

Language Acquisition and Relevant Theories: Through the Lens of NEP-2020

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ABSTRACT

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 marks a transformative shift in Indian education, transitioning from rote learning to a competency-based, multilingual framework. By grounding its strategies in established theories—such as Vygotsky’s “Social Interaction,” Krashen’s “Comprehensible Input,” and Cognitivism—the policy treats a child’s mother tongue as a vital pedagogical tool. While systemic challenges like resource shortages and the “English-only” social bias remain, the policy’s eclectic approach aims to minimize cognitive load and foster emotional safety. Ultimately, NEP-2020 seeks to build a culturally rooted yet globally competitive generation through inclusive, scientifically backed language acquisition.

Keywords: NEP-2020, Social Interaction, eclectic approach, language, Comprehensible Input

Introduction: A Paradigm Shift in Indian Education

The National Education Policy 2020 represents a transformative shift in the Indian educational landscape, moving away from a deficit-based view of linguistic diversity toward recognizing it as a “cognitive, pedagogical, and cultural resource” (Paul, 2026). Traditionally, the Indian system was plagued by a “rote memorization” culture, which the new policy seeks to replace with Competency-Based Education (Nayak and Nayak, 2026). By valuing the approximately 19,569 languages reported as mother tongues in the 2011 census, NEP-2020 aims to foster

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an inclusive environment where a child's native language is the foundation for learning (Shabnam and Kaushal, 2024).

This policy is not merely a administrative change but a scientific realignment with global research on multilingual education (Paul, 2026). It advocates for a learning atmosphere that nurtures both the cognitive and emotional growth of the student, ensuring that language is "lived" rather than just "studied."

Theoretical Foundations and NEP-2020 Alignment

Language acquisition is supported by several psychological and educational theories. NEP-2020 integrates these perspectives to create a holistic pedagogical framework.

1. Behaviorism: The Role of Reinforcement

While modern pedagogy is primarily learner-centered, the behaviorist emphasis on "practice" remains relevant for foundational skills.

- ❖ **The Theory:** Learning through habit formation and reinforcement.
- ❖ **NEP Application:** Accurate pronunciation and grammatical foundations in early years still require structured drill and practice.
- ❖ **Practicality:** Teachers utilize rhymes and repetitive linguistic patterns to instill basic literacy in the foundational years.

2. Cognitivism: Building on Existing Schemas

Cognitive theory posits that the brain processes new information by connecting it to existing mental structures (schemas).

- ❖ **The Theory:** Learning is an internal mental process where new data is categorized based on prior knowledge.
- ❖ **NEP Application:** The policy emphasizes teaching in the mother tongue to ensure that the "cognitive load" is minimized (Singh, 2025). When children learn in a familiar language, they can easily map new concepts onto their existing world knowledge.
- ❖ **Cognitive Benefits:** Research indicates that children in multilingual programs demonstrate enhanced executive functioning, including better cognitive flexibility and attention control.

3. Constructivism: The Student as an Explorer

Constructivism, supported by theorists like Piaget and Bruner, suggests that learners actively construct their own understanding (Nayak and Nayak, 2026).

- ❖ **The Theory:** Knowledge is not “given” but “built” through experience and reflection.
- ❖ **NEP Application:** The policy explicitly promotes inquiry-driven and experiential pedagogy (Nayak and Nayak, 2026). It encourages activity-based learning where students experiment with language through storytelling, role-play, and dialogue.

Vygotsky’s Socio-cultural theory and the Multilingual Classroom

Lev Vygotsky’s theories are central to the NEP-2020 vision of a socially interactive classroom.

1. The Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

The ZPD is the distance between what a learner can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance from a “More Knowledgeable Other” (Hinduja, 2021).

- ❖ **Scaffolding in Practice:** This involves a process where the teacher provides temporary support (explaining, questioning, summarizing) until the student can perform the task independently (Raslan, 2024; Alam and Zhu, 2022).
- ❖ **Impact:** Proper scaffolding leads to high levels of learning independence and improved problem-solving skills (Raslan, 2024).

