

# Retrospect vs Prospect: Deliberating upon the Need and Importance of Modernizing Language Education in Islamic Seminaries with Special Reference to NEP-2020

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## Abstract

Language education within India's Islamic seminaries is rooted in esteemed traditions, primarily serving liturgical and ecclesiastical needs. The pedagogy often parallels the classical Greek and Latin model, emphasizing the Grammar-Translation method and a structural view of language. This approach stands in contrast to the significant evolution seen in global language teaching, which has embraced new innovations in material design, educational psychology, and applied linguistics. Consequently, a divergence can be observed between the methods used in seminaries and the recommendations of national language education policies, with a preference for maintaining established practices. This situation may inadvertently limit educational outcomes. Mindful of the institutional context, this paper explores the value of integrating contemporary methods and materials. It compares seminary practices with national policy recommendations to highlight potential areas for development. Our hypothesis is that a gap may exist between students' learning needs and how languages like Arabic and English are taught. We suggest that current methods and materials may not be fully aligned with a modern needs analysis of students and stakeholders. To investigate this, questionnaires were administered to students and teachers, and an analysis of textbooks was conducted to assess the standards of learning resources.

**Keywords:** Language education, Islamic seminaries (Madrasas), NEP-2020, Modernization, Methods and materials, Needs analysis.

## Introduction

Islamic seminaries, more popularly known as madrasas, serve as a vital educational backbone for the Muslim community in India. The history of the subcontinent, marked by the sociocultural and political shifts during the colonial era, significantly shaped the trajectory of its educational systems. The well-documented controversy between the Anglicists and Orientalists left an indelible impact on the country's educational landscape. The efforts of social and educational reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sir Syed Ahmad Khan also exerted a lasting influence on existing Arabic, Sanskrit, and Persian colleges. In 1837, the removal of Persian as an official language created significant challenges, particularly for the Muslim community, intensifying the debate between indigenous and modern educational models. The revolt of 1857 and the subsequent exile of the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar, deeply influenced the Muslim psyche, especially among religious scholars. This historical context led to a considerable shift

in the mission of Islamic seminaries established before and after this period, with a clear distinction between religious (Sharie) and secular (Ghair Sharie) education shaping their priorities. In post-independent India, various reports, including the Sachar Committee Report (2005) and recent surveys by state governments, have noted that the condition and academic performance of many seminaries face significant challenges.

### **Language Education and the Curriculum of Islamic Seminaries**

Language education lies at the core of the Madrasa curriculum, fostering and nurturing a multilingual environment. Many foundational texts are in Arabic, often taught through Urdu translations, while English has also been provided a space in the curriculum. Languages such as Arabic, Urdu, English, Persian, and now Hindi in some institutions, are part of the learning process. In North India, Urdu is the predominant medium of instruction. Historically, these seminaries were established with the foundational goal of preserving Islamic identity and culture. It was primarily meant to thwart Christian missionaries' onslaught. English as a language and culture was hated and outrightly rejected by such seminaries particularly after the 1857 revolt. Accordingly, language education within this framework largely serves liturgical and ecclesiastical purposes.

### **NEP-2020 and Language Education in Islamic Seminaries**

India is one of the most linguistically diverse terrains on the earth, with multilingualism at the heart of its identity. According to the 2011 census, 26% of the population speaks two languages, and about 7% speak three. The constitution recognizes Hindi and English as official languages of the Union, alongside 24 other languages in Schedule 8, within a landscape of over 120 languages and 270 mother tongues. Given this diversity, language planning and policy have always been complex and sensitive endeavours.

Language policies and their recommendations are typically a culmination of research and advancements in linguistics, language acquisition theories, and educational psychology. Regularly updating these policies keeps them relevant and helps empower human resources. Adopting these recommendations can bring several advantages to educational institutions, particularly those serving marginalized communities. A thoughtful implementation of such policies has the potential to enhance language teaching and learning practices, equipping students with skills for employment and higher education. Indeed, a well-executed policy framework could contribute positively to the entire field of language pedagogy.

