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Multilingualism in India's Education System: Insights from NEP 2020

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Abstract

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 introduces a transformative approach to education in India, emphasizing multilingualism as a core component of the learning process. Recognizing the country's linguistic diversity, the policy advocates for the use of the mother tongue or regional languages as the medium of instruction, particularly up to Grade 5 or ideally Grade 8. This approach is grounded in cognitive linguistic research, which highlights the advantages of early education in one's native language for better conceptual understanding and later language transfer. While prioritizing multilingualism, the NEP acknowledges the importance of English in higher education, technology, and global communication. The policy aims to create a balance between preserving linguistic traditions and ensuring global competence. By fostering multilingual and multicultural education, the NEP envisions a generation of students who are deeply rooted in their cultural identity while also equipped to engage in an interconnected world. In this sense that this article focuses on NEP 2020 that offers a vision for bilingual education and that reconciles India's diverse linguistic landscape with the demands of globalization, fostering both local and global competency among students.

Keywords: NEP 2020; multilingualism; language policy; cognitive development; mother tongue; English learning; cultural identity; bilingual education; globalization; linguistic diversity.

1. Introduction

The government of India has recently published the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 that is a major change in the Indian educational system with an emphasis on inclusivity, flexibility, and holistic learning. This is one of its most prominent aspects; it is preoccupied with the concept of multilingualism as the key to the successful education. Language does not just serve as a medium of instruction, but a very important aspect of forming thoughts, identity and cultural interpretation. According to NEP 2020, cognitive development and understanding in early education is better taught when one is allowed to think and learn in their own language or home language (Ministry of Education, 2020). In a nation as linguistically diverse as India, where there are 22 scheduled languages and hundreds of regional dialects, language becomes an important factor in bringing cultural diversity together with national coherence. The policy recognises this diversity as an asset and not a challenge and the multilingualism is seen as a means of not only pedagogical enrichment, but also as a means of cultural preservation.

The idea of NEP 2020 of employing mother tongue or regional language as the language of instruction to at least Grade 5 (ideally Grade 8) is to guarantee that students acquire concepts of concepts in a more natural and meaningful way. Cognitive linguistic studies are in agreement with this strategy, indicating that early instruction in the native language improves a better conceptual knowledge and easier transfer of learning onto other languages later in life

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(Cummins, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). Nevertheless, in encouraging the linguistic and cultural capital, which is inherent in the Indian languages, the policy also acknowledges the enduring significance of English in the area of higher education, technology, and worldwide communications. English is a critical academic and professional progression in a globalised world since it acts as an intermediary between the domestic and international worlds (Graddol, 2010). Thus, the language policy of the NEP is not against English but is aimed at creating a balance between cultivating the linguistic traditions of the region and making people globally competent.

NEP 2020 is projected to have an education system, which is both multilingual and multicultural. It is based on the assumption that students must not just be able to converse in one language but instead in more than one language to be able to identify with their cultural identity as well as be able to fully contribute to an inter-connected world. The policy is also inclusive and progressive in its approach to language and appreciates the fact that linguistic diversity may be able to co-exist with the global communication requirements. With the focus on the multilingual educational approach and the maintenance of the acquisition of English, NEP 2020 will hope to produce a generation of students that are deeply embedded in their cultural backgrounds and can still find ways to explore the global community. It in this sense that this article represents a vision of bilingual education balanced, of that which reconciles the pluralistic linguistic reality in India with the needs of globalization.

2. Concept of Multilingualism in NEP 2020

The concept of multilingualism, in its generalized context, is the capacity of a person or a group to communicate and express him/herself using more than a single language. It signifies not just linguistic versatility but cultural flexibility, cognitive flexibility and cultural adaptation. In the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, multilingualism has a more educational and social facet. The policy considers linguistic diversity as one of the biggest Indian competitive advantages and believes that an acceptance of diverse languages in education promotes inclusiveness, equity, and intellectual development (Ministry of Education, 2020). According to NEP 2020, multilingualism does not exist merely as a coexistence of languages but as a learning guideline that promotes better learning and fosters the feeling of oneness in diversity. The policy will bring students closer to their cultural identity and also equip them to operate in a globalised world by incorporating multilingual practices into school curriculum in a manner that will enhance their cultural identity.

