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NEP's Three-Language Formula and the Status of English

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NEP's Three-Language Formula and the Status of English

 **The Hindu** 1 July 2026 **GS2**

Source: ujyari.com — researched, fact-checked & UPSC-mapped



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a policy praises English as the language of maths, science and law but classifies it outside the two mandatory native languages, is that a contradiction that hurts students, or a reasonable defence of Indian languages?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)  [The Hindu](#)

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WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

CBSE's class-wise rollout of the **three-language formula**, making a third language compulsory for students entering **Class 6** from 2026-27, has reopened a national debate. For an aspirant, this is a GS2 case on **NEP 2020, language policy and equity in education**, and on an unresolved contradiction over the status of **English**.

THE CRUX IN 60 WORDS

NEP 2020 praises English as the language of maths, science and law, yet requires two of three school languages to be Indian, effectively casting English as a foreign language. That is the contradiction. **CBSE's** transitional relaxations defer it rather than settle it. The ambiguity hurts **first-generation and mobile learners** most. The fix is honesty: secure both multilingualism and English.

THE ISSUE, DECODED

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CONCEPT	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
Three-language formula	Two Indian languages plus one more from Class 6	The trigger of the current row
Status of English	Praised in NEP, yet outside the mandatory native slots	The core contradiction
CBSE relaxations	Transitional exemptions for senior batches	Defer, not resolve, the tension
Mobility and equity	Access for first-generation and migrant learners	Who bears the cost of ambiguity

THE ANALYSIS

- 1 **The policy contradicts itself.** NEP 2020 needs English for the higher-education and professional futures it envisions, yet structures the curriculum so English falls outside the protected two-native-languages core.
- 2 **Relaxations postpone the problem.** CBSE exempting current senior batches and using internal assessment for others eases transition but leaves the status of English unsettled.
- 3 **The burden is unequal.** English-medium and privileged students absorb a third language easily; first-generation and migrant learners depend on secure English as their route to mobility.
- 4 **Multilingualism is a genuine good.** Mother-tongue learning and regional-language pride are worth protecting; the fault lies not in the aim but in demoting English to achieve it.
- 5 **Federal sensitivity.** Language policy touches state autonomy and identity, so implementation must stay flexible rather than coercive.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

*the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which endorses mother-tongue or regional-language instruction in early years and the **three-language formula**, with two of three languages to be Indian.*

Regulator: CBSE, rolling out the formula from **2026-27** with class-wise transitional relaxations;

Children with Special Needs retain exemptions under the **RPwD Act, 2016**. **Constitutional context:**

Article 350A (mother-tongue instruction) and the **Eighth Schedule** (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/eighth-sch-educ/>) of listed languages. **Concept:** multilingualism; medium of instruction; educational equity;

cooperative federalism (<https://ujjiyari.com/terms/cooperative-federalism/>) in language.

THE DEBATE

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Argument for protecting two Indian languages: Without a [mandate](https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/mandate/) (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/mandate/>), English dominance erodes mother tongues and regional cultures; safeguarding Indian languages preserves identity and cognitive benefits of multilingualism.

Argument for securing English: English is the acknowledged gateway to science, higher education and jobs; casting it as peripheral disadvantages exactly the first-generation learners the policy claims to help.

Balanced verdict: The two aims are not in conflict if the policy is honest. Affirm mother-tongue learning and multilingualism while giving English a clear, secure place, and keep implementation flexible rather than coercive.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (TRANSFERABLE SKILL)

When a well-intentioned policy produces backlash, ask whether the objection is to the goal or to the instrument. Here the goal (multilingualism) is sound; the instrument (demoting English) is flawed. Distinguishing the two lets you defend the aim while critiquing the design, a stance that reads as balanced rather than partisan.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

NEP praises English -> yet mandates two Indian languages -> English falls outside the core -> contradiction -> CBSE relaxations defer it -> mobile and first-gen learners bear the cost -> resolve in the learner's favour

THE WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Name the contradiction.** Officially reconcile English's acknowledged role with its curricular status rather than papering over it.
- 2 **Secure English while promoting Indian languages.** Design the formula so both aims are met, not traded off.
- 3 **Keep it flexible.** Prefer voluntary and locally responsive implementation over rigid mandates, respecting state sensitivities.
- 4 **Centre the learner.** Judge every rule by whether it widens or narrows opportunity for the disadvantaged.