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 places a special focus on language and translation. It acknowledges the challenges in language practices across educational institutions and the scarcity of skilled language teachers. NEP-2020 suggests that language learning should be experiential, focusing on conversation and interaction rather than solely on passive reading of literature, memorization of vocabulary, and form-focused rules and regulations. It advocates for the active use of language in real-life situations. Similarly, guidelines from NCF-2005, NCERT, and SCERTs emphasize that language education should be skill-oriented, bridging the gap between the classroom and the outside world by encouraging LSRW (Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing) skills and active learner participation. In essence, these policy guidelines advocate for a more vibrant, inclusive, and communicative approach to language pedagogy, where the needs of stakeholders are central to curriculum design.

It appears that Islamic seminaries have not fully engaged with many of these guidelines, which may contribute to a perception that they are hesitant to embrace calls for reformation and modernization. Consequently, the status of language education in these institutions could be enhanced. The language

textbooks and materials often reflect traditional pedagogical styles, and teaching methodologies may not be fully aligned with contemporary needs. Language learning tends to focus on the reading and comprehension of religious texts, with rote memorization and grammatical analysis as dominant practices. The communicative and functional value of language appears to be a lower priority, which can result in students facing challenges when using the language for everyday transactions. Since comprehension is paramount, language activities often centre on reading and understanding, with listening, writing, and speaking skills receiving less attention. Furthermore, a lack of specialized infrastructure and a scarcity of teachers trained in modern language pedagogy are among the notable challenges.

### **Problem Statement**

The language education guidelines of NEP-2020 reflect modern innovations in teaching and learning, drawing from expert deliberations in linguistics, language acquisition, and educational psychology. Students in Islamic seminaries spend their formative, crucial years learning languages through established, traditional methodologies. The languages they learn could play a more vibrant role in their personal and professional well-being through the integration of recommendations put forward by NEP-2020 and other committees. The current language education system in some seminaries may limit job prospects and opportunities for higher education and broader societal integration. It seems that the implementation of policy recommendations is not always prioritized, which can hinder the further integration of the madrasa education system. As a vital component of this system, language education holds the potential to build bridges to the mainstream, allowing the rich multilingual practices of these institutions to contribute more fully to the community, country, and the world.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The overall aim of this paper is to account for the status and investigate the need and importance of modernizing language education in Islamic seminaries in India, with special reference to the guidelines put forth by the National Education Policy-2020. To achieve this aim, the researchers have identified three objectives:

1. To describe the current status of language education in Islamic seminaries.
2. To compare and contrast the language education guidelines suggested by the National Education Policy-2020.
3. To analyze and evaluate the language textbooks (particularly Arabic and English) used in Islamic Seminaries.

### **Research Methodology**

This study has followed a tripartite scheme of data collection and interpretation:

- Collection and analysis of language textbooks, especially English and Arabic, prescribed in Islamic seminaries.
- Collection and analysis of responses from language teachers currently employed in Islamic seminaries.
- Collection and analysis of responses from graduates of Islamic seminaries.

In addition to data collection from around fifteen different Madrasas, one of the researchers is a madrasa graduate (participant observer) who has spent seven years studying in reputed Islamic seminaries and thus has first-hand experience of the language learning environment.

This study followed a mixed-methods approach, benefiting from both qualitative and quantitative data. A content/textual analysis of language course books was carried out, juxtaposing them with the provisions and guidelines of educational policies, especially the NEP-2020.

**Participants:** Responses were collected from 100 students (70 boys and 30 girls) from fifteen different Islamic seminaries. All students were recent graduates (2020-23) from institutions across Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Delhi, and were enrolled in various courses at Aligarh Muslim University. Ten language teachers were also randomly identified to participate in the study.

**Tools:** Two questionnaires were designed for the purpose. The student questionnaire contained 15 Likert-scale, opinion-seeking statements. The teachers' questionnaire had seven statements using the same scale. Both were designed in Urdu and English and included open-ended questions for further clarification.