One of the main linguistic instruments of NEP 2020 is the Three-Language Formula which is a policy principle that was initially part of the 1968 and 1986 education policies and is more flexible in the 2020 policy. Based on this formula, at least three languages are to be studied by every student in the course of their schooling years, where two of them are native to India. The implementation is modular with the intention to be flexible to enable states, regions and schools make decisions on the specific languages depending on the local contexts and linguistic realities. This normally involves the native or local language, Hindi or other Indian language and the global connecting language, English. This strategy focuses on achieving a compromise between the need to promote the native languages of India and to develop the students with the competencies required to attend higher education institutions and study abroad (NCERT, 2021).

The NEP also has a formidable case in favor of the use of the mother tongue or home language as a medium of instruction at least until Grade 5, but ideally until Grade 8 and even later. This suggestion will be based on the fact that pedagogical studies conducted have established that children acquire concepts better when in a language that they are conversant with. Research on multilingual education also indicates that early first language teaching improves cognitive growth, literacy, and understanding and decreases the number of dropouts (UNESCO, 2016; Cummins, 2000). According to the NEP, the foundational learning is more meaningful when it is related to the linguistic and cultural environment of a child. It also promotes production of quality teaching materials and digital text on regional languages to facilitate this translation.

Multilingualism in NEP 2020 has several-sided advantages. On cognitive terms, multilingual students are more problem-solving, creative and flex their mind because of being able to alternate between linguistic systems (Bialystok, 2009). Multilingual education can be culturally inclusive and respectful in that the students are encouraged to take pride in their native spoken languages without violating the linguistic diversity in India but learn to value diversity among people. It also results in better understanding pedagogically, with the learners being able to connect abstract

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concepts to well-known linguistic systems. Furthermore, NEP 2020 considers multilingualism as an opportunity to enhance the national integration through the formation of mutual understanding between the speakers of two different languages. In nurturing the sense of respect on linguistic pluralism, the policy contemplates education as the connection between local and global citizenship.

Thus, the multilingual vision of NEP 2020 aims towards the production of citizens with a linguistic background but global competitive attributes. It will see a day when the education system will allow the student to not only think but speak more than one language, thus broadening the intellectual scope as well as the cultural understanding. The strategy of the policy acknowledges that linguistic variety does not affect progress but it makes it richer. It is in a globalised environment with English proficiency still being useful that NEP 2020 will encourage a balanced form of multilingualism, namely to enable students to interact without fear with the surrounding communities and beyond.

3. English Language Learning within NEP 2020

English has a large but a balanced role in the multilingual education system of India in the context of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. Historically, English language in India has performed the role of a second language and a lingua franca in the world, as a bridge between different linguistic communities in India, as well as with the outside world. It still remains the major language of higher education, research, administration and international business communication. The NEP 2020 acknowledges this two-fold purpose of English as a practical requirement to be globally competent and as a desirable linguistic tool which opens knowledge and opportunities to access. Nevertheless, the policy also focuses on the idea that the English language should not be promoted at the cost of regional and local languages in India (Ministry of Education, 2020). Rather it promotes a moderate and affirmative linguistic policy that incorporates learning of English with nurturing of the Indian languages so that students would enjoy the cultural context of the locality as well as the means of communication on a global scale.

