National Policy on Education: Proficiency in Three Languages

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Article History: Submitted-03/11/2019, Revised-15/12/2019, Accepted-18/12/2019, Published-31/12/2019.

Abstract:

India is a land of great saints, philosophers, scientists, mathematicians, writers and men of great learning. Education has always occupied a special place in India. It has been considered important in every Indian household and by every Indian citizen. The Indian Government recognizes it as crucial to national progress and security. Time and again the government has always tried to give increased attention to address the educational needs of the people. Through its various educational policies it has tried to encourage a healthy debate, discussion and consensus on the various aspects that challenge the education system.

One topic that it tries to address through its education policy is making the learners proficient in three languages, one of them being English.

This research paper highlights the emphasis laid in the various education policies on the three language model, attainment of proficiency in the languages as a goal, English as an important language, the extent to which this proficiency in English as a language has actually been achieved and what can be done to make it possible.

Keywords: National Policies on Education, English, language, literature, national, international, place, need, skill, ability, aim, proficiency.

English is a major international language and there is no country in the world where a speaker of English cannot be understood. It is the first language in countries like the United States of America, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. It is the second or foreign language in countries like India, Africa, France etc. The speakers of English are spread all over the world. About 1.5 billion of the world population speak English. It is also the most commonly studied foreign language in the world (Lyons). English is the language of international trade, commerce and politics. It is one of the six official languages of the U.N.O. and a link language of the
Commonwealth countries. It also serves as a means of international communication and cultural give and take. It is estimated that:

50 million children study English as an additional language at primary level and it is studied at secondary level by over 80 million learners, and while using internet, the users communicate largely in English. The importance of it we can know through the fact that some 3,000,000 scientific and technological articles, mostly in English, are written annually throughout the world. More than 60,000 books in English are published every year in Britain, America, Australia and other countries. ("English Language Teaching in India" ch.2 26)

The knowledge of English helps to give us glimpses of the various developments taking place in the world and has increased worldwide employment opportunities. Jawaharlal Nehru had said, “English is our major window on the world” and it gives “distilled essence of modern knowledge in all fields of human activity” (Goodman 316). The Radhakrishnan University Education Commission has observed,

It is a language which is rich in literature – humanistic, scientific and technical. If under sentimental urges we would give up English, we would cut ourselves off from the living stream of ever growing knowledge. Unable to have access to this knowledge our standards of scholarship would fast deteriorate and our participation in the world movements of thought would become negligible. Its effects would be disastrous for our practical life, for living nations must move with the times and must respond quickly to the challenge of their surroundings. English is the only means of preventing our isolation from the world, and we will act unwisely if we, allow ourselves to be enveloped in the folds of a dark curtain of ignorance.” (Ministry of Education 283-84)

As a link language it serves as a political, economic and cultural link within various Indian states and countries all over the world.

The Kothari Education Commission, an Education Commission appointed by the Government of India by a Resolution, dated 14 July 1964, to advise the Government on the national pattern of education and on the general principles and policies for the development of
education at all stages and in all aspects held that all students should be able to follow lectures and use reading materials in the regional language, as well as in English.

The Resolution issued by the Government of India on the Report of the Education Commission included:

(b) Three-Language Formula: At the secondary stage, the State Governments should adopt, and vigorously implement, the three-language formula which 'includes the study of a modern Indian language, preferably one of the southern languages, apart from Hindi and English in the Hindi-speaking States, and of Hindi along with the regional language and English in the non-Hindi speaking States. Suitable courses in Hindi and/or English should also be available in universities and colleges with a view to improving the proficiency of students in these languages up to the prescribed university standards.

(c) Hindi: Every effort should be made to promote the development of Hindi. In developing Hindi as the link language, due care should be taken to ensure that it will serve, as provided for in Article 351 of the Constitution, as a medium of expression for all the elements of the composite culture of India. The establishment in non-Hindi States, of colleges and other institutions of higher education which use Hindi as the medium of education should be encouraged.

(e) International Languages: Special emphasis needs to be laid on the study of English and other international languages. World knowledge is growing at a tremendous pace, especially in science and technology. India must not only keep up this growth but should also make her own significant contribution to it. For this purpose, study of English deserves to be specially strengthened. (Ministry of Education xiii-xiv)

The three language formula was again accepted in the National Education Policies of 1986 and 1992. They upheld that:

The Education Policy of 1968 had examined the question of the development of languages in great detail; its essential provisions can hardly be improved upon and are as relevant today as before. The implementation of this part of the 1968 Policy has, however,
been uneven. The Policy will be implemented more energetically and purposefully. (Ministry of Human Resource Development 21)

The Draft of the National Policy on Education 2019 reiterates:

Since children learn languages most quickly between 2-8 years, and multilingualism has great cognitive benefits for students, children will be immersed in three languages early on, from the Foundational Stage. • Home language/mother tongue as medium of instruction • Exposure to three or more languages to students from pre-school and Grade 1 will be given • The three language formula will be continued with flexibility in choice of languages. Flexibility in the three-language formula such that students who wish to change one or more of the three languages they are studying may do so in Grade 6 or Grade 7, so long as they are able to still demonstrate proficiency in three languages (one language at the literature level) in their modular Board Examinations some time during secondary school • A choice of foreign language(s) would be as elective(s) during secondary school. (University Grants Commission 11)

The place of English in school education has always been a matter of debate ever since independence. There are those who consider it beneficial on some grounds – maintaining contact with the outside world and unity in the country; encouraging nationalism; providing fundamental ideas of modern civilization, modern science and philosophy.

