



Trajectory of English Language Curriculum Design in Indian Higher Education: From Macaulay to NEP 2020

Garima Dalal

Associate Professor,

Jawaharlal Nehru University.

garimadalal@jnu.ac.in

Gunjan Arora

Former Post-Doc Fellow,

JNU (Anthropologist, Independent Researcher).

<https://doi.org/10.66376/criterion.v17.n3.1>

Abstract:

The importance of English as a discipline and medium of communication has colonial roots. The need for a common language in a linguistically diverse country like India led the colonisers to introduce English for effective administration and communication. This steered English toward becoming the most widely read and written language over the years. Post-liberalisation and the opening of the economy through globalisation, the language has its own growth trajectory. This growth is evident in the curriculum changes over the years, and since the introduction of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, these changes have become more prominent. The landscape of the current education system, post-five years of NEP 2020, has led to many short- and long-term changes in the curriculum and pedagogical strategies. Focusing on the flexibility of the curriculum, the emphasis on multidisciplinary studies, and addressing regional disparities to promote inclusive education, the NEP has proven to be a game-changer. The paper traces the trajectory of colonial literature-centred English to its current role, that is, after NEP2020, which reframes the English language curriculum. The NEP English curriculum advocates flexibility, multidisciplinary, and communicative competence, yet its implementation in higher education remains constrained.

Keywords: Curriculum Design, English language, NEP 2020, Inclusivity, Higher education.

Article History: Submitted-10/04/2026, Revised-19/06/2026, Accepted-21/06/2026, Published-30/06/2026.

Copyright vests with the author. Licensing: Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Introduction

The Indian education system has a rich history dating back to ancient times. It has undergone significant change, especially during the Muslim and British colonial rule. Initially, “India’s educational system, including *gurukulas*, *madrasa* and Buddhist monasteries, was diverse and deeply rooted in the country’s cultural and intellectual traditions” (Kambala and Mathe 7). “The traditional Gurukula system, dating back to the Vedic period (c.1500 BCE - 500 BCE), continued till the colonial era” (qtd. in Halder 153). This traditional system emphasised the learning of the literature, focused on holistic development, and was characterised by a strong teacher-student relationship. “The curriculum in Gurukulas was comprehensive, covering not only academic subjects but also life skills and spiritual knowledge” (Halder 153). Similarly, “Buddhist educational practices that emphasise holistic development, experiential learning, mindfulness, ethical conduct, and collaborative learning” were part of the education system (Halder 155). In his work *Education and the Colonial Experience*, Krishna Kumar emphasised the holistic nature of pre-colonial education, which offered philosophy, mathematics and sciences and promoted moral and spiritual development. Under British rule, with Macaulay’s Minute on Education (1835), English was introduced as the medium of instruction, leading to the marginalisation of Indian languages such as Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic, as well as traditional knowledge systems (Macaulay 235-240). The main themes of Macaulay’s Minute were:

English should replace Persian as the official language; English should be introduced as the medium of instruction in all the institutions of learning as ‘that language has already access to all the vast intellectual wealth which all the wisest nations of the Earth have created and hoarded in the course of ninety generations’; translation of Western knowledge into vernaculars at that time not properly developed would not be

efficacious; Indians taught through the medium of English would further take care of the education of their countrymen (Ghosh 17).

It was also suggested that funds be allocated for English education in India to help Indian citizens learn about Western culture. Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General of the Company accepted the Minute and a declaration was made stating that, “His Lordship in Council is of the opinion that the great object of the British government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; and that all the funds appropriated for the purpose of education would be best employed on English education alone”(Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy 37). Henceforth, English became the official language of education. Later, “Wood’s Despatch of 1854, also known as the Magna Carta of English education in India” (Krishnaswamy and Krishnaswamy 47), gave a policy statement of the British government and the Company on education, emphasising the improvement of the education system and recommending that the language of education be English.

The British education system was introduced to create a class of clerks to serve the colonial administration (Mukherjee). In his work, *The Foundations of British Educational Policy in India*, Mukherjee argued that introducing English as the primary language led to the sidelining of the traditional educational systems and their learning centres. Priority was given to humanities and clerical training over scientific disciplines, with lasting consequences for the latter (Chandra). “The British policy was to create an Indian class who should think like the British, or as it was said then in Britain, ‘Indians in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions and morals and intellect’” (Vijayalakshmi and Babu 1). The British established universities in India from 1857, and the English-educated middle class had opportunities for government jobs. They were seen as the new elite of India. Many new schools were also established that used English as the medium of instruction. Even after independence, the

English language system was still in place, as finding an acceptable alternative language across Pan-India was challenging.