The language vision of the NEP recognizes the fact that English proficiency is obligatory to the higher education, scientific inquiry, technological innovation and international interaction. In a highly globalized world, English serves as the means of access to global academic materials and online communication technologies (Graddol, 2010). NEP 2020 however goes beyond the colonial past of English superiority by suggesting a fair model of language learning where all languages, even English, learn in a positive, mutually supporting model. The policy is supposed to make the English learning more democratic and accessible to learners with different lingual backgrounds and make it meaningful to them instead of having English as a prerogative of elite or urban schools. In this respect, the policy supports contextual, functional, and communicative teaching of English as opposed to traditional approach of teaching of language through rote memorisation and grammar translation. It is through this form of communication that learners are able to apply English in real-life context, creativity and career expression as opposed to just learning the rules (Richards and Rodgers, 2014).

Moreover, NEP 2020 emphasizes the need to build capacity of teachers in the teaching of English language. The policy acknowledges that English instruction in India, especially between urban and rural areas, has been of varying standards and therefore, there is a need to establish quality teacher education in the country. Such programs will provide teachers with language and instructional proficiency that will be used in multilingual and communicative teaching methods. It has been found out that through effective teacher training, there is a great potential of enhancing the proficiency of English among students, particularly when the teaching of English is integrated with the learning of the students in the existing linguistic repertoires (McKay, 2002). Through teacher competence and confidence, the NEP is hoping to ensure that there would be no disparity amongst the access to English education so that linguistic disparity that normally occurs due to the difference in language exposure would be avoided.

The other significant feature of the policy is its flexibility in its implementation. As opposed to the previous language policies that dictated the same models in all states, NEP 2020 permits schools and regions to implement language teaching according to local circumstances, cultural realities, and the needs of learners. This is flexibility so that although English remains an essential skill to be taught, it will not replace the regional languages or could isolate learners to their cultural background. Rather, it makes English one of the many languages that students can learn and use wisely. The multilingual and inclusive nature of the NEP thus redefines English as an instrument of empowerment rather than a privilege so that learners can interact with national and global worlds.

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Simply put, NEP 2020 is projected to have a learning system in which English instruction does not rival but instead supports the encouragement of Indian languages. It recognizes that it is possible to have linguistic diversity and global communication at the same time. The NEP supports the achievement of the fair and progressive linguistic ecosystem by enhancing functional English education, teacher education, and making policy adaptable. This methodology is a contemporary, utilitarian conceptualisation of language education, that is, a type of language education that equips students to think in more than one language, to travel in more than one manner, and to be active agents in a globalised world.

4. Relationship Between Multilingualism and English Learning

The connection between multilingualism and acquiring English language is dynamic and complementary but not antagonistic. Despite the obvious and widespread misunderstanding that when learning more than one language one can possibly lose command of English, studies and experience in teaching show that being multilingual can positively impact the learning process of the English language and other languages. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is based on this knowledge as it highlights that multilingual education enhances the overall linguistic competence, cognitive flexibility, and academic performance. By gaining literacy and initial concepts in their first language, they attain a greater metalinguistic consciousness the capacity to contemplate and handle the structures of language, and this ability to transfer the skills to acquiring other languages, among them English (Cummins, 2000). In this way, the policy does not perceive multilingualism as a problem but sees it as a means of a more efficient acquisition of the English language and the general communication skills.

Cognitive and linguistic development is set as the first language or mother tongue learners would form the basis of language development. The basic literacy and understanding as experienced in pre-school education using the mother tongue forms a conceptual framework on which other languages are easily acquired. Research on psycholinguistics and bilingual education has demonstrated that linguistic and cognitive abilities learnt in a particular language can be generalized across languages, a concept called Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model (Cummins, 2001). As an example, when the learners are introduced to grammatical principles, reading techniques or even storytelling in their native language, they can transfer the knowledge they have to the acquisition of English. NEP 2020 complies with this principle, promoting the use of mother tongue to teach multilingual education, particularly at lower stages of education, so that students can build a good conceptual and literacy groundwork before entering into learning environments that use the English language (Ministry of Education, 2020).

