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Linguistic Challenges in Multilingual Classroom at the Basic Level: Teacher's Perspective

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Abstract

Classrooms in Nepal represent a vivid picture of cultural and linguistic diversity, making the medium of instruction a major challenge for both teachers and students. This study explores the difficulties teachers face in using mother tongues as the medium of instruction in multilingual classrooms, where content delivery becomes complex. A qualitative research design with a narrative inquiry method and purposive sampling was employed to understand the situation of multilingualism and its impact on teaching and learning. The study was conducted in Bedkot Municipality of Kanchanpur district, a multiethnic and multilingual society.

To analyze challenges at the basic education level, six Tharu students (three girls and three boys) from three schools were selected, alongside interviews with six subject teachers and three principals. Additionally, three focus group discussions were held with classes six, seven, and eight to gain deeper insights. Findings revealed that Tharu students were less active and less confident in classroom participation. While they collaborated well in their mother tongue, their limited knowledge of Nepali and English hindered broader interaction and comprehension. Effective teaching and learning were found to depend on full and meaningful participation of all learners, which was restricted by the linguistic gap.

The study highlights that the absence of local language teachers, teaching materials, scripts, and strategic plans has made the implementation of mother tongue instruction highly challenging. It suggests that policymakers introduce flexible language-

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in-education policies balancing mother tongue with Nepali and English, develop resources, train teachers in multilingual pedagogy, and involve parents to value both identity and opportunity.

Keywords: Multilingualism, linguistic challenges, basic level education, educational policy, Tharu community

Introduction

Nepal is a multilingual, multi-cultural and multiethnic country and its vivid picture can be noticed in the classrooms. According to the Central Bureau of statistics (2014), Nepal is a multilingual country with 123 languages. One of them is the Tharu language spoken in Kanchanpur and Kailali districts of Sudurpaschim province. Approximately 25% speakers among other lingual groups migrated from different districts. However, their language and identity is in shadow as their language and identity is dominated by other languages like Nepali and English used by the teacher in the classroom.

According to The Nepalese Constitution (2072), all the languages spoken as mother tongue in the various parts of Nepal are the national languages (Article 6.2). The constitution in article (18.2) assures that each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children as one of the fundamental rights. However, the implementation side is challenging for the local government due to heterogeneous classroom. According to Cabasang (2016), it is necessary to implement mother tongue in the classroom for teaching and learning purposes. The learning process becomes easier if the content is shared in their mother tongue. Learners feel comfortable to express themselves in their mother tongue than any other language. However, neo-liberal ideology of education gives emphasis on English as a medium of instruction in institutions. (Phyak & Ojha, 2019) The new ideology has become dominant and cause of challenge to use mother tongue in the classroom.

The government has made a provision to get education in their mother tongue in the classroom, but due to the linguistic diversity, it is challenge for the teachers to address all the students' languages in the classroom and problematic to make them understand the content because a single teacher cannot have the knowledge of many languages. Along with this, people give priority to the language in power. Similarly, parents prefer the language of opportunity than the use of their mother tongue as a medium of instruction. In this situation, the researchers state English as a language of hegemony and the parents want their children to have command in the language of opportunity. However, in the present scenario, the government wants to implement the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. Thus, this study attempts to study about the medium of instruction used by the

teachers in the heterogeneous classroom. To address this problem, this research is guided by the overarching questions: what is the status of multilingualism in the classroom? What is the practice of medium of instruction in classroom? What are the causes and its effects in existing medium of instruction? And how could classroom teaching become effective?

Research Methodology

I employed qualitative research approach to understand the situation of multilingualism and its' impact on the classroom teaching and learning. The study area was Bedkot Municipality of Kanchanpur district. Bedkot Municipality is one of the diverse societies with people from multiethnic and multilingualism communities and having their presence in the classroom. This community has most of the people from Tharu and Rana Chaudhary community having their distinct cultural and linguistic identity. They are taken marginalized community; however, they are the inhabitants of this region. I have selected Sharada Secondary School, one of five community schools in the Bedkot municipality. I selected six Tharu students from grade six, seven and eight purposively. Open ended questionnaires were designed to understand the situations and a short direct interview of 10 minutes was carried out with selected respondents. Then the class observation of six, seven and eight and FGD were accomplished. Beside this, the interview with the class teacher and principal of the school as Key Informant Interview (KII) was also carried out. Their interview was audio recorded by taking consent and the interview was transcribed, coded, analyzed, and then interpreted using a thematic approach and discussed linking with the relevant literatures. Based on the findings and discussions, conclusion was drawn recommending areas of exploration for further research.

