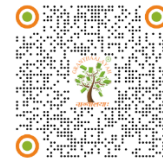Original Article

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN NEP 2020'S FOUNDATIONAL STAGE

Murukali N. [1]* , **Dr. Neizo-u Mero [2]**

[1] Research Scholar, Department of Education, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Nagaland, India

[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Nagaland University (a Central University), Kohima Campus, Nagaland, India

ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 laid importance on the foundational stage (ages 6-8) as this period plays a crucial role in different aspects of a child's development. By suggesting that the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language be used as the medium of teaching, particularly during the foundational and preparatory stages, the policy emphasized the importance of language in early education. It also recommended using the three-language formula promoting multilingualism. This paper will examine on the role of language as it is outlined in the NEP 2020. The study employs a qualitative research design using document analysis, reviewing the existing research papers and secondary sources available. The main purpose of the study is to analyze the role of language in NEP 2020's Foundational Stage and also to analyze the challenges of implementing mother tongue in India's multilingual context. Through the study, it is found that mother tongue-based education enhances understanding, foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN), and that children learn more rapidly in their mother tongue. However, challenges such as India's linguistic diversity, lack of infrastructural facilities, difficulty in language translation of textbooks, absence of indigenous language scripts, selecting the medium of instructions and societal preferences, present a significant barriers to implementation. Therefore, it is important to adopt a balanced approach that incorporates mother tongue instruction with structured multilingual exposure, supported by effective teacher training, curriculum reform, and raising community awareness to address the challenges of implementation of mother tongue in multilingual context.

Keywords: NEP 2020, Foundational Stage, Language, Mother Tongue, Multilingual

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as an anatomy for human interaction and cognitive advancement, rendering it essential for individuals to possess the capacity to teach and learn language, while also establishing the basis for cultural identity. The world is swiftly shifting in the knowledge topography with sweeping scientific and high-tech progress and with that increases the need for humanities and art, as our country advances to becoming the developed nation and to be three biggest economies globally. Given the significant changes in the global ecology, it is undoubtedly becoming more and more essential that children of our country not only learn, but also understand how to learn. The interval from birth to eight years is characterized by significant brain growth in children and is a critical opportunity for education.

According to UNESCO, entirely inclusive early childhood care and education (ECCE) goes well beyond equipping children for elementary school. In addition to being one of the greatest investments a nation can make since it fosters social cohesiveness, gender equality, and holistic development, it may serve as the cornerstone for mental health and lifelong learning (UNESCO). As stated in

NEP 2020 "Pedagogy must evolve to make education more experiential, holistic, integrated, inquiry-driven, discovery-oriented, learner-centered, discussion-based, flexible, and, of course, enjoyable" and "the aim must be for India to have an education system by 2040 that is second to none, with equitable access to the highest-quality education for all learners regardless of social or economic background" Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). Language is a key instrument of education. It enables the learner to comprehend and deciphers ideas, communicate concepts and connect with insightful analysis Asthana (2024).

The NEP 2020 "lays particular emphasis on the development of the creative potential of each individual. It is based on the principle that education must develop not only cognitive capacities - both the 'foundational capacities' of literacy and numeracy and 'higher-order' cognitive capacities, such as critical thinking and problem solving – but also social, ethical, and emotional capacities and dispositions." Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). The recent research on language acquisition served as the foundation for NEP 2020's language learning recommendation. In accordance with NEP 2020, the main objective of the NCF's Framework to Language Education is aimed at making sure that children acquire languages in a way that enhances learning (across all domains and areas), oral and written communication skills, and socioemotional skills, both in their formative years and throughout their lives NCERT (2022). The NEP 2020 indicates a significant shift in India's formal approach regarding language instruction in schools advocating the use of home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language as the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but ideally till Grade 8 and beyond and encouraging multilingualism using an adaptable "Three-Language formula" Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). Achieving the Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by Grade 3 for all children is to be recognized as paramount national concern and only by accomplishing the most fundamental learning requirement i.e., reading, writing, and arithmetic (3 R's) at the foundational level, the remainder of the policy can be applicable Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020).

