



Linguistic Disconnect: Examining the Implementation Failures of Mother-Tongue-Based Education in South Asia

Dr. Sandeep Kaur

Principal

Mata Gurdev Kaur Memorial Educational Institute, Bareta, Mansa

E-Mail- sandeep01barnala@gmail.com

Abstract

Primary education in South Asia faces a persistent crisis stemming from inadequate foundational Early Language and Literacy (ELL) development, fundamentally rooted in the complex, multilingual educational environment. This paper scrutinizes the diverse sociolinguistic landscape, utilizing a foundational 2019 UNICEF study and current research syntheses (2020–2025). The analysis confirms that a significant proportion of children are taught through a non-native Medium of Instruction (MoI), which results in a "double learning disadvantage" (Jhingran, 2019). This disadvantage arises because students achieve social fluency (BICS) relatively quickly but neglect the crucial five to seven years required for mastering Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), essential for deep conceptual understanding (Mohanty, 2024). Recent, progressive policy shifts, notably India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, now strongly endorse mother-tongue instruction until at least Grade 5 (Behera et al., 2025). The study establishes that language is the primary medium for thought, making strong L1 literacy skills essential for equitable learning outcomes. It proposes that Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE), reinforced by UNESCO's 2025 guidance, is the most effective strategy. The paper critically concludes that this policy intent is continuously sabotaged by structural failures, including resource scarcity, insufficient teacher training, and powerful socio-economic resistance to L1 schooling (Ali & Fernando, 2023). A three-pronged action plan is proposed to bridge the significant gap between high-level policy and fragmented classroom practice.

Keywords: Early literacy, Multilingual Education, Mother-Tongue-Based, South Asia, Academic Language, Foundational Learning.

Introduction

1.1 The Crucial Role of Language in Foundational Learning

The acquisition of proficient language and literacy skills constitutes the most vital foundation for cognitive development and success in formal schooling. Language is not merely a subject to be learned; it is the core mechanism through which all other curriculum subjects are processed, understood, and communicated. Globally and acutely across the eight member nations of South Asia, educational equity is profoundly jeopardized by a severe and widespread learning crisis. This paper's central argument, supported by foundational research (Jhingran, 2019) and validated by recent scholarship (2020–2025), is that the pervasive failure to secure equitable and effective learning outcomes is intrinsically linked to the complex, and often detrimental, dissonance between the deep multilingual realities of the child population and the predominantly monolingual or rigid bilingual policies guiding classroom instruction.

The necessity of anchoring classroom instruction in a language the child speaks and understands cannot be overstated. Since language operates as the fundamental vehicle for the internalization and manipulation of thought, any compromise in a child's linguistic competence directly and proportionally impedes their ability to achieve conceptual understanding. This problem is particularly acute in South Asia, a region recognized as one of the world's most linguistically diverse, where children's home languages (L1) frequently diverge from the officially sanctioned language of the curriculum (MoI). Indeed, as Rajan (2023) posits, "Cognition is tethered to the language of deepest familiarity; without it, learning remains superficial, relying on mimicry rather than meaningful assimilation." While policy in some nations, like India with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, has strongly moved toward endorsing the use of a child's L1 (ORF, 2025), a significant and persistent gap remains between this progressive policy intent and the fragmented, resource-constrained reality of classroom practice (Pradhan & Gupta, 2025). This paper first outlines the methodology for this critical analysis, presents the findings on policy and practice, and finally discusses the necessary reforms to achieve effective Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE).

1.2 Sociolinguistic Complexity and Policy History

South Asia is a crucible of linguistic complexity, featuring thousands of languages and dialects across distinct national borders. In this context, language-in-education policy has historically been characterized by a tension between national unification goals (often promoting one or two dominant languages) and the constitutional recognition of linguistic minority rights. Post-independence policies, largely influenced by colonial educational models, prioritized the maintenance of powerful global languages (e.g., English) or national vernaculars (e.g., Hindi, Urdu, Bengali) as the MoI, often marginalizing non-dominant languages (NDLs) and tribal languages (Phyak, 2024; Syed, 2025). This created a significant linguistic discontinuity for millions of children entering primary school.