## **Data Analysis and Interpretation**

### **Insights from Language Textbooks/Material Analysis**

The language textbooks used in Islamic seminaries appear to conform largely to a structural approach in their design. A significant portion of lessons and activities center on the formal corpus of the language. Linguistic competence, often separated from its communicative and functional context, is a characteristic feature. The focus on grammatical details and intricacies seems to promote a form of mental gymnastics. Methods reminiscent of the Audio-Lingual and Grammar-Translation methods, such as pattern practice and rote memorization, are commonly preferred. Arabic textbooks like Muallimul Insha and Hidayatunnahu (syntax), and English textbooks like First Flight and Honeycomb, are often taught in a manner similar to how Latin and Greek were taught in medieval Europe.

In summary, many language textbooks in use, with some exceptions, reflect an older pedagogical style and do not appear to be based on a contemporary needs analysis. They may not be designed by curriculum experts and do not always consider the recommendations of modern language education policies. These textbooks are heavily focused on the corpus of the language, sometimes placing less emphasis on specific communicative skills or the latest advancements in linguistics, language pedagogy, and educational psychology.

### **Insights from Students' Responses**

A majority of students indicated they were not familiar with recent advances and innovations in language teaching. After spending crucial formative years in the seminaries, many students reported that they felt they lacked strong communication skills. They perceived an excessive dependence on the G.T. method and a behaviorist/structural view of language. Oral proficiency did not seem to be a primary goal. Many felt that learners were passive in the learning process, with the teacher leading most of the interaction. Approximately 80% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the way languages are currently taught. When asked about Arabic and English teaching, they responded that they are taught classical Arabic rather than modern standard Arabic, and that English instruction often holds a nominal value. Students reported being unfamiliar with LSRW skills and communicative or functional language teaching approaches. Urdu serves as the main medium of instruction, with reading, comprehension, and translation as key practices that are consistently emphasized. When asked if they desired a change in teaching methods, a majority of students agreed, with a few strongly agreeing.

### Insights from Teachers' Responses

Teachers were asked seven questions regarding their awareness of education policies, language teaching recommendations, and innovations in linguistics and educational psychology. The responses suggest that a majority of teachers may not be aware of the changing paradigms and methods in language teaching. A majority also reported that they had not attended any teacher training programs, workshops, or tutorials.

### Key Considerations for Modernization

The current state of language education in Islamic seminaries appears to be influenced by several interconnected factors.

1. **Institutional Priorities and Curricular Focus:** A cautious approach towards pedagogical change is often observed, with a primary focus on preserving tradition. Language education is viewed mainly through the lens of liturgical purposes. As a result, there is less institutional emphasis on developing skills beyond reading comprehension and grammatical competence.
2. **Language Textbooks/Materials:** The language textbooks used in many Madrasas may not fully incorporate the guidelines of modern educational policies. These textbooks are often developed by individuals who may not be specialists in the latest advancements in linguistics, pedagogy, and material development. Lessons frequently center on grammar rules, and the textbooks may not follow a holistic LSRW framework. This can leave students feeling under-equipped with practical language and communication skills. These materials often follow a traditional format and may not be regularly updated or revised.
3. **Teacher Development:** Teacher education and training represent another area where development could be beneficial. Opportunities for continuous professional development, which would allow language teachers to upgrade their skills and become an even more effective resource, appear to be limited. This is a challenge that merits a thoughtful and robust redressing mechanism.
4. **Infrastructure and Implementation Factors:** Integrating the recommendations of educational policies would require considerable changes in syllabus design, the development of qualified teachers, and an infrastructure capable of supporting modern language teaching. Many institutions may find it challenging to afford and maintain resources like language labs or to redesign their curriculum to meet national standards. Some Madrasas have opted for NCERT books, but may still face challenges in finding teachers qualified to teach according to the prescribed pedagogical guidelines.

### Conclusion

The need and importance of modernizing language education in Islamic seminaries, in light of contemporary educational policies, presents a significant and timely opportunity. This vast network of educational institutions and its students stand to gain immensely by integrating contemporary methods with their established traditions. In a world that has become a global village, language as the primary mode of communication can open doors to numerous job and academic opportunities. This, in turn, can help in enhancing the integration of the madrasa education system, which at times appears to reside on the margins.

Introducing appropriate teaching methodologies and materials can enrich the system and help cultivate a more positive perception. It can build upon the strong foundation of these institutions to foster greater socio-cultural understanding and promote inter- and intra-faith dialogue among peoples from different races, regions, and cultures.

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