English became the official language during the later years of British colonial rule and the post-colonial period. However, ambivalent positions emerged regarding English during the struggle for independence, when the language, though offering the prospect of modernisation, was simultaneously seen as a foreign language that posed Western influence. The tensions continued even after independence when the Constituent Assembly spent three years debating the status of English in free India, and a compromise status of English was accepted, where it was seen as an 'associate language' initially for 15 years until 1965; later indefinitely via the Official Languages Act of 1963 (Borg et al. 22).

During the post-colonial period, English remained the medium of education in schools, colleges, and universities. It was asserted that retaining English as the primary language would help strengthen India's unity and serve as a link with the outside world, as it is an international language. To further the development of English as a language, the Kothari Commission, headed by D.S. Kothari, was tasked with investigating the Indian educational system and developing guidelines for the education sector in 1964-66. The Commission gave recommendations on structure, curriculum and education for all. The main recommendations were adopting a three-language formula at the state level, promoting regional languages such as Sanskrit and international languages such as English, improving university-level education, and designing a well-rounded curriculum. The Commission recommended that English be the medium of instruction in technical education and universities, and that it be used in the library (Chaudhary). The Commission also emphasised the development of English language skills. Several institutes, such as the Central Institute of English (CIE), were established in Hyderabad in 1958, and Regional Institutes were established in Bangalore and Chandigarh. The initial

focus on English language teaching was on literature, but later it was realised that it was necessary to learn all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. “It is necessary to develop all the language skills in order to improve communication skills” (qtd. in Vijayalakshmi and Babu 3).

The English language in contemporary times is seen as essential, as it touches every sphere of our lives and learning. It is used in federal and state administration, the judiciary, public services and education. In a multilingual country like India, English serves as a common ground and enables communication across the country. Higher education, job opportunities, and career opportunities are significantly shaped by English proficiency, and it also boosts one’s social standing. Proficiency in English is essential in today’s globalised world, where career prospects in MNCs and high-end public institutions are possible with English as the medium of communication. “With the increasing use of English and an increase in the number of users, a study has linked education in English to the scope of employment opportunities. The *English-able* earn up to 34% more than those who are not” (Nagarajan)

The apparent need for English in most Asian countries, such as India, where English is a compulsory subject, yet proficiency levels vary. It is a widely spoken language currently taught as the second language worldwide. In India, it is used not only for international communication, but also for inter- and intra-state communication at home. There has been a greater need for proficiency in both written and oral English communication.

Thus, different dimensions of the curriculum have been mapped and recognised in English language teaching, especially at higher education institutes. Some critical questions that curriculum design and development face are: What does teaching the English language mean to a teacher? What are students’ experiences while learning English? How can the student’s language knowledge be assessed after the course? Are students communicatively competent

enough to use the English language after the course? Is the curriculum responsive to changing times? What is the correlation between English language pedagogy and assessment? How can the curriculum be modified or differentiated for different groups of learners? Mapping these questions, this paper argues that NEP 2020's renewed English curriculum emphasises flexibility, multidisciplinary, and communicative competence; however, the current literature-centred examination system limits the transformative vision of the Policy. Structural and pedagogical changes are required to bridge this gap between the intent and practice.

Curriculum Design

“The term curriculum is derived from Latin and means ‘race course’” (Leyendecker). The broader definition now includes ‘educational institutions’ scheduled learning experiences’ (Katal and Singh 45). A curriculum is a blueprint or a guideline that allows for achieving academic goals and is ‘open to criticism and easily converted into practice’ (Katal and Singh 45). Curriculum “refers to the overall plan or design for a course and how the content of a course is transformed into a blueprint for teaching and learning, which enables the desired learning outcomes to be achieved” (Richards 6). Wiggins and McTighe state that

Curriculum takes content (from external standards and local goals) and shapes it into a plan for effective teaching and learning. It is thus more than a list of topics and lists of key facts and skills (the ‘input’). It is a map of how to achieve the ‘outputs’ of desired student performance, in which appropriate learning activities and assessments are suggested to make it more likely that students achieve the desired results (Wiggins and McTighe 6).