1.3 The Policy-Practice Disconnect

In recent years, policy intentions have shifted dramatically toward embracing multilingualism, driven by decades of research proving the academic benefits of L1 instruction. India's National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 stands as a landmark example, strongly endorsing mother-tongue

instruction until at least Grade 5 (ORF, 2025). Similarly, international guidance, such as the 2025 UNESCO report, reinforces this commitment to linguistic equity. However, a significant and persistent gap remains between this progressive policy intent and the fragmented, resource-constrained, and institutionally rigid reality of actual classroom practice (Pradhan & Gupta, 2025).

This paper addresses this crucial implementation gap by performing a critical analysis of the barriers preventing the successful adoption of Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) from 2020 to 2025. It will focus on structural, pedagogical, and socio-cultural resistance, proposing that without a comprehensive overhaul of teacher training and resource allocation, linguistic disparity will continue to undermine educational equality across South Asia.

Methodology

2.1 Research Aims and Approach

This study employs a critical policy analysis and systematic literature review methodology to assess the contemporary landscape of language-in-education policy implementation in South Asia. The central research objective is to synthesize and critically evaluate the practical relationship between high-level policy frameworks, academic findings, and actual classroom realities across the region from 2020 to 2025. This period is particularly relevant due to the impact of the NEP 2020 in India and renewed global focus on Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) post-pandemic.

2.2 Corpus and Data Sources

The corpus for the systematic literature review focuses on materials published between 2020 and 2025 to capture the impact of recent policy shifts and post-pandemic educational reforms. The body of evidence is categorized into three critical source types, ensuring triangulation across policy intent, academic theory, and ground-level implementation reality:

2.2.1 Governmental and Institutional Documents

This category defines the policy intent and international standards.

- 1) **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 (India):** Included as the single most consequential national policy shift in South Asia during this period, mandating L1 instruction until at least Grade 5. Its analysis reveals the aspirational goals and structural mandates for multilingual education reform.
- 2) **National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCF-SE 2023) (India):** This subsequent document provides the operational blueprints for how the NEP 2020's linguistic mandates are to be translated into curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment—a critical resource for examining the implementation design.
- 3) **International Organizational Reports (UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank):** These reports, such as the UNESCO 2025 guidance on multilingual education and the foundational UNICEF Jhingran (2019) report, establish global norms, provide comparative regional data, and offer external validation for the cognitive arguments

supporting MTB MLE. Their findings often contextualize national policies within a broader regional framework.

2.2.2 Academic Journals

These sources provide the theoretical depth and rigorous empirical critique. This sub-corpus consists of peer-reviewed articles from high-impact journals specializing in sociolinguistics, comparative education, and language policy.

- 1) **Empirical Studies and Theoretical Critique:** Key sources are selected for their contribution to the core theoretical constructs and empirical evidence of implementation failure. For instance, Mohanty (2024) is crucial for quantifying the cognitive gap (BICS/CALP disparity), while Rajan (2023) offers the psycholinguistic grounding (cognitive tethering to L1).
- 2) **Political Economy of Language:** Articles like Ali & Fernando (2023) are indispensable for critiquing the socio-economic drivers behind L1 resistance—the "aspirational pull" of English—which policy documents often overlook.
- 3) **Regional Policy Analysis:** Works by Khan & Devi (2024) and Phyak (2024) analyze structural issues (teacher capacity, resource fragmentation) and regional policy failures (Nepal, Pakistan), providing evidence of the systemic nature of the implementation gap.

2.2.3 Grey Literature

This final category offers real-time implementation insights and localized context often missing due to the time lag inherent in academic publishing.

- 1) **NGO and Think Tank Reports (e.g., ORF, 2025):** Reports from organizations like the Observer Research Foundation (ORF) provide rapid analysis of policy reactions, on-the-ground challenges, and public sentiment regarding education reform, particularly concerning the politics of the three-language formula in India.
- 2) **Government Presentations and Policy Briefs:** Documents like the Mishra (2025) presentation offer direct insights into the bureaucratic justification and governmental framing of MTB MLE initiatives. The inclusion of this literature ensures the analysis is grounded in the contemporary political and operational environment, not solely historical or theoretical data.