One more important point of the interconnection between multilingualism and the study of English is the notion of translanguaging, which is a pedagogical approach enabling learners and teachers to freely switch languages in order to create meaning and help in the comprehension. A teacher may use regional languages or lets students use both English and their native language to explain the meaning of the complex English words in a multilingual classroom. Learners are not confused when the method is applied; on the contrary, it enhances its understanding and decreases the cognitive load since it involves the utilization of familiar linguistic materials (García and Wei, 2014). Translanguaging also empowers the students because it enables them to affirm their linguistic identities and makes them perceive all their languages as a learning asset. In classrooms with diverse language backgrounds such as the one that is linguistically diverse like in India, these approaches facilitate the closing of the gaps between the English language and the native language and create an inclusive and effective communication process.

Moreover, bilingual and multilingual pedagogies were observed to enhance language acquisition and understanding through the realisation of cross-linguistic awareness and critical thinking. As soon as educators establish clear parallels between English and local languages, i.e. comparing sentence structures or roots of vocabulary, students start perceiving linguistic patterns on a more comprehensive level (Hornberger and Link, 2012). This cross lingual awareness increases not only learning English but also mastering other languages. In addition, multilingual pedagogy enables learners to make use of and view code switching as a legitimate and strategic learning tool instead of a mistake. These practices allow building classroom spaces in which the imposition of English as superior does not occur but rather as a subset of a larger communicative repertoire, which will decrease anxiety and enhance motivation in the non-English-speaking learner.

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The multilingual framework by the NEP 2020 is therefore creating a mutual relationship between the local and global languages and makes English learning a part of culturally and linguistically responsive learning model. With the incorporation of English education and multilingual pedagogies, the policy will not expose the learners to alienation of their linguistic background as they acquire the skills on how to communicate globally. Multilingualism thus can be used as a bridge to the mind and a foundation to the culture in successful acquisition of English. Students do not just learn English as a vacuum in this vision but are broadening their linguistic intelligence as a whole - becoming people who can move freely between and among a variety of linguistic worlds and do so with self-assurance, understanding, and imagination.

5. Challenges in Implementing Multilingualism and English Education

Although the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is a progressive and inclusive vision of multilingual and English education in India, its adoption is associated with diverse systemic and practical issues. Multilingual education is successful based on the readiness of teachers, resources within the school and the policy objectives and the realities on the ground. Teacher preparedness is one of the challenges that are leading. There are only a few teachers in India who are trained on multilingual pedagogy or communicative English teaching. A large percentage of educators particularly in rural and semi-urban schools are monolingual, and are not exposed to language diversity that is reflected in their classrooms (NCERT, 2021). The model of effective multilingual education needs to be made with effective teachers capable of navigating and integrating more than one language in the classroom, but the most common pre-service and in-service teacher training models in India remain based on monolingual or grammar-based approaches to teaching. Research has revealed that teachers can tend to be unprepared to work with both regional languages and English, which results in applied language principles of NEP inconsistently (Mohanty, 2019).

The other significant issue is the lack of educational materials in the regional and tribal languages. Although NEP 2020 promotes the utilization of mother tongue or local language as the medium of instruction, there is still a large gap in the availability of textbooks, teaching materials, and other digital resources in most of the Indian language. In a number of other minor languages that are not widely spoken, particularly tribal languages, there are no standardised written resources or other teaching aids. This is because the gap in resources restricts how schools can successfully adopt mother-tongue-based education. Moreover, the digital learning systems and e-contents, which are central to the modern paradigm of education, are mostly in English or some of the most popular Indian languages, marginalising millions of learners (UNESCO, 2021). The vision of equitable multilingual education is not easily realised unless the localised educational infrastructure is invested in.

