

# TEACHING ENGLISH IN MULTILINGUAL AND MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS IN NEPAL

*Bhim Lal Bhandari\**

## ABSTRACT

*English is being taught in diverse contexts around the globe. Teaching of English in multilingual and multicultural contexts in Nepal is one of the major challenges in ELT. The majority of classes in Nepal consist of linguistic and cultural diversity where students need to have different learning materials, methodologies and learning styles which help them minimize the problems of interaction and comprehension. This article presents both challenges and opportunities of teaching English in multicultural and multilingual contexts. The problems created by linguistically heterogeneous learners and attitude of parents towards multilingual education are the major challenges for its effective implementation. Moreover, the problems of teachers and students are being addressed in this article along with some suggestions for teachers to solve them and make ELT more effective, better and easier.*

**Key Words:** multilingualism, multiculturalism, intercultural, interlingual communication, socio-cultural, linguistic diversity.

## INTRODUCTION

Nepal is a multicultural, multiethnic and multilingual country where English is being taught as a compulsory subject from lower to higher level.

Nepal is rich in cultural, ethnic and ecological diversity. The previous census has recorded 123 national languages in addition to 'other' languages. The language situation thus shows that Nepal is a multilingual country. Since the country is multi lingual, the education opportunity should also be given to the children of different language families (Awasthi, 2013).

At present, English is no longer the language of Americans, British, Canadians and so on but it is regarded as a global language and a means of intercultural and interlingual communication. However, the challenges to the effectiveness of teaching English in classroom, is the issue of every teacher. There are many challenges to make its teaching more effective, better and easier. One of the major challenges is how

---

\* Mr. Bhandari is Reader in English Education at Butwal Multiple Campus, Tribhuvan University, Rupendehi, Nepal.

teaching of English can be made appropriate in the multilingual and multicultural context of Nepal. Needless to say, there is a craze of learning English among students and guardians which lead the public schools to adopt English as a medium of instruction, English medium schools are increasing day by day. However, there have been very few discussions on how to address the multilingual and multicultural challenges in English classrooms. Students' cultural knowledge and linguistic background can be a resource for teaching and learning English. Teachers of English should give emphasis on multicultural experiences that children bring into the classrooms while learning English. Teaching of English should be contextual in relation to society to address the expectations and experiences of children from diverse cultural backgrounds so that they can get opportunities to utilize their previous knowledge to use English. The more time the students are given to think the better they can perform. Our attempts should be to deconstruct the old rules of teaching English and reconstruct alternative ones to engage students in doing things. English teaching should address socio-cultural realities that exist in the societies. The existing huge gap between socio-cultural reality and teaching of English in Nepal can be eliminated by designing appropriate syllabuses, employing appropriate methods of teaching and producing learning materials considering our own multilingual and multicultural realities.

In this regard National Education Commission (1992) reports,

To permit the use of a language other than Nepali as the medium of instruction in areas where Nepali is not the mother tongue, basically, as is advisable, reading and writing are conducted in Nepali with instructions and explanations given in the mother tongue of the area, provided that the reading materials become available in sufficient quantity.

It is therefore to address linguistics diversity in Nepal the children of major languages should be provided education in their mother tongue by preparing the text books in their languages. It is also the right of the children to get education in their mother tongues. The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) has stated that all the languages spoken as mother tongues in Nepal are national languages of Nepal.

In the similar vein the School Sector Reform Plan (MOE, 2005) states,

To ensure that children learnt in their mother tongue at least in the early grades upto three, school management committee (SMC) can determine the language(s) of instruction in consultation with the local body. Grades four and five can follow a transition from the mother-tongue medium of instruction to Nepali medium of instruction. From

grades six to eight, the medium of instructions can be fully in Nepali. English will be taught as a subject from grade one onwards.

In spite of the legal provisions and commitments of the government, effective implementation and outcomes of multilingual education are not yet seen in the languages in which the children are supposed to be provided primary education in order to fulfill the objectives set by Education for all. Although multilingual education was implemented in Nepal in 2007, there is no significant change for managing the education to the heterogeneous children in the language classrooms is recorded.