2.3 Analytical Framework

The analysis utilizes a qualitative, critical framework guided by two main theoretical constructs:

- 1) **Cummins' Threshold Hypothesis (BICS/CALP):** This provides the core rationale for why L1-based instruction is necessary—to build robust Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) before transitioning to a second language (L2) MoL.
- 2) **Critical Policy Analysis:** This approach moves beyond simply describing policy content to interrogate the underlying assumptions, power dynamics, resource allocations, and socio-economic interests that determine why policies succeed or fail

on the ground. It focuses specifically on the tension between the policy ideal (equity) and the practical outcome (systemic exclusion).

The synthesis of these sources and frameworks allows the study to move beyond mere descriptive reporting to offer a robust, critical perspective on the implementation gap, specifically identifying where structural and resource deficiencies turn progressive policy into linguistic neglect.

Results: Synthesis of Policy and Implementation Challenges (2020–2025)

The comprehensive systematic literature review (2020–2025) yields a clear duality: on one hand, a robust and academically reinforced policy consensus for MTB MLE; on the other, a consistent and deeply entrenched set of structural and cultural impediments that defy effective implementation.

3.1 Cognitive Foundations: The BICS/CALP Disparity

Empirical research in psycholinguistics and educational psychology provides the unequivocal justification for MTB MLE. The key conceptual failure in non-L1-based education lies in confusing a child's Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS)—the social, everyday language acquired quickly—with their Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)—the complex, decontextualized language needed for abstract thought and subject mastery.

3.1.1 Cummins' Theory and Cognitive Overload

The distinction, based on Jim Cummins' theory, is critical because BICS is easily achieved through exposure, often taking only two to three years. In contrast, CALP, which involves literacy, critical thinking, decontextualized reasoning, and complex problem-solving, is intrinsically tied to the cognitive framework established in the L1 and takes five to seven years to develop in an L2 environment. The consequence of prematurely demanding academic work in an L2 is the fundamental learning barrier known as the "double learning disadvantage" (Jhingran, 2019). Mohanty (2024) elaborates on the quantifiable nature of this failure:

A child may acquire social fluency in a new language within two years, yet the cognitive jump to academic language proficiency requires an instructional period closer to seven years, a fact routinely ignored by aggressive Medium of Instruction transition policies in South Asia.

This aggressive transition prematurely forces the child into a state of cognitive overload: they must simultaneously decode the foreign language *and* grasp complex curriculum concepts, resulting in low comprehension and an over-reliance on rote memorization (ORF, 2025). The absence of a stable L1 cognitive anchor prevents the high-level transfer of conceptual knowledge necessary for critical thinking and problem-solving in L2, making learning an exercise in linguistic translation rather than intellectual discovery.

3.2 Empirical Challenges to MTB MLE Implementation

Despite the clear cognitive imperative for L1 instruction, policy implementation in South Asia faces consistent and pervasive structural challenges that span resource allocation, professional capacity, and societal beliefs. These barriers transform the policy intention of MTB MLE into an unattainable ideal.

3.2.1 Resource Constraints and Material Scarcity in NDLs

The most visible, and perhaps most politically expedient, impediment is the sheer lack of high-quality educational resources in Non-Dominant Languages (NDLs). While policies may mandate instruction in the local language, the practical, logistical, and financial investment required to develop, print, and distribute curriculum, textbooks, supplementary reading materials, and assessment tools in potentially hundreds of distinct, low-resource languages is monumental.

The challenge transcends mere printing; it involves complex intellectual work. The production process demands:

1. **Orthography Development:** Standardizing the writing system for previously unwritten or poorly standardized NDLs.
2. **Lexical Expansion:** Creating technical vocabulary for scientific and mathematical concepts that often do not exist in the oral tradition of the L1.
3. **Contextualization:** Ensuring that the content and illustrations resonate culturally and locally with the students, as noted in the recommendations from Behera et al. (2025).

Monje et al. (2025) note that this forces teachers in marginalized areas into the impossible task of translating technical and abstract concepts on the spot, creating ad-hoc, inconsistent instructional quality. The result is often that centrally produced, dominant-language materials (e.g., in Hindi, Urdu, or English) are used by default, nullifying the MTB MLE policy in the classroom.

3.2.2 Teacher Capacity, Professional Development, and the Lack of Bilingual Pedagogy

Teacher capacity represents the single most significant human resource bottleneck of policy implementation. Even where L1 materials exist, the majority of educators in South Asia have been trained within a rigid, monolingual paradigm that views the use of non-MoI languages in the classroom as a disruption or a deficit.