Another exacerbating reason is that parents aspire and English-medium education is favored in the society. In modern India, the English language has become a representation of modernity, mobility and upward social mobility. Although parents prefer schools taught in English to their children even in the rural areas, they think that having knowledge of English is the key assurance of career opportunities as well as global opportunities (Graddol, 2010). This social understanding is a problem to the attitude of NEP that focuses on the importance of teaching local languages because most of the parents associate teaching the local language with minimal educational opportunities. Due to this, schools and other institutions tend to focus more on English-medium instruction in order to cater to the market requirement despite, the teachers not being well trained to teach in English. This poses a dilemma between policy motive and parental expectations which negatively affects the justification of multilingualism in instruction (Annamalai, 2012).

This problem of standardisation and testing is an impediment too. The linguistic diversity of India presents a challenge in coming up with standardized assessment systems that can support the needs of several lingual backgrounds and provide national academic standards. Standardised testing models are also more favourable to English or other dominant languages in a region to the disadvantage of learners who are taught in smaller lingual groups. To create similar academic standards in the different languages, there needs to be the linguistic and pedagogical coordination that is yet to be established. In addition, the process of translating educational material into various languages without compromising the content concept is not easy, which makes it even more difficult to assess it and align it with the curriculum (Menon, 2022).

These issues are worsened by the urban-rural divide which creates vast differences in exposure to English, teacher competence, and infrastructure in different regions. With urban students generally having more access to English

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speaking settings, private tuition and access to multimedia, rural students are left to government schools which are under-resourced and have little support in teaching English (NCERT, 2021). This gap enlarges the language proficiency gap, which supports the social inequalities. Therefore, English proficiency is not only a linguistic problem but a signifier of an opportunity and class, which contradicts the objective of NEP, which implies equity in education.

Lastly, the lack of uniformity in the adoption and implementation of the three-language formula between states complicates everything. Education as a co-ordinate subject in the Indian Constitution is subject to a leeway in states to incorporate their own linguistic policy. Whereas other states have managed to adopt regional and English language, others have experienced opposition owing to language politics or administrative issues. To illustrate, states that are characterized by high linguistic identities can be obstinate towards the implementation of the Hindi or any other local language in the tripartite language equation, and those that lack sufficient congruence between local language representation and national unity (Pattanayak, 2014). These discrepancies result in an unbalanced multilingual education situation in India. Thus, the introduction of multilingual and English education according to NEP 2020 faces complex issues pedagogical, infrastructural, sociocultural, and administrative. To overcome these barriers, it is necessary to invest in the constant training of the teachers, development of multilingual learning materials, and popular education, which should emphasize the cognitive and cultural advantages of the multilingual education. In the absence of answers to these gaps, the vision of transformation in NEP 2020 can stay a dream but not a working model.

6. Strategies and Recommendations

To implement the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and its multilingual vision effectively, a set of strategic and evidence-based practices are to be embraced in an attempt to close the policy-practice gap in the classroom. The initial necessary measure is the creation of multilingual teaching resources and computer-based information in the regional and tribal languages. Although NEP 2020 urges the use of mother-tongue-based education during the first few years, the implementation of the concept will rely on the availability of pedagogical materials in various Indian languages. Textbooks, audio-visual materials, and online learning platforms in the local languages can be created to make sure that learners can get conceptually rich teaching in a language that they understand best (UNESCO, 2021). The cooperation of the government agencies, educational publishers and language specialists is crucial in order to create culturally relevant, age-based, and linguistically correct learning materials. Also, the incorporation of open educational resources (OERs) and multi-language digital repositories would allow teachers to customize the content to meet the needs of the region and linguistic minorities (NCERT, 2021).

It is also important that teacher education programs should be enhanced to equip teachers with multilinguals pedagogy. Teachers are the central figure in the effective application of multilingual and English language learning, but most of them are not being trained on how to deal with linguistically diverse classes. It is necessary to add the modules on bilingual and multilingual methods of instruction, theories of language acquisition, and communicative approaches to teaching English in pre-service and in-service teacher training programs (Mohanty, 2019). The workshops on professional development must focus on the application of translanguaging, cross-linguistic scaffolding to help learners in their understanding. Moreover, creating language resource centres and teacher exchange opportunities at regional and national scales can promote the professional cooperation and capacity-building of the teachers who know different languages (Pattanayak, 2014).