Results and Discussion

Status of Multilingualism in the Research Area

The area of this research was Daijee of Bedkot municipality where people from different language backgrounds live together. The classroom has the participation of students from heterogeneous background. The medium of instruction in the classroom is Nepali or English rather than their mother-tongue. Though the constitution has given right to the local government to implement the local language as a medium of instruction but, the Nepali or English language has been given due emphasis.

Table 1

Distribution of Number of Students as per their Gender and Caste/Ethnicity

| Class | Total | Male | Percent | Female | Percent | Languages (Mother Tongue) | | | | | |
|-------|-------|------|---------|--------|---------|---------------------------|------|-------|------|--------|------|
| | | | | | | Doteli | % | Tharu | % | Nepali | % |
| 6 | 70 | 21 | 30.0 | 49 | 70.0 | 26 | 37.1 | 35 | 50.0 | 9 | 12.9 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|----|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|----|------|
| 7 | 48 | 19 | 39.6 | 29 | 60.4 | 24 | 50.0 | 15 | 31.3 | 9 | 18.7 |
| 8 | 55 | 23 | 41.8 | 27 | 49.1 | 35 | 63.6 | 9 | 16.4 | 11 | 20.0 |

Note. Source: Administrative Report of School, 2079.

The survey figured reveals the drop out number of Tharu language speakers is increasing every year. The academic performance of these students is found decreased due to the means of instruction in the classroom which triggers them to become depressed and leave the school. The population of students (70.0%, 60.4% and 49.1%) is female in class six, seven and eight respectively. Similarly, 37.1 percent, 50 percent, 12.9 percent of students are found Doteli, Tharu and Nepali language as their mother tongue in class six where it was (50.0%, 31.3% and 18.7%) in class seven and (63.6%, 16.4% and 20.0%) in class eight. The result shows that a good majority of students from Tharu community study in each class; however, the number of students was seen decreasing. Half of the students from Tharu community in class six while that percent was 16.4 percent in class eight that shows the decreasing number of Tharu students in upper classes. Table 1 shows that the number of students having Doteli and Nepali language as their mother tongue is in increasing order. The cause of increasing the population of other language students is due to migration of students from other hilly regions of Sudurpaschim. Likewise, the cause of decreasing ratio of Tharu students might be concerning their socio-economic status and language that they mostly felt uneasy and could not understand English and Nepali as compared to other tongue students and hence they prefer to drop out the class.

Medium of Instruction and Classroom Practice

The classroom in the communities of Nepal is having linguistic diversity and English or Nepali is used as a medium of instruction. In this scenario, the understanding level of the students gets hampered due to lack of the English language knowledge and insufficient Nepali language proficiency. According to UNESCO (2010), when children are taught in their first language, it builds good foundation for learning. In the case of students from Tharu community, they remain less active in the classroom; feel less confident to express themselves though they perform well in the activities with their friends in their language because they lack knowledge of Nepali or English. Due to this, they remain poor and back ward in almost all the aspects in comparison to other students. Teaching and learning become effective only after the active participation of all the students in the classroom. But a single teacher cannot have command on the mother tongue of all students. As a result, they have weak understanding of the content or lack of knowledge of English language and remain passive in the classroom.

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has provisioned to promote all the mother tongues in Nepal as a national language and tried to guarantee the right of communities to protect and promote minority languages. Similarly, it has granted the right to the local

government to implement the mother tongue- based education in the basic level. In the same vein, Awasthi (2004) stated that mother tongue- based instruction in the early grades enhances children's ability to learn better than second or foreign language. However, the teachers in the classroom are found using Nepali or English language as a medium of instruction. The teaching and learning process in the multilingual classroom is a challenge because local language teacher is not recruited in the schools. As a result, it has created barrier in their interaction and learning of the content knowledge in the classroom. In line with Awasthi (2004), Fillmore (2020) also explores on the implementation of the mother tongue-based education in the classrooms to promote the local people have access to the opportunity of education and make them understand the content. Many researchers have talked in favor of multilingual education policy and practices. The use of mother tongue helps students to express and participate in the activities in the better way. Beside all these, the real situation of the classroom is dominated using Nepali or English language.

