

Language Planning in Multilingual Nepal: Challenges and Strategies for Preservation and Integration

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Abstract

This article critically examines language planning in Nepal, emphasizing the systemic marginalization of minority languages in a multilingual setting. It highlights how socio-political and economic pressures compel marginalized communities to adopt Nepali—the dominant language with institutional backing—while their native tongues face functional exclusion from education, administration, and national discourse. Based on a review of existing literature, interviews with educators, and analysis of policy documents, the study reveals how such dynamics contribute to cultural erosion and perceived injustice. It advocates for inclusive, sustainable language planning through multilingual education policies and formal recognition of regional languages as pathways to linguistic equity and preservation. Finally, it proposes potential solutions and recommendations, such as multilingual education policies and the formal recognition of regional languages, to foster linguistic preservation and inclusion in Nepal.

Keywords: Language planning, Minority Language, Multilingualism, Justice

Introduction

Nepal is a linguistically and culturally diverse nation, home to 124 mother tongues as recorded in the National Population and Housing Census 2021 (CBS, 2023). Despite this rich multilingual heritage, the state has yet to formulate a comprehensive language policy that meaningfully addresses the needs of its diverse linguistic communities. Although the Constitution of Nepal (2015) acknowledges the country's multilingual character—affirming the right of every community to use and promote its language (Article 32)—Nepali remains the sole official language at the federal level, and practical implementation of multilingual provisions remains limited and inconsistent.

This disconnect between constitutional recognition and policy execution raises critical concerns about the marginalization of indigenous and minority languages. Historical language policies have prioritized national integration, often at the expense of linguistic diversity, resulting in declining intergenerational transmission, reduced visibility of minority languages in education and governance, and a growing dominance of Nepali and English in public life. The identification of 13 new languages in the 2021 census further underscores the dynamic and evolving nature of Nepal's linguistic landscape, yet these languages remain largely unsupported institutionally. Against this backdrop, this study is necessary to interrogate the gaps in Nepal's language planning, examine the socio-political and structural barriers to

language preservation, and propose inclusive strategies that align with both constitutional commitments and the lived realities of multilingual communities

Major Languages and Demographic Trends

The census data reveal that Nepali remains the dominant mother tongue, spoken by 13,084,457 people (44.86%) in 2021, up from 11,826,953 (44.64%) in 2011. Other significant languages include *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, *Tharu*, and *Tamang*, each with over a million speakers. While some languages, such as Magahi, have seen substantial increases, others like *Doteli* and Urdu have experienced declines in speaker numbers and percentage share.

Table1: Mother tongue reported as having spoken by more than 1 hundred thousand population each in census 2021 and 2011.

Mother Tongue	Census 2021 Population	Census 2021 Percent	Census 2011 Population	Census 2011 Percent
Nepali	13,084,457	44.86%	11,826,953	44.64%
Maithili	3,222,389	11.05%	3,092,530	11.67%
Bhojpuri	1,820,795	6.24%	1,584,958	5.98%
Tharu	1,714,091	5.88%	1,529,875	5.77%
Tamang	1,423,075	4.88%	1,353,311	5.11%
Bajjika	1,133,764	3.89%	793,416	2.99%
Avadhi	864,276	2.96%	501,752	1.89%
Nepalbhasha	863,380	2.96%	846,557	3.20%
Magar Dhut	810,315	2.78%	788,530	2.98%
Doteli	494,864	1.70%	787,827	2.97%
Urdu	413,785	1.42%	691,546	2.61%
Yakthung/Limb	350,436	1.20%	343,603	1.30%
Gurung	328,074	1.12%	325,622	1.23%
Magahi	230,117	0.79%	35,614	0.13%
Baitadeli	152,666	0.52%	272,524	1.03%

Mother Tongue	Census 2021 Population	Census 2021 Percent	Census 2011 Population	Census 2011 Percent
Rai	144,512	0.50%	159,114	0.60%
Achhami	141,444	0.48%	142,787	0.54%
Bantawa	138,003	0.47%	132,583	0.50%
Rajbanshi	130,163	0.45%	122,214	0.46%
Sherpa	117,896	0.40%	114,830	0.43%
Khash	117,511	0.40%	-	-

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics. (2021).

