

The Challenges of Linking Theory to Practice: *NEP 2020, NHEQF* and the Undergraduate English Classroom

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Abstract

This article uses a basic model of descriptive policy analysis to evaluate the recommendations of The *National Education Policy 2020* and UGC's Draft *National Higher Education Qualifications Framework* (NHEQF) with specific reference to the component of 'communication skills' cited as a significant 'generic learning outcome' that will empower students to study further and/or enter the world of work after graduating. The article is concerned with how these objectives of the policy, that will bring about a dramatic paradigm shift in the higher education landscape of the whole country, will impact the teaching of English especially in terms of pedagogy, assessment and teacher training.

Keywords: National Education Policy 2020, draft national higher education qualifications framework, communication skills, pedagogy, assessment, teacher training

Introduction

This article seeks to reimagine the English undergraduate classroom in the light of two policy documents released by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India—the *National Education Policy (NEP) 2020*, and the Draft *National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF)* uploaded by the University Grants Commission. Since both documents include 'communication skills' as a key component of their recommendations; the article analyses this 'generic learning outcome' with specific reference to English language skills—

listening, speaking, reading and writing and makes the undergraduate English classroom, its site of enquiry. The rationale for the enquiry is to suggest how the teaching of English language skills can segue with the objectives of *NEP 2020* and the *NHEQF* for the empowerment of the primary stakeholders of this policy—the students. Patton et al. (2016) provide a useful framework for this particular issue. As they mention on page 3, the purpose of their book is to provide a ‘portfolio of methods’ to approach public policy and since the national policy on education is the one that concerns us teachers as a major constituency among the stakeholders, this article takes its cue from the descriptive policy analysis that “focuses on the possible outcomes of proposed policies” to evaluate these policy documents and suggest how best their desired objectives can be achieved.

Rationale and Scope of the Study

For social, professional and personal reasons, it would be useful for the specific site of teaching and learning in the English language classroom to be investigated in the context of the philosophical aspirations of the two documents. These reasons are the commonly held conviction among the students (and the market that they seek to enter) that it is the knowledge of English and the ability to communicate in it, that is the passport to success and upward mobility. It is also widely perceived that it is this ‘link language’ that gives students the cachet to augment their academic and professional qualifications and makes them productive members of all the fraternities to which they belong or seek membership, and it is proficiency in this language that will therefore help them to fulfil their personal and professional aspirations.

Research on the ‘power and prestige’ conferred by English in India, confirms this hypothesis as borne out by, among others, Azam et al (2013) when they conclude that “In India, the raw difference in earnings between people who speak English and people who do not is large, ... we find that there are large, statistically significant returns to English-language skills in India” (Azam et al., 2013, p. 365). They further go on to say that “In India and many other developing countries, there is active debate over whether to promote the local language or a more globally accepted language like English in schools. While promoting the local language might make primary schooling more accessible and strengthen national identity, it may reduce economic opportunities because of the

special role of English in the global economy” (Azam et al., 2013, p. 365). In a Research Report titled “English Skills for Employability: Setting Common Standards” (Prince & Singh, 2015), a detailed study was carried out to address the problem of why “far too many students are graduating without sufficient skills to enter the workforce; they are unemployable” (Prince & Singh, 2015, p. 4). As the background and rationale to this particular study indicates, “many policy making bodies view English as a key skill that can transform the employability of India’s youth . . . Special emphasis on verbal and written communication skills, especially in English, would go a long way in improving the employability of the large and growing mass of disempowered youth” (Prince & Singh, 2015, p. 66).

Sahgal (1991) investigates the expansion of the use of English in the functional domains of family, friendship and institutions, among a cross section of Indian speakers and finds that, “English has acquired more functional roles, and is the main language of the friendship and institutional domains. It has even penetrated the family domain, which suggests that domain separation is beginning to disappear with English gradually becoming associated with intimacy, spontaneity and informality, along with its use in education, administration and the mass media” (Sahgal, 1991, p. 305).

As research bears out the importance of learning English as a core competency, this article will look at the policy recommendations of the *NEP* and *NHEQF* documents with reference to three areas of concern with specific reference to the teaching of English: pedagogy, assessment and teacher training, in order to ascertain how the policy envisages their implementation and how this can be achieved.

21st Century Skills for Equity, Access and Employability

The cornerstones of equity, access and employability that are reiterated every time the changes envisaged in the higher education landscape are debated and discussed, merit closer investigation so that they do not remain catchwords but inform the practice of both teachers and students. Since the scope of this article is limited to the English undergraduate classroom it would be apposite to investigate what the *NHEQF* recommends for the achievement of these aims.