Causes and Effects of Existing Medium of Instruction

The use of medium of instruction is always a matter of debate among the scholars and major issue in language planning and policy. Our present constitution has granted the local level the right to implement the mother tongue -based education in the classroom because each community shall have the right to operate school up to primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education for its children. Despite this, the use of mother tongue in the classroom is still ignored and priority is given to the Nepali and English languages. In my observation, I noticed the Nepali language is used mostly than the mother tongue because teacher lacks the knowledge of mother tongues of the students and the lack of script, teaching and learning materials and local language teacher.

The practicing of the educational policy in Nepal does not seem stable in the context. Nepal is the country of diversity in caste-ethnicity, culture, religion, and language. The government introduced the multi-lingual policy to ensure the language and cultural rights to people. On the other hand, it is believed that the desire for English language skills is based on the high instrumental value of English due to its position as a global language. English language knowledge is supposed to have access to the international community and opportunities (Dhakal, 2016). He explained the monolingual medium of instruction in language which suppressed the rights of other languages and their situation remained poor in the classroom. The language hegemony discriminates the marginalized language speaking students. In case of Nepal, the Constitution 2015 has made the provision that every person and community shall have the right to use their language, right to preserve and protect their language. However, in real situation, they drop out from the schools, or stay unexpressed and lack content knowledge as they do not understand the other than their mother tongue and lack confidence to express in the

English or Nepali language. On this, Mahzoun (2021) stated that in certain part of the world, many people know more than one language. It always remains a topic whether knowledge of more than one language helps or hinders the learning and production procedure. They explain that knowing only one language does not promote our learning, it makes us unsocial. Similar is the case with the speakers of the Tharu language, the knowledge of their mother tongue only restricts them from being social.

According to Fillmore (2020), Nepal is a country with diverse culture and language with more than 123 languages. Historically, the medium of instruction in the schools was Nepali language, and more recently English, and then Nepali and English languages are taken as the language with power as well as a means of instruction in the classroom. Since my teaching experience in the multilingual classroom of both in private and public schools, it is noticed that the teacher and students use either Nepali or English language while sharing and discussing both in and outside the class. In such situation, the teacher needs to be aware about the presence of the minority language students in the class as the Government of Nepal at present has introduced mother tongue based multilingual education which is supported by the Constitution 2015 stating that “all the mother tongues spoken in Nepal shall be the national language” (article 6) and right is guaranteed to the local government to address the mother tongues of their locality as a means of instruction in the classrooms. The Nepal government is likely to succeed in its ambitious goal of providing mother tongue-based education to all children in the reference of past situation, present and emerging trend. Having said this, Tupas (2015) explored that mother tongue based multilingual education has been gaining ground in several educational context around the world in the recent years. According to him, Southeast Asia is hugely linguistically diverse region got dominated by the speakers of language in power. In context of Nepal as well the students are found disadvantaged of their right to Education in their mother- tongue. To support this, Awasthi (2004) stated that country being linguistically diverse, multilingualism has been a way of life in this small South Asian nation, but this has not been reflected in its education system as it is challenge for the teachers and local agents to implement mother tongue based multilingual education in all the classroom of basic level in the absence of teaching materials, books, and local language teachers.

Thus, teaching in multilingual classroom sometimes hampers due to mother tongue influence because teaching in the individuals’ mother tongue is a huge challenge for the teachers. In such case language in power is much crucial to implement. The dominant language like Nepali and English use in the classroom influence policy making and enactment of the policies in daily classroom works. Similarly, Cabansag (2016) has taken the concept of mother tongue based multilingual education as an opportunity for preparing coming generations to adopt the concept better and become a rich contributor

in the globalized and intercultural world. He mentioned the bright side of this concept by sharing that it helps learners to express ideas better, develop a self-confidence, better retention, and promotion. Good environment for learning and sharing in the classroom, however he has talked multilingual environment, translation difficulty, lack of instructional materials and mandatory compliance to the administration, as challenges to have mother tongue based multilingual classroom. The students in the classroom show their willingness to have classes in their mother tongue rather than the long-held view of English as a desired language and medium of instruction.

