
LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE BACKDROP OF NEP 2020

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Abstract :

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 represents a landmark re-imagining of India's educational landscape, with significant implications for the teaching of language and literature in higher education. This research paper examines the policy's vision, its impact on pedagogical approaches, curricular structures, multilingualism, literary studies, assessment methods, and challenges in implementation. Drawing on policy documents, scholarly critiques, and comparative frameworks, this paper argues that while NEP 2020 presents opportunities for revitalizing language and literature teaching, its success depends on effective institutional strategies, teacher preparedness, and contextual adaptation across regions.

Introduction :

Language and literature teaching in higher education has long been at the core of cultural, cognitive, and communicative development in academic settings. The launch of the 'National Education Policy (NEP) 2020' by the Government of India marked a paradigmatic shift in educational philosophy and practice, advocating for flexibility, multilingualism, and cross-disciplinary learning. For language and literature disciplines, traditionally perceived as rigid and rooted in canonical practices, NEP 2020 introduces new pedagogical and curricular possibilities. This research explores how NEP 2020 repositions language and literature education within the broader goals of holistic learning, cultural diversity, and global competencies.

Background: NEP 2020 and its Vision :

NEP 2020 emerged from an extensive consultative process and replaced the nearly three-decade-old policy framework established in 1986. Its core principles include access, equity, quality, affordability, and accountability (Ministry of Education 5). The policy advocates a 'holistic, learner-centered approach' that integrates language, arts, and interdisciplinary learning as essential components of higher education. The document emphasizes multiple languages at all levels of education, aiming to create 'multilingual individuals capable of engaging with local, national, and global contexts' (Ministry of Education 21).

NEP 2020's guiding philosophy draws from socio-cultural and constructivist educational theories, recognizing language not only as a tool for communication but as a medium for cognitive framing, identity formation, and cultural expression (Kramsch 3). Consequently, the policy foregrounds language diversity and literary understanding as pillars

for sustaining cultural traditions while preparing learners for global participation.

Multilingualism and Language Policy in NEP 2020 :

One of the most transformative elements of NEP 2020 is its emphasis on ‘multilingual competency’. The policy recommends early foundational bilingual learning, continued language development across educational stages, and flexibility for learners to study diverse languages (Ministry of Education 23).

Three-Language Formula Revisited :

NEP 2020 revisits the ‘three-language formula’ with a renewed focus on regional languages. Higher education institutions are urged to offer courses in Indian languages alongside English and other foreign languages, thereby broadening linguistic access and cultural immersion.

This emphasis addresses concerns of linguistic homogenization and historical marginalization of regional languages in higher education (Pillai 78). For example, universities are encouraged to develop curriculum frameworks that include Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Bengali, and other languages, reflecting India’s linguistic plurality.

Multilingual Pedagogies :

The policy also suggests ‘multilingual pedagogies’, where learners can use their home languages in academic discourse and assessments, especially in early years. While this is more applicable at school levels, higher education stands to benefit from such a framework by incorporating ‘translanguaging practices’, which allow learners to navigate multiple languages fluidly for cognitive and interpretive tasks (Garcia and Kleyn 45).

By embedding multilingual pedagogies, universities can overcome the cost of exclusive English-medium instruction and improve comprehension, participation, and performance among diverse learner groups.

Language Teaching: Pedagogical Shifts and Curriculum Reform :

Language teaching in higher education under NEP 2020 has two major axes: ‘competency-based instruction’ and ‘integration with digital tools’.

Competency-Based Language Instruction :

NEP 2020 stresses ‘competency-based instruction’, which reorients teaching away from rote memorization to real-world communicative competence. The policy declares that language education should move beyond grammar drills to foster skills such as critical reading, argumentation, academic writing, and intercultural communication (Ministry of Education 27).

This approach aligns with ‘Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)’ and task-based learning models that prioritize meaningful interaction and learner agency. In this framework, language classrooms engage students in collaborative projects, debates, reflective writing, and digital content creation, which mirror authentic language use beyond examinations.

Digital and Blended Learning :

NEP 2020 acknowledges the role of ‘digital infrastructure’ in enhancing language learning. It encourages the use of online platforms, multimedia resources, and virtual exchange programs to supplement classroom teaching (Ministry of Education 40). For example, digital storytelling, language labs, and online peer review can transform traditional modes of instruction.

However, effective integration of technology requires institutional investment and faculty training, especially in regions with limited digital access. The digital divide remains a major challenge in translating policy goals into classroom realities.

Literature Teaching: Canon, Context, and Creativity :

Literature instruction in higher education has traditionally centered around canonical texts, historical periods, and critical theories. NEP 2020 encourages rethinking these practices by emphasizing ‘contextual relevance, intertextuality, and learner-centric interpretation’.

Rethinking the Canon :

NEP 2020 does not prescribe specific literary content but promotes ‘diversity and inclusivity in curriculum design’, encouraging universities to include texts from local literatures, indigenous narratives, and marginalized voices. This shift reflects postcolonial literary theories, which critique the dominance of Western canonical texts and advocate for pluralistic literary worth (Ashcroft et al. 12).

