

Understanding Multilingualism for Promoting Indian Languages, Arts and Culture in Teacher Preparation in the light of NEP 2020

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Abstract: - Realizing the potential of India as a language rich nation, the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 has significantly used this language diversity as an ace. The Constitution of India guarantees minorities, whether based on religion or language, the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice (Article 30). Similarly, Article 29, of the Constitution of India states the protection of interests of minorities and that any section of citizens residing in the territory of India having a distinct language, script and culture shall have the right to conserve the same. Therefore, our educational institutions, especially teachers are the best means to create an inclusive, multi-cultural society as they are centrally placed to prepare students with constitutional values as global citizens. NEP, 2020 aims at just that: preparing our young minds to be global citizens yet strive at the core of Indianness. Hence, teacher preparation must take into account the needs of all learners and the aspirations of their families. This paper attempts to throw light on understanding multilingualism for promoting Indian languages, arts and culture against the backdrop of the National Education Policy, 2020 and teacher preparation. It also discusses the crucial significance of culture on language learning. Language is not just a means of expression. It is much deeper. It is an expression of one's cultural identity. Language learning in a child is crucial. It supports the ability of a child to communicate and express and understand feelings.

Key words: Multilingualism, teacher preparation, NEP 2020, culture, identity

Introduction

Words are like keys: if you choose them right. They can open any heart and shut any mouth, provided they understand what you say.

The above statement drives home the significance of multilingual education in the context of India. India is home to the most plural country in the world, with 22 languages scheduled in its Constitution making India a truly multi-cultural land. Hence, for harmonious living and peaceful co-existence among people of diverse backgrounds and perspectives, respecting the life and dignity of all individuals living in society is essential. This may be done by choosing

appropriate words and vocabulary that resonates with the Constitutional spirit of India and promoting human dignity.

Understanding Multilingualism

Dictionary.com (4th Edition, 2025) dictionary defines “multilingualism” as the “ability to speak multiple languages or the use of multiple languages”. Multilingualism is the ability of an individual speaker or a community of speakers to communicate effectively in three or more languages. Bilingual may signify as one who is a speaker of two languages. The advantages of multilingualism in education stem from a celebration and an awareness of “ourselves and others” as cultural beings who carry certain aspects of their legacy and heritage from which we may all mutually benefit. This awareness of others by primarily creating within ourselves an openness and a new perspective of how we view things that are distant or unfamiliar to us is a boon to be internalized: both through assimilation and adaptation.

Linguistic scholars have identified categories to make the measurement and description of types of bi- and multilingualism as there are very different kinds of bilinguals and multilinguals. Researchers classify bilinguals as early or late bilinguals and further early bilinguals are subdivided into two types: simultaneous bilinguals (those who acquired two languages simultaneously as a first language) or sequential bilinguals (those who acquired the second language L2 after the first language L1 was acquired. Researchers use the term elite, academic and elective bilinguals for people who choose to study a second language and natural, folk, circumstantial bilinguals for people who grow up in communities, where several languages are spoken. (*Valdes, 1996*).

However, meaningful comparisons of bilingual persons usually cannot be determined easily without specific attention to the contexts of each bilingual person, as each person’s life experiences are not alike. The “differences” and “similarities” between bilingual individuals depend on various factors like: age of acquisition of second language, specific contexts in which the two-second languages are used, years of practice of each language, receptive and productive skills of each language, level of formal education undertaken in each language and degree of proficiency achieved in each language etc. (*Valdes, 1996*).

Changes in existing society, changing demographics, social structures, and increased globalization have brought us to the crucial juncture of education that needs to be multicultural. Realizing the potential of India as a language-rich nation, the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 has significantly used this language diversity as an ace. The NEP, 2020 has categorically stated that “Wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond will be the home language/ mother-tongue/ local language/regional language” (www.education.gov.in). The NEP, 2020 has clearly observed and quite rightly underlined the possibilities of multicultural education. In the Indian context, under the Constitution of India, the 8th Schedule lists 22 languages. This raises the tremendous possibility and is a guiding force and a gateway for an education that is multicultural.

The cultural differences that manifest amidst the diversity of a country are an important part of the history of a nation's identity. This aptly applies to the case of India too. No other society in the world is as plural as India. India is home to 17.7 % (world meters, LIVE, 2025) of the total world population. It is the most populous country in the world now (overtook China in 2022). It is one of the largest superpowers in Asia and hence it has many lessons which it can teach the world. One such lesson is unity in diversity. India has Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Parsis, Buddhists in its rich religious profile, coupled with the rich diversity each group brings with it in terms of its language, culture, and accompanying arts.

Significance of Culture in Language Learning

Culture is essential in studying languages. Language is not just a means of communication. It is a social phenomenon. As it conveys meanings to words, sentences within a context. Research indicates cultural identity is directly associated with pronunciation. A study was conducted by *Amirian and Bazrafshan (2016)* to measure the impact of attitudes and cultural identity towards foreign language learning based on pronunciation learning of Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students. The findings indicated that cultural identity has a meaningful association with learning pronunciation among Iranian EFL students and that participants hold a positive attitude towards learning a language that is not their native language.