This table provides a clear comparison of the populations and percentages of speakers of various mother tongues in Nepal from the 2021 and 2011 censuses. The data shows that Nepali remains the dominant mother tongue, with an increase in its speaker base from 11,826,953 (44.64%) in 2011 to 13,084,457 (44.86%) in 2021. Maithili, Bhojpuri, and Tharu also saw increases in their speaker populations, although the growth rate of Maithili slowed slightly from 11.67% in 2011 to 11.05% in 2021. *Tamang* experienced a slight decrease in percentage terms, from 5.11% to 4.88%, despite an increase in absolute numbers.

NepalBasha (Newari) remained relatively stable, with a minor decrease in its percentage share from 3.20% to 2.96%. *Gurung* and *Yakthung/Limbu* maintained their speaker populations with slight variations. Magahi showed a substantial increase in its speakers, jumping from 35,614 (0.13%) to 230,117 (0.79%).

Overall, while some languages saw significant increases or decreases in their speaker populations, Nepali continues to be the predominant mother tongue in Nepal, with *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, and *Tharu* maintaining strong presences.

An indigenous language refers to a language that is native to a specific region and traditionally spoken by the original inhabitants of that area. These languages are deeply intertwined with the cultural, spiritual, and ecological knowledge systems of Indigenous communities and often evolve independently of dominant or colonial languages (Pun & Gurung, 2020). In Nepal, such languages are typically spoken by ethnic groups officially recognized as *Adivasi Janajati* (Indigenous Nationalities), as defined by the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities Act (2002). These languages are frequently transmitted orally and may lack formal recognition or institutional support (Tumbahang, 2010). Examples of indigenous languages in Nepal include *Tamang*, *Limbu*, *Tharu*, *Newar (NepalBhasa)*, and various Rai languages such as *Bantawa* and *Chamling*. These languages are not only linguistic systems but also carriers of ancestral knowledge and identity.

In contrast, a minority language is one spoken by a numerically smaller group within a state where another language holds dominant or official status. While some minority languages are also indigenous, others may not be. Their minority status is shaped by demographic, political, and institutional marginalization (Gautam & Poudel, 2022). A language may be considered a minority language if it is spoken by a small population, lacks legal or educational support, or is geographically isolated. Examples of minority languages in Nepal include *Urdu*

(spoken by the Muslim minority), Sanskrit (historically significant but now limited in use), *Magar*, and *Dotyali*—the latter often viewed as a dialect of Nepali but with distinct linguistic features and cultural identity.

Classification and Regional Distribution of Language Families Spoken in Nepal

A quarter of Nepal's population speaks one of the Sanskrit-related languages of the Terai, such as *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, and *Avadhi*, or the indigenous *Tharu* language (Moran, 1996). The majority of Nepal's languages are spoken by Mongoloid Hill tribes and belong to the Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. *Gurung*, *Tamang*, *Magar*, *Sherpa*, *Rai*, and *Limbu* tribes each have their own languages, often subdivided into distinct regional dialects; Rai alone has approximately 34 recognized varieties. Most of these languages remain unwritten, though Newari possesses its own alphabet and a tradition of classical literature (Moran, 1996).

The native tongue of nearly half the residents of the Kathmandu Valley, Newari, represents a special case. Structurally related to Tibeto-Burman languages, Newari script bears a resemblance to the Tibetan alphabet. However, with the advent of the printing press, the script has largely been replaced by Devanagari (Moran, 1996).

The official national language of Nepal is Nepali, which originated from the language of the *Khasa*—a hill tribe that migrated eastward along the Himalayas and, by the 14th century, had established an empire in northwestern Nepal. The *Khasa* influence extended far beyond their small kingdom, with their language being officially used in the *Newar* courts of the *Malla* kings a century before the *Gorkhalis* conquered the Kathmandu Valley (Moran, 1996). However, following the enactment of the new constitution in 2072, various local government bodies have begun using local languages alongside Nepali *Khas* to promote linguistic diversity and inclusion.

The *Gorkhalis*' rise to power solidified Nepali's role as the primary language. Today it's the mother tongue of 44.64% population (CBS, 2021); another above 40% speak it fluently as a second language. As the official language of Government, schools and mass media, Nepali has become the lingua Franca of diverse ethnic groups. Increasingly, it is replacing these ethnic languages, the more obscure of which are slowly dying out.