THE TAKEAWAY BOX

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Analyse the three-language formula as a case of policy contradiction, where a sound aim is undermined by a flawed instrument, with equity consequences.

“The policy needs English for the futures it wants students to have, but structures the curriculum as if English were an optional extra.”

NEP 2020; three-language formula; CBSE 2026-27 rollout; Article 350A; Eighth Schedule; RPwD Act 2016.

When protecting a cultural good imposes costs on the already disadvantaged, how should policy weigh identity against opportunity.

UPSC has asked about the medium of instruction, multilingualism and the aims of education; this connects those to NEP 2020’s language design.

educational equity; cooperative federalism (<https://ujyari.com/terms/federalism/>); the mother-tongue instruction debate; social mobility.

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion>), *Ministry of Education* (<https://www.education.gov.in/>)

Source: NEP's Three-Language Formula and the Status of English — Ujyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

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The controversy over a compulsory third language from Class 6 flows from an unresolved contradiction in NEP 2020, which values English's role in maths, science and law yet effectively treats it as a foreign language under the two-native-languages rule, and temporary CBSE relaxations do not resolve the inconsistency, which works against students' interests and mobility.

 **SUPPORTING**

- NEP 2020 itself acknowledges English's central role in higher education, science and professional life, which sits awkwardly with rules that push it outside the compulsory native-language slots.
- Transitional CBSE relaxations only defer the tension for current batches rather than settling the status of English.
- For first-generation and mobile learners, an ambiguous stance on English risks widening, not narrowing, opportunity gaps.

 **COUNTER**

Protecting two Indian languages guards against the erosion of mother tongues and regional cultures that unchecked English dominance can cause.

 **WAY FORWARD**

Resolve the contradiction openly: affirm multilingualism and mother-tongue learning while giving English a clear, secure place, keep implementation flexible and voluntary where feasible, and centre the policy on the learner's interest.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK

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QUESTION

"The three-language formula's treatment of English reflects an unresolved tension in NEP 2020." Examine the contradiction and its consequences for students, and suggest how language policy can serve both linguistic diversity and student mobility. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

A language policy that praises a language in one paragraph and demotes it in another sends students a confusing signal. NEP 2020's treatment of English does exactly that.

BODY

The three-language formula is not new, but its latest application, a third language becoming compulsory for students entering Class 6, has revived an old debate with a sharp new edge. NEP 2020 explicitly recognises English as the working language of higher education, science, technology and much of professional and legal life.

Yet the same document requires that two of the three school languages be Indian languages, which in practice places English outside the protected core and treats it, functionally, as a foreign tongue. That is the contradiction: the policy needs English for the futures it wants students to have, but structures the curriculum as if English were an optional extra.

The recent CBSE relaxations, exempting current senior batches from a board examination in the third language and evaluating it internally for others, ease the transition but do not resolve the underlying inconsistency; they postpone it. The stakes fall hardest on the students the policy claims to serve.

First-generation learners and those who move across states for education or work depend on a clear, secure grounding in English precisely because it is the gateway to mobility. An ambiguous stance risks converting a well-intentioned defence of Indian languages into a barrier for the disadvantaged.

The genuine goal, multilingualism and pride in mother tongues, is worth pursuing, but it is not served by pretending English is peripheral. Honesty about the contradiction, and a design that secures both aims, would serve students better than transitional patchwork.

CONCLUSION

The formula's spirit, multilingual, rooted in Indian languages, is sound; its treatment of English is not. Resolving the contradiction in the learner's favour, rather than deferring it, is the real task.


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