



2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

Factors Affecting Exposure to the English Language among Students in Manipur

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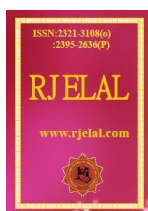
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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.4.465](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.4.465)



Article info

Article Received: 02/11/2025

Article Accepted: 27/12/2025

Published online: 31/12/2025

Abstract

Manipur, a multilingual region characterized by diverse ethnic communities with distinct indigenous languages, presents a unique linguistic landscape where English occupies a pivotal role in education. As the primary medium of instruction and assessment, English proficiency is crucial for academic achievement and access to broader socio-economic opportunities. However, in Manipur, students experience widely varying levels of exposure to the English language, which is a basic prerequisite for acquiring the language. This study examines the factors shaping exposure to English language among students in Manipur such as home environment, school infrastructure, socio-economic status, media and technology access, and socio-political context. By analyzing these determinants, the study aims to highlight the disparities in language exposure and their implications for learning outcomes along with the importance of creating inclusive and supportive learning environments that enhance English engagement in Manipur while preserving its cultural and linguistic identity.

Keywords: Multilingualism, English Language, Education, Socio-Political Context, Cultural Diversity.

1. Introduction

Manipur is a state in the north-eastern region of India, known for its extensive cultural and linguistic diversity, with over thirty regional languages spoken by its numerous ethnic communities while Manipuri (Meiteilon) functions as the *lingua franca* of the State. In the state, English is introduced in schools from the

nursery or pre-primary level as a compulsory subject up to the higher secondary level. Although Manipuri (Meiteilon) and other regional languages, along with English serve as medium of instruction in many schools, textbooks, reference materials, and digital learning resources are predominantly in English, making proficiency in the language

essential for academic success. The reliance on English in examinations further underscores the importance of early exposure to English. Students are expected to read, comprehend, and respond to questions entirely in English, which makes proficiency in the language an absolute essential. However, students' exposure to the English language largely varies due to factors such as home environment, educational infrastructure, internet access, socio-economic background and socio-linguistic attitudes.

Exposure to English language can be defined as the amount of contact a person has with the English language, essentially how much they are actively engaged with hearing, reading, and speaking English, whether through formal learning, media, or everyday interactions, allowing them to absorb and learn the language naturally. Despite the central role of the English language in education, many students struggle with its comprehension due to limited exposure to English outside the classroom. This challenge is particularly evident in government schools, where students often come from non-English-speaking backgrounds and lack access to supplementary learning materials. In contrast, students in private schools tend to receive more English-language exposure through structured teaching methods, better resources, and an environment that encourages communication in English.

In highly developed countries like China, Japan, and South Korea, where English is not an official language, proficiency in English, although desirable, is not an essential for academic achievement or career advancement since their systems function effectively within their native linguistic frameworks. Despite English not being a dominant language, these countries have become global leaders across multiple sectors and industries. While such countries have demonstrated that national development is not dependent on English proficiency, the situation in India presents a more complex challenge. In a country like India, where English holds official status but is not

spoken by the majority of the population, its dominance within institutions has proven to be more of a hindrance than a facilitator of development, largely because access to the language remains highly uneven across the country. This disadvantage is even more pronounced in regions such as Manipur, where it struggles with the broader challenge India faces but also experiences an added struggle of marginalization due to geographical, infrastructural, and socio-linguistic constraints, making English language development even more difficult.

2. Need for Students' Proficiency in English in Manipur

According to research, the main reason for students' failure in the secondary schools is their inability to study the school subjects through the medium of English. Other students of regional medium schools, who study English as a second language, determine it as a foreign language which restricts students' opportunities to practice outside the classroom. (Dendir, 1981).

Based on his field surveys in the mid-1980s, Stoddart (1986) had the following to say about the English language ability of the vast majority of students in Ethiopia:

"Students do not possess sufficient English even to understand what they hear from their teachers or read in their textbooks, let alone to participate actively the inability of students to function through English, the quality of teaching and learning in schools has been very adversely affected... In such a situation it is no longer appropriate to call English as a medium of instruction; rather it has become a medium of obstruction. (pp. 6-7)."

Several studies highlight the correlation between English proficiency and better academic performance. According to Racca, et.al. (2016), students with higher English proficiency perform better in subjects taught in English, as they face fewer comprehension barriers.