Multilingualism and Consequences

Because of linguistic diversity, many illiterate Nepalese are fluent in two, three or even four languages. Indeed, Nepal's linguistic landscape fosters widespread bilingualism and multilingualism—even among those without formal education. According to the National Population and Housing Census 2021, 46.23% reported Nepali as their second language, indicating a significant portion of the population communicates in more than one language. Additionally, the census identified 117 second languages in use, reflecting the depth of language contact and multilingual practices across the country.

A study analyzing the 2021 census data further notes that multilingualism is not limited to the educated elite. Many individuals, including those who are illiterate, are functionally fluent in two to four languages, often using their mother tongue at home, Nepali or Hindi in public spaces, and English or regional lingua franc as in specific domains like trade or tourism. This organic multilingualism underscores the importance of recognizing and supporting linguistic competencies beyond formal literacy, especially in language planning and education policy. It proves that language learning is not some kind of miraculous talent, but a skill born from the need to communicate. In terms of intelligibility, in Terai region from east to west, many languages (*Rajbansi*, *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, and *Avadi*) are on a line of continuum. It is very difficult to say where one language ends and other begins. People of two different neighboring

language communities can understand each other's' language. But the longer the distance between two different speech communities, the more it is difficult to understand. The characters of one language transfers to another language because of these phenomena the same language shows i.e. variations of the same language. Language is associated with politics, economy i.e. power. Nepali has become lingua Franca in different ethnic groups. Despite the fact that each language is unique in itself, many minority languages are dying out.

In the 2021 and 2011 censuses, the status of Nepali, *Tamang*, *Sherpa*, *Gurung*, *Magar*, and *Nepalbhasa* (Newari) as second languages reveals notable trends and contrasts. Nepali, as a second language, experienced a significant increase, with 13,482,904 speakers (46.23% of the total population) in 2021 compared to 8,682,499 speakers (32.77%) in 2011. This substantial growth highlights the rising prevalence of Nepali as a second language. Similarly, the *Tamang* language saw an increase in second-language speakers, from 33,450 (0.13%) in 2011 to 71,569 (0.25%) in 2021. *Gurung* and *Magar* also showed growth, though less pronounced: *Gurung* speakers rose from 22,834 (0.09%) to 23,698 (0.08%), and *Magar* speakers increased from 42,952 (0.16%) to 54,143 (0.19%). *Nepalbhasa* (Newari), on the other hand, remained relatively stable, with 32,604 speakers (0.11%) in 2021 compared to 32,594 (0.12%) in 2011. Notably, *Sherpa* was not listed as a second language in the provided census data. The trends indicate a broadening linguistic landscape, with Nepali increasingly becoming a common second language, while other ethnic languages like *Tamang*, *Gurung*, and *Magar* also see gradual adoption as second languages. (Census, 2021)

Language Planning Strategies in Nepal

Language planning in Nepal has evolved significantly, influenced by political shifts, social movements, and globalization. Previous studies highlight the tension between linguistic diversity and national integration, emphasizing the need for balanced policies (Giri, 2019). Scholars argue that while Nepal has constitutional provisions recognizing indigenous languages, practical implementation remains weak (Yadav, 2021). Case studies from other multilingual nations, such as India and Switzerland, provide insights into potential frameworks for managing linguistic diversity. In the context of Nepal, such comparative lessons gain relevance when viewed alongside constitutional commitments. Article 32(1) of the Constitution of Nepal (2015) guarantees that "each person and community shall have the right to use their language," while Article 31(5) affirms the right of every community to acquire education in their mother tongue up to the secondary level and to establish educational institutions accordingly. These provisions not only recognize linguistic rights but also imply a constitutional mandate for proactive language planning and promotion. However, the gap between policy and practice in Nepal underscores the importance of learning from international models that have successfully institutionalized multilingualism through legal, educational, and administrative frameworks.

Language is perhaps one of the most important assets of human civilization. It plays a crucial role in societal development and is closely related to poverty, economic development, educational achievement, national integration, and disintegration. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Article 19, as cited in Minority Rights Group International & UNICEF, 2010.).

