



ISSN: 3049-3978 (Online)

Interdisciplinary Perspectives of Education

Contents available at: <https://www.swamivivekanandauniversity.ac.in/ipe/>

EDUCATION IN MOTHER TONGUE VERSUS ENGLISH MEDIUM IN INDIA: A DISCOURSE

Shabnam¹

¹ Ph.D. Scholar (Senior Research Fellow), Department of Teacher Training and Non-Formal Education, IASE, Faculty of Education, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi,
Email: shabnamnaaz00@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper provides a critical analysis of the recent advisory or directive issued by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), which recommends the mother tongue or regional language as the medium of instruction at the primary level. The advisory not only reopens the long-standing debate over the language of instruction in India but also questions whether maintaining English as the medium of instruction in primary schools aligns with social inclusion and educational equity. This article is a comparative review of five key opinion pieces authored by Shambhavi Gupta – Educationist and Child Language Policy Expert, Bengaluru; Shailaja Menon – Professor, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru; Anurag Behar – CEO, Azim Premji Foundation; Peggy Mohan – linguist and writer, New Delhi; and Krishan Kumar – former Director, National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT); Professor, Department of Education, University of Delhi. The research concludes that in a multilingual country like India, mother tongue-based education is essential not only for child-centred learning but also as a crucial step towards building an inclusive and equitable education system. The article ultimately provides policymakers with practical guidance on implementing multilingual education effectively.

Keywords: CBSE, Multilingual Education, Mother Tongue, English Medium, Language Policy, Equality in Education, Teaching Methods

1. Introduction

A mother tongue is the language that children learn from their family, culture and region. Mills (1993) defined it as the language primarily spoken at home. It is essential that during the early years, education should be provided in the native language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; Walter, 2010). A mother tongue is associated with the personal, social, and cultural identity of children (UNESCO, 2016). The controversy over the medium of instruction is not new in India, as it is in linguistically diverse across the world, with more than 22 officially recognised languages and many more dialects. But English has retained a distinct position as a language of aspiration, power and social mobility over the decades. The Radhakrishnan Commission (1948), Mudaliar Commission (1952-53), Kothari Commission (1964-66), National Policy on Education (1986) and the Knowledge Commission (2005) have all suggested that education in the mother tongue be provided at an early age, usually at the primary school level. The recent (2025) advisory by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), which suggested the use of mother tongue or regional language as a medium of instruction in the early years of education of children, has once again brought the national debate to the fore. This decision has elicited responses from different scholars and academics. Is the move by CBSE to switch to the mother tongue in place of English in line with the fast-changing knowledge-based society? Is it better to teach preparatory education in English to enable students to compete with the rest of the world? or in their native language to enhance their basic knowledge and identity? The scholar presented their own perspectives on this complicated problem, which emphasize various aspects of it.

2. Constitutional Context

According to the Census of 1971, 2001 and 2011, India has five language families, namely Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burman and Sino-Tibetan. The Constitution of India lists 22 languages as the major languages of the country. Articles 343-351 of Part XVII of the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India address the issues of the languages of the country. Article 343 (1) states that the official language of the Union shall be Hindi written in the Devanagari script. Although Hindi is the most spoken language, it is not the national language of India, but the official language. Article 343 (2) states that English shall be used in official purposes.

3. Police's Perspectives on Medium of Instruction

India's educational policies are committed towards linguistic and cultural diversity. In 1957, the Government of India adopted the three-language formula, and a framework for structuring language in education was established. The National Education Policy 1968 gave weight to the usage of mother tongue or regional language as a medium of instruction in foundational schools. It advocates for providing education in a child's native language, particularly during the early stages of development, to enhance the quality of teaching and establish a strong foundation. The Education described this vision of the three-language formula repeated in National Policy on Education (1986), emphasising the importance of the mother tongue in developing understanding, thinking and overall academic performance of the children. The National Education Policy NEP 2020 reaffirmed the role of mother tongue as a medium of instruction and suggested that mother tongue should be used at least up to Grade 5, with a preference for Grade 8 and above, if possible. This approach will appreciate the cognitive advantages, also emphasising the importance of preserving India's rich linguistic and cultural heritage.