There were those who objected to its use. By saying that it divided the nation into two parts.

Dr. Hans, Lecturer in Comparative Education in the London University, points out in his recent book the serious drawbacks in adopting a foreign language as a medium of instruction. He says, "before entering school the pupils have acquired a proficiency in their mother tongue, have built up a vocabulary covering most of the objects of sense impressions and their daily activities. At school they have to superimpose on this basis a language of ideas and abstract relations, expressed entirely in a foreign medium. Their minds become split into two water-tight compartments, one for ordinary things and actions expressed in their mother tongue, and another for things connected with school subjects and the world of ideas expressed in a foreign language. As a result they are
unable to speak of their home affairs in the school language and about learned subjects in their mother tongue”. (Ministry of Education 276-77)

Consequently, the study of English in several states was delayed, the number of periods devoted to English were curtailed and some states even made the study of English optional. Our Constitution envisages that Hindi would replace English for all official purposes by 1965 but even before the deadline due to some disturbance the Parliament passed a bill in 1963 declaring English as the Associate Official Language of India for an indefinite period. English is used in Offices, High Courts, State Legislative Assemblies and the Parliament. Presently India uses two national languages – Hindi and English for central administrative purposes. Hindi is the national official language and English the associate language. The Kothari Education Commission (1964-66) after examining the whole field of Indian education assigned a compulsory place to the study of English. “As English will, for a long time to come, continue to be needed as ‘a library language’ in the field of higher education a strong foundation in the language will have to be laid at the school stage” (AhujaG.C.andPramila77). The study of English or for that matter Hindi or any other regional language cannot be dispensed with. When the language is being taught and learned by students at least the students should be able to read, speak, understand and express themselves in it. However it was observed:

Two study groups were also appointed in 1965 and 1969 respectively by the Ministry of Education and Youth Services, Government of India to inquire into the current state of teaching of English in India. Both the groups were headed by Prof V.K. Gokak, the first director of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Language Hyderabad. The findings of the first study group revealed that the standards of English in India have deteriorated very fast in our schools and colleges where students can’t write or speak a single correct sentence in English. The findings of educations commission (1966) and the study group (1970) are also the same. (“English Language Teaching in India” ch.2 42)

The condition still prevails. If we take the two main objectives of teaching English – Language Development, Literary Development, at the junior level the focus should be to develop language while at the senior level both language and literature should be developed.
Some oppose the study of English as they think English is a difficult language and a majority of students fail in the examinations only because of their failure in English. However I feel that the students should be motivated to learn it and the teachers should make use of a proper balanced technique to teach the language. The conditions under which English is being taught and learnt in the government schools is far from satisfactory. The reasons being the undefined place of English in India, dearth of competent teachers, emphasis on examination marks as the aim of teaching English rather helping students to master the skills of the language and excessive use of the translation method. No textbooks, workbooks are prescribed for English Language. Students are asked to refer to textbooks of English which have sentence wise translations in Hindi.

There has always been a confusion regarding the place of English in India the result being that students are not serious about the study of English. The teachers are teaching the subject only to enable the students to pass the examination by cramming things. They are not being taught to master the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. There is a shortage of good and competent teachers.

The English Review Committee appointed by the U.G.C. in 1965 had remarked, “There is a shortage of teachers. Those available have just passed the school final examination, having themselves studied English in village school for 4 or 5 or 6 years. They have little idea of correct usage, and none at all of correct pronunciation. Their vocabulary is limited as is their reading.”(Goodman 321)

This remark seems to be equally applicable even today. The translation method is being used which yields very poor results. Majority of the students cannot speak simple sentences in English nor can they understand when they are explained things in English. They rely on Hindi translations - written and oral to understand lessons. This handicap continues when they go for higher education. They request teachers to teach plays of Shakespeare and works of other great writers in Hindi. Translations from one language to another are not always exact, the result being that the essence of what the poet or author wanted to convey is lost. The students do not realize that when they go ahead in life out of the school or college they will not find people who are going to translate English into Hindi for them. The teachers teaching English are forced to give into such demands otherwise they might lose their jobs. The students are motivated only to
somehow pass the subject by mugging up answers. It has been observed that a student from a
good public or private school who is taught without the use of Hindi translations has a better
understanding of English and is able to master language skills which help him in future. Students
of government schools do not have any graded textbooks in English Language. The monthly
syllabus has so many lessons that the teacher has to somehow finish the course at break neck
speed before the monthly tests. Whether the students understand the lessons or not is considered
immaterial. The syllabus of the classes especially IX, X, XI, XII is far above the level of
majority of the students because the foundation of English Language has not been laid in the
lower classes. Professor V.K. Gokak aptly says,

