

CHAPTER-15

Reimagining language education in India: A linguistic perspective on NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

Language learning is essential for the cognitive growth, social interaction and construction of meaning in a multilingual society such as India. Linguistic diversity provides opportunities and challenges in implementing educational policies and practices. The National Educational Policy (NEP) 2020 proposes a strategy that supports the country's multilingualism with a linguistically well-informed framework. The policy also covers the need of first language acquisition, and inclusive language pedagogy. This paper aims to critically analyze the language education parameters of NEP 2020 drawing from the linguistic theories of language acquisition, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

An integral representation of NEP 2020 is the use of the L1 language as the medium of instruction during the early schooling. This parallels with research on the first language (L1) acquisition, which emphasizes the conceptual apprehension and cognitive development are appropriately facilitated through a known linguistic system. The policy advocates for the additive multilingualism by encouraging the learning of multiple languages without displacing the learner's first language.

Additionally, NEP 2020 encourages language cross-curriculum, advocating the development of language skills within diverse subject areas. This resonates with discourse based and communicative language teaching frameworks, which focuses language as a tool for knowledge construction.

The paper focuses to argue that NEP 2020 displays the paradigm shift towards a linguistically responsive education, preserving the sustenance of the live language without losing its quality over the globalizing capacity. However, its success depends on teacher preparedness, development of multilingual teaching materials, and assessment practices which provides a ground work with the linguistic diversity. Overall, the policy has the potential in linguistic capacity-capability of competence and performance to effectiveness in Indian educational system.

KEYWORDS: Language Education, Multilingualism, L1 based education, Language Acquisition, Sociolinguistics.

1 Reimagining Language Education in India: A Linguistic Perspective on NEP 2020

Language is not regarded as mere medium of communication; it is an essential cognitive, social and cultural resource that formulates human thought, shape individuality, and social communication. The various linguistic researches have reflected that language mediates learning, structures access to knowledge, and influences educational achievement. India being a linguistically rich country and in other such multilingual societies language education

occupies a precisely critical position as it integrates the issues of equity, cultural preservation, national integration and global participation.

India is regarded as one of the most linguistically diverse nations in the world. According to the Census of India, over 19,569 mother – tongue was recorded revealing a depth of linguistic diversity that far exceeds official language classification underscoring the necessity of a multilingual education policy as NEP 2020. It is estimated and recorded a hub of hundreds of languages belonging to several major language families with distinct variations across regions, communities, and social groups. The Indian Constitution recognizes 22 scheduled languages by the government of India, yet there are tribal and minority languages that are not recognized and remain outside of the institutional support structures. In the Indian context, historically the language education has been modelled by the colonial powers which is according to their motives and privileges shaping the colonial legacies, ideologies, socio-economic hierarchies inclining towards English and a constrained set of dominant regional languages marginalizing the others. The post – independence policies have attempted to concentrate the imbalance through the three - language formula to resolve the issue. The domination of English – medium education continued to spread out, causing a pedagogical alienation and learning gaps, especially among the first - generation learners.

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a significant shift from earlier approaches by explicitly grounding language education theoretically and socio – cultural settings as well. NEP 2020 recognizes multilingualism as a resource rather than a problem and develop a linguistically responsive education system that values learners' existing linguistic repertoires (Government of India, 2020). By emphasizing the mother tongue - based education as a fundamental principle which adds the capacity of the human resource development in multilingualism, cross – curricular language development. Enabling the policy to align hand in hand with the contemporary linguistic theories of language acquisition, sociolinguistics and applied linguistics.

The paper focuses to magnify the critical approaches NEP 2020 from a linguistic perspective, examining how its language principles and parameters corresponds with the established theoretical frameworks. According to the theories of first language acquisition, additive bilingualism, sociolinguistic functional multilingualism, and communicative language teaching, the study evaluates the policy's capacity to transform the Indian education system and its benefits on the upcoming contemporary society. The analysis further explores the challenges of implementation, including teacher preparedness, material development, and assessment practices, which determine the practical success of the policy.

2 Theoretical Framework: Language Acquisition Theory

Language acquisition theory accentuate the basic role of the first language (L1) in perceptive and conceptual development. According to Cummins (2000), proficiency in the first language provides the cognitive and academic foundation for acquiring additional languages. The skills like problem solving, abstract reasoning and literacy when trained in one language provides a further effect of transfer and support to the others facilitating the multilingual competence, this idea is connected to the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, explaining the reason of why proficiency in a first language (L1) can help at being skilled at learning a second (L2) and vice versa, promoting bilingual development. This principle is also known as the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory further highlights language as a mediating tool for cognitive development. Effective and efficient learning occurs through social interaction, and

language performs as a basic medium of construction to acquire knowledge. While learning, instruction through the medium of familiar language, learners can comprehend meaningfully and engage with content, resulting in deeper conceptual comprehension.

Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis correspondingly supports L1 – based instruction by arguing that understandable input is vital for language acquisition. When learners receive instruction in an unfamiliar language, the perception and recognition load increases, hindering comprehension and learning outcomes. Thus, L1 – based education enhances accessibility, understanding and recollection.

Through the lens of sociolinguistics, language is embedded within the socio – cultural structures, power relations, and cultural identities. Fishman (1972) introduced the concept of functional multilingualism, where different languages perform different roles in society. Languages coexist by occupying complementary domains in multilingual societies as in home, education, administration, and religion.

India illustrates stable functional multilingualism, where regional languages, Hindi, English, and classical languages coexist without necessarily competing hierarchically (Annamalai, 2001). This sociolinguistic ecology challenges monolingual models of governance and education that dominate the Western national – state ideologies.

Applied Linguistics and language pedagogy: applied linguistics highlight the communicative competence instead of grammatical competence alone. Hymes (1972) argued that language education should concentrate on the capacity or the ability to use language applicable to the social contexts. The Communicative Language Teaching; states that language learning emphasizes on the real – life communication and interaction rather than just grammatical frameworks. It views as a tool for semanticity and not just for structure.

Discourse based pedagogy unites language learning with content learning, promoting language across the curriculum (Halliday, 1933). This approach parallels with educational models that included language development within subject learning along with treating language as a separate field.

3 NEP (2020) and L1 - Based Education

NEP 2020 clearly encourages the use of the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction till at least grade 5, ideally grade 8. This policy shift demonstrates a reflection of the understanding that conceptual learning is optimally facilitated via familiar linguistic systems. Further focuses on the depth of understanding of how children learn effectively in their early stages. The efficiency is proven to be high when the medium of instruction is facilitated through a familiar language, allowing it to function as a tool for communication, a medium of thought, reasoning, and meaning-making. The National Education Policy envisages this critical link between language, cognition, and academic success.

Researchers have depicted that children learn best in their first language (Cummins, 2000; Mohanty, 2010). L1 - based medium can effectively mediate to enhance the comprehension capacity, classroom participation, and retention rates, especially among the marginalized and first - generation learners. By creating a foundation in early education in the respective mother tongue, NEP 2020 aspires to achieve cognitive development and educational inclusion. Furthermore, aligning with constructivist learning theories, which address the learner – centered pedagogy. When students learn in their native language, it actively promotes knowledge construction efficiently instead of passively memorizing information. This transforms the classrooms into highly interactive and engaging learning spaces that flourish and provide a stage for critical thinking.

The use of the mother tongue makes a significant contribution to cognitive development. When children are taught in a language they understand well, they are capable of understanding better

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and developing the basic skills such as thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Establishing a strong base in the first language also supports the acquisition of additional languages. Thus, mother tongue-based instruction does not hinder multilingualism; it proves to strengthen by fostering confidence and linguistic awareness in the learners.

NEP 2020 put forth that, in regional sets, a parallel to the constructivism advocating the learner-centered pedagogy, learners actively acquire knowledge through interaction with their native language; they are more inclined to question, discuss, and reflect, thereby engaging in the learning process rather than passively memorizing information. This pedagogical shift transforms classrooms

3.1 Additive Multilingualism and Language Policy

Additive multilingualism refers to the acquisition of multiple languages without displacing the first language (Lambert, 1974). NEP 2020 explicitly promotes additive multilingualism by promoting the learners to acquire various languages while preserving their linguistic identity. This approach negates with subtractive bilingualism, where the dominant language replaces the mother tongue which leads to loss of language and its identity this notion is also called subtractive bilingualism. NEP 2020's supports linguistic diversity ensuring that multilingualism becomes an asset rather than a barrier. English is positioned as an additive global language rather than a replacing force. As a global lingua franca, English enhances globalization without undermining indigenous languages. Furthermore, it establishes a balanced approach reflecting India's sociolinguistic reality and global aspirations.

On the other hand, subtractive bilingualism (in the Indian context; post-colonial era) occurs when the dominant language gains momentum and creates the sense of inferiority to the first language in the speakers. This results in death of a language, reflecting to loss of cultural identity, reduced self esteem especially those from the minority background. In many post-colonial and multilingual societies, formal education supported with the medium of a dominant language has historically contributed to subtractive outcomes. Whereas East Asian countries like Japan, China, Korea has been able to make effective contribution through the system of additive multilingualism with promotion of their first language.