OBJECTIVES

This study examines the following objectives.
1) To analyze the role of language in NEP 2020's Foundational Stage.
2) To examine the educational implications of Foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN).
3) To analyze the challenges of implementing mother tongue in India's multilingual context.
4) To suggest measures for effective integration of NEP 2020 language policy.

METHODOLOGY

The present paper is a review of secondary data i.e. government reports, research articles, news articles that is related to the study area. Thus, the study is qualitative in nature.

THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN NEP 2020'S FOUNDATIONAL STAGE
NEP ASSERTION AND PURPOSE.

As a revolutionary project in Indian education, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020) focuses on the foundational period for children between the ages of three and eight. With the goal of creating a strong preschool framework that fosters literacy, numeracy, intellectual, and socio-emotional abilities, this policy emphasizes the significance of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE). By employing, engaging and activity-based approaches, the NEP guarantees that children achieve critical learning thresholds by the third grade by emphasizing core literacy and numeracy Delhi Public School Greater Faridabad. (n.d.).

According to NEP 2020, the home language, mother tongue, local language, or regional language will be used as the medium of teaching until at least fifth grade, but ideally until Grade eight and beyond. The local language will then be taught as a language whenever possible and this includes both in public and private schools. There will be high-quality academic textbooks available in mother tongues and home languages. Early on, every attempt will be made to bridge any gaps between the child's spoken language and the instruction medium Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). Children will be exposed to a variety of languages at an early stage, with a focus on their first language, beginning in the Foundational Period, since research clearly demonstrates that children acquire languages swiftly between the ages of 2 and 8 and that multilingualism has significant cognitive benefits for young students. NEP also emphasizes that the three-language formula will continue to be used while taking into consideration the requirements of the Constitution, the goals of the people, the regions, and the Union, and the necessity of fostering both national unity and multilingualism Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). In order to develop linguistic competency and cultural awareness from an early age, the policy emphasizes multilingualism in early life and urges children to be exposed to and learn many languages Dhokare et al. (2023). The learning in the Preparatory Class shall be based primarily on play-based learning with a focus on developing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities and early literacy and numeracy. ECCE's overarching goal is to achieve the best possible results in the areas of both physical and motor growth, cognitive growth, ethical and socioeconomic development, artistic and cultural development, and the development of communication and early language, literacy, and numeracy. Activity-based

learning will be the primary form of instruction in the Preparatory Class, with an emphasis on the growth and development of psychomotor, cognitive, and affective abilities as well as early literacy and numeracy Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020).

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR FOUNDATIONAL, LITERACY, AND NUMERACY (FLN).

According to surveys, a significant percentage of elementary school students, roughly 5 crores in number have not mastered foundational literacy and numeracy and this suggests that we are currently experiencing a learning crisis. Thus, NEP stated that achieving fundamental reading and numeracy for every child will become a pressing national priority with immediate initiatives to be carried out on numerous fronts and specific short-term goals. Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020) The policy states that achieving equitable fundamental literacy and numeracy in elementary schools by 2025 shall constitute the education system's principal mission iDream Education (2023). Various Ministries and policies in the country have launched different initiatives in order to ensure that every child achieve Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN), which are highlighted below.

RECENT INITIATIVES AND PRIORITIES OF NEP 2020
NIPUN BHARAT

In order to ensure that every child in the nation achieve Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) by the end of the third grade by 2026–2027, the Indian Ministry of Education introduced a comprehensive education initiative in July 2021 "the National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy", the NIPUN Bharat FLN Mission NCERT (2022).

The mission emphasize on the essential role of ECE in establishing a solid basis for FLN, makes significant investments in training teachers in effective FLN teaching techniques, and engages with populations to increase public understanding of the importance of FLN and advocate support for the mission. It also actively tracks and assesses its progress to make sure it is on track to achieve its intended objectives and acknowledging India's diversity of languages, motivates children to acquire proficient in their mother tongue along with literacy and numeracy iDream Education (2023).