3. Importance of Exposure to the English Language

The level of exposure a learner receives to English plays a vital role in shaping their fluency, confidence, and overall ability to use the language effectively. English exposure helps learners acquire essential language skills through activities such as reading books, watching movies, listening to conversations, or engaging in discussions where individuals naturally pick up vocabulary, grammar, and expressions. This regular practice not only improves fluency but also helps reduce fear or hesitation, boosting self-confidence in using the language and strengthens the ability to communicate ideas clearly.

According to Jabarani (2019) intensive exposure to English language to learners of the English language specially in third world countries like India, prove language acquisition easier and faster. In a study conducted by Matusevych, et.al. (2017) on the impact of first and second language exposure on learning second language constructions, results show that higher cumulative amount of target language exposure leads to higher proficiency. The rise of digital technology has also increased students' exposure to English through television, internet, and social media, and online learning platforms. A study by Meng, et.al. (2024) shows that frequent exposure to English media significantly improves English proficiency.

These findings support the importance of adequate exposure to English language for a successful education in third world countries like India, especially in Manipur where English is the primary medium of education.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative and descriptive approach to provide a comprehensive overview of the multiple factors influencing students' exposure to the English language in Manipur. The study uses document analysis methodology to systematically

evaluate previous research studies, academic journals, newspaper articles, and government reports to present a holistic examination of the educational, infrastructural, socio-economic, and socio-political conditions that shape English language exposure in the state. This qualitative methodology enables a holistic and interpretive understanding of the issue, highlighting not only the educational limitations but also the broader social and political dynamics that influence students' engagement with English in Manipur.

5. Factors affecting Exposure to English among the learners in Manipur

Many students in Manipur struggle with English proficiency, which can impact their overall academic performance. Differences in exposure levels from school infrastructure, home environment, and digital access including the internet can lead to disparities in comprehension, communication, and performance in subjects taught in English. This study aims to investigate the extent of these disparities and their implications.

While English serves both as an official and educational language in India, its accessibility and effective exposure vary considerably across regions. In Manipur, where linguistic diversity and socio-political challenges intersect, English exposure is neither uniform nor equally distributed.

a) Geographical and Infrastructural Constraints

Manipur's topography, marked by remote hill districts and uneven infrastructural development, significantly limits access to quality English education. Schools in rural and hilly areas often face shortages of qualified English teachers due to poor accessibility, inadequate library resources, and minimal digital infrastructure. A study conducted by Newmai and Temjensosang (2025) in Tamenglong, a hill district of Manipur, observed the shortage of teachers and staff, disproportionate teacher to student ratio and a

deployment preference of valley schools, highlighting the stark difference between the student-teacher ratio on government documents and the actual reality of the situation in the district, in addition to a decreasing enrolment rate, high dropout rates and an increasing number of defunct schools.

Further adding to these challenges is the frequent unavailability of reliable electricity, which disrupts use of electronic learning tools. For instance, in 2018, Leisang village in Kangpokpi District, Manipur was the last village in India to be electrified. Additionally, limited or inconsistent internet connectivity restricts students' ability to access online learning platforms, digital media resources in English. These infrastructural and technological deficits severely reduce opportunities for students to engage with English outside formal classroom settings, further widening the gap in English exposure between learners in urban areas and those in remote or rural areas.

b) Socio-Economic Status and Family Background

Socio-economic conditions significantly impact access to English exposure. Singh's (2018) study revealed that the family background of the children is a large factor affecting language learning where it is observed that parents with higher education and stable incomes in Manipur could provide children with better support for learning English than those with low income, and the children and the parents whose upbringing is in the urban area have greater motivation and awareness in learning the English language.

Families from higher socio-economic strata can afford private schooling, language tutoring, and access to English media such as books, television, and online platforms. Conversely, children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds often remain confined to under-resourced schools, where exposure to English is minimal. This disparity

reinforces inequalities in language exposure and subsequent educational opportunities.

c) Media, Technology, and Home-Based Exposure

Research in second language acquisition emphasizes that consistent, meaningful, and intensive interaction with the target language is indispensable for fostering both fluency and accuracy, and for accelerating the overall process of language development, which is where the home environment plays a pivotal role in shaping students' exposure to English in Manipur, since opportunities to engage with English in formal school settings are often limited. Urban households often provide multiple avenues for informal English learning through access to television programs, newspapers, books, encyclopedias, and digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, or computers. English-language TV channels and educational programmes allow children to hear authentic language usage in diverse contexts, while comic books and illustrated storybooks facilitate vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and narrative understanding. Encyclopedias and reference books encourage independent learning and familiarization with academic English. In addition, internet access and reliable electricity enable students to explore online learning platforms, English-language websites, digital storybooks, and educational apps, providing continuous and interactive exposure to the language.