4. Objectives of the Study

- i. To critically examine the emerging argument on whether to teach children in their mother tongue or in the English language at the lower level of education in India.
- ii. To examine the Current Debate concerning mother tongue medium instruction.

5. Need and Significance of the Study.

In a multilingual nation such as India, the medium of instruction is as much a choice of language as it is a matter of social inclusion, equity in education and cultural belonging. English has been considered the language of progress over the decades, resulting in the separation and exclusion of children belonging to disadvantaged sections of society from education. This has been a debate since the new advisory that was issued by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) in 2025, recommending the use of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in primary education. There is a need to undertake this research because there is a wide gap between policy on language education in India and the practices happening at the school level. This research aims to highlight this gap. In reviewing the views of prominent scholars and writers, this attempts to interpret the social, pedagogical and

political justifications that favour or disfavour mother-tongue-based education. The study indicates the relevance of considering language diversity as an opportunity, but not a problem. By teaching children in their first language, they will become more involved in learning, become more confident and have the same opportunities. The paper provides practical tips to policymakers, teacher trainers, and institutions to adopt mother-tongue-based education successfully. In conclusion, the study not only puts the problem of language at the centre of attention but also offers valuable input into the field of democracy, inclusiveness, and quality learning in education.

6. Methodology

In this research, the methodology of qualitative content analysis has been used. It aims to draw thematic comparisons of concepts expressed by various writers to comprehend the social, academic, and political sectors of the argument between the mother tongue and the English medium. Five of the biggest news articles/opinion articles published in May 2025-July 2025 were chosen to be analysed. The articles were analysed using four main parameters: pedagogical efficacy, Sociolinguistic impact, the Political history of language policy (including policy and power dynamics), and Practical implementation challenges. Such methodology will assist the researcher to compare concepts, the effects of policy, and the intricacies of education based on language in a multilingual state such as India.

7. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Shambhavi Gupta

Mother tongue is necessary for elementary education.

In one of the government schools of Delhi, Class 3 students were given an option to select the language they would want to study. The response was in one's own language. When students communicate in their mother tongue, they feel more confident and manage to express their knowledge more effectively. Regrettably, many students are trained in English from the very beginning—a language they do not use at home as well as in the community. They struggle with words rather than understanding the material, which makes them feel insecure and unable to learn. It is good that the new CBSE directive, which requires the mother tongue or local language to be taught at the elementary level, is welcome. These directives reflect the National Education Policy 2020 and the recommendations of UNESCO, according to which education in the mother tongue plays a vital role in the understanding of the child, the

processes of his learning and social-emotional development. When taught in their native language, children comprehend more, and their capacity to think, ask questions, and learn with self-confidence also increases. In Bengaluru, children taught in their mother tongue performed better in maths and language compared to those taught in English. However, others argue that the shift will only continue to disadvantage children in underprivileged sectors, as they will miss out on English. But studies indicate that when the foundation of the mother tongue is firm to begin with, subsequently learning the English language becomes easier.

Nonetheless, some people argue that the decision will further disadvantage children in underprivileged sectors by denying them access to English. Yet study shows that it is easier to learn English later, when there is a good knowledge of the mother tongue at the initial stages.

In a multilingual world, as in India, where the child has one language at home, the second language in the community and the third in the school, not only is the neglect of the mother-tongue educationally wrong, but also a disrespect to linguistic and cultural diversity. It is not an issue of learning English, but teaching in the same manner in the beginning. Language is not an end in itself. Education at the primary level should be taught in a language that children are familiar with and can identify with. The languages of children need to have a presence in education, not only to make education equal but also to achieve social justice.