VIDYA PRAVESH

The foundation of Vidya Pravesh represents the substantial emphasis that NEP 2020 sets on achieving the FLN's objectives for every child. The policy underlines concerns that many students actually fall behind in the initial few weeks of Grade 1 given that we have not yet achieved comprehensive access to ECCE. A three-month activity-based school preparatory program has been suggested as a temporary solution to help close this literacy gap NCERT (2022).

NCERT created Vidya Pravesh for children starting first grade. during the course of three months, four hours each day will be dedicated to acquainting kids with the school setting, giving them opportunities to understand about ethical principles and diverse cultures, and allowing them to engage with their physiological, social, and natural surroundings. Additionally, Vidya Pravesh will be created to support NIPUN Bharat's objectives for learning by laying the groundwork for literacy, language, and numeracy NCERT (2022).

BALVATIKA

According to NEP 2020, "every child will move to a "Preparatory Class" or "Balvatika" (that is, before Class 1) with an ECCE-qualified educator prior to the age of five." The Balvatika program is designed to equip children with the cognitive and linguistic skills necessary for learning to read, write, and enhance understanding of numbers using a play-centered approach. It is intended to run for one year prior to Grade 1. NCERT has created policies and procedures, which include Balvatika, for the first three years of preschool Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020).

CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING MOTHER TONGUE IN INDIA'S MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT.

According to NEP 2020, the medium of instruction used in schools for students in grades 1 through 5 or 8 and above is to be done in mother tongue. It is stated that children who have a solid foundation in their mother tongue are a better able to master over other languages (NISHTHA FLN National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement NCERT (n.d.). Students' language development is improved by learning in their mother tongue or regional language as it enables them to have a strong foundation in their native speech. The acquisition of any new languages can be positively impacted by this foundation Dhokare et al. (2023). However, several academicians, researchers and language specialists have described it as an unrealistic objective for a multilingual nation like India, despite the fact that it appears to be a useful strategy for children to strengthen their core learning. Several challenges impeded the implementation of mother tongue in India's multilingual context, such as:

- **Challenges relating to infrastructural facilities**

Even though the Indian government acknowledges 22 languages as scheduled official languages and works to provide education in them, the basic infrastructure for learning has not been sufficient to accommodate all mother tongues Mahto (2022). Particularly in areas with limited funds, there may not be enough infrastructure and resources, such as language-specific textbooks and instructional materials Dhokare et al. (2023). There aren't plenty of schools which can offer multilingual classroom. There are significant differences between public and private educational institutions that must be addressed early on, which include the need for additional classrooms. Currently, even the same courses cannot be taught in the same classroom due to linguistic differences, that might result in a learning gap. This means that there's a need to develop a schedule that works for both the instructors and children.

- **Translation of Textbook**

Through the study of Acharya, January 2022 (as cited in Lopez et.al., 2020) the biggest hurdle that could prevent policy recommendations from being implemented is the language translation of all subject matter from first to fifth grades or to grade eight. Since it is well recognized that literature in any language grows over the course of writing, the main challenge here appears to be the absence of vocabulary in the majority of the languages that are yet to be recognized under the government of India. For disciplines like science and math the issue of vocabulary deficiency may become more serious as grade rise due to the increased complexity Acharya (2022).

- **Absence of indigenous language scripts**

Since many indigenous and tribal indigenous languages merely represent dialect used by tiny populations without a printed script, the government might find it extremely harder to translate the textbooks into those languages. Consequently, it could present a significant challenge prior to translating works into the mother tongue Acharya (2022).

- **Selecting one or more mediums**

It is a well-known fact that India is a multilingual nation with a sizeable immigrant community that has moved from their home states to nearby or distant regions in search of employment opportunities in the public or private sectors. In such scenario, choosing and deciding on a specific teaching medium(s) may seem challenging considering the fact that a school's specific classroom might consist of variety of language-speaking children. It may be challenging to hire employees for numerous languages, regardless of whether that's feasible Acharya (2022).