According to Phillipson (2003), language planning is a specialization in the sociology of language requiring input from economics, demography, education and linguistics. This framework serves as a strategic set of tools for implementing language policy measures, primarily utilized in post-colonial states. Such measures aim to counteract language

endangerment by addressing socio-economic oppression, enhancing the status and perception of the language among its speakers, and fostering linguistic loyalty.

Language is a strong bond of social identity. To a great extent, ethnicity and language go together to form the identity, but they are not necessarily the same in each case. Most communities are identified by their mother tongue and live historically together in close areas. Language planners and scholars have come to realize that language is a social resource and hence plannable. But it raises the question whether it is plannable in the same sense as economic planning.

All developmental planning is planning for social goals, but language planning has a strong link particularly with cultural planning. It deals with publication, works of art, theater (Yadav 1990). Despite the fact that Nepal is a multilingual and multicultural country, language planners have negatively evaluated other than Nepali languages. No clear-cut policy has ever been enunciated with regard to regional and minority language status.

Kennedy (as cited in Lin & Martin, 2005, p. 119) highlights that language use is deeply connected to political influence, economic progress, cultural identity, and national values, which has led to a greater awareness of the crucial role language policies play in shaping a nation. A language being a societal resource it can be used in improving social life along with improving the language. So language planning is an attempt to guide the developmental process of a language in a direction desired by the planners and their master.

According to Weinstein (1980,) language planning is a government authorized. Long-term, sustained and conscious effort to alter a language's function in a society for the purpose of solving communication problems." It might include evaluating available resources, making difficult decisions, allocating various roles to various languages or dialects within a community, and investing precious resources.

Language planning is a deliberate effort to modify or regulate a language or one of its variations. This intervention may target its status in relation to other languages or its internal structure to bring about specific changes. These approaches are not mutually exclusive; efforts to modify status lead to status planning, while changes to the linguistic structure constitute corpus planning (Wardhaugh, 1986).

Language planning is a deliberate and strategic effort to influence the function, structure, and acquisition of languages within a society, often driven by sociopolitical, educational, and cultural goals (Cooper, 1989; Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). In multilingual nations like Nepal, where over 124 languages coexist, language planning is essential not only for national integration but also for the preservation of linguistic diversity. The rationale for planning stems from the need to address language endangerment, promote equitable access to education and governance, and uphold linguistic rights. Without such planning, dominant languages—such as Nepali and English—tend to marginalize minority tongues, leading to cultural erosion and social exclusion (Pun & Gurung, 2020; Ojha & Phyak, 2019). Effective language planning ensures that all linguistic communities are represented in public life, education, and media, thereby fostering inclusivity and cultural sustainability.

Language planning is typically categorized into several interrelated types. Status planning involves assigning roles to languages within a society, such as designating official or regional languages (Holmes, 2013). Corpus planning focuses on developing the internal structure of a language—standardizing grammar, orthography, and vocabulary (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997). Acquisition planning promotes the learning and transmission of languages, often through educational policies and curriculum design (Fishman, 1987). Prestige planning aims to elevate the social value of a language, encouraging its use in formal and cultural

domains (Nordquist, 2025). Additionally, domain planning allocates specific languages to particular sectors, such as health, law, or local governance. In Nepal's context, these planning types must work in cycle to support mother tongue-based multilingual education, regional language recognition, and the development of linguistic resources. A holistic approach that integrates these dimensions is crucial for resisting linguistic assimilation and ensuring the survival of Nepal's rich linguistic heritage.

Wardhaugh (1986) explains that language planning encompasses both status and corpus planning, each serving distinct but interconnected purposes in shaping linguistic development. Status planning involves modifying a language's role or function, which directly impacts the rights of its speakers; for instance, when a minority language is excluded from educational use, its status declines, reflecting the influence of sociopolitical factors that can either enhance or diminish its presence. Meanwhile, corpus planning focuses on refining and standardizing a language or its variety to ensure it fulfills diverse functions within society. This process includes developing orthography, expanding vocabulary sources, compiling dictionaries, fostering literary works, and promoting new applications of the language. By integrating these approaches, language planning supports linguistic adaptation across key domains such as governance, education, and commerce, ultimately shaping the linguistic landscape of a nation.