The *NHEQF* forms the bedrock for the learning outcome-based

curriculum framework for each course and this is the fountainhead of the *NEP* aspiration to prepare our students for the demands that the 21st century will make on them, personally and professionally.

In the introduction, Section 1.1 the *NHEQF* marks the importance of identifying the specific skills needed to prepare ‘well-rounded learners’. In section, 2.1, this document talks of the kinds of changes in the current system that will be necessary to fulfil this objective, among which is included “revamping curriculum, pedagogy, assessment, and student support for enhanced student experiences”; and goes on in section 1.3 to refer specifically to “key 21st century capacities” which include “soft skills, such as communication, discussion, and debate”. In the third section of the documents the denotation of communication skills is clarified as “written, oral, literacy and numeracy skills” as the “professional skills that a learner must be able to do”.

The goalpost of this document is clearly spelt out in its fourth section, when attention is drawn to the wide spectrum of higher education institutions in India that make it difficult to arrive at a common set of criteria to determine whether outcomes associated with different qualifications have been achieved or not. This not only “constrains the mobility of students and their employability” within India, but also impacts their ability to move between India and other countries for work and study. This is the rationale behind adopting “a nationally accepted and internationally comparable and acceptable qualifications framework to facilitate transparency and comparability of higher education qualifications at all levels”.

Regardless of the level at which the learner leaves the programme of study (even to return to it later) the *NHEQF* envisages the successful acquisition of certain competencies that transcend the knowledge base of the specific discipline/s being studied. Labelling these graduate profile/attributes, Table 3 in section 4.2.2 talks of the ‘generic learning outcomes’ in which are included communication skills, along with others like critical thinking, creativity, research related skills, learning how to learn skills, etc. With specific reference to communication skills, it is mentioned that “The graduates should be able to demonstrate the skills that enable them to: listen carefully, read texts and research papers analytically and present complex information in a clear and concise manner to different groups/audiences; express thoughts and

ideas effectively in writing and orally and communicate with others using appropriate media; confidently share views and express herself/himself; construct logical arguments using correct technical language related to a field of learning, work/vocation, or an area of professional practice; convey ideas, thoughts and arguments using language that is respectful and sensitive to gender and other minority groups.” This is the background against which the ‘new’ English classroom can be visualized.

The first issue of concern is pedagogy and the actual nuts and bolts of what transpires in the hour-long interactions between teachers and students.

Pedagogy in the *New English Classroom*

What is it about pedagogy that will be different from what we have been used to? The primary difference of course comes from the modularity of the new paradigm that means that the same student need not necessarily be with you from one semester to the next and in fact may appear, move out and reappear at will. What does this mean for the traditional paradigm of knowledge handover that we are used to and have practised and perfected over years of classroom experience? The first thing that comes to mind is that every new batch of students will indeed be new, and even if some of the faces are known and familiar it would be useful to treat them as new, so that the classes can be planned keeping in mind the fact that for some of the learners, this will be their only opportunity to interact with a specific teacher.

A useful pointer that the *NHEQF* provides is what is called RPL—the recognition of prior learning. This is “an assessment process that involves the assessment of an individual’s relevant prior learning (including formal, informal, and non-formal learning)”. So, when the teacher meets a class for the first time, it may be a good idea to devise a small assessment exercise to determine the kinds of previous learning in the context of the desirable learning outcomes for the course that is to be studied. This will help both teachers and students to chart the milestones and journey of the semester so that ultimately all the students arrive at the same benchmark destination.

How then can this destination be reached through a revisioning of the conventional pedagogical practices? In section 1.3 of the Introduction,

the NHEQF recommends that “The pedagogy will have an increased emphasis on communication, discussion, debate, research, and opportunities for cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking.”

When it comes to pedagogy, the effort is best judged by the outcome. To illustrate the importance of the teacher and the centrality of the learners in the classroom, it may be worthwhile to move to a fictional classroom and witness one possible kind of pedagogy that can be meaningfully employed by a teacher.

