NEP 2020, Regional Language and Vocational Education

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Abstract: This paper looks at the need to address the issue of using English as the language of assessment in vocational programmes. Whereas the practical component may be assessed in a regional language, the theory component is assessed by the assessing agencies in English and so may prove to be an obstacle in properly assessing the learning outcomes of skill-based courses. Therefore, vocational education might deter students with low proficiency in the English language and thus might not become a viable option for them.

Keywords: NEP 2020, vocational education, medium of instruction, mother tongue, Low English Proficiency, skill development.

One of the guiding principles listed out in the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 is "promoting multilingualism and the power of language in teaching and learning." [i] This objective is given in the policy to address "some of the major problems currently faced by higher education institutions" namely, "Limited access particularly in socio-economic and disadvantaged areas, with few higher education institutions that teach in local languages." [ii]

This recommendation of the NEP 2020 advocating the mother tongue or regional language to be the medium of instruction for at least the primary or secondary levels is not new. The report of the Kothari Commission on Education and National Development as also the Right to Education Act 2009 had also emphasized on the mother language as medium of instruction in school education.

However, implementation has been another thing. Enrollment even in rural India is more in private English medium schools as compared to government aided schools that have the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Nevertheless, learning in the mother language can be implemented wherever possible.

A child begins learning to express itself in the mother tongue. It is the first language that a child learns from the conversations of the family members and others around her. Children learn languages and internalize its grammatical structures by way of communicating in the language with their family members, friends and peers. If a child is suddenly made to learn in a language completely new to her, which she has had no exposure to; she is bound to be confused. Early learning can best take place in one's mother tongue.

It is also true that if a child is within an environment where more than one language is spoken at home and around her, she learns the other language even acquiring a good command over the different syntax structure of the other. It is clear that a person can easily learn a language when it is the language of communication around her.

Such opportunities are lacking in most Indian rural and semi-urban towns and for most learners the mother tongue is the only or the main language spoken around them. In such a scenario it is better that learning different subjects in school takes place in that language which the learner is comfortable in, along with a second or third language taught through the medium of the mother tongue. For such learners, the learning outcomes would be better if they have English as a second language (ESL) than being learn-by-rote learners in fully English medium schools. Parents' participation in their children's learning is also enhanced. This will foster concept understanding, meaningful learning, and improvement in self esteem as also reduced dropouts among school children. However, parents in general perceive that education through the English medium is a guarantee to a better life and career. More often than not children lose out in understanding concepts and gaining competencies. Thus the urgent need to focus on the skill development needs of students has come to the fore.

Low English language proficiency is one of the reasons for dropouts in higher education as well. Prof. M. P. Punia, Vice Chairman, AICTE listed out the industry observations about engineering graduates in the country[iii] most of which are related to lack of application of knowledge to real life situations and can be inferred as being due to low language proficiencies and practical training. The NEP 2020 has rightly sought to "re-imagine vocational education" in the country [iv] aiming it to be socially perceived as on par with traditional academic education.

The introduction of vocational education or skill education programs in India began with the implementation of National Skill Qualification Framework (NSQF) through institutions of Higher Education. This is an opportunity to bridge the skill gap of learners and catering to requirements in various industry sectors of our country thereby improving employability of our youth.

However, skill development needs to be looked at differently for youth with low English proficiency. Vocational education provides skills and knowledge needed to work in a particular occupation. It is in sync with the requirements of the job market. It will now fast become a part of our higher education system with the implementation of the NEP. The vocational degree programmes initially aimed especially to accord an

opportunity for vertical mobility for students who opt for vocational electives at the secondary or higher secondary level. With mechanisms for equivalence and lateral entry options in the new policy, students from the non - vocational programmes will also be able to opt for entry to skill based programmes. Providing training for specific skills will require to impart practical skills in the core trade as also soft skills so that candidates are job ready. Vocational training gives hands on learning experiences so that students understand concepts and can operate at the level of the specific job roles in their trade.

Now for a learner with low English proficiency, the vocational training is a good option provided it adopts the regional language as a mode of instruction and assessment. Otherwise, these students are likely to lag behind here too, like in the traditional theory based system of mainstream education. The core competences need to be delivered and assessed in the regional or local language for higher educational institutions with such student profile. They can be skilled and work on the regional level and also be successful entrepreneurs. Proficient students can move on to higher levels. The NEP does aim to increase the GER in higher education including vocational education through instruction in local languages or bilingually. For a learner set where the gaps with regards to core skills intersect with low proficiency in English, assessment needs to be reconsidered. Multilingual assessments are an option. For improvement in employment and entrepreneurship we cannot afford to leave out the rural youth or the ones with low language proficiencies.

If mechanisms for these can be generated, we can attain the objectives of the NEP and targets set out for the SDG 4 that is, "ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."[v] Higher education institutions, teachers, the NSDC and industry partners need to take up the challenge to provide learning resources, digital content and assessment mechanisms in regional languages. This is not an easy task but needs to be done to leverage our demographic advantage lest we lose out on many of our aspirants.

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[i] https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf p 33, accessed 15/05/2022.

[ii] https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf.

[iii] UGC's Consultative Meeting on Implementation of NHEQF with Vice- Chancellors on 25th May, 22. https://youtu.be/u-sdpd2w7vk accessed 26/05/2022.

[iv] https://www.education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf pp 43-44, accessed 15/05/2022.

[v]https://www.unoosa.org/oosa/en/ourwork/space4sdgs/sdg4.html#:~:text=Sustainable%20Development%20Goal%204%20aims,and%20secondary%20schooling%20by%202030 accessed 24/05/2022.