Cobarrubias (as Cited in Wardhaugh, p.337) has described four typical ideologies that may motivate actual decision making in language planning in a particular society: these are linguistic irrigation, linguistic pluralism, vernacularization and internationalism.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore the nuanced dimensions of language planning and preservation in Nepal. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) argue, methodological choices should align with the research context and questions, particularly when the aim is not to establish definitive truths but to uncover embedded meanings and contextual understanding. The primary method employed is document analysis, drawing upon national instruments such as Nepal's Constitution, government policy reports, and linguistic surveys. This method is complemented by semi-structured interviews with educators, policymakers, and linguistic experts to enrich contextual interpretation. The interpretation of data is both descriptive and critical—descriptive in outlining existing frameworks and practices, and critical in interrogating the socio-political implications of language policies and their implementation. This combined strategy enables a grounded yet reflexive analysis of the challenges and potential pathways for equitable language planning in a multilingual nation like Nepal.

This study employed a qualitative research design involving semi-structured interviews with teachers, policymakers, and linguistic experts from diverse linguistic and geographic backgrounds across Nepal. Participants included educators from both public and community schools, representing linguistic groups such as *Maithili*, *Tamang*, *Tharu*, and *Limbu*. A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to select participants who had direct experience teaching in multilingual classrooms or working within communities where minority languages are spoken. This approach ensured the inclusion of voices from both urban and rural regions, enabling nuanced insight into the strategies and challenges of language planning and implementation at the ground level.

Results and Discussions

The decline of linguistic diversity in Nepal is a growing concern, as many indigenous languages face the threat of extinction. Several factors contribute to language endangerment, including sociopolitical influences, economic migration, lack of institutional support, and the

dominance of Nepali and English in formal education and governance. Minority languages often suffer from limited intergenerational transmission, as younger speakers increasingly adopt dominant languages for economic and social mobility. When a language loses its speakers, it gradually fades from daily use, leading to cultural erosion and the loss of unique worldviews embedded in linguistic traditions.

Nepal, a nation renowned for its rich linguistic mosaic, is home to 124 mother tongues spoken by diverse ethnic communities across its hills, plains, and mountains (National Population and Housing Census, 2021). While major languages like *Maithili*, *Bhojpuri*, *Tharu*, and *Tamang* each claim over a million native speakers, many indigenous languages are witnessing a steady decline. This shift is exacerbated by rapid urbanization, economic migration, and the increasing dominance of Nepali and English in education, administration, and mass media. Although Nepali is spoken by 44.86% of the population as a mother tongue and by over 46% as a second language, the rising prevalence of Nepali and English is accompanied by code-switching, vocabulary erosion, and weakened intergenerational transmission of minority languages. Despite constitutional guarantees of linguistic rights, the absence of robust implementation frameworks continues to marginalize local languages and limits their functional use to familial and ceremonial contexts.

In response to these growing challenges, Nepal has seen emerging attention toward language planning through initiatives promoting multilingual education, decentralization, and cultural revitalization. Strategies such as mother tongue-based early instruction, formal recognition of regional languages, and the inclusion of minority languages in local governance structures are gaining momentum. However, policy ambitions are hampered by limited political will, insufficient educational resources, and inadequate teacher training. Experts warn that without integrated efforts—including policy reform, institutional support, and community-led documentation and archiving—Nepal risks accelerating the loss of its intangible cultural heritage. To resist the tide of "linguistic Darwinism," where dominant languages thrive while others fade, a sustainable and inclusive language planning framework must prioritize equity, accessibility, and long-term cultural preservation.

Language Endangerment and Loss

Language is a dynamic and living entity, sustained by the people who speak it. Without active speakers, a language ceases to exist. It thrives only when individuals use it in communication, preserving its relevance and continuity (Gautam & Poudel, 2022; Ojha & Phyak, 2019). Insights from interviews with teachers and experts suggest that the vitality of languages in Nepal faces significant threats due to various factors, including declining intergenerational transmission, sociopolitical influences, and the dominance of widely spoken languages in education and governance.

State policies mandating Nepali as the primary medium of instruction and official communication have significantly marginalized minority languages. As a result, non-native speakers encounter considerable difficulties in accessing quality education and securing employment opportunities, which pressures them to adopt Nepali as their primary language. This linguistic shift, driven by systemic constraints, gradually diminishes the use and vitality of indigenous languages, posing a serious threat to their preservation.

