

Monolingual Instruction in Multi-lingual Classrooms at Primary Level in Nepal

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Abstract

This article attempts to explore the classroom activities conducted by using monolingual instruction in multilingual classrooms. The main objective of this article is to explore the difficulties faced by both teachers and students because of the medium of classroom instruction where the students come from different linguistic backgrounds. The primary data were collected from three teachers who have been teaching in basic level for more than five years. The research sites were three community schools located in Madhyapur Thimi Municipality, Bhaktapur. Class observation, in-depth interviews and informal conversation with the teacher participants were the tools for data collection. From the data collected through these tools and study of the available literature, it was found that teachers feel difficulties in delivering sufficient information and the students feel problems in grasping enough ideas from their non-native language used as the medium of instruction in multilingual classroom setting. Uses of students' mother tongues, formation of mixed linguistic groups, presenting plenty of teaching materials and conducting sufficient interaction between teachers and students and among the students both inside and outside the classroom were helpful to minimize such difficulties in teaching.

Keywords: medium of instruction, monolingual, multilingual, classroom interaction, effective teaching

Introduction

The study on the effectiveness of monolingual instruction in multilingual classroom at primary level is the burning issue in the field of educational research all over the world. It is important in our context because Nepal is a multilingual country where educational institutions have been adopting monolingual instruction in teaching- learning activities. Almost community schools use Nepali language as the medium of classroom teaching. However, a limited number of community schools and the institutional schools accept English as the medium of classroom instruction in Nepal. The students who come from the family where neither Nepali nor English is used at their homes are facing different kinds of problems in their learning process in school environment. The teachers who teach in such multilingual contexts are not free

from the problems of delivering the sufficient information and engaging the students in effective classroom interaction. Hence, it is the time to formulate the appropriate educational policy and recommend for effective practice which is mandatory to minimize such problems in school teaching within the country.

Background of the Study

Nepal is a small country situated between India and China which are geographically large, economically emerging and politically super powers. Though, Nepal is small in its size, it is very rich in its cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity. It shows that Nepal is a multilingual, multicultural, multi-racial, multiethnic and multi-religious country where many religions are followed, varieties of languages are spoken and innumerable festivals are celebrated. The report of National Population and Housing Census 2021 (NPHC 2021) on caste/ethnicity language and religion has mentioned 124 national languages spoken in Nepal. Among these languages, Nepali is used by the highest percentage of the population as their first language. The report shows that about 44.86% people in Nepal use Nepali as their mother tongue and it accepts that 55.14% people do not speak it as their native language. In multilingual countries like Nepal, the question related to language of instruction for classroom teaching is the primary educational agenda all over the world.

In multilingual areas, it is very difficult to make decisions about the medium of instruction for classroom teaching. Among many mother tongues, what languages are to be taught and used as the medium of instruction in what grades and when to transit from local language or languages to national and/or international languages. The process of developing and selecting the effective instructional methods and materials for teaching and learning activities are the crucial questions in the formation of language policy. Many language pedagogues have prescribed the students' first language as the medium of instruction that they speak at home, family and in their community. Others advocate the official/national language of the country or an international language such as English or any other language of the UNO as the medium of classroom interaction. In these disputes, the applied linguistic pedagogues who support the students' mother tongue as the medium of classroom instruction argue that learning everything in their mother tongue is their language right (Skutnabb- Kangas, 1994). This opinion tries to promote the native language of the

learner as the medium of classroom instruction which makes the learning process more effective.

The sociolinguistic structure of Nepalese society is complex because people from different castes, cultures, races, and religions live together in the same locality. They celebrate different festivals, follow different cultures, have their own tradition and speak a variety of languages. These students have to begin their learning from their mother tongues and cultures and make transition to other languages and cultures in schools as medium of instruction. The parents have to send their children in the same school where many other children come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds and they do not understand one another's culture, tradition, behaviors and even languages. This situation has created problems for the children of minority or marginalized groups to understand the common Nepali language which is used as the medium of instruction from pre-primary level to higher level education in Nepal. However, the children of minority ethnic groups do not understand Nepali language in many places. If they understand it, they do not feel comfortable to express their views, opinions, experiences, and assumptions in Nepali language properly. The children from non-Nepali language community do not speak Nepali at home with the members of their family. They do not have common and shared language or languages to exchange their ideas, opinions, feelings and emotions with other children who do not understand other friends' languages. If they express, some students do not understand the friend's expressions. On the other hand, the teachers who teach such children in schools cannot use the students' native languages nor do the students understand their teachers' expressions in the course of teaching and learning process. Because of these reasons, the interaction between teachers and students and among the students themselves cannot take place as effectively as it is expected. The interaction between them can be less impressive for those students who come from other socio- linguistic backgrounds. They cannot express their views and understandings in the subject matters clearly due to no or insufficient knowledge of the language of instruction in the classroom teaching.