This is the description of a classroom in *Miss Carter’s War* written by Sheila Hancock (2014). The eponymous Miss Carter has just joined her first job as an English teacher in a grammar school. For her first class with them, Marguerite Carter chooses a Shakespeare sonnet as she hopes she can “enthuse girls with her love of Shakespeare” (Hancock, 2014, p. 21). The teacher has prepared Sonnet No. 29 and asks the girls to take out their books. A scenario that would resonate with most teachers ensues when one of the girls, Elsie, says she does not have a book and would not even like to share another girl’s because she says, “I ‘ate Shakespeare anyway. It’s rubbish.” The teacher asks her why exactly she thinks so and the girl responds, “Because its gobbledegook”. Instead of the teacher getting all hot and bothered she says, “That’s a wonderful word. I think Shakespeare would have liked it” (Hancock, 2014, p. 23). The class continues in this vein and the sonnet is read out and the teacher’s question about what it “means” is met with silence and perhaps the same blankness we often encounter in the class when the students are faced with a text that is unfamiliar in terms of language and context and also has the reputation of being ‘high literature’ that is beyond them and more importantly, irrelevant to their needs and times. At this stage Miss Carter makes an important decision that changes the tenor and nature of her interaction with the girls and transforms their relationship with literature. She “decided to abandon any attempt to parse the poem and stick(s) to interpretation” (Hancock, 2014, p. 25). The unresponsive and uncomprehending class responds with enthusiasm and honesty as soon as the teacher helps them to connect the more complex words and phrases of the poem to their own experiences and focuses on the emotions and connotations of the language to build these bridges. As the students are meaningfully engaged in making sense of the sonnet which was earlier alien and out of reach, the whole atmosphere in the classroom and the relationship between the teacher and the students is

transformed from a conventional hierarchy into a collaboration where they learn together: “The ideas were flowing now, and the class was visibly enjoying themselves, their relationship with their teacher relaxed and casual” (Hancock, 2014, p. 28). Five minutes before the end of the lesson, the teacher asks one of the girls to read out the sonnet again and asks “‘Hands up class, if you like the poem better now.’ A sea of waving hands restored her faith in her ability to teach” (Hancock, 2014, p. 29).

As this fictional account demonstrates, pedagogy is the fountainhead of effective education and it is a crucial variable for the success of our initiatives and policies. Once the handover of knowledge has in a sense been accomplished, how do we ‘measure’ whether this has happened and to what extent? The primary tool of this measurement is assessment, to ascertain the success or failure of our learning targets and aspirations.

Assessment in the *New English Classroom*

Kizlik (2012) reminds us that “assessment is a process by which information is obtained relative to some known objective or goal. Assessment is a broad term that includes testing. ... Whether implicit or explicit, assessment is most usefully connected to some goal or objective for which the assessment is designed. ... Assessment of skill attainment is rather straightforward. Either the skill exists at some acceptable level or it doesn’t. Skills are readily demonstrable. Assessment of understanding is much more difficult and complex. Skills can be practised; understandings cannot. We can assess a person’s knowledge in a variety of ways, but there is always a leap, an inference that we make about what a person does in relation to what it signifies about what he knows.”

The *NHEQF* defines assessment in the following terms: “The process of determining a student’s achievement of expected learning outcomes involving the use of a range of methods and practices”. A useful starting point while thinking about assessment would be to look carefully at the learning outcome descriptors as outlined by the *NHEQF* for each level from 5 (certificate) to 10 (a doctoral degree). It is interesting to note that at each level, communication skills are a key element in the generic learning outcomes and for each level, as the complexity increases, so does the expectations of competency but the foundation remains the ability to communicate effectively and in consonance with the needs of the context and the requirements of the occasion.

A shared blueprint or assessment rubric is one of the most useful contributors to making the classroom a space for collaborative learning. In Annexure 1 of the *NHEQF* there is a seed that can be germinated into such a blueprint and modified according to individual requirements and contexts. The document assigns the core skills, competency and responsibility to each grade point and letter grade to be given at the time of evaluation. The core skills are Reading and Writing, receiving and transmitting oral and written messages and communicating with required clarity and skill. The focus is on the students' ability to be able to read and listen with understanding, be able to critically analyse these inputs and then talk or write about them in a clear and concise manner to a variegated specialist and non-specialist audience. Since the purpose of assessment is to make learners independent of the teachers and gradually be able to perform those knowledge tasks that they could earlier do with assistance and guidance, the variable of responsibility becomes important as the continuum moves from the ability to only work under continuous instruction and close supervision, to taking responsibility for one's own work and learning. The level to which the teacher aspires for her learners is one at which they will "pursue self-paced and self-directed learning to upgrade knowledge and skills that will help them adapt to changing demands of workplace and pursue higher levels of education and training and meet their own learning needs relating to the chosen field(s) of learning".

