

Rethinking, Resurrecting and Revitalizing Mother Tongue Instruction at ELT Classrooms in Basic Schools

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Abstract

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Through this hermeneutic phenomenological research, I tried to explore the perceptions of teacher/head teachers towards mother tongue instructions in community schools and the understanding of parents regarding the practice. For that, I employed in-depth interview and collected data from 18 participants: 1:2:3 head-teachers, English subject teachers and parents from three schools i.e. three head teachers, six teachers teaching basic level students and nine parents sending their children at community schools selected purposively. Based on the analysis and interpretation of the responses, I concluded that the head teachers and teachers were in favour of MTI as MoI for several reasons like comprehensible input, interactivities in the classroom, student friendly teaching and learning and natural delivery of the lessons. However, they were not in a condition to defend the school administration (School Management Committee) because of the pressure of parents and the threat of losing job (no students no job) even though they knew the advantages of MTI. On the other hand, parents were happy for few English words uttered by their children

at home. Parents seemed unaware about the advantages of comprehensive input to bring desired outcome. It implies that the right of basic school students to get education in their mother tongue needs to be taken into consideration for cognitive as well as all round development of students. Rethinking about the practice, resurrecting the mother tongue and revitalizing it might be judicial decision at present.

Keywords: English medium instruction, mother tongue instruction, perceptions, understanding

Introduction

Language is a medium to exchange ideas for general day to day communication and classroom interaction. Without language (standard/dialect/idiolect/ sign language), teaching and learning cannot

be imagined. Pedagogy and content have changed in course of time but the language is constantly serving people to make them understand the subject matter and to live a comfortable life in a broader sense.

Majority of the languages spoken in the world lack written script. So, when writing was incorporated as learning, those languages lacking such system got shadowed automatically. And those languages having scholars who could impart education got chance to flourish and those languages having no benevolence from policy makers, politicians and educationists got shrunk. People, these days in Nepal, have the belief that English medium instruction is a panacea and ask the school administration to impart education in English medium. And the children taught in English medium schools seem to have better performance in many respects for several reasons. It makes common people believe that EMI has magical impact in overall performance of children. On the other side, the practice at schools and the authentic written document of the government of Nepal are controversial. Nepal has guaranteed the right of mother tongue education (clause 31 & 32) and right to preserve and promote its languages that is supposed to foster human civilization (Government of Nepal, 2015). The authentic government documents (The Local Self Governance Act 1998, Education Act 2002, Education Regulations 2002 and Curriculum of Primary Education 2007) have made the provision of imparting mother tongue education in their community. They stated that local mother tongue would be the MoI in early grades. The study report (Jameli & Facandu, 2019) showed that almost 40 percent of children deprived of education in their mother tongue and it negatively affected their learning. It discourages them to join the classes since they do not understand the language used at school. Kosohen (2017) reported that majority of the countries focused on the other language than the languages children speak at home as an MoI. It resembles with the Nepalese context where mostly Nepali or English languages are used from the very beginning in basic level. It is hard for the teachers to understand the problems the students go through. The teachers seem to be ignorant of the difficulties when they use other language; friends are strangers and the content is new to the students. Because of this, sometimes the learner who goes to school happily the first day denies to go to the same school the second day. Then, the slogan of providing basic education in mother tongue seems to be confined only in the constitution. Supporting this view, Benson (2004) reported the fact that children learn best in the mother tongue which the parents, school administration and teachers are not ready to accept.

The difference of home language and MoI at school resulted a negative impact on test scores (UNESCO, 2016). However, the use of mother tongue enhanced classroom participation, increased regularity and tightened family relations and guaranteed family support in children's learning (Trudell, 2016). In line, Benson (2004) stated that the rapid transition from mother tongue to SL might hamper full mastery of either language. Practically too, the second language instruction is not favourable because children may have no one at home to support if medium of instruction at school and day to day communication at home take place in different languages. The use of the mother tongue in the beginning helped educationally marginalized people to enroll, attend and achieve their goal (Pinnock, 2011). As Nepal is a multilingual and multicultural country, it might be the reason as mentioned by Pinnock et al. (ibid) in the enormous dropouts in basic level. In the same vein, UNESCO (2003) also suggested to adopt local language to bring disadvantaged children into the mainstream of education. The government of Nepal has tried to follow it implementing as pilot project in some of the districts.