Challenges in the Classroom Interaction

Language has become one of the burning issues in the multi-lingual nations like Nepal. Medium of instruction, one of the major issues in the language planning and language policy has made teaching in the multi -lingual classroom challenging for the teachers. Several barriers exist in the implementation of multilingual education like, lack of practical scripts, local language teacher, lack of written materials big size of the classroom, multiple mother tongues, lack of curriculum and instructional materials. Similarly, there are several hurdles in the use of multi-lingual education in the context of Nepal like, unsupportive parents, debate on the importance of language or written script, whose language to use in the classroom. There are many other challenges like the students are forced to learn in the language that are not their mother tongue. The demand of English language for the opportunities allures the parents to force their children learn this language than their mother-tongue. They feel proud when their children speak Nepali or English language.

For this, Van Dijk (1993) mentioned that the elites dominate others with the power of language, knowledge or education which is valued resource in the society. Such people have higher status, confidence while speaking and this helps students to perform better in career. However, people with powerless language hesitate and feel less confident to speak. So, Giri (2010) has described the language policy as the visible and invisible debate. According to him, elites are found using language for their interest even in constitutional or other educational provisions. The way the provision of language in the constitution of 1990 is found confusing. The constitution of Nepal has announced Nepali as National language or official language. He stated that the constitution in 1990 has granted the rights of minorities and ethnic communities by giving the position only in the paper. However, its practical or legal aspect is not clearly given. Moreover, Interim Constitution of Nepal 2007 has announced all the mother tongues in Nepal are taken as national language. Along with this, constitution announced their mother tongue to be used as official purposes. But in contrast, the young generation showed their reluctant behavior in their ethnic language thinking that their ethnic language is of no more use for

their professional development. There is the contradiction between language theory and practice by mentioning that Nepali-English languages are taken as dominant languages where local and other languages are not given any priority (Giri, 2010). In addition, the constitution of Nepal 2015 announced equal rights to all, and it is under practice in federal, provincial, and local levels.

Students with competency in multiple languages develop higher order thinking and confidence. However, lack of script, trained teachers and teaching learning materials hinder from running classes in the language (UNESCO, 2011). There are multiple languages with multiple dialects, lack of mother tongue speaker teacher, lack of written literature, larger heterogeneous classroom, and lack of curriculum and instructional materials and lack of practical writing system become cause of obstacle in multilingual classroom. Similarly, this would be troublesome for the teachers as well to have knowledge of all languages and run classes. As we find the classes run more in formal language than the mother tongue of students. At this situation, students share that they do not understand when the lesson is delivered in the English language. Neither they ask any question, nor participate in the class, instead remain silent without understanding the content.

According to Paudel (2010), the students who have non-Nepali mother tongue have lagged compared to their Nepali-language mother tongue counterparts in terms of their achievement at the academic level (p. 127). Most of the classrooms of Nepal are having multilingual environment with the different group of students from different mother tongues. The students in multilingual classroom are more competent in their mother tongue than other languages. As a result, they could not feel confident to express themselves in the Nepali or English language. Similar is the case with the students from Tharu community that they are taken as marginalized community and they get very low exposure of their language which hampers their learning in the classroom. In this regard, the girls from the Tharu community are found more rigid and unexpressive than the boys in the English language learning classroom. One of the students opined:

Sir class ma aaunuhunxa ani aafnai hisab le padhaera janu hunxa. Class ma students dherai hunxan ani halla garear sunnai mildaian. Kahile kahi ta sir le padhaeko bujhidaian kina ki sir le English /Nepali bhasha ko use grnu hunxa. Ani janne sudents lai question sodhnu hunxa ani aru lai dherai kam sodhnu hunxa.

The students expressed that teacher comes to the class and delivers the content in the Nepali or English in the authoritative way and students are supposed to remain silent or do the writing activities in the classroom. Only the smart students ask the questions related to the subject. The teachers do not like to interact and know about the students' problems. It results poor or no interactions between teacher and students and among

the students. It is difficult for the teachers to run classes in the different mother tongues because of lack of its script and reading materials. Along with this, teacher teaching in the classroom also lacks the knowledge of all the mother tongues to address them in their mother tongue. On the other hand, students who lack the knowledge of English language feel themselves inferior and its' impact can be noticed in their grades and success in life. The knowledge of multiple languages has created the situation of code mixing which creates confusion on the listeners. Along with this, if the students mix the codes in writing or speaking, it reduces their grades and put bad impression to the teachers. After observing the classroom, the researcher came to know that students very rarely speak when they are asked question by the teachers. It is because of their anxiety of speaking English language or feeling of being criticized by the teachers and friends. When they are asked questions during interview, they speak broken English with the use of their mother tongue.