For instance, a literature program under NEP 2020 might juxtapose ‘Shakespeare with Kabir’, ‘Faiz Ahmed Faiz with Tukaram’, and ‘Gabriel García Márquez with Mahasweta Devi’, opening avenues for comparative study that bridges cultures and epochs.

Interdisciplinary Literary Pedagogies :

NEP 2020’s emphasis on ‘interdisciplinary learning’ enables literature to intersect with history, sociology, philosophy, and digital media studies. Literary texts can be explored as cultural artifacts that reveal social structures, gender dynamics, and power relations. Such interdisciplinary engagements enrich literary interpretation and prepare students for diverse career paths.

Creative and Critical Engagements :

Literature teaching under NEP 2020 encourages ****creative engagements****, where students participate in writing workshops, literary festivals, theatre, and community-based projects. The policy also supports critical pedagogies that foster reflective reading, ethical inquiry, and dialogic learning.

These pedagogical orientations move away from passive reception toward ‘active literary production and critique’, which are crucial for nurturing imaginative and analytical capacities.

Assessment Reforms: Towards Flexibility and Competence :

Assessment in higher education has historically hinged on summative examinations. NEP 2020 advocates a 'shift towards continuous, formative, and competency-based assessment' in language and literature courses (Ministry of Education 51).

Continuous and Formative Assessment :

Under this model, learners are evaluated through reflective journals, portfolios, presentations, project work, and peer assessments. These methods provide a holistic view of learner progress and competencies, including linguistic proficiency, critical thinking, and creative expression.

In literature courses, assessments might include reflective essays on thematic concerns, digital storytelling projects, oral presentations, and collaborative reviews. Such practices align with authentic assessment models that reflect real-world literacy tasks.

Rubrics and Transparent Criteria :

NEP 2020 also emphasizes transparent evaluation criteria, with clearly defined rubrics for language and literary assignments. Rubrics help students understand expectations and self-regulate learning, fostering metacognitive skills essential for academic success.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development :

The successful implementation of NEP 2020 hinges on quality teacher preparation. For language and literature educators, this entails not only subject expertise but also proficiency in 'multilingual methodologies, digital literacies, and interdisciplinary teaching'.

Pre-Service and In-Service Training :

NEP 2020 calls for robust 'pre-service teacher education' programs and continuous 'in-service training' to equip faculty with contemporary pedagogical skills (Ministry of Education 68). Workshops on digital pedagogy, inclusive teaching, language assessment, and curriculum design are vital for translating policy into practice.

Research and Innovation in Pedagogy :

Institutions are encouraged to foster research in language and literature education, exploring areas like multilingual literacy, digital narratives, and culturally responsive teaching. Collaboration among departments, interdisciplinary research centers, and community partners can enhance innovation.

Challenges in Implementation :

While NEP 2020 envisions a transformative framework, several challenges may hinder its full realization:

Resource and Infrastructure Constraints :

Many institutions, especially in rural areas, lack adequate infrastructure—libraries, digital tools, language labs—that are necessary for enriched language and literature teaching.

Faculty Readiness and Workload :

Transitioning to new pedagogies demands significant faculty effort and training, which can be constrained by existing workloads and limited professional development opportunities.

Assessment Culture :

Shifting assessment paradigms from high-stakes exams to continuous evaluation requires systemic changes in institutional culture, student mindsets, and administrative practices.

Linguistic Politics and Equity :

While NEP 2020 promotes multilingualism, implementation may be uneven across regions due to linguistic politics, resource allocation, and varying institutional priorities.

Discussion :

NEP 2020 presents a visionary framework that reconceptualizes language and literature teaching as integrative, inclusive, and competency-oriented. Its emphasis on multilingualism resonates with India's linguistic diversity and global interconnectedness. By promoting creative pedagogies, digital incorporation, and cross-cultural literary engagements, the policy aligns educational practices with contemporary communicative and cognitive demands.

However, policy intentions must be matched with strategic action plans that account for contextual realities. Institutional autonomy must be leveraged responsibly to design curricula that reflect local linguistic heritage and global literatures. Faculty development programs should be prioritized to build pedagogical competence. Moreover, sustained engagement with stakeholders—students, teachers, administrators, and communities—can ensure that transformations are holistic, equitable, and meaningful.

Conclusion :

Language and literature teaching in higher education stands at a crossroads shaped by the transformative aspirations of NEP 2020. The policy's emphasis on multilingualism, competency-based instruction, interdisciplinary learning, and inclusive curricula opens new horizons for academic inquiry and cultural engagement. Successful implementation depends on systemic readiness, digital access, pedagogical innovation, and stakeholder collaboration. As India's higher education system evolves, language and literature disciplines have the potential to lead in nurturing critical thinkers, empathetic communicators, and culturally fluent global citizens.

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