Research (Mundy & Madeen, 2010) has sought the need of mother tongue of children to be the optimal language for literacy development at basic schools. The study has also encouraged mother tongue instruction in basic education since 1953. Malone (2005) states that the different classroom culture, textbook, medium of instruction do not play positive role to make them educated. Instead, it might cause loss of confidence, inability to learn other language skills, increment of repetition, irregularity at school, high dropout rates, deprive of heritage language, culture and finally no feeling of patriotism. And it has been found that after attending classes for several months too, it is hard for the students to learn basic things in Nepalese schools. They run various programmes for inclusive education but it has not been effective. Minority language speakers were in a powerless situation to fight and change the status quo of their language (Taylor, 2010). In line, Buhmann and Trudell (2007) reported that children might have double burden in learning new concept and words and structures of new language at a time. Whether to learn new language or to learn the content delivered in the second language in the early age that is a great challenge to the small children and consequently they leave school.

The government seems to have realized the importance of indigenous language and culture. So, by changing the regulations, it is trying to address the problem. Though the languages are privileged by this provision, there are some factors which obstruct it to bring into effect. Perceived status of the mother tongue hinders the language users to make it a medium of instruction. Like that, cost and lack of trained teachers are other problems to make every language a medium of instruction in each school. Very few languages have written form and only a few languages are standardized which restrict to be a medium of instruction at school. The Census Report of Nepal (2021 AD) has recorded 124 languages spoken here although, all of them do not have same status. Rai (2005) has given the status of killer languages to the languages like Nepali and English. Though the Constitution (Government of Nepal, 2015) guaranteed and implemented the MTBMLE, to address the issue, the haphazard use of MoI seems to be counter-productive in future. This study uncovered the teachers' perspectives, parents' expectations and understanding on the practices being done in the community schools of Nepal. The research conducted before have analyzed the teachers' /students' perspectives and practices as a survey. However, no research has tried to investigate parents' understandings regarding the MTI including the head-teachers in detail. So, this research has good justification to be done.

Review of Literature

Languages spoken all around the world are not equal in terms of their power, number of speakers and heritage of literature. That means some languages have higher social value in comparison to others. The nature of humans to adapt the popular one has been the threat to the existence of indigenous and tribal languages. Seargeant (2025) writes that worldwide there are more than 7000 mother tongues and the UN has emphasized MTI 1950s onwards. But in most of the countries its implementation is hopeless. But in most of the countries its implementation is hopeless. The academicians might not have imagined what the consequence is of that practice. As said by Maseko (2014), in Nepal too, knowingly or unknowingly children from the very first day of their school who are below three years are instructed using other languages. Further, he adds hundreds of millions of children are cheated daily. It demonstrates the need of campaign and voice for mother tongue instruction and implement constitution of our country. Otherwise, there is a risk of losing linguistic identity in the beginning and ultimately our national identity. Parents are hungry of modern education and their misconception

is that only the other language can fulfill it. For the parents, few words of their children in other language is everything. So, unanimously, the private schools of Nepal have collected thousands of students and the community schools where there is Nepali medium instruction, lack students though there are provisions of good furniture, classrooms, playground and so on. In the same vein, Maseko (ibid) stated that MTI was the best for early education and children's ability to learn a second (official) language does not suffer and the literacy in the mother tongue of learners wherever they live lays the cognitive and linguistic foundation for learning new languages, culture, traditions, religions, and many more. Studies have proved that accelerated learning in their mother tongue. More significant aspect is that their self-confidence grows remarkably; consistently they engage in learning; they enjoy the interactivities at school. Ultimately, there is the potentiality of fulfilling their educational needs with significant contributions to the nation where they live.

Many countries seemed to have failed in making policy, doing practice and bringing outcomes regarding the MTI. Phyak (2011), reported that Nepal adopted monolingual policy from the time of unification of modern Nepal. Weinberg (2013) in line, added that policy makers had afraid of introducing indigenous languages into schools when they doubted the possible hindrances in National identity and development of Nepali language. During that time, minority languages were stigmatized. They behaved as if only the Nepali language could transmit knowledge not others. The policy was formulated to support the Nepali language instruction (Dhakal, 2015). The Report of Education in Nepal (2011) seemed to have promoted Nepali language by the provision to use it up to higher education. Despite this, the report reminded the advantage of mother tongue instruction to make the children literate. Similarly, All Round National Education Committee (2018) recommended the use of Nepali including the mother tongue of children. Although the report seemed to have advocated for the single language in education, it revealed the importance of using the mother tongue of children.