Judiciously and creatively done, assessment can become one of the most important pedagogical pillars on which a strong and sustainable edifice of education can be constructed. For courses in which the learning outcomes have been spelt out, the creation of an assessment rubric that can be shared with the students will achieve two purposes. It will break down the outcomes into tangible targets and also give the students a clearer understanding of how they can chart their progress from the time they enter the course till the time they complete it.

For the purpose of illustration, we can look at the course objectives of the Generic Elective Paper on 'Academic Writing and Composition' offered by the Department of English, University of Delhi. This is what is stated: "This course is designed to help undergraduate students develop and research composition, argument, and writing skills that will enable them to improve their written abilities for higher studies and academic endeavours." It is hoped that these course objectives will be achieved

through the following three course learning outcomes: Understanding concepts; Expressing concepts through writing; and, Demonstrating conceptual and textual understanding in tests and exams.

Since this is what is to be achieved, an evaluation rubric will assist in its successful and measurable fulfilment. Such a rubric would achieve a range of pedagogical advantages, including giving the learners a goal to aspire to as well as an honest evaluation of their own current standard of competency. It would also give the assessment a validity and reliability that is highly desirable and in consonance with the objectives of *NEP 2020* that seeks to empower students according to globally recognized benchmarks of learning outcomes.

For both pedagogy and assessment to work effectively and appropriately, the key variable is planning and as the teacher is the one who will execute the plans, it is teacher training that becomes the third pillar on which the new English classroom is being reimagined in this article.

Teacher Training for the *New English Classroom*

Looking back at the journey of higher education in India with respect to teacher training, it can be seen that *NEP 2020* is carrying forward a legacy of best practices that begins with the setting up of a 'normal training school' in Serampur in 1802 and carries on after Independence, wherein in every education commission report emphasis is laid on the importance of having a cohort of well-trained teachers to realize the vision of each subsequent policy. In a comprehensive presentation on this theme, Singh (2020) marks the shifts that have taken place in this field and how the teacher is now seen as one who is "a co-creator of knowledge" and at the "centre of knowledge creation" and must be cognizant and sensitive to issues of gender, access, diversity", etc.

The *NEP 2020* is one of the first education policy documents to mention teacher training for those teachers who will be responsible for teaching in higher education institutions and training students at the tertiary level. The document recommends that along with their doctoral degree, potential and prospective teachers will take "credit-based courses in teaching/education/pedagogy/writing related to their chosen PhD subject" and also be exposed to "pedagogical practices, designing curriculum, credible evaluation systems, communication," through programmes like teaching assistantships. It is hoped that this will

motivate many researchers to become teachers (*NEP*, 2020: Section 15.9). The policy document also suggests various programmes for in-service training of tertiary level teachers along with “technology platforms such as SWAYAM/DIKSHA for online training” (*NEP*, 2020, Section 15.10). One of the most laudable recommendations of this document in the context of teacher training is the proposal to set up “A National Mission for Mentoring” that will have a “large pool of outstanding senior/retired faculty—including those with the ability to teach in Indian languages—who would be willing to provide short and long-term mentoring/professional support to university/college teachers” (*NEP*, 2020, Section 15.11).

Beyond the syllabus of the programme of study, teachers are also concerned with what the *NHEQF* calls ‘generic learning outcomes’ and this is how these are defined: “Generic learning outcomes: The transferrable, non-discipline specific skills that students of all programmes of study need to achieve through appropriate learning experience. Generic learning outcomes include those that have application in study, work, professional practice, and life contexts”.

It is hoped that with a recalibrated teacher education programme, the teachers who enter the classrooms in higher education institutions will be better equipped to collaborate with their students to create a learning environment that is empowering and relevant for the needs of the individuals and society.

Conclusion

If the *NEP* 2020 and the Draft *NHEQF* provide the blueprint for the future of education in India, teachers of English need to understand how they can use this to construct their own edifices of learning in every interaction with the students and also aspire to a goal when the scaffolding becomes redundant so that each learner stands independently, ready to face any communication challenge with the self-confidence that comes from a successful handover of knowledge from the higher education institution to its primary stakeholders. This is more important than achieving the objectives of gross enrolment ratio and employment, as these are at best short-term targets and may change in the next few decades. What is needed is to lay strong foundations of quality higher education by continuously upskilling the teachers, reinventing pedagogy

in consonance with the times and achieving scales of assessment that act as guideposts to a higher education whose transformation is not superficial but revolutionary and forward looking.

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