

IS ENGLISH MEDIUM MEANINGFUL IN PRE-PRIMARY LEVEL IN NEPAL?

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Abstract

Language is a means for communication. It also helps children in their cognitive development. Intellectual (cognitive) development, the emergence of increasingly sophisticated forms or levels of understanding, reasoning, and rationality is an ongoing process of reflection, coordination, and social interaction that begins in early childhood and continues, at least in some cases, long into adulthood (Moshman, 2003). It is also regarded that whatever the children build their concept about the society in their early childhood remains throughout their life. In this process language has a pivotal role. However, it is not to say that thinking (as an intellectual ability) cannot take place without language (Munn, 1951) but rather mostly, thinking is mediated by language and thus develops to a higher level of sophistication. This article focuses on the important contribution of mother tongue in the process of cognitive development and raises questions against the local decisions of using English medium in pre-primary level.

Key words

Communication; mother tongue; rationality; cognitive; development

Introduction

The present constitution of Nepal (2072) has mentioned some of the articles regarding the use and preservation of mother tongue. Sub-article 5 under article 3 under section 3 for fundamental rights, it states that all nationalities will have the right to get education in their mother tongue. Similarly, sub-article 1 under article 32, under section 3, it states that all nationalities will have the right to use their mother tongue. On

the basis of above articles and sub-articles, elected local bodies have made changes in the medium of instruction. The government has also assisted them in printing the textbooks in local language, considering the fact that imparting education to children basically in pre-primary level is effective in their mother tongue. However, in some places in Nepal like in Birganj. Policies have been made to use English as medium of instruction from pre-primary to secondary level which is of

course controversial to national policies and basic principles of intellectual development. Many researches have been carried out to assert the fact that intellectual development is high among the learners who are instructed in their mother tongue.

The role of mother tongue in education

Education is the potential instrument for encouraging independent thinking among the learners. It is believed that learners perform better when they develop concept regarding different objects around the world. The curriculum for primary school/elementary school in mother tongue emphasizes the importance the individual's personal and intellectual development. When parents spend their time with their children and tell stories and discusses different issues, the children's reasoning capacity increases and they start to think rationally and creatively.

UNESCO has encouraged mother tongue as medium of instruction in primary education since 1953. (UNESCO, 1953) and UNESCO highlights the advantages of mother tongue education right from start: children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school (Kosonen, 2005). Parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children learning (Benson, 2002). Some educators even argue that only those countries where the learners' first language is the language of instruction are likely to achieve the goals of education for all.

The role of mother tongue in second language learning

Incomplete first language skills often make learning other languages difficult. Cummins (2000) emphasizes, the level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. When the mother tongue is promoted, the concepts and literary skills can transfer to the second language. Further, a high correlation between learning to read in mother tongue and subsequent reading

achievement in the second language has been found (Koda, 2005).

The Ethiopian Second National Learning Assessment (ESNLA), conducted in 2003-2004, has provided a unique opportunity to explore the impact of learning with the mother tongue on academic success at the two terminal points of primary education. It was found that pupils who studied biology, chemistry, physics and mathematics through the medium of their mother tongue showed progress than those who used other language.

In short, supporting development of the mother tongue enhances the development of the second language learning.

Major theories of cognitive development

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development

Based on Richmond's (1970) explanation of Piaget's theory, Piaget proposed, intellectually developing children organize their experiences into schemes (organized patterns of action or thought that help them understand the world. In Piaget's theory, two major principles operate on scheme development: adaption and organization.

Humans desire a state of cognitive balance. When the child experiences cognitive conflict (a discrepancy between the child's beliefs the state of the world to be and what s/he is experiencing) adaption is achieved through assimilation or accommodation.

Based on Richmond, at the center of Piaget's theory is the principle that cognitive development occurs in a series of four distinct, universal stages which always occur in the same order, and each builds on what was learned in the previous stage.

Sensorimotor stage (infancy to 2 years): In this stage, knowledge of the world is limited. It is only based on immediate physical

interactions and experiences. The child uses motor activities. Children acquire object permanence (knowing an object exists when it is out of sight), in this stage. Mobility allows the child to begin developing new intellectual abilities. Language as a symbolic ability is developed at the end of the stage.

Pre-operational stage (toddler and Early childhood; 2 to 7 years): In this stage, the child's knowledge is dominated by the external world. The child only focuses on one aspect of something at a time. Thinking is done in a non-logical, non-reversible manner (lack of the ability to perform a mental operation and then reverse one's thinking to return to the starting point).