Some experts have observed that socioeconomic pressures significantly influence language abandonment among minority language speakers. Many individuals perceive limited practical utility for their mother tongues in public life, mainstream media, and government institutions. As a result, they are compelled to shift toward dominant languages like Nepali to access better economic opportunities, enhance career prospects, and integrate more effectively

into society. This gradual transition, driven by systemic factors, accelerates the decline of indigenous languages and poses challenges for linguistic diversity and cultural preservation.

The generational shift in language proficiency is evident as younger speakers demonstrate reduced familiarity with traditional vocabularies, while older generations often resist the integration of Nepali linguistic features into their native languages. This dynamic leads to frequent code-switching in conversations, where speakers alternate between languages, and contributes to gradual language attrition. Over time, the diminished transmission of indigenous linguistic knowledge further accelerates the decline of minority languages, posing challenges for cultural preservation and intergenerational communication.

To establish the language of conquerors seems to be an obvious means of assimilating a conquered people to them (Grant as cited in education for development or domination?). In Nepalese context, nowadays many languages have disappeared and some are on the process of disappearing. It is basically the cause of state policy towards language. Rulers are imposing Nepali language as the means of instruction in Education despite its difficulties for nonnative Nepali speakers. Minorities are deprived from being educated in their own language. These people are compelled to educate their children in colonizers language due to various reasons. They do not see any use of their own language in office university exam or in public service commission. So, they are pushed to leave their mother tongue and adopt 'colonizers' language i.e. Nepali language is spoken by the ruling elites. It is spoken by the higher class of natives at the seats of Government.

The phenomenon of language loss remains a complex issue, often leading to uncertainty about its pace and extent. While people may recognize that languages are disappearing, they may lack awareness of how rapidly this process is occurring. Structurally, various elements of a language can change swiftly, especially among those most exposed to external influences. One significant indicator of language decline is the increased frequency of code-switching, where speakers integrate features from dominant or contact languages into their speech. Grammatical structures may also undergo transformation, with shifts in the use of inflections and function words influenced by the prevailing language. Additionally, vocabulary erosion is evident, as younger generations retain only a fraction of the traditional lexicon known to older speakers, while older individuals may struggle with or resist the borrowed words introduced from the dominant language. This dynamic ultimately accelerates linguistic attrition, posing serious challenges to language preservation and cultural identity.. They see high chances of getting job through that language. Indigenous people are compelled to leave their mother tongue because they don't get any job opportunity despite the fact they are able to use their own language well. They don't find the uses of their own language in Media, i.e. TV, newspaper, radio etc. Because of the linguistic environment, they feel frustration towards their own language and ultimately the language disappears. So, we need language documentation which is a lasting, multipurpose record of a language (Himmelman, 2006). The process of compiling language documentation is extensive, with no definitive upper boundary to the amount of information that can be recorded. Given the complexity of linguistic structures, cultural contexts, and variations in usage, language documentation remains an ongoing and limitless endeavor.

Current Strategies and Challenges

Despite Nepal's multilingual reality, language planning has historically favored Nepali, with limited recognition for regional and minority languages. Effective language planning requires input from diverse fields such as economics, demography, education, and linguistics. It is a deliberate, sustained effort, often government-authorized, to alter language functions and solve communication problems in society.

Nepali has been the official language in Nepal, and it has been given the status of a national language. But many local language groups have now been resenting the fact that the imposition of Nepali as the national language has retarded the growth of their languages and has forced many a non Nepali speaking, group to accept against their wish. Many languages are spoken on a regional basis.

One expert on language education in Nepal argues that the country cannot isolate itself from globalization, as English plays a dominant role across various sectors. In many academic disciplines, proficiency in English is essential for even basic competence. The growing demand for English has led to the establishment of private schools to accommodate public expectations. However, the use of English as the primary medium of instruction has also created unintended barriers, as teachers often use students' inability to express themselves in English to maintain classroom discipline, discouraging them from asking questions in their native languages. As a result, many students graduate from English-medium education with inadequate English proficiency, which neither benefits them nor contributes effectively to national development.