The rationale behind the multilingual education is that it can provide comprehensive instruction to the children (Taylor, 2010). Likewise, Phyak (2011) argues that MTBMLE might transform and contribute to social welfare; It maintains gap between community and school and helps to save identity and address the social issues. Inline, Benson (2004) states that mother tongue facilitates to understand sound-symbol relation and maintain meaning-symbol correspondence. People who learn language for reading, are efficient learners if they can employ guessing game. It is believed that they understand the rules of the written system of their language. Benson (2004) argued that MTI promoted learners to learn concepts and make them competent in the L2. Further, he argued that bilingual instruction allowed and facilitated teachers and students to interact in the natural environment and make meanings together, creating participatory role to psychological and linguistic development together.

Explicit teaching of the L2 orally allows students to learn rather than to memorize things. Consequently, the transfer of linguistic and cognitive skills is possible in bilingual instruction. Once students have basic literacy skills in the mother tongue and communicative skills in the L2, they are believed to transfer the literacy skills they have acquired in the mother tongue. This pedagogical principle of positive transfer of skills are derived from Cummins' (1991, 1999) Interdependence Theory. It argues that the knowledge of language, literacy and concepts acquired through the L1 can be accessed and used in the second language once oral L2 skills are developed that requires no re-learning. In this sense, L2 is a means to express the ideas, feelings and opinions in the target situation.

Consistent with these principles, it may be possible for children schooled only in the L1 to transfer their knowledge and skills to the L2.

Language is a means to transmit cultural practices of a community. Language ideology includes beliefs, feelings and conceptions about language structure and use in which the political economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups and nation are reflected (Kroskrity, 2010 as cited in Poudel 2018). I employed Kroskrity's (2010) idea of three partially overlapping layers of language ideologies for the study. First, language ideology reflects the perceived value of language and discourse that is constructed addressing the need of the contemporary society. It believes that truth, morality and aesthetics are relative concepts depending upon a society. Standard language ideology is the one under this group which is designed to valorize the standard language and other aspects of mainstream culture while devaluing the non-standard and its associated cultural forms. Second, language ideologies are multiple because of the plurality of meaningful social divisions within socio-cultural groups. The third is related to awareness of local language ideologies articulated by members, researchers and teachers. It recognizes ideologies of practice from utilitarian perspective.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study based on the theory of interpretivism. Interpretivists understand the world of human experience by digging up the matter deeper in the collaboration with the concerned authority (Cohen et al., 2011). Interpretivists discover reality through participants' experiences and their own backgrounds (Cresswell, 2003). They allow researchers view the world through the lens of the participants. This research method focuses to obtain the desired result since this research explored the teachers' head teachers' and parents' ideology on Mother Tongue Instruction based on the constitution of Nepal 2015. The reality of this issue is drawn from the interactions among the teachers and parents which they call by-product of the society.

Sampling is an inevitable process of conducting research. Generally, in qualitative research data are collected through purposive sampling procedure. In qualitative research, the number of participants depends on the scope, nature, the quality of the data, the design, and the use of shadowed data (Morse, 2000). Considering all these five things, the participants in this study included three head teachers, six English language teachers who have been teaching in basic level of community schools and nine parents. They were selected purposively assuming that they were experienced and could provide necessary information on the issue.

There has been an issue that whether early child development (ECD) and basic level learners have to be taught in mother tongue or the target language. If we were obedient followers of the constitution (Government of Nepal, 2015) then, there would not be such dilemma. Recent policies foster Mother Tongue Instruction at the early grades and gradual shift to the second language. It offers conceptual explanation of MTI which helps the concerned to infer the relevant thematic issues.

I conducted in-depth interview to explore the perceptions of the teachers and parents. I interviewed the participants in a natural setting without being judgmental. I managed to interview them in an assembly of a cooperative of teachers that lies in Pokhara. I recorded the information taking notes. In case of parents, I visited them at their home and informally talked to them on the basis of interview guideline and recorded their version. The data collected from the interview were transcribed and categorized into different themes. I employed qualitative data analysis procedure (Creswell &

Creswell, 2018) which includes transcribing, editing, categorizing, organizing, summarizing and deriving conclusions of the information collected from various sources. The patterns, themes, categories and regularities of the data were noted. On the basis of those themes, the views were synthesized and inferentially the conclusions were drawn.

Results and Discussion

The findings derived after analyzing the interview excerpts based on research questions are presented thematically.