In contrast, many rural households in Manipur face significant limitations. Unreliable electricity, lack of internet connectivity, and limited access to digital devices restrict students' opportunities to engage with English outside the classroom. Similarly, the absence of English-language books, comic series, or reference materials reduces informal learning opportunities. These disparities in home resources create a pronounced gap in English exposure, favouring students from urban, resource-rich households while constraining

language development among students in rural or economically disadvantaged areas.

d) Linguistic Diversity and Social Attitudes

The linguistic landscape of Manipur is highly heterogeneous, comprising *Meiteilon* (Manipuri), numerous other languages from the Sino-Tibetan family, including major Naga languages like Tangkhul, Kuki-Chin languages such as Thadou, along with minor communities speaking Indo-European languages, primarily Nepali and Bengali. In Manipur's tribal population, children initially learn their mother tongue, followed by Manipuri, especially in the valley areas with a high concentration of Manipuri speakers, with English being introduced later. Such multilingual contexts often delay or dilute consistent English exposure. Moreover, while English is viewed as a language of prestige and mobility, cultural movements advocating for linguistic preservation may at times resist dependence on English. This tension complicates the balance between academic and global linguistic demands and local identity assertion.

Singh (2018) notes the strong tendency of Manipuri speakers of English to preserve their own regional language in his study 'Sociolinguistic and Socio-psychological factors behind learning English in Manipur (India)'. Since the Manipuri language is classified as a vulnerable language by UNESCO, there has emerged a number of advocates of the Manipuri language, which has significantly culminated in criticism against the native Manipuris, especially the Meiteis for using English in public platforms or on social media. There have been many instances of public figures and regional YouTubers receiving negative criticism and jeering comments for using English. There is also a heightened sensitivity regarding accent, for instance, Bollywood celebrities are criticized for their "fake accents" when they do not speak with the typical Indian English accent, which is a phenomenon that can also be observed in Manipur. Such social pressures and attitudes

appear to discourage the use of English, thereby limiting opportunities for meaningful exposure to the language.

e) Changing Media Trends

Over the past decade, there has been a notable shift in the nature of English-language media content in Manipur. During the era when the television was the primary source of digital media, viewers had access to only two to four regional-language channels. Today, however, the widespread availability of smartphones and internet access has enabled us to consume media freely. The rise of regional-language content on social media platforms such as YouTube has likely contributed to a decline in engagement with English-language media. Consequently, the preference for media in regional languages over English reduces opportunities for exposure to the target language among students in Manipur.

f) Educational Medium and Pedagogical Approaches

The medium of instruction remains one of the most significant determinants of English exposure in the classroom. Although English is often the declared medium of instruction, its implementation is inconsistent. Teachers frequently resort to code-switching between regional languages, limiting immersive English exposure. While many urban and private schools adopt English as the medium of instruction, a large section of rural and government-run schools continue to rely on Manipuri, Hindi or local tribal languages, reflecting the linguistic backgrounds of the majority of their students. Even within English-medium institutions, the emphasis often rests heavily on grammar and written exercises rather than communicative competence, thereby limiting authentic exposure to spoken English. The pedagogical orientation towards rote learning rather than interactive learning further reduces opportunities for meaningful language practice.

g) Teacher Quality and Training

A key barrier to effective English exposure in Manipur is the shortage of qualified teachers, especially in remote and rural areas with minimal oversight, where teacher competence and access to professional development opportunities are often inadequate. Many teachers, even if proficient in English, lack formal training in contemporary pedagogical methods and strategies for integrating Information and Communication Technology (ICT) into language instruction.

Digital resources such as language learning applications, multimedia content, online exercises, and virtual communication platforms can substantially enhance English learning. However, teachers who are insufficiently trained or lack pedagogical expertise often struggle to use these tools effectively, particularly in rural classrooms where infrastructural challenges, such as unreliable internet, limited access to digital devices, and large student-teacher ratios, further constrain ICT integration. This restricts their ability to create interactive and immersive learning environments, thereby limiting students' exposure to authentic English input.