Many languages spoken by economically and politically marginalized groups are disappearing, reflecting a form of linguistic Darwinism in which only the dominant languages survive. While some view this as a natural process, others argue that languages are an essential part of humanity's heritage and should be preserved. According to Pattanayak (as cited in *Educational Rights of Minorities*, p. 15), languages collectively form a national mosaic, and the loss of even a few linguistic elements diminishes the beauty and integrity of the whole. He metaphorically compares this to a lotus, where withering petals or displaced mosaic chips make the entire structure appear less vibrant. The extinction of languages, therefore, impoverishes a nation culturally and intellectually.

In the Nepalese context, linguistic diversity necessitates a multilingual policy to ensure justice for minority language speakers. Implementing a three-language policy—incorporating local, national, and international languages—could help balance linguistic preservation with national integration, fostering inclusivity while maintaining Nepal's rich linguistic heritage.

One language expert emphasized that supporting minority language speakers requires their languages to be formally recognized within the national socio-economic development framework, considering the number of speakers and the functionality of different languages. The unique cultural and intellectual contributions of each ethnic group are deeply tied to their linguistic heritage, making it essential for a country that values diversity to protect and sustain its linguistic assets. At the same time, advancements in science, technology, and international communication necessitate proficiency in an international language, with English being the most widely used globally.

Several educators emphasized the need of connection between national policies and local classroom realities. One teacher remarked, *"We're told to support multilingual education, but there's no training or books in our students' languages—how are we supposed to teach?"* This reflects a systemic gap in resource allocation and teacher preparedness.

Others shared hopeful strategies rooted in community engagement. As one teacher noted, *"If we work with local elders and parents, we can build simple materials in our own languages. We don't need to wait for the center."* Such grassroots-driven approaches are seen as both empowering and culturally relevant, yet often lack institutional support.

Challenges also emerged around policy ambiguity. A senior educator voiced concern, stating, *"The government talks about language rights, but it is unclear how that translates into classroom practice. We're afraid to do something unofficial."* This tension between top-down mandates and local initiative stifles innovation and experimentation in multilingual teaching.

Finally, some expressed concern about intergenerational language loss, with one participant reflecting, *“Even our own children are forgetting our mother tongue. If schools don’t step in, who will?”* This points to the emotional weight teachers carry as both educators and cultural custodians.

Ways Forward

If all students in a classroom share the same native language, instruction should be conducted in their mother tongue to facilitate effective learning and comprehension. However, in linguistically diverse classrooms where students come from different language backgrounds, a bilingual or trilingual approach would be more appropriate. This policy ensures that students can access education in a language they understand while also acquiring proficiency in the national or international language, fostering inclusivity and enhancing educational outcomes.

Participants underscored the critical role of equitable language representation, echoing sentiments such as: *“Our children don’t see their language in books—they think it doesn’t matter,”* highlighting the psychological and educational impact of linguistic invisibility. Document analysis further revealed that despite constitutional provisions, instructional and reading materials remain overwhelmingly centralized in Nepali. One teacher noted, *“Even when students understand lessons better in their mother tongue, there’s nothing available to teach them with.”* These findings support the argument that books and educational materials should be published in all languages in proportion to the number of speakers. Doing so ensures fair linguistic accessibility while fostering a sense of value and inclusion among minority language communities. In line with this, the research advocates for multilingual curricular development, where students gain foundational knowledge in their mother tongues while also building fluency in Nepali and English—advancing both cultural preservation and academic achievement.

A child's first language is widely regarded as the most effective medium for early learning, as it fosters cognitive and linguistic development. Research indicates that literacy in the native language should be acquired before learning a second language to ensure stronger proficiency. UNESCO (1953) emphasized this, stating that the mother tongue is the most suitable medium for a child's education. Teaching minority languages plays a crucial role in fostering a positive self-identity among children. Without such instruction, minority students may feel that their language and culture are undervalued in school, leading to perceptions of inferiority. Additionally, proficiency in their mother tongue is essential for effective communication with family members, including parents and grandparents, and for maintaining cultural knowledge, history, and personal identity.

Educational institutions, including universities, colleges, schools, and public service commissions, should recognize and accommodate regional languages as both the medium of examination and instruction. Such a policy would enhance students' accessibility to various governmental opportunities by ensuring that linguistic diversity does not serve as a barrier to academic and professional advancement. Integrating regional languages into formal educational and evaluative processes promotes inclusivity, equitable access, and a more representative educational framework that reflects the linguistic realities of diverse communities.