Shailaja Menon

A couple of days ago, one of the drivers told me: Ma'am, we do not know English, but our children attend an English-medium school, because they want to have a promising future. This type of thinking is not limited to an individual. Millions of parents in India perceive English as a tool to enrich their children, to be socially respected and able to access opportunities. They believe that English can open up the future for their children. They advocate that children be educated in their native language, particularly till the third grade. We must recognise that India is a multilingual nation. Different languages are practised in the home, society and in school. Already, many families have children who are learning two or three languages. What is your native language? Some families speak Hindi, some Urdu, some Telugu and some tribal languages. There are also cases where, in one house, there are different languages spoken. In this situation, it does not always mean that one can choose only one mother tongue. In addition, the current society is global. Students want to have local

opportunities but also want to establish a mark nationally and internationally. That's why English is usually compulsory, as it's required in college, competitive exams, or even job opportunities. Naturally, young children are supposed to be taught a language that they can understand and refer to their own experiences. However, we ought to remember that children can easily alternate between languages, as long as they are presented with the right environment and manner.

Anurag Behar

On May 22, the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) issued a directive. In some newspaper articles and opinion articles, there was a vehement opposition to this directive, but this objection was essentially false. In its directive, BSE has recommended the mother tongue as a language of instruction in primary education. It is necessary to mention first that the instruction in the first language of children, L1, must be used as the language of instruction. This may be the mother tongue, but not necessarily so. It is the first language that the child feels comfortable in. Children learn with more confidence when they read in a language that they know. They find the processes of reading, writing and thinking natural. Children need to be taught literacy in their first language (L1), next in their second language (L2), and finally in their third language (L3). After the child is literate in L1 and L2, other languages can be employed in various subjects too. This CBSE directive has been given in a comprehension of the multilingual situation in India. It is an effort to use the language of children and select the medium language in accordance with children. It also embraces the multilingual challenge, without causing new problems. Many critics have accused it of either removing English or pushing it down its priority list. That is a misunderstanding, however, as the following shows: The idea of this policy is not to eliminate English, but to give the children a solid basis in the language that they are used to first. Whenever children are taught in the language they understand, they read and write faster and can think more deeply. They can then learn other languages (English) later.

The purpose of the CBSE directive is to foster a multilingual culture rather than impose a single language. For instance, Class 1 students in Mangalore, Karnataka, may speak either Konkani or Tulu, but also know Kannada. English may be a foreign language and sometimes a complex one to them when it is selected as the mode of instruction. Kannada is well understood, making it a better medium. This is the general case in India. There are few English-speaking people in most parts. It is, however, mostly taken as the primary medium of instruction, hence affecting the learning of children. The strategy of CBSE is informed by

research and experience in the teaching of languages - a move towards understanding and inclusiveness. In the forthcoming years, the medium of instruction in schools will be predominantly Indian and local languages, Union Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan said. Institutes of higher education, such as IITs, are offering courses in regional languages, including engineering. There is continued emphasis on the provision of books in Indian languages. In the case of students from rural or economically less privileged backgrounds, technology can aid in making them comprehend the material in a language they find more comfortable.

Peggy Mohan

We have reached the point of inflection. Individuals who feel not confident enough with the English language are now keen on participating in the discussion. The other parts of the world, Africa, South America, Central America, East Asia and South-East Asia, are moving towards a new future, whilst India seems to have come to a halt. A few years ago, we had hoped to expand our role in India. Play on the international scene. But we did not get there. Why is this so? When we compare ourselves with other developing nations, we feel that we are not doing as much. We embrace the models that the developed world has established, and we believe that this is the way a modern nation ought to be.