Teachers in Moral Dilemma in the Implementation of MTI

The teachers teaching at basic schools were found confused whether to advocate for MTI or go with the flow of the common practice. They experienced the comprehensibility, practicality and interactivity the MTI created in the past. They also understood the demand of parents and cry of the day in favour of EMI. Probably, they could not resist EMI for that reason. One of the teachers Chandra (pseudonym) said that he was a basic level teacher teaching for fifteen years. He said, 'Teaching small children in L2 is a sin because they even don't know Nepali alphabets. Except in the classroom, they do not hear English words. How can they learn that difficult language?'. It signified the learners' difficulties in understanding the instructions and teachers tension on delivering comprehensible input. It reflected their dissatisfaction with their practice. The flexible language policy in the secondary level also contributed in the loyalty of teachers towards EMI. However, Ssentanda (2016) pointed out the adjustment problem of learners when they had to transition to EMI from MTI from the Basic to the Secondary level. One of the teachers doubted that implementation of MTI without being ready to cope with the challenges might be counterproductive. It resembled with Chicoine (2019) who reported that the implementation of MTI without preparation resulted in negative attitudes within society toward MTI. He argued that MTI might result in more harm than benefits if it lacked proper implementation. The sudden transition from MTI to EMI might create problem and the question like if they had to adopt EMI in secondary level why not to start in the early stage might be raised. After having basic concept on the content, the medium of expression may be any language because they had at least basic knowledge of language, culture, history, moral and so on which they could translate in the target language later on.

The next teacher Balaram (pseudonym) said that he had been teaching Basic level students for nineteen years. He said :

'L2 instruction made the learners dull in other areas too. The learner who used to speak with Nepali subject teacher also hesitate speaking with others. For teachers it, is the same but in my experience previously learners used to take part in interaction on different topics but when we shifted to L2 instruction the class became silent and monotonous. Parents would assist them in need but English medium instruction led teachers to the difficulty. The sole source of knowledge became the teachers'.

It is evident from the interview that the learners who would learn communicating to neighbours, relatives and friend were confined only to the English text books and the teachers. How much an unmotivated learner learn from the limited sources is a doubt. The natural environment has been changed into simulated and artificial one. Learners who would learn informally and unknowingly

were bound to depend only to the teachers. Students were affected more than the teachers. Likewise, a teacher, Kumar (pseudonym) who had the experience of teaching for twenty-six years had both sweet and bitter experiences as he taught both in MTI and EMI. Dullness of the learners, dumb silence class, poor achievement, monotonous class, etc. were resulted after implementing EMI that was embarrassing to him. On the other hand, increment of learners in the class and happy parents made them forget everything and practised the same.

Next teacher Rajendra (pseudonym) of the age thirty said that he was teaching at basic level for five years. His school had EMI before he joined it. He had very good experience of teaching learners in English. Students had no problem in medium of instruction in the class but he felt that they lacked assistance from home. He believed that EMI was the cry of the day. And the teachers had to be more committed and responsible to bring positive outcome. He doubted that EMI might be difficult for old teachers in the beginning but he was optimistic of the rewarding result. Another female teacher, Devi (pseudonym) said that from content coverage point of view, MTI was far better as it encouraged the teachers and learners establish good rapport, it was learner friendly and it facilitated group and peer work. But because of the craze of English language they felt happy for the EMI they had at school. She reported that comparatively the learners having been taught by MTI were better than the one through EMI. She said that all round development of learners was possible in MTI but not in EMI. The haphazard implementation of EMI might be counterproductive (Paudel, 2021, Phyak, 2011, Poudel, 2018 & Rana, 2018)). It is the teacher who knows the reality best about the students. It is wise to accept teachers' version and act accordingly in the classroom.

Teachers' perspectives towards MTI were positive as it fostered interaction, in-depth knowledge, good rapport among teachers and learners and all round development of learners. Because of the whim of English as if it is the solution of each and every problem, the craze of private schools, many of the schools implemented EMI.

Parental Demand and the Implementation of EMI

The next stakeholder of education is the group of parents who plays crucial role in choosing MoI in a community school. This study tried to understand the parents' perceptions on the MTI to their children at school. They believed that EMI opened the door to bright future whereas they doubted in MTI that might hinder grooming their potentiality. They seemed to be unaware of the potential hindrances EMI could have in cognitive, socio-psychological development because of the lack of sufficient interaction, exposure, resources and relations with friends and teachers. Ramji a parent said that his son studied at grade three. He admitted him at the present school because there was EMI. Further, he said:

All the people who can teach their children at private school have sent them there but for us it is very expensive. This school has started EMI so we feel happy. I don't know what my son has learnt but I know that my son is reading in EMI school. I don't know what the policy says.