### **MULTILINGUATION AND MULTICULTURATION**

The situations where the speakers use more than two languages and adopt various cultures is said to be multilingualism and multiculturalism. Multilingualism refers to the language situation where the speakers use more than two languages in the same setting for similar purposes. The people who are multilingual do not necessarily have exactly the same degree of abilities in all the languages. Typically, multilingual have varying degrees of command of the different repertoires. The differences in competence in the various languages might range from command of a few lexical items, formulaic expressions such as: greetings, rudimentary conversational skills and the way to excellent command of the grammar, vocabulary, specialized register and styles. Appropriate code choice in different speech communities is said to be a new challenge in multilingual communities. Participants, setting, topic, social distance, the status, the lectures of setting and dimensions of formality and the function or goal of interaction are some affecting factors in code choice. Hence “multilingual Education entails teaching and learning of multiple languages” (Lotherington, 2004: 710).

Regarding the medium of instruction for the children UNESCO as early as in 1953 states that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue or any other language a child understands well, Mother tongue is the natural means of self expression of the experiences and thoughts learnt in childhood (UNESCO, 1953).

Furthermore, the medium of teaching also transfers the culture of the language used in instruction. It is, therefore, significant to select the mother tongue of children as the medium of instruction for teaching them. Teaching the children through mother tongue at the primary level is very meaningful to make education accessible to the children and to involve

them in the learning process (cf. Awasthi, 2004, Yadava, 2011, Yadava and Dhakal, 2011).

Mackey and Hornberger (2009) assert that "teachers in general and language teachers specially, face the challenging task of respecting linguistic diversity..." Most of the learners in the Nepali schools come up with different native language backgrounds which can interfere in their EFL learning. In order to respect the linguistic diversity in multilingual and multicultural contexts, English teachers should reshape their teaching procedures to decrease the degree of mother tongue interference and language anxiety. There are very few linguistically homogeneous countries in the world, such as Iceland; however, many countries display linguistic diversity. In case of Nepal, more than hundred languages are spoken here, 700 and 800 languages are spoken in Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, respectively. Yadava (2003), states that Nepal is a multiethnic nation comprising various ethnic and religious communities. Its ethnic and religious diversity is coupled with its linguistic plurality. It is also one of the factors of students' poor performance in English. Migration movement of people, spread of colonial power, travel and tourism, volunteer programmes etc. are some causes of linguistic diversity and multiculturalism. Monolingualism hardly exists in any part of the world. For Wardhaugh (2008) "... a monolingual individual would be regarded as misfit who lacks an important skill in society i.e. the skill of being able to interact freely with the speakers of other languages." Hence, living in a monolingual community is nearly impossible at present. Moreover, monolingual learners feel difficulty to present them effectively in the global market of competition. As a result, they will be hopeless, helpless, powerless and desperate due to their frequent failure in the field of educational opportunities.

Multilingualism is closely related to multiculturalism. For example, in Tukano community where both husband and wife speak separate languages as a result their children are sure to be multilinguals. In such contexts multilingualism becomes a norm. If we take this case as a norm in Tukano like communities, teaching and learning of English becomes a more challenging task for both stakeholders i.e. teachers and learners. Teachers in such situation need to bring diversity in their delivery also. No single method of teaching would yield a desired result because the advantage of a multilingual individual is that he cannot understand the world better and compete with multilingual but also can widen horizon of knowledge for better

career advancement. Learners are the members of a particular socio-cultural community so their language and cultural backgrounds influence them. The class where the majority of the students speak one language, their classroom interaction is limited to a simple language but they have to use English if they come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds as they do not understand each others' language. However, individual and cultural diversity influences language learning decisions and choices because they are fundamental elements of language teaching.

#### **SOME CHALLENGES OF MLE**

Multilingual education is not free from challenges. The sociolinguistic situation in our country is far more diverse. Implementation of MLE due to multilingual classes and parents' interest to educate their children in English has become more complicated. Regarding the heterogeneous nature of the children, it is quite difficult to choose a language for the medium of instruction.

This situation leads to the classrooms with students from heterogeneous linguistic background. This is interlinked with the development of resource, teacher training and ultimately linked with financial management. Taking into consideration the heterogeneous nature of the classroom, we need to find an appropriate model to handle this situation (Ghimire, 2014).

Parents and guardians feel the necessity of giving education to their children in English, so that they could get good opportunities at home and abroad. Hence, they are found reluctant to allow their mother tongue as the medium of instruction in schools.

#### **PROBLEMS OF TEACHERS AND STUDENTS**

Both non-Nepali and non-English speaking teachers and students in the classroom face the following problems:

- Problem of low interaction between teachers and students.
- Problem of comprehension and effective learning.
- Problem of structural organization.
- Problem of content delivery treating all languages with equal respect.
- Problem of determining the individual needs and awareness of each student.
- Problem of excessive use of mother tongue.
- Problem of discipline and interest.

