

## Language in Education from the Perspective of NEP 2020

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### Abstract

*Education plays a crucial role in an individual's development and, ultimately, in national development. One of the most important components that determines the quality and effectiveness of education is the language of instruction. India is known across the world for its rich cultural heritage and linguistic diversity. Language has long been a subject of debate in the country, and various educational committees and commissions have widely discussed language-related issues in education. Recognizing its importance, the Constitution of India has granted several language-related rights to different sections of society. The introduction of the New Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020) has once again drawn our attention to the issue of language in education. This paper aims to examine NEP 2020 with regard to the role of language in education, assess how effectively it addresses language-related concerns and explore the challenges it may face.*

**Keywords:** language, NEP (2020), linguistic diversity,

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### Introduction

Language is the primary means of communication through which people exchange ideas, information and messages. India is known worldwide not only for its cultural diversity but also for its linguistic diversity and rich repository of knowledge. The Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution lists 22 official languages, but remains silent on the matter of a national language. Articles 350A and 350B specifically emphasise the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction at the primary stage.

Since Independence, India has constituted various commissions and committees to introduce necessary reforms in education to meet the evolving aspirations of the nation. These include the University Education Commission (1948), the Secondary Education Commission (1952), the National Policy on Education (1968), the National Policy on

Education (1986) and the Programme of Action (1992). After 34 years, the need for a new education policy was felt to address the requirements and aspirations of the twenty-first century. Responding to this need, the Government of India introduced the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020.

The NEP 2020 aims to ensure quality education for all students, irrespective of their place of residence, with particular emphasis on historically marginalised, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. However, a pertinent question arises — what happens if the use of one particular language makes quality education accessible only to a certain section of society, while excluding others. In this context, the language of instruction becomes important—it must be understandable to students and enable them to express themselves fully.

Since language is one of the key components of education and has been a major concern

for every educational commission and committee, this paper presents an inquiry into NEP 2020 with respect to certain questions related to language in education.

## Literature Review

Various academicians and scholars have reviewed and analysed NEP 2020 from language perspective. For instance, Sengupta (2021) critically assessed the policy with respect to language and referred to it as a “contradiction of intentions”. Sharma (2021) examined language issues in the policy and highlighted how multilingualism and the power of language can significantly contribute to the holistic development of students from primary to higher education. Kumari and Yetcherla (2022) explored various initiatives under NEP 2020 aimed at promoting languages, arts and culture among schoolchildren, noting the intrinsic link between language, art and culture. Gautam (n.a) also addressed language-related concerns in NEP (2020). However, only a few studies have comparatively analysed NEP 2020 in relation to earlier educational policies and in the context of present-day realities. Therefore, this paper tries to comparatively analyse and interpret NEP 2020 with respect to language in education, keeping in view the vision of a new, aspirational India.

This paper attempts to answer the following questions.

1. Does NEP 2020 present any new ideas with respect to language in comparison with previous national education policies?
2. Is NEP 2020 effective in addressing the long-standing language-related issues in education as compared to the earlier national education policies?
3. What are the major challenges that NEP 2020 faces?

## New Ideas of Language in NEP 2020

The NEP 2020 presents many new concepts related to language in education, such as multilingualism in the classroom and bilingual teaching. Instead of promoting any single language (such as Hindi), it emphasises the development and preservation of all Indian languages. It is the first national education policy to highlight the promotion of classical languages and to recommend the standardisation of Indian Sign Language (ISL) across the country, along with creating greater awareness about it. The terms ‘mother tongue’, ‘local language’, ‘home language’ and ‘regional language’ are specifically used in NEP 2020 to refer to the languages of instruction in education.

**Table 1: Language in Education from the Perspective of Three National Education Policies Addressing Long-standing Language Issues in Education**

S. No.	Point of Comparison	Kothari Commission (1964–66)	NEP (1986) and Program of Action (1992)	NEP 2020
1.	Introduction of language in policy	Evolution of a language policy	Language development	Multilingualism and the power of language
2.	Medium of instruction	School level: Regional language University level: Regional language + English	School and higher level: Regional language + modern Indian languages	School and higher level: Regional language + mother tongue + English
3.	Teaching	Single language	Single language	Bilingual approach
4.	Exposed to different languages	Not specifically discussed	Not specifically discussed	From foundational stage onwards

5.	Multilingualism	Not applied	Not applied	Promoted
6.	Three-language Formula	Suggested to adopt at the secondary level	Accepted by states to adopt at the secondary level	Accepted fully with liberty to choose three languages as per their preference
7.	Indian Sign Language	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	Will be standardised across the country
8.	Promotion of Hindi	Much emphasised	Much emphasised	Not discussed
9.	Promotion of classical languages	Not discussed	Not discussed	Emphasised to make available as optional language in school
10.	Promotion of modern Indian languages	Much emphasised	Much emphasised	Much emphasised
11.	Link language	Focused on the development of Hindi as the link language	Focused on the development of Hindi as the link language	Not mentioned