Students' Understanding of the Content

The content taught in the mother tongue of the students is understood easily by the students and they feel comfortable to express their feelings and participate in the classroom activities when the medium of instruction is their mother tongue. However, the situation of the medium of instruction is different than the willingness of the students and the provision to implement the mother tongue by the government. In this context, a subject teacher reported:

We are compelled to use English /Nepali language for teaching because the school administration and the pressure of guardian to make their children learn to speak English language to make them competitive in the world and to control the students drop out rate due to attraction towards the English medium schools.

At present scenario of classrooms in Nepal is that students learn less effectively in their first language in the multilingual classroom because the priority is given to the English language at this globalized world. Parents believe that their children make better career and get opportunities in the global market only after learning the English language. This belief of the parents brings challenges in the implementation of the medium of instruction in the multilingual classroom. English is the demand of the modern time, and it could be problematic for the teacher to run the classes in the languages of the all the students.

As May (2017) argues that there are various approaches used to teaching multilingual students. He focused on the most common forms of bilingual education. When the mother tongue of the speaker does not work to achieve the determined goal then the speaker chooses the second language (L2) to complete the task. Furthermore, May and Hill (2005) stated four different models-Transitional model, Maintenance model,

Enrichment model and Heritage model. Where 'transitional model' gives priorities to the mother tongue in the early stage than it shifts to the second language as soon as they can in order to bring them in the mainstream. This model states on shifting of mother tongue to second language within 1-2 years. Similarly, 'maintenance model' aims to maintain the ethno-linguistic rights by strengthening the cultural and linguistic identity of the students. Although both mother tongue and second language are used in the class, however mother tongue should be used by 50% of the students. Likewise, 'Enrichment model' tries to maintain mother tongue of minority's language safe and helps to develop and expansion of the language. It saves the cultural pluralism and unit the national society along with autonomy of cultural groups. In between the maintenance and enrichment model, the 'heritage model' is developed. It promotes the student to use the indigenous languages as their mother language. But in case of the observed classroom, the use of students' first language found ignored and the use of Nepali or English language is promoted. As a result, the learning of the student gets affected.

In the globalized world, one needs to be competent enough to perform and make their position through tough competition. Having the knowledge to perform only in their mother tongue in the world where English is the language of power will discourage the students from achieving the success and the desired goal in their lives. According to Rai (2021), monolingual aspect develops the self-esteem, confidence, respectful and meaningful learning for better performance of students from ethnic and minority communities, however, Giri (2010) mentions that the local language does not bring new opportunities in their life but keeps people very far from competitive world and understanding of the content knowledge. As a result, learners develop negative attitude towards their mother tongue. Hence, it is realized to maintain the cultural, religious, and lingual identity of indigenous and ethnic community by following multilingual approach with the knowledge of English language in the competitive world. In this competitive world, the knowledge of the mother tongue only will hinder the students from grabbing the opportunities and gaining the prestige in the society. Students feel themselves less confident to perform in the English language class because they are exposed with the mother tongue in and outside the classroom and limited time of the classroom practice fails to develop their level of English language.

Conclusion

In the present scenario, the government wants to implement the mother tongue as a medium of instruction to preserve the languages of the Nation and gives right to get education in their mother-tongue. Lack of books, teaching/learning materials, local language teachers, heterogeneous classroom hinders students from Tharu language to get quality education. Cultural and religious identity could be preserved using mother-tongue

in the classroom but sometimes the knowledge of their language becomes the cause of embarrassment for them and hinders them from the access of opportunities

Students' mother tongue helps them to understand the content delivered in the better way and enhances their engagement in the classroom activities. The knowledge of the subject matter becomes long-term and effective when they are taught in their mother-tongue. The learning process becomes easier and long term for them. Learners feel comfortable to express themselves in their mother tongue than any other language. The government has made a provision to get education in their mother tongue in the classroom, but due to the linguistic diversity, it is burden or challenge for the teachers to address all the students' languages in the classroom because a single teacher cannot have the knowledge of many languages. Lack of script, books, teaching learning materials and local language teachers are the causes of the poor implementation of the mother tongue in the classroom.

At present the new ideology has become dominant and cause of challenge to use mother tongue in the classroom. People give priority to the language in power because it is taken as language of opportunity by them. Similarly, parents prefer the language of opportunity than the language of identity as a medium of instruction. Its direct impact can be seen in the knowledge, participation, and performance of the students in the classroom. It also restricts students from being creative and expressive.

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