National Language Policy 2020 aims to achieve linguistic diversity and multilingualism as an asset fostering holistic academic and mental growth. In the Indian context, English being the dominant language, the policy aims to shift this dominance to recognize this as a lingua franca, a tool to connect internationally creating a balanced approach to ensure that English enhances to make a global village while preserving the indigenous languages without sidelining and embracing its uniqueness and build confidence and pride in one's own first language.

3.2 Language Across the Curriculum

National Education Policy encourages a cross-curricular language development by integrating language skills into all domains. This ensures a discourse-based pedagogy and CLT frameworks. Language is considered as a tool for knowledge construction rather than a separate academic subject. Learners develop reading, writing, speaking, and critical thinking across the various disciplines such as science, mathematics, and social studies. Communicative competence and academic literacy are prioritized and ensured through the framework. Halliday's (1993) functional linguistics supports by emphasizing that language learning occurs through meaningful usage in different socio-cultural contexts reflecting in the proposed theoretical orientation.

Initially language has been often differentiated as a different discipline separated as domains such as science, mathematics and social studies. NEP 2020 has changed this perspective and

views language as learners develop reading, writing, speaking, listening and critical thinking skills through meaningful engagement with subject specific content.

This cross – curricular integration nurtures a discourse-based pedagogy where students actively engage in classroom discussions, collaborative tasks, presentations and reflective writing. These practices parallel with Communicative Linguistic principle allowing the learners to use language to ask questions, negotiate meaning, express view points and construct knowledge collectively.

Communicative competence falls beyond grammatical accuracy to facilitate sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies, improving the learners capacity in language useage across the curriculum and ensures that learners are exposed to academic language practices hence strengthening their overall proficiency and boosting their confidence. By positioning language as a central tool for knowledge construction and pedagogy with CLT and functional linguistics, the policy aims at developing communicative competence, academic literacy and critical thinking across disciplines.

3.3 Multilingual Governance and the Indian Context (Miller, 2005 Critique)

Miller's (2005) claims that it is easier and more economically convenient for nation – states to govern and educate using a medium of single language to instruct. From the policy making perspective, this linguistic uniformity streamlines communication, ensures efficiency in governance and communication. This may hold relevance in homogeneous societies, but given the circumstances of the Indian economy it's not possible. India is a diverse multilingual country which is defined and recognized by the constitution. This linguistically richness is managed by the government without confining and suppressing to a dominant language. The Indian educational experience demonstrates that mother tongue – based multilingual education enhances comprehension, participation, and retention, particularly among first – generation learners, making multilingualism pedagogically and economically sustainable in the long run. The national identity of India is its multilingualism and the linguistic diversity. This linguistic richness is treated as a resource to build and manage through inclusive policies to safeguard and preserve. The Indian educational experience provides sturdy empirical evidence against Miller's claim. India exhibits consistently that mother – tongue based multilingual education ensures improved cognition, comprehension, perception, better classroom participation and retention rates especially among the first - generation learners from the marginalized communities (Cummins,2000). Educating children in a familiar linguistic medium, they are better able to grasp the foundational concepts, active engaging in learning, and remain connected to schooling. Thus, leading to long term educational outcomes.

Sociolinguistically, India showcases a stable functional multilinguistic system where languages of diverse varieties exist together and displays the mutually intellectual working of regional tongues, such as Hindi, English, and classical languages to occupy a complementary domain. For instance, the regional languages serve as a primary media of everyday communication and early education. Hindi functions as a link language across many regions, and English occupies domains that are related to higher education, science, technology, and global communication. This illustrates how multiple languages can coexist productively with in a single national framework, each satisfying distinct mutually intelligible roles.

The additive role of English as a global lingua franca further weakens the assumptions that linguistic uniformity is necessary for efficiency. In India, English is not reputed as a replacement for indigenous languages. This additive multilingual model proves that linguistic diversity can coexist with global competitiveness and economic advancements putting forward multilingualism as a resource.

NEP 2020 explicitly reinforces the multilingualism by promoting flexible language education by substantiating the learners' linguistic repertoires. Thus, contrary to Miller's assertion, the Indian case illustrates that multilingualism can coexist with effective governance, educational equity and global competitiveness (Miller, 2005; Cummins, 2000; NEP, 2020).

3.4 Implementation Challenges

NEP 2020 aims to achieve better standards for multilingualism through sustenance of regional language, classical language and global lingua franca substantiating without losing the quality of L1 among the learners, and creating additive multilingualism, it faces significant implementing challenges. The fundamental challenge is teacher preparedness. Before NEP 2020 the country followed the system of NPE (National Policy on Education) during the post - independence the education system was focused on English education system that prevailed then, gave English its dominance over the years. This created a different impact over the years making English as the medium of learning, leading to language homogenization. This led to the dominating English as the lingua franca across the different domains subsiding the regional and minority languages. Slowly creating the disparity between the dominant and local languages. Further leading to the loss of the linguistic diversity which can contribute towards cultural erosion. As linguistic diversity is linked to cultural and biological diversity the loss of which leads to permanent loss of unique knowledge systems about ecosystems, medicine and sustainable practices.

