

Did not originate in India, argue some experts; recognised as associate official language, say others

CBSE 'foreign' tag on English sparks debate

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New Delhi: A CBSE directive categorising English as a foreign language has sparked a debate over whether an associate official language recognised by the Constitution can be treated as a non-native language.

The CBSE has mandated the study of two Indian languages and one foreign language such as English, French, German, Spanish or Arabic for students enrolled in Class VI in the 2026-27 academic session.

Until last year, schools allowed students to pursue their mother tongue, English and a foreign language or any Indian language as a third language.

The latest CBSE directive is in line with the National Education Policy (NEP), but this is probably the first time the board has classified English as a foreign language.

Prof. Panchanan Mohanty, linguist and retired faculty member of the Central University of Hyderabad, said English had a unique place among all languages used in India. Even though it's foreign in origin, it has been recognised as an associate official language of India, he said.

"It is a fallacy to call Indian English a foreign language just because of its foreign origin. There is no similarity between the status of Spanish, German, Japanese or Mandarin in India on one side and Indian English on the other. Therefore, Indian English is a second language in the Indian context," Mohanty said.

He argued that Indian English was different from the English used by native speakers. It is a variant of English in its own right and recognised all over the world.

Mohanty said Indian English, which originated here

and is widely used in the country, cannot be pushed to the margins as a foreign language when Nepali is one of the 22 languages officially recognised under the Constitution's Eighth Schedule.

Prof. Anita Rampal, former dean of the faculty of education at Delhi University, said English had not been referred to as a foreign language in any of the official documents, including the census.

"The government is deliberately using the term 'foreign' language for English and placing it in opposition to 'native' Indian languages to align with its ideological agenda. The Constitution mandates English as an (associate) official language. How is its status being changed through a circular to ascribe it as a foreign language?" Rampal asked.

Former director of the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Prof. Awadesh



Kumar Mishra, argued that a foreign language could be made an official language, but that did not mean the language belonged to the country. In Switzerland, there are six official languages, including French and German, which are not native.

"English, like Arabic or Chinese, is alien to the Indian linguistic substratum. Irrespective of whether a language belongs to the Dravidian, Austro-Asiatic, Tibeto-Burmese or Tai-Kadai family of languages, they all at least share a few things. They all have a subject-object-verb

(SOV) order except for two. Khasi has an SVO like English, and Kashmiri follows the SVO partially," Mishra said.

He said the use of suffixes, prefixes, compounds, idioms and proverbs is completely different in Indian languages. All Indian languages have phonological similarities, except the Andamanese languages.

"English is not understood by all. Some English words are used in Indian languages. We have Persian and Arabic words in all Indian languages, too. Persian and Arabic were here for many centuries. They still are foreign languages," he said.

However, Mishra admitted that learning English was necessary.

"None of the Indian languages is ready to occupy all the domains of use that English has occupied. So English is necessary, whether in primary or higher education or as an (associate) official lan-

guage. You cannot abandon it," he said.

Puducherry objects

The government of Puducherry has opposed the CBSE policy as it debars students from learning French along with English under the three-language formula.

An official of the Puducherry government said chief minister N. Rangasamy had written to education minister Dharmendra Pradhan in May, arguing that French is an integral part of the historical and cultural identity of the Union Territory. He has demanded flexibility in the policy so that French can be treated as a regional language for teaching in schools.

The new policy has created concern among Portuguese speakers in Goa. Jose Remedios Rebello, former chairman of the Goa Board of Secondary and Higher Secondary Education, said the CBSE schools in Goa

used to allow English and Portuguese as part of the three-language policy in Class VI.

"Now the CBSE has started offering English or Portuguese. Students cannot study both. There are a few families which speak Portuguese in Goa. The schools are trying to convince parents about the new policy," Rebello said.

Rebello said the schools under the Goa board had already discontinued Portuguese and French as a third-language option in Class VI. Under the NEP, students are allowed to study Konkani or Marathi as the first language, English or Portuguese as the second language and any Indian language as the third language.

In Kerala, many CBSE schools also offer Arabic and English under the three-language formula. The CBSE circular has complicated things for students whose mother tongue is Arabic.