We learn positive and negative messages about our identities and those of others (Howe and Lisi, 2016). Certainly, one of the most powerful sources of information about our identities from our immediate environment is our parents (Howe and Lisi, 2016). This is a major challenge towards understanding cultural identities and their influence on teaching-learning. As children, when we construct our own meaning from an event, experience or our personal discovery through our interaction with the source(s) of happenings, either direct or tacit, our way of thinking is reinforced through our attitudes/ behaviour. Schools are institutions where opportunities must be provided for understanding, valuing differences and respecting others' perspectives.

The NEP, 2020 emphasizes the use of "extensive technology for teaching and learning different languages and to popularize language learning" (NEP, 2020 (para 4.12, pg. 13, www.education.gov.in)). How this will be addressed in the coming years is yet to be unfolded. Language is not just a means of expression. It is much deeper. It is an expression of one's cultural identity. Language learning in a child is crucial. It supports the ability of a child to communicate and express and understand feelings (*Zainol Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi, & Alzwari, 2012 as cited by Amirian and Bazrafshan, 2016*). It also supports a child's thinking ability and socialization skills.

The NEP 2020 also states that works of art (prose, poetry, films, music etc.) in India's rich languages contribute to the development of national identity and wealth. Public intellectuals and scholars have portrayed this as the tip of the Ganga-Jamuna culture that clearly resonates with the heart and spirit of Indianness.

Constitutional Provisions in the Development of One's Cultural Identity

The Constitution of India (www.legislative.gov.in, 2024) guarantees that minorities, whether based on religion or language, shall have the right to establish and administer the educational institutions of their choice (Article 30). Similarly, Article 29, Of the Constitution of India guarantees the protection of interests of minorities and that any section of citizens residing in the territory of India having a distinct language, script and culture shall have the right to conserve the same. Hence, our educational institutions, especially the resources therein are powerful means to create an inclusive multi-cultural society. A textbook is one of the greatest resources in any classroom, after a good knowledgeable teacher.

Hence, teacher preparation must take into account the needs of all learners and the aspirations of their families. Teachers must be the link between students' needs, families' aspirations and policymakers. Teachers enter the lives of the diverse demographics situated in every nook and corner of India through their daily engagements with their students. Thus, teachers are centrally placed to prepare students with constitutional values as global citizens. The NEP, 2020 aims at preparing our young minds to be the global citizens with core values of Indianness. Our educational institutions, popular media, TV, and newspapers have to be the custodians of the Constitution of India and not contribute to disharmony in a large plural democracy. Responsible teaching-learning to mould young minds and responsible reporting as a social good should be promoted and fulfilled by both educational institutions and media in a democracy that is so vast and plural, both in terms of language and religion.

Focusing on the undeniable role of teachers and teacher educators in nation -building, *Indian Education Commission*, popularly known as *Kothari commission* (1964-66) has empathetically stated that the destiny of a country is being shaped in its classrooms. This statement clearly implies the tremendous responsibility placed on the shoulders of our teachers who are not only responsible for moulding the character, values and minds of lakhs and thousands of our future generation of learners and nation builders but also providing mentorship through the right guidance to an increasing academic population holding diverse backgrounds. Amidst a huge diversity of the student population, the challenge of teachers for providing an education that has elements of "cultural awareness, knowledge base and skill set" (Howe & Lisi, 2017) is fraught with innumerable challenges.

The following themes highlights the challenges to teacher preparation:

Challenges to Teacher Preparation

- **Preparing educators who understand ground realities of cultural diversity and have the ability to respect and value cultural differences**

India's diversity is its spiritual and intellectual wealth. People from all faiths and languages cohabiting India since ancient times through its medieval and modern history have shaped its unique culture, contributing to its diversity and richness. It is this diversity that makes India's

position as secular democracy unique to the world. From India the world can draw lessons of peaceful co-existence and progress and growth of the country: *Ek Bharat Shreshtha Bharat*.

If teachers are not aware or lack sufficient knowledge and understanding of a diverse culture that is representative of a composite India, then teachers shall be averse to responding to their learners' diverse needs and understanding. Adequately prepared teachers who are well versed to handle the cultural diversity shall contribute to the cause of understanding multilingualism for promoting Indian languages, arts, and culture as envisaged by NEP 2020. Research indicates that "lack of significant preparation in multicultural education may contribute to teachers not recognizing or understanding the educational needs of diverse students" (Howe & Lise, 2016).

The NEP, 2020 aims to make explicit the roles of teachers as incumbent upon them to foster a "caring and inclusive school culture". Nevertheless, bias, prejudice, and discrimination are embedded in education systems (Howe & Lise, 2016) but multicultural education needs to support teachers to be culturally competent. One of the primary roles of a teacher is to prepare students who respect differences and values differences and teacher education institutions must prepare a competent workforce to be able to work in a global economy.