Concrete operational stage (Early adolescence; 7 to 11 years): In this stage, intelligence is demonstrated through logical and systematic manipulation of concrete objects. In other words, operational thinking develops and egocentric thought diminishes.

Formal operational stage (adolescence and adulthood; 11 and above): in this stage, intelligence is demonstrated through the logical use of abstract concepts. The abilities to generate abstract propositions and hypotheses and to predict possible outcomes are evident. Problems are approached in a systematic way. Formal logical system can be acquired. However, Cook and Cook (2005) maintain, many people do not still think formally during adulthood.

Implication of Piaget's theory in education

Piaget's theoretical arguments about the nature of cognitive development, nevertheless, have direct implications in education. When the materials and instructions are suitable for students in terms of their cognitive abilities, their pace of learning increases gradually. Therefore, it is important to instruct them in their mother tongue. Indeed, premature questioning or explaining frustrate the child who cannot understand what s/he is

taught. In preschool and elementary school, for example, children need to see physical representations of ideas or concrete example of concepts.

Moreover, teachers should allow children to act upon the world with objects and tasks that serve to foster their understanding of invariance.

According to Berk (1991, cited in Slavin, 1994) the main educational implications drawn from Piaget are 'A focus on the process of children's thinking, not just its product. And recognition of the crucial role of children's active involvement in learning activities...' (p.45)

Piaget's theory also suggests that students' intellectual development in educational setting demands organized curriculum to lead their minds toward equilibration, creativity and knowledge expansions.

The role of language in Piaget's theory

Based on Becker and Varelas (2001), 'Piaget related the importance of social interaction for intellectual development to the role of language...' (p.22). they quote Piaget statement: "The isolated individual would never be capable of complete conservation and reversibility...and it is the exigencies of reciprocity which allow this double conquest, through the intermediary of a common language and a common scale of definitions". (ibid). they mention however that the role of language for Piaget changed in his later works. In Piaget's account, 'it took me some time to see, it is true, that the roots of logical operation lie deeper than the linguistic connections'; my early study of thinking was centered too much on its linguistics aspects' 'some forty years ago, during my first studies ...I believed in the close relation between language and thought" (Piaget, 1972/1973, cited in Becker and Varelas, 2001, p.23).

Piaget in his theory of the child's cognitive development refers to egocentric speech in the

preschooler as well. Piaget's conception of child egocentric speech is of primary significance in his theory. In egocentric speech, the child talks only about himself, takes no interest in his interlocutor, does not try to communicate, expects no answers, and often does not even care whether anyone listens to him. In Piaget's account once the child reaches the stage of concrete operations, egocentric speech simply disappears. Because the child is now aware of the need to make what he says accessible to his listener and has the intellectual competence to learn how to make himself intelligible (Wood, 1998). Language for him is a 'system of symbols for representing the world, as distinct from actions and operations which form the process of reasoning' (Wood, 1998, p.25).

Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of cognitive development

The gist of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Slavin, 1994). In other words, individual's development is a result of his or her culture. He states 'any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two plane. First it appears between people as an inter-psychological category, and then within the child as an intra-psychological category' (Vygotsky, 1981, cited in Cook and Cook, 2005, p. 194).

In Vygotsky paradigm culture makes two sorts of contributions to the child's intellectual development. First, children acquire much of their thinking from it. Second, children acquire the means of their thinking from the surrounding culture.

However, there is a slight differences between Piaget and Vygotsky regarding egocentric speech. Piaget refers to this early form of speech in a way that the child is unable to use speech to interact with others; Piaget sees egocentric speech as characteristics of an 'imperfectly social phase of the child's development, soon to disappear' (Elliot, 1994,

p.40). Vygotsky argues, on the other hand, that 'egocentric speech serves as an intellectual purpose for children and does not disappear at the age of seven but is internalized to form inner speech and verbal thinking' (Wood, 1998, p, 30). For Vygotsky, this speech, at first, is social. In other words, the main purpose of language for children is social. They use the language to obtain the help of others and to solve problems that immediately occur before them. Social interaction plays an important role in the transformation and internalization processes.

In his account, 'child logic develops only along with the growth of the child's social speech and whole experience...it is through others that we develop into ourselves...and.. this is true not only with regard to the individual but with regard to the history of every function...any higher mental function was external because it was social at some point before becoming an internal, truly mental functioning' (Meadows, 1993, p.237).

