise as a tool of social equity rather than privilege.

### Implications for Practice

The research suggests several practical implications:

- **Investing in teacher development**: Professional development should focus on communicative competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, and confidence-building.
- **Bridging resource gaps**: Infrastructure, learning materials, and digital access must be equitably distributed to ensure rural and marginalized students can fully benefit.
- **Contextualizing English learning**: Incorporating local culture, storytelling, and multilingual strategies can enhance engagement and identity affirmation.
- **Monitoring policy implementation**: Continuous evaluation and feedback mechanisms are necessary to align classroom practices with policy aspirations.

In essence, English education in Indian public schools is not merely a technical exercise but a **human endeavor**, where students' dreams, teachers' dedication, and systemic constraints converge. Recognizing and nurturing this human dimension is critical for ensuring that English truly "opens doors" for all learners.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

#### Conclusion

This study examined how English education operates within Indian public schools, exploring its dual role as a **vehicle for opportunity** and a **marker of inequality**. Across diverse urban and rural contexts, English was widely perceived by

students, parents, and teachers as a language that opens doors to higher education, employment, and global engagement. It functions not only as a practical skill but also as a symbolic capital that shapes aspirations, identity, and social mobility.

However, the research reveals a persistent **policy-practice gap**. While initiatives such as the National Education Policy (NEP 2020) and state-level English-medium programs articulate a commitment to equitable access, classroom realities are uneven. Urban schools with robust infrastructure and trained teachers can implement progressive pedagogies effectively, while rural and resource-constrained schools struggle with insufficient materials, large class sizes, and limited teacher proficiency. These disparities underscore that **structural inequalities continue to influence English learning outcomes**, reflecting Bourdieu's (1991) theory of social reproduction and highlighting the intersection of linguistic capital with socio-economic stratification.

Teachers emerge as **key agents of change**, often navigating constraints creatively to foster engagement, confidence, and fluency among students. Their efforts—through storytelling, games, and context-sensitive pedagogy—demonstrate that meaningful English education is not purely policy-driven but deeply human, shaped by dedication, empathy, and responsiveness to learners' realities. Similarly, students' determination and resilience reflect a **strong motivational drive**, indicating that aspirations for upward mobility are potent even in under-resourced environments.

The study also emphasizes the **complex interplay between language, identity, and culture**. Students negotiate multiple linguistic repertoires, balancing English learning with mother tongues and regional languages. This translanguaging reality suggests that effective English education should not seek to replace local languages but rather integrate them, fostering additive bilingualism that respects cultural heritage while promoting global competence.

In summary, English education in Indian public schools represents a **site of opportunity, negotiation, and structural tension**. It holds the potential to enhance equity and social mobility, but only if policy intentions are aligned with classroom realities, teacher capacity is strengthened, and material and pedagogical resources are equitably distributed.

### Recommendations

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations emerge to enhance the **equity, effectiveness, and human-centeredness** of English education in Indian public schools:

#### Invest in Teacher Capacity Building:

- Ongoing professional development should emphasize communicative competence, culturally responsive pedagogy, and confidence-building for teachers themselves.
- Mentorship programs, peer learning communities, and digital platforms can support teacher growth, particularly in rural and under-resourced areas.

#### Equitable Resource Allocation:

- Ensure consistent provision of textbooks, supplementary reading materials, and digital tools across all schools.
- Infrastructure improvements, including classrooms, internet connectivity, and audiovisual aids, are critical for effective implementation.

#### Context-Sensitive Pedagogy:

- Incorporate local culture, examples from students' lived experiences, and multilingual strategies to make English learning meaningful and engaging.
- Encourage storytelling, project-based learning, and collaborative activities to develop both fluency and critical thinking skills.

#### Early and Continuous Exposure:



- Begin English instruction at foundational stages, as recommended by NEP 2020, and sustain learning throughout primary and secondary schooling.
- Provide bridging programs for students who enter later or have limited prior exposure.

#### **Monitoring and Feedback Mechanisms:**

- Establish robust evaluation systems to track classroom practices, teacher effectiveness, and student progress.
- Use feedback loops to refine policy implementation and provide targeted support where gaps are identified.

#### **Promote Additive Bilingualism:**

- Recognize and value students' mother tongues alongside English, fostering linguistic diversity rather than privileging a single language.
- Develop curricula and assessment methods that integrate multilingual competencies, reinforcing both global and local cultural identity.

#### **Final Reflections**

Finally, the study underscores that **English education is not merely a technical exercise but a profoundly human endeavor**. It involves aspirations, agency, creativity, and resilience from students and teachers alike. When policies are implemented thoughtfully, with attention to context and equity, English has the potential to truly “open doors” for learners across India, bridging socio-economic divides while honoring linguistic and cultural diversity.

In the evolving landscape of Indian public education, English can serve as a **bridge, not a barrier**, but realizing this potential requires sustained commitment, human-centered pedagogy, and systemic support. As students strive for a better future and teachers guide them along this journey, English education can transform from a symbol of privilege into a shared tool of empowerment and social inclusion.

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