One of the challenges here would be how the receptive and productive capabilities of young children in language learning can be gauged and tapped in terms of spoken languages / mother tongue/ local language of a geographic area. A child may be monolingual in terms of a home language which may not be the local language. How will teachers navigate this linguistic barrier and address the needs, in spite of teachers' efforts towards respecting and acknowledging differences in a classroom?

- **Professional development issues**

Continuous professional development of teachers is crucial for any success of a nation's education. Teachers touch the future of any community, society or nation. Society has placed tremendous responsibility on the role of a teacher in shaping the minds of young learners. Innovative teaching-learning with practical experiments to build curiosity, creativity, and habit of peaceful co-existence is essential. Only when teachers are professionally sound with unyielding principles, a nation of young charismatic learners/citizens who values development and progress will be created.

The NEP, 2020 ensures all teachers have access to both types of support: academic and professional. The support to all in-service teachers to be provided within an environment that shall be conducive to their betterment.

Moreover, in language development, the three components of language are: form, content and use. How the components will be developed the policy is yet to determine. Especially in the component of use: because when we say, someone "speaks" a language fluently, we generally signify that all four basic language skills are covered: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Unless one is fluent in all the 4 skills, quality language learning will be an occupational hazard.

Teachers in various regional languages will be the cynosure of all eyes, struggling and juggling with various languages.

- **Lack of expertise and skills required for preparing teachers**

Often, this may seem to be a non-existent issue and many a teacher educator may brush off with a shrug off the shoulder. Teaching in a multicultural environment requires knowledge and skills. The knowledge and skills are to be context-specific and localized. In India, as a vast multi-lingual country, generic teacher preparation may not suffice or address the local area teaching-learning needs.

Teacher educators as multi-linguists are in scarce supply. Language is a means of expressing one's cultural identity. For example, in minority-dominated areas (MDA) or a tribal belt, a teacher educator from a common background and one who is a multi-linguist and knows the spoken language of the area will most certainly be an asset to the group of educators placed in such districts or areas. Research literature suggests that motivation is one key ingredient in enabling teachers to foster excellence among students while simultaneously pushing them to excel in their teaching -learning endeavours.

The NEP, 2020 aims to bridge this gap by collaboration with IITI (Indian Institute of Translation and Interpretation), which is yet to be established. The proposed IITI to have multilingual language experts from across the country, which will help to promote all Indian languages. The policy further recommends that schools may use the services of local specialists for promoting local knowledge and skills. However, a caveat that needs to be addressed by the policy in this regard is that teaching is a specialized job that has professionalism and pedagogy infused in every subject. How the local "specialized instructors" will promote the local knowledge and transfer skills as a part of multilingualism in a diverse and plural student demographics, amidst a fast-moving economically mobile migrant population, especially in semi-urban areas, and towns needs consideration and further elaboration.

- **Multilingual resources and resources in specific languages**

Teacher-educators based in a region should have thorough professional knowledge of diverse resources available in specific languages for specific subjects in the area. The learning resources may be in the form of cultural artifacts to be used as supplementary resources or even the primary resources like historical materials or physical evidence available at museums.

The National Education Policy, 2020 recommends the use of locally available cultural material in the classroom as per the needs of students and communities. The NEP 2020 also recommends "to encourage innovative new school textbooks in all States and in all regional languages". But how the policy aims to arrive at sourcing local content and flavour is yet to be decided. The policy needs further elaboration and direction on how different teachers' teaching styles may be made suitable to student achievement in terms of student learning outcomes.

The NEP, 2020 emphasizes that teachers will be encouraged to use a bilingual approach including bilingual teaching-learning materials with those students whose home language may be different from the medium of instruction. But how this step will be achieved, clarity is

lacking (para 4.11, pg. 13). Further the policy outlines that “states from different regions of India, may enter into bilateral agreements to hire teachers in large numbers from each other, to satisfy the three-language formula in their respective states”. How this may be converted into the real practice, the model(s) has not been reflected upon yet. Considering India home to a wide variety of languages and each abounds in the production of its native literature as well, how a well-structured synthesis will be achieved in terms of quality language learning has not clearly been demarcated.

Conclusion

It is worthwhile to reflect on how our teacher preparation programmes will plan out a road map and prepare educators who are adept at providing multicultural education. The National Education Policy NEP (2020) has provided the framework and teacher preparation programmes which must prepare global citizens with the 21st century skills and yet the focus will be on celebrating our innate local diversity of resources. As *Adrian Blackledge and Angela Creese (cited by Richard Nordquist, 2010)* state, new multilingualisms emerge in the language practices of young people when they create meanings with their diverse linguistic repertoires. This is reflected in the language usage and practices of the children in different regional languages of India when people use words of Hindi, Urdu, and English (though a non-scheduled language) to make themselves understood and understand the contextual meaning in which they are placed. These will pave the way for promoting multilingualism in Indian classrooms and hence the need for preparing teachers for multicultural education.

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