2. Social Interaction and Peer Tutoring

Vygotsky argued that social dialogue is the primary tool for cognitive development.

- ❖ **NEP Relevance:** In a multilingual classroom, students from different linguistic backgrounds act as MKOs for one another (Elleuch, 2024).
- ❖ **Peer Learning:** By pairing students with varying linguistic proficiencies, learning becomes a collaborative “transaction” that is both fun and effective.

Stephen Krashen’s Input Hypothesis in the Indian Context

Stephen Krashen’s distinction between “learning” (conscious) and “acquisition” (subconscious) is a cornerstone of effective language pedagogy (Zeng, 2025).

1. Comprehensible Input (i+1)

Krashen suggests that we acquire language when we understand messages that are just one level above our current proficiency (i+1) (Namaziandost, Nasri, and Ziafar, 2019; Lin and Cai, 2025).

- ❖ **NEP Strategy:** The policy aims to make learning materials “engaging and accessible” rather than “burdensome” (Paul, 2026). By using localized and bilingual materials, teachers provide the necessary “i+1” input that challenges the student without overwhelming them.

2. The Affective Filter

If a student is anxious, bored, or lacks confidence, an “affective filter” blocks the input from reaching the brain (Zeng, 2025).

- ❖ **Stress-Free Learning:** NEP-2020 advocates for a safe environment where children can speak without fear of being judged for errors. Reducing stress ensures a “Low Affective Filter,” which is essential for successful language acquisition (Zeng, 2025).

Challenges and the Ground Reality

Despite the visionary nature of the policy, several systemic bottlenecks hinder implementation (Nayak and Nayak 2026).

1. Resource Constraints and Infrastructure

- ❖ **Material Shortage:** There is a significant lack of high-quality bilingual or multilingual textbooks and learning resources in many of India’s 270+ identified mother tongues (Shabnam and Kaushal, 2024; - 2023).
- ❖ **Digital Divide:** In rural areas, the lack of internet connectivity and digital literacy among both students and teachers limits the effectiveness of platforms like DIKSHA (Mangamma 2025).

2. Teacher Training and Preparation

Many educators are not yet trained in modern multilingual pedagogical methods or “Translanguaging” (Shabnam and Kaushal, 2024; Singh, 2025). Furthermore, there is a shortage of qualified regional language teachers to meet the policy’s requirements for instruction up to Grade 5 (Mangamma, 2025).

3. Socio-Cultural Resistance

There is a persistent “English-only” mindset among many parents, who view English as the sole key to the global economy and employment (Shabnam and Kaushal, 2024; Kasar, 2025). This socio-economic pressure often causes resistance to mother-tongue-based instruction, despite its proven cognitive benefits (Shabnam and Kaushal, 2024).

Strategic Solutions and the Path Forward

To bridge the gap between policy and practice, a multifaceted approach is required (Singh 2025).

- ❖ **Technological Integration:** Leveraging AI tools and digital apps can help deliver content in local languages where human resources are scarce (Mangamma, 2025; Singh, 2025).

- ❖ **Community Engagement:** Involving local communities and parents in school activities can help revitalize indigenous languages and change perceptions about multilingualism (Singh 2025; Paul, 2026).
- ❖ **Policy Flexibility:** Implementation must be flexible and culturally responsive, allowing for localized curricula that reflect the specific needs of rural and urban learners (Singh, 2025; Paul, 2026).
- ❖ **Increased Funding:** Achieving the target of investing 6% of GDP in education is essential to build the necessary infrastructure and support teacher training programs (Mangamma, 2025).

CONCLUSION: THE ECLECTIC APPROACH

There is no “magic bullet” for language teaching. Instead, NEP-2020 invites us to adopt an *Eclectic Approach*—one that combines the discipline of behaviorist practice, the mental scaffolding of cognitivism, the discovery of constructivism, and the social warmth of Vygotskian interaction (Paul 2026). By fostering a generation that is deeply rooted in its cultural identity while globally competent in languages like English, India can truly position its learners on the global stage (Nivedita 2025; Kasar, 2025).

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