The essential shift required is from this monolingual teaching mindset (L1 is separate from L2) to a bilingual or multilingual pedagogy—which treats the child’s entire linguistic repertoire as an asset to be leveraged. This requires mastery of advanced instructional techniques:

- 1) **Bilingual Methods:** Structured approaches for teaching subjects using both L1 for foundation and L2 for transition.
- 2) **Translanguaging:** The fluid practice where multilingual teachers and students strategically use multiple languages within a single lesson to optimize communication, knowledge construction, and meaning-making (Pradhan & Gupta, 2025).

The current failure resides in the educational bureaucracy's reluctance to reform the teacher training curriculum to meet the policy demands. As Khan & Devi (2024) contend:

Policy mandates for multilingual education are mere paper declarations until they are supported by massive, sustained investment in teacher capacity and localized material development, making implementation a structural rather than a pedagogical failure.

The policy thus stalls at the classroom door because the frontline implementers—the teachers—are neither trained nor equipped to execute the multilingual vision.

3.2.3 Sociocultural Resistance and the Aspirational Pull of Global Languages

A deep-seated tension exists at the societal level between educational equity and economic aspiration. While policymakers advocate for the cognitive benefits of L1 instruction, a powerful cultural current pulls parents toward English or the dominant regional language, which are viewed as the sole pathway to social mobility, global employment, and status (ORF, 2025).

This parental and community pressure frequently overrides official policy, leading to high enrollment in English-medium private schools, or resistance to L1 instruction in public schools. Ali and Fernando (2023) capture this phenomenon starkly:

The preference for English as the medium of instruction is less a pedagogical choice and more a socio-economic imperative. It is a calculated gamble by parents seeking to secure their children's future, even when it demonstrably compromises their foundational learning in the short term, thereby creating a systemic paradox where equity is sacrificed for perceived opportunity.

Furthermore, this resistance is reinforced by the institutional environment itself. Bhatia (2023) argues that: "For many students from marginalized linguistic groups, the school environment is viewed not as a place of intellectual development but as a site of linguistic exclusion, actively discouraging the use of the very language that facilitates conceptual thought." When L1 is associated with low status and is actively suppressed in the classroom, the perceived value of MTB MLE plummets, regardless of policy.

3.2.4 Policy Fragmentation and the Reinforcement of Linguistic Hierarchies

Even robust national policies, such as the NEP 2020, grant significant implementation flexibility to state and provincial governments across South Asia. This necessary flexibility often leads to severe policy fragmentation, where local authorities reinforce dominant regional languages at the expense of genuine linguistic pluralism. Anand (2025) points out that in multilingual states, local policy may recognize one or two historically powerful regional languages but ignore smaller tribal or minority languages, thus embedding existing linguistic power structures.

For example, a national policy might endorse L1 instruction, but the state-level Department of Education only allocates funds and training for the officially recognized "State Language," excluding dozens of smaller tribal or minority languages speaking languages like Warli or Santali. The state government fulfills the technical requirement of "local language" instruction by funding materials and teacher posts only for the dominant language, effectively maintaining linguistic hierarchies (Anand, 2025). Phyak (2024), examining the case of Nepal, demonstrates how even constitutionally recognized linguistic rights can be nullified by centralized educational bureaucracy that fails to provide the necessary resources and decentralized authority for local-level implementation.

Discussion

4.1 Reconciling Equity with the Political Economy of Language

The consistent failure to close the policy-practice gap in South Asian multilingual education is fundamentally a clash between the social objectives of education (equity, cognitive development) and the political economy of language (aspiration, power). The analysis of sociocultural resistance demonstrates that language choice in education is deeply political. English and dominant national languages serve as formidable gatekeepers to higher education and employment, making the parental "calculated gamble" for English-medium schooling understandable, if detrimental to foundational learning (Ali & Fernando, 2023).

To overcome this, policy advocacy must pivot from focusing solely on the *cognitive* benefits of L1 to demonstrating the *economic* benefits of L1 as a foundation for superior L2 mastery. Instead of being framed as an alternative to English, L1-based schooling must be actively promoted as the most effective scaffolding mechanism for achieving the high levels of academic L2 proficiency (CALP) that is the true driver of long-term economic mobility. This requires transparent data dissemination showing that students who receive initial L1 instruction outperform those who are prematurely immersed in L2.