Implication of Vygotsky's theory in education

One of Vygotsky's main contribution contributions to education is his concept of zone of proximal development: the gap that exists for an individual between what s/he is able to do alone and what s/he can achieve with the help from more knowledgeable person. Individuals' potentialities are different. 'Some children have larger zones of proximal developments than others, even when their existing levels of performance are similar' (Wood, 1998, p.27).

The role of language in Vygotsky's theory

Vygotsky theory focuses heavily on language and social interaction, and the role they play in helping learners acquire the culture in which they live. In his theory, language is the tool people use for cultural transmission, communication, and reflection on their own thinking. For him language is the most

important psychological tool that mediates our thoughts.

In short, according to his theory, language has two specific roles in cognitive development: communication and regulation. Communication is important in the transmission of culture. Regulation is important in gaining control over one's own cognitive processes. He puts forward: 'in growing up within linguistically structures and sustained relationship the child begins to perceive the world not only through their eyes but also through speech. And later it is not just seeing but acting that is informed by words'(Vygotsky, 1978, p.32 cited in Edwards, 2004).

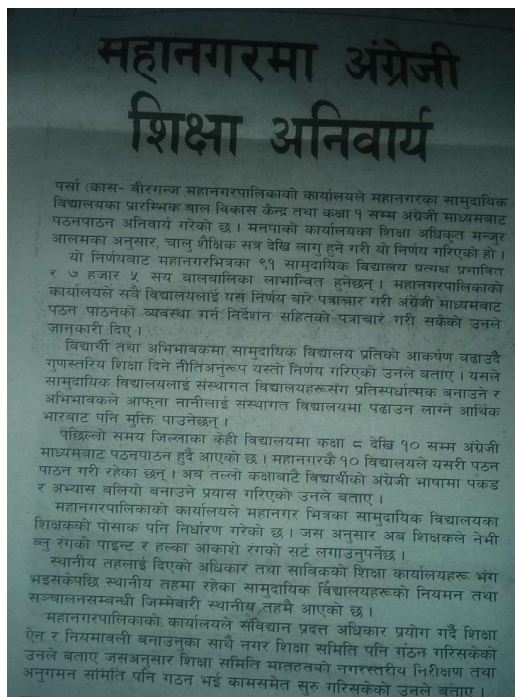
English as a medium of instruction in Birgunj metropolitan

These two psychologists claim that infants are born with the basic abilities for intellectual development or elementary mental functions (such as attention, sensation, perception and

memory). Eventually through interaction within the socio-cultural environment, these are developed into more sophisticated and effective mental processes. Overall both Piaget and Vygotsky recognized the complementary nature of cognition, social interaction and language, as well as the complex nature of development. On the other hand the researches carried out by UNESCO gives much emphasis on the use of mother tongue medium of instruction in pre- and primary level. But, we can see the local decision of using English as medium of instruction which contrasts with the principles of cognitive development and many researches carried out in favor of using mother tongue. There is threat of dropping out of the children from the school in case they find different linguistic environment in their home and school. Compulsory use of other language rather than their mother tongue may make them realize of inferiority. For a moment that may be enjoyed by local guardians, basically by uneducated people but for long run, this is not effective for the children is well understood by educated people. Nevertheless to say, language commission has been pleading all the communities to preserve their languages. Language shows ones culture and it is, of course, the assets of the nation. In such situation local decisions regarding the forcefully use of English as medium of instruction in pre-primary and primary level is a matter of discussion. One of the decision that I have quoted is from The Kantipur Daily regarding the use of English.

Conclusion

This short article provides an information that Piaget's theory grounded in scientific and epistemological (how do we know what we know) understanding of how children's knowledge of the world develops. There is no doubt that his work is important for the investigation of intellectual development. Overall, both Vygotsky and Piaget recognized the complementary nature of cognition, social interaction and language as well as the complex



nature of development. However, they had different emphases in their theoretical propositions. Piaget emphasized on maturational processes in the developmental route. Vygotsky, on the other hand, stressed on the socio-historical mediation of meaning from social context to individual realization. It is not found among the local policy makers giving emphasis on intellectual development of Children. They seem unaware of laden of English language in pre-primary and primary level despite the fact that English in Nepal is taught either second language or even in some places as third language of the children. There is huge possibilities of dropping out the children from the school. Nevertheless to say, use of another language in their early stage of life kills their creativity.

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