- **Societal Preferences**

According to Singh (2025) (as cited in Singh & Hari Narayanan, 2023) considering the importance attached to English education, community members, parents, and policymakers pose a significant barrier to the introduction of mother tongue/MLE in schools. Many individuals prefer English-medium schools above regional education because they think that competence in the language is necessary for socioeconomic advancement. The idea that regional languages have little professional significance is reinforced by the denigration of indigenous languages Singh (2025).

MEASURES FOR EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION OF NEP 2020 LANGUAGE POLICY

Children will be exposed to a variety of languages early on (but with a special emphasis on the mother tongue), beginning in the Foundational Stage, as research shows that children acquire languages very quickly between the ages of 2 and 8 and that multilingualism has significant cognitive benefits for young students Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020) A well-organized curriculum, qualified teachers, and helpful materials are necessary for schools to successfully apply the "Three-Language Formula". The following are some of the measures which can be adopted for effective integration of NEP 2020 policy.

- **Broad- Based curriculum:** Taking into consideration the multilingual education in the country as per NEP 2020. Teacher training and curricular alignment are essential for effective implementation of multilingual education Mishra (2025). Considering the language context of various places, a flexible curriculum that enables multilingual teaching and learning should be created. To encourage cultural knowledge and respect, varied viewpoints and cultural information needs to be incorporated into the curriculum Dhokare et al. (2023). It is also essential to carefully choose age-appropriate, pertinent, and educational resources for pupils in order to increase the efficacy of language acquisition Bashir and Jan (2024). To facilitate multilingual instruction, high-quality, standardized instructional resources in all regional languages are to be provided Dhokare et al. (2023). All languages should be delivered in a fun and engaging way, with lots of interactive dialogue and early reading and writing in mother tongue in the formative years Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020), inorder to ensure that the mother tongue, Hindi, and English are taught gradually by aligning with the linguistic curriculum with NEP 2020 requirements. Besides, incorporation of other language courses that stresses the understanding, writing, and speaking abilities should be emphasised Vas (2025).

- **Teacher Training and professional growth:** In the light of the latest educational policy, teachers are acknowledged as the main influencers in fostering multilingualism in classrooms as they have a significant impact on the student experience. A language instructor will significantly impact students' engagement with the topic if they have the proper combination of training, enthusiasm, and expertise Bashir and Jan (2024). Hence, the Central and State governments should make significant effort to fund language teachers in several regional languages Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020).

Teachers can improve their language skills by taking language proficiency classes and participating in immersion programs. Thus teachers should be provided with specific training programs to offer them the resources they need to teach in many languages. Dhokare et al. (2023).

- **Interaction with the Communities and Stakeholders:** For multilingual education to be implemented successfully, local communities must be involved and supportive Dhokare et al. (2023). In addition to being informed about the advantages of multilingualism for their children's learning and development, parents and communities are important partners in the promotion of multilingual education. They should also be included in the decision-making processes concerning language policies and practices Multilingualism and Education (2023)

- **Infrastructure and Technology:** Technology should be used to promote language acquisition and to teach and learn many languages Ministry of Human Resource Development (2020). Investing in digital resources and technologies that facilitate multilingual education, such as bilingual e-books and digital language learning platforms can be emphasized. It is also crucial to guarantee that everyone has fair access to technology and digital resources so as to fill in the digital gap Dhokare et al. (2023).

CONCLUSION

To conclude, NEP 2020 rightly places language at the center of early education, advocating mother-tongue instruction in the foundational years to strengthen foundational literacy and numeracy and to support children's cognitive, emotional and cultural development. While India's linguistic diversity and gaps in resources, teacher readiness, and parental preferences for English create real implementation challenges, these can be overcome through a coordinated strategy: locally adapted curricula materials, systematic teacher training, appropriate technology, and sustained community engagement. By combining evidence-based classroom practices, clear policy guidance, targeted financing, and robust monitoring, the policy can make multilingual, mother-tongue education a practical reality. Ultimately, NEP's language vision offer a path to more inclusive, equitable and meaningful schooling that nurtures individual potential and strengthens social cohesion.

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