But now I sense that translation is the focus of most of the energy in India. The government policy does not drive it, but the ordinary people are moving this initiative. That is the most thrilling part. All of a sudden, I'm now being invited to talks, podcasts, and the launches of new Hindi books. I have been assured that even when I pause in the process of speaking in Hindi, I will have the opportunity to express myself and share the boundaries of our linguistic lives. Diglossia is a form of bilingualism where two or more languages are used at the same time to perform different tasks. One is a high (English) language, the language of science, maths and power, whereas the other is a low language, used to raise children, and the language of the poor. Science and technical education in India were required to use the English medium. Language was believed not only to be a means of reading and speaking, but it was also a symbol of modernity, namely an ideology. But now that these languages have made it back into the limelight, they have definitely proven themselves. They did not die out, but they gave people who never had an opportunity before to become thinkers and inventors.

Krishan Kumar

The move by the CBSE to ensure that the mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction in the lower grades requires structural modifications and independence in the classroom.

The recent announcement by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) to use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in the initial school years is significant news. In case this decision is taken seriously in schools, it will have numerous impacts. There is now a need to introduce multilingualism in education. It is valid to ask, how will a child be able to learn a language he has not heard before? However, CBSE is a vast organisation, yet its suggestions are not binding. Nevertheless, this directive will prompt schools to reconsider their educational methods. Also, this ruling means that anything that had been done up till then was not right.

Effects of English Supremacy

The CBSE ruling adopts the multilingualism concept in India. Nevertheless, it is not a simple task to change the system that gives preference to English in education. English has not been solely dominant, but it is a worldwide language. Power and privileges have been preserved, a process that has been ongoing throughout history. English has also introduced a social divide, especially in schools, where there is an impression that only those who can learn in English can get an education. English dominance in our country is such that poor parents would also like their children to be educated in English. They can afford to pay a high cost to it even when they realise that their children will not learn much in school.

Mother tongue

The new advisory of CBSE lays stress on the mother tongue. Nevertheless, its potential gains will materialise only given the assumption that there will be more than one language within the same class. An example is that in Delhi, a class can be composed of Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, and Bengali language backgrounds. Mother-tongue-based teaching depends on the recognition of this diversity. We must also recognise that children from dominant linguistic groups have historically had an advantage over others. The new policy will only be successful when it manages to respond to this disparity.

Teachers & Curriculum

Many teachers are faced with the challenge of teaching children of other language backgrounds in the same classroom. This is not an impossible task to accomplish. The acceptance of the languages used by the children and their use in school by teachers benefits all children, including the children whose mother tongue is English. Multilingual teaching

presupposes that children have languages that teachers should regard as a learning resource rather than a liability.

The language of power

It has now become a socially accepted belief that English is the language that will bring about progress and prosperity. It is an inheritance of colonialism. The English do not have any political power, but they have social power. It is this strength that forces schools to lean towards English. The policy of CBSE can only be successful when it shatters the myth that education can only be imparted in English.

8. Key Findings

- i. Education in the mother tongue is natural and effective for children. Shambhavi Gupta and Anurag Behar believed that early years of learning in the mother tongue will improve comprehension, congruency and speed of learning.
- ii. Multilingualism must be viewed as an asset, not as a liability - Anurag Behar and Krishan Kumar pointed out that diverse-language classrooms are inclusive and democratising.
- iii. It is not feasible to eliminate English- Shailaja Menon and Peggy Mohan are of the view that English in social reality is a language of aspiration and opportunity; change cannot come too fast and without resources.
- iv. The policy is different from the actual ground reality. All authors admitted that, even in the case of the most progressive language policy, it is not possible to conduct effective implementation without strengthening the processes of teacher training, textbook development, and local adaptation.
- v. The real issue is not language but quality - Krishan Kumar specifically mentioned that it works out that the quality of education in English medium schools is also not so good. Thus, the reform will not take place by altering the medium alone, but by changing the methodology of teaching.