As education is a dynamic process, change is its inherent nature. India, with its vast linguistic diversity, has seen some languages evolve over time through continued use, while others have lost their status due to ignorance or neglect and lack of promotion. Language has historically been one of the most powerful tools to rule and exert influence — history offers ample evidence of this. Given India's linguistic diversity, the education system has consistently faced challenges regarding the language of instruction. Some of the major issues include are the reluctance of states to fully implement the three-language formula even after 54 years of its introduction, conflicts around the promotion of Hindi, the difficulty in promoting all Indian languages equally, concerns over selecting an effective and efficient medium of instruction, and more recently, the growing desire among state governments to adopt English as the medium of instruction.

The NEP 2020 offers significant recommendations, particularly in addressing these long-standing problems. As shown in Table 1, NEP 2020 has accepted the three-language formula but has left the choice of languages to states. It does not favour the imposition of a particular language, and instead promotes bilingual teaching and multilingualism in classrooms. In doing so,

the policy effectively addresses the major issue of implementing the three-language formula.

Senior journalist Sudheer Pachauri, while speaking at the launch of three bilingual (Hindi + English) medical books, blamed non-Hindi speaking communities for hindering the promotion of Hindi, even calling them enemies of the language. On the other hand, the forced imposition of Hindi as a medium of instruction in Kendriya Vidyalayas, Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs) and central universities—recommended by the 11th Official Language Committee report submitted to the President of India by the Home Minister—sparked strong opposition against Hindi among academicians (Achary, 2022). In contrast, NEP 2020 shows a thoughtful understanding of these linguistic issues. While discussing language in education across 13–15 pages, the policy document neither mentions Hindi specifically nor calls for its promotion in any form. This clearly indicates the policymakers' awareness of the sensitive nature of language imposition that goes against the aspirations of a new and inclusive India.

Instead of promoting any single language, the policy begins its discussion with multilingualism and the importance

of linguistic diversity. By avoiding the imposition of any language on the states, NEP 2020 acknowledges Article 345 of the Constitution, which grants states the right to choose their official language. In this way, NEP 2020 effectively addresses the second major issue—conflict over the promotion of Hindi.

As previously mentioned, NEP 2020 does not prioritise any single language. It gives equal importance to all languages—whether regional, mother tongue, home language, classical, modern Indian or foreign languages. So far, no education policy in India has been this broad or inclusive in scope. To enrich language learning, it recommends making available subject textbooks in all Indian Languages, using information and communication technologies to facilitate language learning, and exposing students to various languages from an early age. It also proposes the “development of Indian languages” through initiatives like Ek Bharata Shreshth Bharat at the school level.

The NEP 2020 does not consider any single language as the most efficient across all levels of education. Instead, it emphasises multilingualism. According to Okal (2014), “Multilingualism is referred to as the ability of a speaker to express himself or herself in several languages with equal and native-like proficiency.”

The NEP 2020 recommends the use of the mother language or home language as the medium of instruction at least up to Grade 5. It also promotes the learning of Indian classical languages as optional subjects for at least two years at the secondary level, aiming to acquaint students with the rich literature and knowledge contained in them. At the higher education (university) level, NEP 2020 promotes and emphasises the importance of English and other rich foreign languages, as they provide access to global knowledge.

## Major Problems of NEP 2020

Despite presenting many new and inclusive ideas, NEP 2020 is not free from criticism, especially regarding language. One major issue it overlooks is the need for a national or link language. Does the policy assume that no such language exists in India that can play this unifying role? If so, it is a matter that requires serious thought. It is the twenty-first century and Indians have established their presence across the globe, especially in the world’s most powerful countries like the USA, the UK, Canada, etc. In these countries, Indians are not only living and working but have also become an integral part of their political and economic systems.

In such a situation, it becomes important to focus on the development of a single language that can serve as a national link language. On one hand, it would strengthen national unity and integrity, and on the other, it would make it easier for the world to connect with India through a common language—something that currently seems quite challenging. Chaturvedi (2022) observes, “If a particular language speaking group is being economically and politically powerful, then their language starts getting respect and honour.” In light of this, perhaps now is the right time to start working towards the development of such a language.

## Conclusion

Language is one of the most precious jewels of any culture and civilization—a fountainhead of national unity and integrity. It is the right time to take action to preserve and promote all Indian languages by giving them their rightful place in education because when a language dies, its people often lose their identity as well. As Sharma (2021) aptly states, when language comes, it brings its culture, and when it disappears, it takes that culture along with it.



The imposition of a single language, or the belief by some powerful people that their language is superior to others, is a direct assault on federalism and the principle of equal

citizenship. It also violates the constitutional rights guaranteed under Article 351. Despite its limitations, the ideas presented in NEP 2020 with respect to language are valuable.

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