Richards in his paper, *Curriculum Approaches in Language Teaching: Forward, Central and Backward Design* explains that Curriculum development in language teaching can start from ‘input’ (i.e. the content of the course that has to be organised into teachable and learnable units

arranged in a rational sequence resulting in the Syllabus of the course) then proceeding towards the ‘process’ (i.e. how teaching is to be carried out and this forms the domain of methodology) and final is the ‘output’(i.e. the learning outcomes like performance, competence and skills). While making a distinction between Forward design, Central Design and Backward Design, Richards explains three different processes of curriculum development and mentions that “there is no best approach to curriculum design and each works well in different circumstances... each approach makes different assumptions about the context for the curriculum, for example: whether intended for large scale or small scale implementation, the role of instructional materials and tests, the level of training of teachers, the roles of teachers and learners, teacher’s proficiency in English, the demands made on teachers, the level of teacher-autonomy assumed for teachers and the amount of support provided for teachers” (Richards 28-29).

In the Indian context, there has been much emphasis on educating the youth and preparing them for the global market in recent years. A skill-based curriculum emphasising innovation, critical thinking, and creative problem-solving has been on the agenda. For this, the course’s curriculum is the sole means by which students can be prepared to meet future requirements (Bhardwaj and Kumar). There has been a surge in the need to design a globally acceptable curriculum. With the advancement of the IT industry, it has become imperative to prepare future generations for industry readiness. With Industry 4.0 gearing towards AI, there is a high dependence on information and communication technology. Along with ICT skills, students today must be prepared for interpersonal skills. The education sector has seen changes in how digital learning platforms replace traditional teaching pedagogies. So, ‘both the technical and interpersonal skills need to be imparted’ (Kumar and Rewari 424), and the future generations have to have skills like “ICT usage, creative problem solving, creativity and innovation, adaptive thinking, social and emotional intelligence and analytical and communication skills

are very much needed in the industry”(Kumar and Rewari 424). With this vision, a promising Policy on Education was released in 2020, to ‘transform India into a global knowledge power’ (Govinda 603) that encouraged to promote multilingualism and power of knowledge in teaching and learning, impart foundational literacy and numeracy, achieve universal access to all levels of learning, build synergy in curriculum from school to higher education, respect for diversity and local context, equity and inclusion in all educational decisions, and guarantee good governance and empowerment. The Government of India released a 66-page Policy document on education with the vision to transform every dimension of education. The idea was to lay the foundation for a more inclusive, learner-focused and future-ready generation of competent learners who can navigate globally. It states:

Education Policy 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... but also social, ethical and emotional capacities and dispositions (National Education Policy 4)

The National Education Policy also envisioned an education system rooted in the Indian ethos, transforming India into an equitable and vibrant knowledge society where education for all is the central theme. The Policy also envisions India as the global knowledge superpower. With a particular focus on Higher Education in Part II of the report, it delineates that higher education “must enable an individual to study one or more specialised areas of interest at a deep level and also develop ... humanities, languages as well as professional, technical and vocational subjects” (National Education Policy 33). Highlighting the significant problems with higher education, the report also mentions a severely fragmented higher education system, less emphasis on the development of cognitive skills and learning outcomes, a rigid separation of

disciplines, and limited access to higher education in socially and economically disadvantaged areas, and limited teacher and institutional autonomy, to mention a few. To completely re-energise the system, the report suggests moving towards multidisciplinary, revamping curriculum and pedagogy, and increasing access to an equitable and inclusive system for disadvantaged regions and underprivileged students.

The idea of flexible and innovative curricula, which enable combinations of disciplines, thus providing a holistic, multidisciplinary education and a pedagogy with increased emphasis on communication, discussion, debate, research, and opportunities for cross-disciplinary thinking, has been strongly suggested (National Education Policy 37). It is also recommended that “effective learning requires a comprehensive approach that involves appropriate curriculum, engaging pedagogy, and continuous formative assessment and adequate student support” (National Education Policy 38). Moreover, “all programmes, courses, curricula and pedagogy across subjects, including those in-class, online and ODL modes as well as student support will aim to achieve global standards of quality”(National Education Policy 39).

On 29th July 2025, National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 completed its five years, and higher education institutions “are evolving into multidisciplinary hubs, with reforms like the Academic Bank of Credit, multiple entry and exit options and biannual admissions. The UGC (Open and Distance Learning and Online Programmes) Regulations have enabled 116 institutions to offer a plethora of online and distance courses, benefitting nearly two million students” (Bansal). Guided by NEP 2020, a “flexible curricula and multidisciplinary learning are likely to lead the change, while credit transfer policies make education more student-centric” are geared for changes in the education landscape by 2030 (Shiraz).