A genuinely democratic and just society is established through the protection of fundamental rights for all citizens, irrespective of gender, caste, religious affiliation, or linguistic background. In this context, granting official status to the languages of minority communities at the regional level is essential for fostering inclusivity, ensuring equitable representation, and upholding linguistic diversity. Such recognition not only strengthens social

cohesion but also affirms the right of minority groups to preserve and utilize their linguistic heritage in both public and administrative domains.

The educational rights granted to minority communities were of greater significance than their right to use their language for official purposes. Under the provisions outlined in international treaties, minority groups were entitled to primary education in specific circumstances and had unrestricted access to private schooling. A fundamental characteristic of these institutions was the use of minority languages as the medium of instruction, thereby ensuring linguistic inclusivity. While the state retained the authority to mandate the study of the official language, it was not permitted to impose restrictions requiring certain subjects to be taught exclusively in that language (UNICEF & Minority Rights Group International, 2010.).

Regional languages should hold a predominant status within their respective areas, not only in administrative functions but also in commerce, law, and education. Recognizing and institutionalizing local languages in both educational and governmental sectors is essential for promoting linguistic inclusivity, ensuring equitable access to resources, and preserving cultural heritage. Such recognition strengthens the connection between linguistic identity and societal participation, fostering a more representative and accessible system for diverse linguistic communities.

Both minority and majority communities should have opportunities to engage with and appreciate each other's cultures and languages through a well-integrated school curriculum and educational materials. Incorporating diverse linguistic and cultural perspectives into formal education fosters mutual understanding, social cohesion, and respect for cultural diversity. This approach fosters meaningful intercultural dialogue while equipping students with the essential knowledge and skills to actively engage in and contribute to a multilingual, multicultural society.

Conclusion

Nepal's linguistic diversity is a cultural asset that requires sustainable language planning. While challenges persist, proactive strategies such as policy reforms, educational interventions, and grassroots initiatives can contribute to preserving and integrating diverse languages. Future research should explore the socio-economic impacts of multilingualism in Nepal and assess the effectiveness of emerging language policies.

The conclusion, while commendably highlighting the urgency of sustainable language planning, leans heavily on broad calls for reform without sufficiently interrogating the structural and political barriers that have historically hindered effective implementation in Nepal. Although the emphasis on educational integration and grassroots initiatives is promising, the findings could have benefited from a more critical analysis of why past policies have fallen short—particularly in contexts of limited institutional capacity and political will. Moreover, the recommendation for future research, though valid, underlines a reliance on further empirical validation rather than offering concrete, immediate policy pathways. As a result, the conclusion raises crucial issues but leaves key questions about feasibility and actionable mechanisms underexplored. Finally, it calls for further research into the socio-economic impacts of multilingualism and the real-world effectiveness of policy implementation, emphasizing that deeper empirical insights are essential to resist the trend of "linguistic Darwinism" and design inclusive, evidence-based solutions.

Integrating minority languages into education plays a crucial role in preventing language loss and preserving cultural heritage. Every minority language possesses inherent value and holds equal importance to the majority language. Therefore, it should not only be

utilized as the foundational medium of instruction for minority communities but also continue to play a vital role in later stages of education, ensuring linguistic diversity and cultural preservation. By granting minority languages a more prominent place in the curriculum, educational systems can promote linguistic diversity, ensure equitable language representation, and strengthen the identity of linguistic communities.

The findings presented carry far-reaching implications for Nepal's language policy, educational practice, and future research. Policymakers are urged to move beyond symbolic recognition of multilingualism by adopting a comprehensive language planning framework—such as a three-language policy that integrates local, national (Nepali), and international (English) languages—to ensure justice, equity, and global readiness. In practice, this necessitates the institutionalization of mother tongue-based multilingual education, the development of inclusive teaching resources, and the accommodation of minority languages across examinations and administrative systems. The urgency of reversing language shift, stemming from Nepali-English dominance and intergenerational vocabulary erosion, also underscores the importance of active language documentation. For researchers, the study identifies a need to assess the socio-economic impacts of multilingualism, examine policy implementation gaps, and explore how linguistic inclusion affects national cohesion and development among concerns over linguistic attrition and "linguistic Darwinism."

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