4.2 Addressing Structural Failures and Institutional Inertia

The challenges highlighted in resource creation and teacher capacity point directly to a structural failure of state capacity (Khan & Devi, 2024). Centralized education bureaucracies are inherently ill-equipped to manage the logistics of producing tailored materials for hundreds of NDLs. This necessitates a radical decentralization of resource creation, empowering local NGOs, universities, and community linguists who possess the necessary expertise and cultural knowledge.

Changing the school's culture of linguistic exclusion, as emphasized by Bhatia (2023), is equally vital. This demands curriculum reform that fully integrates translanguaging into every subject and every training module, ensuring that teachers are not simply told to use the L1, but taught *how* to use all available languages as cognitive resources for complex concept formation, thereby fundamentally shifting the classroom's institutional power structure away from monolingual bias.

4.3 Policy Fragmentation: The State-Level Challenge and Case Studies

The implementation chaos stemming from policy fragmentation (Section 3.2.4) necessitates a closer look at regional and state-level policy variations. National policy merely offers a mandate; implementation success depends on bureaucratic commitment at the state/provincial level.

4.3.1 Case Study: Linguistic Hierarchies in State-Level Funding

In many Indian states, for example, the NEP 2020 mandate for L1 is interpreted narrowly to mean only the dominant regional language (e.g., Marathi in Maharashtra, Bengali in West Bengal), despite the presence of sizable tribal communities speaking languages like Warli or Santali. The state government fulfills the technical requirement of "local language" instruction

by funding materials and teacher posts only for the dominant language, effectively maintaining linguistic hierarchies. Funding is not allocated for the development of Santali orthography or Warli-speaking teacher training, directly subverting the policy's equity goal (Anand, 2025). This is a political choice disguised as a logistical necessity.

4.3.2 Case Study: Top-Down vs. Bottom-Up Implementation

Contrast the top-down, underfunded implementation in regions like Pakistan, where a persistent Urdu-only policy continues to marginalize students in Sindh and Balochistan despite academic consensus (Syed, 2025), with the more decentralized, though imperfect, efforts in Nepal's policy. Nepal has constitutional recognition for over a hundred languages, but the centralized curriculum development process has failed to keep pace with the linguistic diversity, resulting in a large number of recognized NDLs lacking functional classroom materials (Phyak, 2024). These case studies confirm that legislative intent is meaningless without decentralized resource control, high-quality, localized socio-linguistic data, and the political will to fund minority languages.

Conclusion

The analysis firmly establishes that Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education is the academically and ethically sound solution to South Asia's early literacy crisis. While policy consensus is strong, the evidence unequivocally shows that this progress is being undercut by a profound implementation gap rooted in structural deficiencies, a political economy favouring English, and inadequate teacher preparedness.

To transform aspirational policy into tangible classroom reality, this study recommends a decisive three-pronged action agenda for systemic change:

1. **Policy and Political Will:** The political commitment to MTB MLE must be codified beyond aspirational policy documents into enforceable legislation. This requires mandatory, regular, and comprehensive socio-linguistic mapping to accurately identify all NDLs and inform local implementation. Crucially, funding mechanisms must be ring-fenced to ensure resources reach the most linguistically marginalized groups, preventing the common trend of funding being diverted to dominant regional languages.
2. **Resource and Curriculum Reform:** A high-level, dedicated governmental body must be tasked with accelerating the creation of high-quality, contextualized bilingual learning materials in NDLs. Curriculum reform must integrate L1 literacy into all foundational subjects. Assessment systems must be overhauled to measure true conceptual understanding—permitting the use of L1 for comprehension checks—rather than testing proficiency in the MoI alone. This validates the child's L1 as a legitimate cognitive tool.
3. **Capacity Development and Community Engagement:** Sustained, mandatory, and targeted in-service teacher training focused on advanced multilingual pedagogies, specifically translanguaging, must be implemented regionally. Furthermore, proactive community and parent engagement programs are essential to re-frame the narrative,

communicating effectively that L1 instruction is a long-term investment in superior academic and eventual L2 proficiency, directly addressing the deep-seated aspirational pull toward English that currently undermines all policy efforts.

The definitive success of multilingual education across South Asia hinges not on re-writing policy, but on securing the political, financial, and institutional commitment necessary to validate a child's home language as the absolute, non-negotiable foundation upon which all future learning must be built.

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