- Problem of different learning styles and effective learning for all.
- Problem of giving and getting feedback.
- Problem of giving home assignments and correcting them.

Due to linguistic uniformity, there is usually less interaction between the teacher and students, as a result, the latter may not comprehend the contents that the teacher delivers them. The non-Nepali speakers are often in minority in most of the classes and they have poor performance as they feel hesitation to interact with teachers. In order to cope up with such a situation, Harmer (2008) suggests that we might ask all students to look at the same teaching text but make a difference in terms of the tasks we ask them to in response to the text.

#### **SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS**

While teaching to the students with diverse language and cultural backgrounds, teacher face many problems which can be minimized in the following ways:

- by sharing the problems with their colleagues
- by forming peer groups of students with the same language background
- by preparing appropriate materials that fit in to multilingual contexts
- by providing translation type of home assignment for the students
- by using examples from multiple languages
- by inviting students for group discussion
- by running multilingual teaching methods in English class
- by enhancing collaboration and reducing ethnic prejudices.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Until and unless we deconstruct the old tradition of teaching English in the classroom and establish the new tradition of two way communication to foster intercultural communication as a carrier of ethnic identity and culture, the English language teaching will not be effective and successful. Due to the heterogeneous nature of classroom situation and the beliefs and attitudes of parents towards multilingual education, it is quite difficult to boost up and address its necessity for effective implementation of multilingual education throughout the country. Cross (1992), recommends for peer and group work. He states that "teacher can

multiply the opportunities for practice and for creative language use by introducing pair and group work". Both teachers and students feel comfortable and easy to use their own native language even if the purpose of teaching is to make the students competent and proficient in English. Excessive use of learners' mother tongue seems to be barrier for better language learning. It is quite difficult for teachers to devise right type of teaching methodology in multilingual and cultural contexts. One of the problems is to decide the medium of instruction in a multilingual context. Moreover, it is essential to provide different tasks to different students to grow them at their own pace. Mother tongue interference, whatever may be its intensity is also one of the factors of students' poor performance in English. Those who have wide and varied knowledge of different languages perceive the world through different perspectives, as they are socially and culturally more sensitive than monolinguals. It is, therefore, isolated, unexpressive and be able to live in global community practicing different ideas, world views and issues easily in the global village. Students should be provided with multilingual and multicultural education in order to help them not to be culturally and linguistically marginalized, but to socially inclusive, globally united, culturally cohesive, open to discourse and academically and intellectually competent.

#### **WORKS CITED**

- Awasthi, L.D. (2004). *Exploring monolingual school practices in multilingual Nepal*. PhD Thesis. Copenhagen: Danmarks Pædagogiske University/ Danish University of Education.
- (2013). Multilingual education in Nepal: Current policy and future directions. A paper read at seminar on multilingual education. 14 December 2013, organized by MLE Resource Centre, CERID/TU and UNESCO.
- Cross, D. (1992). *A practical handbook of language teaching*. London: Prentice Hall.
- Ghimire, L. (2014). *Language policy of mother tongue-based multilingual education in Nepal*. PhD Thesis Submitted to Tribhuvan University, Nepal.
- Hall, G. (2011). *Exploring English language teaching language in action*. India: Routledge.
- Harmer, J. (2008). *The practice of English language teaching*, Longman: Pearson Longman.

- Lotherington, H. (2004). *Bilingual education. in the handbook of applied linguistics*: (Eds.) Allan Devies, Catherine Elders. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 695-718
- Mackay, S.L. & Hornberger N.H. (2009). *Sociolinguistics and language teaching*, Noida, India: Cambridge University Press.
- Ministry of Education. (2005). *School sector reform plan (2009-2015)*. Kathmandu.
- Report of the National Education Commission (1992). Kathmandu: Ministry of Education.
- UNESCO. (1953). *The use of vernacular languages in educations: The Report of the UNESCO Meeting of Specialists (Paris)*. Monographs on Fundamentals Education 8.
- Wardhaugh, R. (2008). *Introduction to sociolinguistics*, New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Yadava, Y.P. (2003). *Language in population monograph of Nepal Volume-1* Kathmandu: CBS.
- Yadava, Y.P. & Dhakal, D.N. (2011). *Why multilingual education? (Matribhasi sikskya kina?)*. Pragma 106, pp. 1-6