The establishment of the integrated language learning settings where the English and the Indian language will coexist in a natural environment can also increase the linguistic proficiency and intercultural awareness of the students. Instead of viewing English as distinct or superior language, schools must promote the interactions of two or more languages where learners freely move between languages. In this way, the linguistic diversity will be respected and the communicative competence in English will be enhanced. The language used in learning the content and expressing creativity and social interaction in these classrooms is in both the English and Indian languages, which facilitates balanced bilingualism (Hornberger and Link, 2012).

Multilingual and English education can be enhanced further with the use of technology and the artificial intelligence (AI) tools. Instruction can be personalised, using digital platforms, language learning applications, and AI-based adaptive systems, according to the linguistic background and the level of proficiency of each student (OECD, 2021). Linguistic differences can be overcome by using multilingual speech recognition, digital translation programs, and

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virtual classrooms that are interactive in order to overcome the shortage of instructors, particularly in areas with minimal teacher supply. These technologies may also offer continuous evaluation and feedback both in English and regional languages, and this would encourage inclusive and data-driven learning.

The necessity to develop a community and parental understanding of the cognitive and educational benefits of multilingualism is also important. English-medium education is usually viewed by the parents as the sole route to success, and awareness campaigns, workshops, and school-community partnerships can play a role in modifying this status. It is possible to create wider social support of multilingual education by highlighting research findings that show how mother-tongue education is useful to achieving academic success and learning a second language (Cummins, 2001). The schools can host cultural and language festivals that would appreciate the linguistic heritage of India so that the families could attribute value to bilingualism and multilingualism as a strength, not a weakness.

Multilingual learning should be more practical and interactive through the introduction of language exchange and bilingual learning activities. Students of various linguistic backgrounds can be paired to work on collaborative projects, debates and storytelling which will enable them to learn each other language and culture. In such programs empathy, collaboration and language inquisitiveness are encouraged. Besides, inter-school partnerships and online pen-pal interactions may introduce students to several linguistic environments, which supports the purpose of the NEP to prepare linguistically proficient but globally competent citizens. To ensure that the multilingual and English language learning objectives of NEP 2020 are met, one would need to adopt a combined approach based on curriculum development, teacher training, technological innovation, and community involvement. Through these measures the India will be closer to having an education system that not only hails the rich linguistic heritage but also equips the students to interact comfortably in the local and the global arena.

7. Conclusion

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 imagines the language education provision in India to be based on a transformative approach, which will integrate linguistic inclusiveness with global competence. It acknowledges that, to the contrary, the linguistic diversity in India is not a weakness but an asset, which can be used to create a more comprehensive, more equal and more thought-provoking education system. Focusing on the multilingualism as one of the main principles, NEP 2020 confirms that the early years of learning in the native or regional language promote better understanding, emotional attachment, and cognitive growth (UNESCO, 2021). Meanwhile, the policy recognizes the centrality of English in higher education, technological literacy, and global communication as a means of ensuring that in addition to their cultural and language background, students are also able to navigate a global platform confidently and fluently (NCERT, 2021).

The combination of the multilingualism with the English learning is the balanced and inclusive vision of NEP 2020. Whereas the multilingual education enhances conceptual backgrounds of the students and gives them pride in being multilingual, proficiency in the English language opens up the world of knowledge, career and intercultural interaction. It has been demonstrated that multilingual students acquire a much better understanding of the metalinguistic awareness, problem solving, and empathy, which are vital elements of success in the global 21st century (Cummins, 2001; Mohanty, 2019). Therefore, the language policy in NEP 2020 is not the battle between English and the Indian languages, but an invitation to combine the two to complement each other and enrich the others. The success of the NEP 2020 multilingual vision should not be based only on the policy, but on the practice, and on how learners who think and speak many languages can be raised to communicate to the world in one voice.

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