Multilingual pedagogy requires teachers who must be trained in linguistics, language pedagogy, and culturally responsive teaching methods (Mohanty, 2010). The development of multilingual teaching material is another challenge. Textbooks, digital resources, and assessment tools must reflect linguistics diversity and cultural contexts. Without adequate resources, policy goals risk remaining symbolic. Assessment practices must also evolve to accommodate multilingual competence. Traditional monolingual assessments fail to capture learners' full linguistic potential. NEP 2020 requires linguistically inclusive evaluation models that recognize trans-linguaging and code – switching as learning resources rather than deficiencies. Consequently teachers who have been trained through the earlier policy of NPE where the mode of medium was English lack proficiency and confidence to teach content effectively in regional languages.

Multilingual pedagogy posits requirement of teachers who are linguistically competent, trained in applied linguistics, multilingual education theory and culturally responsive teaching practices (Mohanty, 2010). The teachers must be capable to guide learning across languages, facilitate translanguaging validating the learners' linguistic repertoires. The current gap in teacher education and professional development poses a serious obstacle to NEP 2020's goals. Another major challenge is in the development of multilingual teaching and learning materials. Textbooks, digital content, classroom resources and supplementary reading materials must reflect India's vast linguistic and cultural diversity. Hornberger (2003), a well-known linguist and educator who specialized in multilingual education, language policy, and linguistic human rights, argues that multilingual education cannot achieve its goal without institutional support for developing materials. At present, many regional languages lack adequate registers, standardized terminology for scientific concepts, or high – quality instructional resources.

Assessment practices demands for a significant reform. Traditional monolingual assessments are ill-equipped to capture the full potentiality of learners' linguistic and cognitive abilities in multilingual classrooms. Such assessments often penalize students for code – switching or translanguaging (Gracia and Wei, 2014). NEP 2020 calls for more inclusive and flexible

evaluation models, but implementing linguistically responsive assessment assessments at scale remains a formidable challenge.

Beyond the education systems lies the ideological and societal barriers. The prestige associated with English has created parental resistance in some contexts, where dominant languages are associated with power and progress resulting in 'linguistic imperialism'. Linguistic diversity is enrooted in the cultural and biological diversity and language loss often results in the irreversible disappearance of indigenous knowledge systems related to ecology, medicine, agriculture and sustainable living.

NEP 2020 represents a deliberate rejection of the monolingual efficiency advocated by Miller. Subtractive language policies undermine academic achievement, whereas mother - tongue based multilingualism education improves learning outcomes and long- term economic efficiency as proposed by Cummins (2000). This is a crucial policy that showcases multilingualism as a pedagogical, cognitive and economic resource, its success lies in the fact that Indian education system has to invest heavily on teacher education, material development, assessment reform and ideological change.

4 Conclusion

The National Education Policy 2020 is a change for education in India. It wants to make sure that education is good for people who speak languages. The National Education Policy 2020 is based on ideas about how people learn languages, how languages work in society and how languages are used in life. The policy thinks that knowing languages is very good for peoples brains, culture and education.

The National Education Policy 2020 wants to help people learn in their language first and then learn other languages. It also wants to include language in all parts of the school work. The National Education Policy 2020 is similar to what experts, in languages are saying now and it looks at how languages are used in India.

The policy goes against the idea that one language should be used in government and schools. It shows that using languages can actually be efficient, fair and help our country compete with others, around the world. What is happening in India is an example of this. India is showing that we do not need to have one language to be a strong country. Instead India is proving that when we support languages it helps everyone get a good education and learn new things. The policy and what is happening in India both show that multilingualism is a thing. Multilingualism can really help people learn and grow.

The new education policy, NEP 2020 will only work if it is done correctly. To make NEP 2020 work we need to prepare teachers create resources and change the way we evaluate students. These things are necessary to make NEP 2020 a reality. If we do not have these things NEP 2020 may not be able to make the changes it is supposed to make.

In summary, NEP 2020 offers a thorough linguistic structure for education in India. It can enhance linguistic ability, skills, and effectiveness, thus promoting a fairer, more inclusive, and internationally competitive education system. It provides a robust and research backed framework for additive multilingualism, its implementation faces significant challenges rooted in historical policy legacies, institutional capacity, and societal attitudes. Addressing these challenges is essential not only for educational equity but also sustaining India's linguistic, cultural and intellectual heritage in a globalized world. Embedding linguistic diversity at the heart of education policy, NEP 2020 acts as an example for multilingual countries globally.

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