Inclusivity, flexibility and multidisciplinary Curriculum

NEP 2020 has placed intense focus on critical thinking, curriculum flexibility, digital literacy, multidisciplinary, and inclusivity. This marks the shift from rote learning practices that have dominated the education system. The student-centred approach and the focus on the learner's experience are the main ideas that have been kept in mind while recommending changes in the education system. The suggested curriculum changes are designed to help learners cultivate a habit of critical thinking and apply their knowledge in real-world situations. NEP 2020 emphasises and recommends inclusivity, another critical area, and equitable access to education for all, which should be the agenda of all higher education institutions, with a focus on marginalised and disadvantaged groups. To address disparities, the Policy proposes establishing Gender-Inclusive Funds and Special Education Zones, thereby ensuring that every child receives a quality education. Thus, NEP 2020 signals a transformative shift in India's educational system. While addressing critical gaps, it emphasises holistic, multidisciplinary education. However, this only appears on paper, leaving critical gaps that force us to examine the current institutional reality. The Policy's claims, on the one hand, aim to address critical gaps, while, on the other hand, there is a strong need to implement them in practice.

Advocating a flexible, multidisciplinary curriculum would provide opportunities to introduce new subjects, implement pedagogical changes, and implement project-based learning. A shift towards a dynamic curriculum would align with the global education trend. A Pilot programme on "Curriculum Innovation Project" in Andhra Pradesh has shown that project-based learning and interdisciplinary subjects enhanced student engagement and achievement (qtd. in Ashokkumar et al.). Similarly, the "Inclusive Education Initiative" in Bihar exemplifies how targeted funding and special programs address educational disparities and improve outcomes for marginalised students (qtd in Ashokkumar et al.). The evidence from these localised pilot

projects cannot be generalised, as the gap between such projects and the routine practices followed in institutions highlights the vulnerability of the Policy's claims. Such initiatives point to structural difficulties in implementing the Policy that need to be addressed. The infrastructural and resource constraints may not achieve the target of achieving a 100% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in pre-school to secondary levels by 2030. The focus on digital literacy may not be achieved due to existing educational inequalities, as there is still uneven access to digital resources across different regions (qtd in Ashokkumar et al.). Transitioning to a new curriculum and pedagogical reforms may encounter resistance from institutions and educators; the multidisciplinary approach may also dilute subject-specific expertise.

The short-term impacts, such as the integration of digital learning, the emphasis on online learning resources, and teacher training, and the long-term impacts, such as increased educational enrollment, enhanced student learning, and better alignment between education and job-market needs, need to be assessed through more data-driven studies. Effective execution, resource allocation, infrastructure development, and overcoming resistance to change are a few mindful steps needed for effective implementation. For this potential, steps such as targeted funding to reduce disparities in resource allocation, a streamlined process to overcome administrative hurdles, and increased stakeholder engagement to overcome resistance to change might help. Comprehensive studies evaluating the effectiveness of NEP 2020 are needed to assess the impact of curriculum changes, teacher training programs, and digital integration. Longitudinal regional studies to examine the impact on marginalised sections would offer valuable lessons. These studies help calibrate policy initiatives, identify steps to scale, adapt, and adjust them, and provide insights for effective strategies. Practical feedback from various stakeholders would be essential to address disparities and strengthen policy initiatives. The authors feel that we still need more evidence from longitudinal studies

of Indian classrooms to determine whether NEP2020 can counter the structural and pedagogical changes.

Conclusion

The paper traces the evolution of the English language curriculum in Indian higher education from colonial times to the NEP 2020. English introduced primarily for administrative purposes was initially literature-centred and examination-driven. The reforms from the Kothari Commission to the NEP2020 have aimed to modernise the curriculum, but the real change in assessment and institutional practices has lagged. Curriculum theory explains this persistent gap, as the effectiveness of curriculum design depends on a range of contextual factors. NEP2020 has been an ambitious policy aiming to transform the curriculum by focusing on communication, digital learning, multidisciplinary learning, etc., yet practical challenges hinder its successful implementation. A few success stories from localised pilot projects have also highlighted the need to address existing structural constraints to align with the Policy's ambitious vision. Effective communication design for English language teaching cannot rely solely on policy vision; it must go beyond those goals. It is essential to synchronise the teaching content, methods and assessment to achieve the envisioned goals. The crucial challenge ahead is whether higher education institutions can rebuild the structural and pedagogical conditions that align with the Policy. Until the curriculum is well aligned, we are only redescribing rather than redesigning.