The teaching of English in our schools is in a chaotic state today. Pupils are taught
English for about six periods a week for six years. But it has been estimated that they
hardly know 150 words by the time they join a university. This means that they have
hardly been able to learn English words at the rate of one word per period. They do not
know how to use the commonest structures of English. (Goodman 321)

The government should make an effort to properly define the place of English in India
keeping in mind the national and international importance of English. The aim of teaching
English must be to enable the students to master the four skills of language. The emphasis should
be on developing real language ability. The students should be able to understand spoken
English, read books in English and should be able to express themselves in English orally and in
writing. The All India Seminar on the Teaching of English in Secondary Schools, held at Nagpur
in 1957, recommended that “within a period of six years of high school course, the pupils should
be enabled to attain a working knowledge of English, giving them mastery over about 250 basic
structures and a vocabulary of 2500 essential words.” Also “an attempt should be made to initiate
the pupils in literary appreciation or cultural enjoyment of the English language in the last two
years of the High School(Secondary) course. The material used should be adopted to the general
character of the course and should be simple from the linguistic point of view” (Goodman 338-
39). Instead of the Translation Method, the Direct Method of teaching should be adopted so that
the students start thinking in English. The teachers must keep themselves informed of the new
developments taking place in teaching the language and try to incorporate those they think are
beneficial for the student. According to the British Council the communicative approach which
includes task based teaching is the best known current approach to language teaching. Teachers can select techniques from various approaches keeping in mind the needs of their learners. Most course books also mix methods and techniques. The teacher should reduce the use of mother tongue to the minimum in the classroom and use only English as the medium of instruction. The students must be encouraged to express themselves in English. According to C.C. Fries, “A person has learned a foreign language when he has thus first, within a limited vocabulary, mastered the sound system (that is, when he understands the stream of speech and achieves an understandable production of it) and has, second, made the structural devices (that is, the basic arrangement of utterances ) matters of automatic habit” (Goodman 329). Language is a skill and therefore has to be learnt through continuous practice. Thompson and Wyatt observe, “The power of expression in a language is a matter of skill rather than of knowledge: it is a power that grows by exercise, not by knowing merely meanings or rules” (Goodman 330). The teacher must do a lot of oral and written exercises with the children. For example words can be taught by showing pictures or drawing pictures and various activities can be done while teaching grammar. The students must be taught basic sentence patterns and correct pronunciation and intonation right from the beginning. The teachers must try to make the lessons interesting by language games, group and individual competitions, using audio visual aids. It is important to motivate the children and not to discourage them. Last but not the least we must stop blaming each other and start working for the benefit of the students.

The commendable proposals in the Draft of National Policy on Education-2019 are – the inculcation of “language weeks,” “language melas,” weekly language focused school assemblies, workbooks on Language from Grade 1-5, “Show and tell” sessions in the Foundational and Preparatory years and a fun course on “The Languages of India,” Grade 6-8.

However the National Policy on Education may reconsider the following. Grammar books or workbooks should be continued till class XII. The multilingualism which it states has great cognitive benefits for students and so the children will be immersed in three languages early on, from the Foundational Stage has already been stated in various previous policies. However proficiency in English has still not been achieved. The reality is that children are struggling to master proficiency in Hindi and English. Will the burden on students not increase? Further there is a question of won’t taking all these languages together create chaos and
confusion. Does the country have competent teachers in all the languages from school to university level. Does the country have books on all subjects in so many different languages? Another plan is the:

Exposure to three or more languages in schools: To leverage the enhanced language-learning abilities of young children, all students from pre-school and Grade 1 onwards will be exposed to three or more languages with the aim of developing speaking proficiency and interaction, and the ability to recognize scripts and read basic text, in all three languages by Grade 3. In terms of writing, students will begin writing primarily in the medium of instruction until Grade 3, after which writing with additional scripts will also be introduced gradually. (Ministry of Human Resource Development P4.5.3 81)

The fun course on languages will only increase confusion and burden the students further more. The emphasis is to make the students a jack of all trades and master of none. The draft states that teaching of the three languages will begin from the Foundational stage of education (pre-primary school to Grade 2). If we look at the present situation the children are struggling with two languages.

Children grasp language after listening to their parents, relatives and friends. We have to teach it properly so that they acquire the skills of using it properly. Language, according to O. Jesperson, is a “set of human habits, the purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings, and especially to impart them to others” (Goodman 323). It is sad to conclude that though the education policies have always laid proficiency in the languages as one of their objectives, the road to success in proficiency in English is full of challenges and still a long one.

Works Cited:


