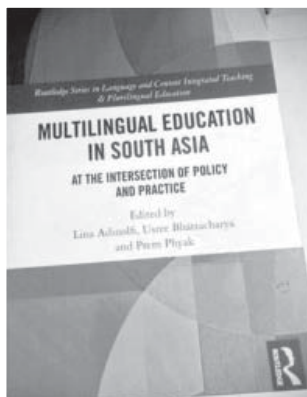


## BOOK REVIEW

### Multilingual Education in South Asia: Where Policies and Practices do not Meet

*Reviewed by Ghazi Shahadat Hossain*



**Multilingual Education in South Asia: At the Intersection of Policy and Practice**

**L. Adinolfi, U. Bhattacharya, and P. Phyak (Eds.)**

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South Asia boasts of not only a rich cultural heritage of linguistics and education but also witnessed bitter experiences of colonial legacy which imposed new epistemologies on it and the anxiety that arose out of the hybridized entities - translocal and local, indigenous and colonial - contributed to the complexity of culture and education. For instance, Panini's, who lived between the 5th to 6th century BC, contribution to grammar is still respected by modern linguists and many of his ideas in phonology have been incorporated into modern phonology. Both Sanskrit and Tamil have the oldest history of continuous literate history and the educational and grammatical discourse belonging to this rich tradition is still very relevant. Suresh Canagarajah in his forward to this book observes that another fascinating trait in this region is that languages and literacies in South Asia symbolize different ideologies and values and Sanskrit served as the lingua franca among different communities living in this region. And with the advent of colonial rule and education, the opportunities to explore the ideologies and values embedded in the South Asian language were denied. The colonial agenda to introduce education finds expression in Macaulay's (1835) *Minute*: to generate "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals, and in intellect" (p.350). Through this declaration, the superiority of English over other vernaculars in the region was established and English language teaching was purposefully used to govern the people, change their values and identities. Interesting to notice that English itself underwent many changes with its blending with diverse indigenous languages in South Asia.

To talk about some recent trends in South Asian language education, many countries, influenced by catchwords such as *Education for All*, *Sustainable Development Goal*, *Right to Education Act*, have taken massive initiatives to ensure education for all citizens of the country. However, ensuring literacy for all new children is as challenging as making sure participatory classrooms, learner autonomy, learner-centered classroom pedagogy. And the linguistic diversities in the region, priorities that in conflict with each other each only add to the already existing challenges. Therefore, responding to the calls of states, homes, local, national and global language such as English and accommodating those voices in sustainable way was a key concern for educators and policy makers in South Asia (Adinolfi et al. 2020).

The edited book offers an outstanding scholarly contribution from Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Pakistan and critically evaluates and captures the approaches, challenges and the potential solutions to the application, interpretation and adaptation of language-in- education policy in South Asia. Scanning the ground level perspectives of students, teachers, policy makers and other practitioners with regard to education policy in the region, the overall objective of the volume is to bring underlying Please omit the word, ideological, practical and identity-related issues embedded in the language-in-education policy to the surface. To put it differently, the book illustrates how systematic inequality inculcated and gets rooted through language policy and through their related interpretations. For instance, through their writings, the writers in this handbook have addressed the challenges in pedagogies and language teaching policies and language-teaching policies. Such a scholarly effort by the writers is surely fraught with implications. For example, the close analysis of local classroom dynamics and local community conditions can help greatly the contemporary scholars and philosophers to review, rethink, and reevaluate language education in this territory. In addition, the diverse learning contexts, and levels from both rural and urban settings can greatly facilitate the understanding and critical inquiry of scholars from other parts of the globe.

In the first chapter of the book, Wijesekra and Hamid (2022) reveal how English can serve as a language of peace in post-conflict Sri Lanka. Both the writers show how mother tongue as a medium of instruction (MoI) in the public schools of Sri Lanka facilitated and perpetuated separation in the already created division among the various ethnic communities such as Sinhala, Tamil and Muslims and despite many benefits of imparting education through mother tongue, it produced reverse effects in the case of Sri Lanka. Realizing the gravity of the issue, the government of the country introduced the teaching second national language policy, which means that Sinhala for Tamil-speaking students, Tamil for Sinhala-speaking students and Muslims could choose any of them between the two. But the program was unsuccessful due to the lack of trained teachers. The initiation of bilingual education (BE) in the form of English and Tamil/ Sinhala produced wonderful results to eliminate racial differences and promote harmony among these different ethnic communities. The use of English created a “third space” beyond every group’s boundary and this new-found space helped students belonging to diverse ethnicities to come close, suppress their ethnocentric attitudes and beliefs and grow and learn together. Using Bourdieu’s framework to look at the role of language from diverse perspectives, the writers, however, warn the role of English as a double-edged knife, that is, while English, in this context,

has empowered the students who have mastered it, it may also disempower people who have not mastered it.

The success of language teaching program is highly determined by the context in which it is used, taught and learned. If the use of learners' first language in the classroom only consolidates the divide between students of diverse ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, translanguaging, the judicious use of students' mother tongue to facilitate and promote students' second language development, was used very successfully in the highly multilingual classrooms of India. Mahboob and Lin (2016) point out many benefits using local language and can be used to "translate, or annotate, ..., explain, elaborate, or exemplify TL, academic content ..." (p.33). Similarly, chapter 2 by Lightfoot et al. showcase ...the multilingual practices in India and reveal how teachers working in multilingual contexts were able to convert the resources of learners' mother language, cultural values and perceptions for co-creation of knowledge and development of higher order thinking skills. They also demonstrate that through systematic comprehensible input, teachers can integrate new practices in multilingual classrooms. And chapter 3 captures the linguistic realities in Nepal and discloses how English medium instruction (EMI) fueled by the idea of neo-liberal ideology, modernity, cultural capital for survival and career success constructs inequalities and marginalization along ethnicity, gender and class lines. Sandwiched between the detrimental influence of English and the dominant language Nepali, the Madhesi ethnic community of Southern Nepal and their language had no space for their voice in Nepali scholarship in language education.

Similarly, chapter 4 brings the linguistic landscape of Western Nepal and identifies dichotomies between language policy and practice. In other words, it shows the gap between the center and the periphery and observes that implementation of imparting education in mother tongue is a far cry if field realities are not taken into consideration. While the local level leaders and provincial actors think English as a means of economic success, quality, superiority, it is very challenging for central policy makers to implement mother tongue instruction in Nepali education system. Finally, the writers suggest strengthening the multilingual education and providing linguistically inclusive education to children across Nepal. On the other hand, chapter 5 takes us to the hegemonic linguistic landscape of Pakistan. One cannot help being shocked to see how Pakistan still holds and continues colonial legacy where English still enjoying the most powerful status, Urdu having the second position and local language has the third position. Although English holds a paradoxical status—being an official language, a marketable commodity, and a prerequisite for employment in local and global markets—it is nevertheless socially discouraged as a means of social communication. It is a big question how the mastery of English can be obtained excluding students' linguistic and cultural resources available in their mother tongues.

Chapter 6 by Stanley V. John spotlights how early bilingual education imparted to tribal children in Indian schools brought long-term educational benefits for them. The writer's study ruled out early misconceptions about tribal students as under-achievers and had cognitive deficiency. He postulated that integration of pupil's home language and culture through bilingual textbooks and related activities in the teaching and learning processes can bring long-term

academic benefits for students. Through his study, the researcher has proved that students whose teachers made of bilingual resources and created home-language milieu in the classrooms during the early years of tribal children's schooling outperformed in all five subjects in high school than those students who did not have such exposure. Then chapter 7 by Tania Rahman and Prem Phyak has discussed the feasibility and potential effectiveness of Objective-Based Education (OBE) introduced in the tertiary institutions of Bangladesh. With a cynical tone and sharp criticism of such initiative by University Grants Commission (UGC), Bangladesh, both the writers have opined that the students of English medium schools are the preferred daughters of OBE while most of the students seeking admission in the universities are from Bangla medium institutions. According to them, traditional method of didactic teaching in the teaching and learning practices of Bangladesh, centrally controlled curriculum process, traditional assessment system, Bangla as a medium of instruction in most universities, and students' poor skills .... in foundational skills will pose significant challenges in the implementation of OBE.

The concluding chapter by Sakshi Manocha takes us back to rural tribal schools in Odisha, India and compares and contrast between the effectiveness of two projects -MLE and MLE plus schools. The article portrays the linguistic hierarchy operating in India and reveals the double divide between the elitist language of power -English vs. Hindi/Tamil. Such tension centering around the status of languages is further aggravated by the ambiguity in the definition of mother tongue and India's 3 languages formula. In this context, Hindi is the medium of instruction, English is the second language and Sanskrit enjoying the status of third language resulting in exclusion of all indigenous or minoritized languages. Against this backdrop, the writer reveals how collaborative norms, use of Saora culture and language as an integral part of classroom design, participatory teaching and learning practices, the incorporation of children's linguistic and cultural resources as pedagogical tools for engaging pupils in classroom activities have turned the MLE plus schools project project very successful and effective.

Written in a very plain and lucid style and capturing the multilingual linguistic landscapes of educational institutions of South Asia, this book offers a compelling reading for those who are interested in language teaching, education, curriculum and syllabus design and language policy and practice. Like Pfeifer's (2018) study in which she outlines the theory and benefits of mother tongue based multilingualism, all the contributors in this book, through their professional expertise, and academic and scholarly skills have unpacked the status of multilingual education, multilingual classroom realities, practices, challenges, risks, pitfalls and opportunities. In spite of limited coverage in terms of languages and countries, lack of sufficient depth in analysis and fewer large-scale quantitative studies, its emphasis on practice and policy gap rather than overcoming challenges, and absence of a chapter providing future projections of the issue, this book is undoubtedly a very significant landmark in the collection of study of language-in-education policy.

## The Reviewer:

**Ghazi Shahadat Hossain** is currently working as an associate professor of English language and literature and coordinator of MA in TESOL program at Premier University, Chittagong, Bangladesh. Also, he is a PhD scholar of TESOL at Far Western University, Nepal. In addition, he teaches Technical Communication at UTS College, University of Technology, Sydney.

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