9. Discussion

The controversy surrounding the medium of language in India extends beyond tools to encompass aspects of balance, social setup, and power dynamics. The presence of a mother tongue in the CBSE directives aims to enhance cognitive ability and counter

the influence of an English-dominant society. This paper explored the views of five authors regarding the interactions between language, culture and education, and does not attempt to jump to premature conclusions. Shambhavi Gupta and Anurag Behar are also adamant that a child learns more than academics; he also learns about cultural identity and self-esteem. Learning in their language evokes more attachment to school. Krishan Kumar observes that English creates a power structure in schools, and it is in the interest of certain groups. Peggy Mohan notes that English has changed in terms of social value, and its unquestioned usage may endanger the Indian culture, which is diverse. Shailaja Menon complicates this by posing questions on how mother-tongue education can be adopted when the parents are fond of using English as the language. The researchers note that policy must take into consideration not only scientific data but also the opinion of the people. All authors concur that teacher training, curriculum and method used in assessment must be consistent with the new framework of language to have successful language policies.

10. Recommendations

In a multilingual society like India, the following recommendations are presented to make education more inclusive, effective and equitable:

Special training on multilingual pedagogy (e.g., translanguaging, code-switching) should be provided in all teacher training institutes, so that teachers can utilise linguistic diversity as a valuable resource in the classroom.

Textbook and academic content development in local languages

Educational publishing houses often produce good-quality textbooks, workbooks, and digital resources in the major languages of the region; this should be made available by the NCERT and the state education boards.

English should be taught as a subject, not as a medium.

English should be taught as an additional language at the primary level. At the same time, the medium of instruction should be the child's mother tongue or regional language, allowing their bilingual ability to develop gradually.

Schools should be given flexibility according to the local linguistic context, all schools should be given autonomy to make medium decisions based on their region, community and linguistic background of the students.

Participation of parents and the community should be increased.

A dialogue should be held with parents to raise awareness of the benefits of mother-tongue-based education, thereby fostering support and trust at the social level. The government and policymakers must ensure that, regardless of the language medium, there is no compromise in the quality, resources, and ability of teachers.

11. Conclusion

The new directives of CBSE are not only a change of language policy; they require a change in the philosophy of education. Effective implementation of mother-tongue-based education can be an essential step towards improving academic performance and also creating social justice, cultural pride and equality of opportunity. But this should be done in collaboration with the teaching community, curriculum specialists and schools. This policy, when properly implemented, can make education more inclusive, fair and effective.

Studies indicate that mother tongue-based education is not solely a language substitution process but an essential aspect of educational justice, child-centred learning and cultural participation. Concurrently, it is imperative to remember that it is not possible to eliminate English in general; it must be taught as a subject, not as a medium of instruction. The insights expressed by the authors also reveal that language policy will not have much effect unless teachers, parents, and communities actively embrace it. Policy offers a sense of direction, but real change occurs when we all work together. It takes place through the teacher. Hence, with the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of India, which speak different languages and have different cultures, there is a necessity for a flexible, multilingual, and accommodating language policy that can not only make children successful in academic life but also promote their identity, self-esteem, and learning skills.

References

- Annamalai, E. (2001). *Managing Multilingualism in India: Political and Linguistic Manifestations*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000129728>
- Behar, Anurag. (10 June 2025). *Education in Mother Tongue: A Late Corrective Step*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/>

- Gupta, Shambhavi, & Menon, Shailaja. (18 May 2025). *Should English be the medium of instruction?* (Dis/Agree column). The Times of India.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>
- Kumar, Krishna. (28 June 2025). *A multilingual classroom*. The Indian Express.
<https://indianexpress.com/>
- Mills, R. W. (1993). Introduction. In R. W. Mills & J. Mills (Eds.), *Bilingual education in the primary school: A handbook for teachers* Routledge.
- Mohan, Peggy. (2 July 2025). *The future is bilingual*—The Times of India.
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/>
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic genocide in education – or worldwide diversity and human rights?* Retrieved June 1, 2020, from <http://www.tove.skutnabb-kangas.org/en%20most%20recent%20books.htm>
- UNESCO. (2003). *Education in a Multilingual World*. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).
- UNESCO. (2016). *Global education monitoring report: Policy paper 24*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation.
<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000245614>