It is evident from the interview that the parents were proud of teaching their children at English medium schools. However, they were ignorant of how much was the achievement and what overall development had taken place. From the interview, it was clear that the parents were unaware of the provision of MTI policy of the government at basic level. Likewise, another parent responded that her son studied at class two. He could speak few words in English. However, she did not know that EMI

hampered overall development of her child. When her son asked her to help in his study, she could not help. She said that she did not admit her son to that school because it had EMI but it was near from home. She also did not know how much her son had to know and what he had known. She said that she was happy for her son got chance to study in English medium school. She even did not know the provision of constitution to teach basic level students in their mother tongue. It raised the question of accessibility to schools rather than the MoI. First, the schools need to be in the easy access of the children.

The next participant said that her daughter studied at grade four of the community school where there was no EMI. She wanted her daughter's school implement EMI because she wanted to make her good at English. She believed that only English medium instruction could fulfill the need of the twenty first century. She did not believe in the fact that MTI could develop her child emotionally, academically, socially more in comparison to other language. She did not know the provision made by the government to offer education to basic level learners in their mother tongue. Parental support to children in their learning as suggested by Jeong et al. (2017) is a must but the English illiterate parents may lack support to their children. Moreover, Lim-Ramos et al. (2020) also pointed out the need for parents' help in children's studies at home. However, the parents still lacked competence in English to support their children in the Nepali context.

On the basis of their discussion it is revealed that because of the ignorance of the advantages of MTI, parents were insisting school administration to implement EMI. They even did not know the provision made by the government for MTI realizing the significance of it. This resembles with the findings of Pandit (2025) who reported that the mother tongue based multi-lingual instruction is the judicial solution of immediate problem i.e. incomprehensibility and can contribute in cognitive development and fulfilling the knowledge gap.

Head Teachers' Dilemma in the Choice of Medium of Instruction

Head teachers are one of the determinants of implementing a particular language as an MoI. Based on the interview they were found in favour of the implementation of MTI however, they expressed their tension to manage multilingual teachers, learning materials and to resist the parental demands. Although MTI for the children was a means to cognitive development and wide exposure the head teachers were afraid of losing the students because of the attraction to EMI. Regarding the practice at his school, Ramesh (pseudonym) a head teacher of a community school said:

I doubt whether our school loose the number of students who prefer EMI. The tendency of studying at EMI schools has become a fashion consequently, financially poor parents too, choose EMI schools. On the other hand, preparations to implementing MTI is a must which lacks in our context...

It is evident from the interview that only the endeavor on behalf of the head teacher was not enough to implement MTI in multilingual Nepali context. Despite the head teachers' interest, the attraction towards EMI has hindered implementing MTI in community schools. Similar to the finding of this study, the head teachers supported MTI with some reservations regarding the availability of materials, teachers and convincing policy to avail equal opportunity to MTI products in Kenya (Kagendo, 2024). In the similar vein, Mostert (2012) reported that the presence of multi-language speakers within a class made MTI impossible despite the head teachers were aware of the advantages

of it to the basic level learners. It implies that implementation of MTI is difficult for several reasons like the lack of teachers, materials, training, need of the nation and assurance of the MTI product in job opportunities. Moreover, the middle path of bilingual instruction and the majority speakers' mother tongue instruction they sought for the judicial settlement of the issue of medium of instruction in the basic schools.

Conclusion and Implications

MTBMLE has been introduced in education to address the voices of minority communities; reestablish language and local knowledge in Nepal. Formulation of the mother tongue instruction policy only at basic level cannot bring desired outcome unless the issues like lack of teachers, lack of awareness towards the importance of mother tongue and indifferent stakeholders are addressed with judicial solutions. MTI preserves their language which ultimately protects language identity. It is teachers' responsibility to unravel these language issues emphasizing the proper implementation of this policy. Not only the promotion of language, MTI revealed that it supports the whole learning process. It implies that MTI for cognitive development, setting the basic learning pattern and wide exposure is necessary in early school age and EMI for higher studies might be advantageous. It implies that, the authority has to play decisive role for the successful implementation of the MTI policy by managing human resources, materials and fulfilling the demand of the stakeholders.

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