Consequently, students in rural and government schools have limited opportunities to engage with English in meaningful ways, which adversely affects their language development and overall proficiency. Addressing these issues requires not only improving teacher quality through recruitment and professional development but also equipping them with skills to effectively integrate ICT and modern teaching strategies, thereby ensuring uniform and effective English language exposure for students across the region.

h) Educational Policy and Reforms

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces significant reforms aimed at improving the quality and accessibility of education in India, with important implications

for English language teaching and exposure. One of the key recommendations of NEP 2020 is the emphasis on multilingual education in the early years, advocating for the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, while gradually introducing English as a subject. This approach, while strengthening foundational literacy and cognitive development in the first language, may inadvertently limit early exposure to English, particularly in regions like Manipur where students may have minimal contact with the language outside the classroom.

Reforms like the NEP 2020 offer both potential benefits and challenges, requiring a careful balance between fostering English proficiency for academic and global relevance while also facilitating easier understanding of educational concepts through students' familiar regional languages and maintaining the region's local linguistic heritage.

i) Socio-Political Context and Conflict

Exposure to English in Manipur is heavily influenced by the state's socio-political context, its long history of insurgency, and recurring conflicts. Socio-political movements emphasizing the preservation of local identity and culture, while crucial for safeguarding regional languages, can inadvertently discourage the use of English in communities, public spaces, and social media, limiting authentic engagement with the target language.

Manipur's history of insurgency and socio-political unrest has clearly disrupted educational systems, particularly in conflict-affected rural and border areas. Periodic school closures, displacement of families, and general instability have hindered consistent access to English education, reducing continuity of exposure, especially among vulnerable student populations. Frequent disruptions such as internet bans further exacerbate this situation, restricting access to online English content, digital learning platforms, and virtual

communication tools that are increasingly essential for language learning. Singh et al. (2025) notes the impact of the on-going ethnic conflict in Manipur since May 2023 on education due to large scale displacement of students and faculties, conversion of schools and colleges into temporary relief shelters, which has further widened the digital divide and reinforced existing educational disparities between urban and rural regions, as well as among different ethnic groups.

6. Conclusion

English proficiency is a key determinant of academic success, employability, and socio-economic mobility in a highly multilingual and multicultural state like Manipur. Its importance extends beyond linguistic competence, encompassing critical thinking, communication skills, digital literacy, and intercultural awareness. In this regard, exposure to English must be recognized as a central factor in the process of language learning and in the broader development of individuals. Adequate English exposure not only enhances students' comprehension and academic performance but also builds confidence and adaptability, enabling them to participate effectively in higher education, employment, and global interactions.

While English serves as a medium of instruction and is integral to textbooks, examinations, digital resources and other learning materials, students' access to and engagement with the language remain highly inconsistent. Exposure to English language in Manipur is shaped by a complex interplay of educational, socio-economic, infrastructural, cultural, and political factors. This study highlights that while English remains a critical medium for academic learning, access to the language is uneven across urban and rural contexts. Classroom practices, teacher quality, and pedagogical approaches, although important, are insufficient on their own; the broader home environment, including access to

English-language media, books, digital devices, and internet connectivity, plays a decisive role in shaping students' exposure.

Geographical constraints, infrastructural deficits, and socio-political instability, including conflicts and intermittent internet bans, further exacerbate disparities in language acquisition. The linguistic diversity of Manipur, coupled with socio-cultural attitudes towards English and regional language preservation also influence the willingness and opportunities for students to engage with the language meaningfully. Together, these factors create significant disparities in English exposure and proficiency, which in turn affect academic performance, educational mobility, and future career prospects.

Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that includes improving teacher training, enhancing school infrastructure, integrating ICT effectively in classrooms, enhancing home and community-based exposure, and ensuring access to digital and print resources at home, and fostering positive socio-cultural attitudes toward English. Schools, teachers, and policymakers in Manipur must prioritize creating immersive and accessible opportunities for English engagement, both inside and outside the classroom, to ensure that learners fully benefit from the linguistic, intellectual, and cultural advantages the language offers. They must also balance the promotion of English with the preservation of regional languages, ensuring that students can develop linguistic competence while enhancing knowledge of their own native languages. By creating inclusive and supportive environments for English language learning, Manipur can empower its students to achieve academic success, participate fully in higher education and professional domains, and navigate the globalized world while preserving its rich linguistic heritage.

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