Works Cited:

Ashokkumar, T., et al. "Analyzing the Impact of the New Educational Policy 2020: A Comprehensive Review of India's Educational Reforms." *Evaluation and Program Planning*, vol. 108, 2025, 102515. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2024.102515>.

Bansal, S. "NEP 2020 Turns Five: A Look at India's Journey of Education Transformation." *India Today*, 29 July 2025, www.indiatoday.in/education-today/news/story/nep-2020-turns-five-a-look-at-indias-journey-of-education-transformation-2762918-2025-07-29.

Bhardwaj, A., and V. Kumar. "Web and Social Media Approach to Marketing of Engineering Courses in India." *International Journal of Business Innovation and Research*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2022, pp. 541–55.

Borg, S., et al. *English Language Teaching, Learning and Assessment in India: Policies and Practices in the School Education System*. British Council, 2022.

Chandra, Bipan. *History of Modern India*. Orient Blackswan, 2014.

Chaudhary, S. "Kothari Commission, 1964–66 on Language Education: In Retrospect." *Language and Language Teaching*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2014, pp. 41–47.

Ghosh, S. C. "Bentinck, Macaulay and the Introduction of English Education in India." *History of Education*, vol. 24, no. 1, 1995, pp. 17–24.

Govinda, R. "NEP 2020: A Critical Examination." *Social Change*, vol. 50, no. 4, 2020, pp. 603–07.

Haldar, P. C. "Traditional Indian Pedagogies and Their Relevance in the Context of NEP 2020." *Indian Knowledge System*, KD Publications, 2024, pp. 151–65.

India, Ministry of Education. *National Education Policy 2020*. Government of India, 2020, www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf.

India, Planning Commission. *Report of Planning Group Workgroup on Teacher Education for the 12th Five-Year Plan*—Department of School Education and Literacy, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2011.

Kambala, Y. J., and R. Mathe. “The Impact of British Colonial Rule on the Indian Education System: Collapse and Deterioration.” *International Journal of Current Innovations in Advanced Research*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2023, pp. 7–11.

Katal, A., and V. K. Singh. “Curriculum Design and Development: A Case for Higher Education in India.” *The International Journal of Pedagogy and Curriculum*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2022, pp. 45–66.

Krishnaswamy, N., and L. Krishnaswamy. *The Story of English in India*. Foundation Books, 2006.

Kumar, Krishna. *Education and the Colonial Experience*. Oxford UP, 2001.

Kumar, V., and M. Rewari. “A Responsible Approach to Higher Education Curriculum Design.” *International Journal of Educational Reform*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2022, pp. 422–41.

Leyendecker, R. “Curriculum and Learning.” *Encyclopaedia of the Sciences of Learning*, edited by N. M. Seel, Springer, 2012, pp. 896–900.

Macaulay, Thomas Babington. “Minute on Indian Education.” *Speeches and Papers on Indian Questions, 1835–1838*, edited by W. Empson, Oxford UP, 1835, pp. 235–40.

Mukherjee, A. *The Foundation of British Educational Policy in India*. Cambridge UP, 2002.

Nagarajan, R. “Those Who Speak English Fluently Earn up to 34% More Than Others: Study.” *The Economic Times*, 5 Jan. 2014, economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/news-by-study.

industry/jobs/those-who-speak-english-fluently-earn-up-to-34-more-than-others-study/articleshow/28426329.cms.

Richards, Jack C. "Curriculum Approaches in Language Teaching: Forward, Central, and Backward Design." *RELC Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2013, pp. 5–33.

Shiraz, Z. "These Trends Are Set to Reshape Higher Education in India over the Next 5 Years, Say Experts." *The Times of India*, 22 Aug. 2025, timesofindia.indiatimes.com/education/news/8-trends-that-will-shape-higher-education-in-india-over-the-next-5-years/articleshow/123433103.cms.

Vijayalakshmi, M., and M. S. Babu. "A Brief History of English Language Teaching in India." *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, vol. 4, no. 5, 2014, pp. 1–4.

Wiggins, G., and J. McTighe. *Understanding by Design: A Framework for Effecting Curricular Development and Assessment*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2006.