When the students feel difficulties to participate effectively in the whole teaching learning process, they do not show much interest to take part in classroom activities. Such students cannot achieve the objectives intended by the curriculum. As result, the performance of the children whose mother tongue is other than the medium of instruction is comparatively lower than those children whose native language is the

medium of instruction. The evidences show that the rate of the drop outs increases if the classroom environment for the students is not much comfortable for them. In Nepal, the one of the major cause of dropping out the students in school level is feeling difficulty in interacting with teachers, other friends and feeling different or isolated from others mainly because of their language problems (Awasthi, 2004). Hence, non-native speaking children have been found to be disadvantaged group in the Nepalese school system, where only Nepali language is used as the medium of instruction.

As an English teacher, I have some bitter experiences in delivering right information to the students due to the language problem faced by both teachers and students. I taught five years in schools where the majority of the students had come from Tamang, and Rai communities. I did not understand their local languages and used to explain the contents in Nepali. Sometimes they received wrong information because of the language which was used as the medium of instruction in classroom teaching. It encouraged me to study the challenges faced by both teachers and students in multilingual classroom.

Last year, I studied the problems faced by both the teachers and the students in multilingual classroom where Nepali language was used as the medium of instruction. In my study, I attempted to explore the classroom activities, the difficulties faced by the teachers and the students due to the non- native language used as the medium of classroom instruction. I had tried to explore the possible solutions for minimizing such problems on the basis of the experiences expressed by the teacher participants.

I have expected that the findings of my study can provide insights to the teachers for improving and developing the students' learning capabilities in multilingual classroom. The results can be important source of feedback for teachers, school administration and local government authority. It can be important to share among a number of educational practitioners including other teachers, researchers, educators, course designers, textbook writers, material developers at basic level education. I have expected that the study can be the important source for the local authority to take future steps in the development of primary education in multilingual society.

Objectives of the study

The study was conducted for the following objectives;

- i. To explore the classroom activities conducted in monolingual instruction in multilingual classrooms.
- ii. To explore the difficulties faced by the teachers and students due to medium of instruction in multilingual classroom settings.
- iii. To suggest some pedagogical implications of the study based on analysis and interpretation of data collected from the study.

Literature Review

To educate children properly in multilingual society, many educators advocate that the country or state should adapt multilingual language policy for the medium of institutional instruction. According to Cenoz and Gorter (2010), “Multilingual education which refers to those educational programs that aim at achieving communicative competence in at least two or more languages. In multilingual education, languages other than the dominant language are frequently used as language of instruction (p.2).” But in Nepal, this policy is very difficult to apply because there is large number of minority languages having very few speakers and they rarely speak their mother tongues with their children and family thinking that it is not useful for future. On the other hand, Phyak (2007) has opined that the use of mother tongues in educating children have a great importance because most of the minority languages are on the verge of extinction due to the disappearance of their literature. Only a few native languages have their scripts or literary tradition and majority of indigenous languages do not possess their own written forms.

A number of recent publications focused on education in developing countries argue strongly for the use of the mother tongue/ home language as the medium of instruction, at least in the early years of education. For example, Ball (2014), after an overview of interest in and approaches to mother tongue education in the past several decades in many countries around the world, concludes, “Children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school more and more children are likely to drop out of the school or fail in early grades.” Many research reports have addressed to use children’s first language for literacy and learning throughout their primary education. The evidences show that more than two languages must be used for content based instruction, not just taught as subjects for providing multilingual education. Therefore, in the case of Nepal, these languages should be included

as the medium of instruction in school education as children's mother tongue, which may be indigenous/ minority languages; Nepali, the official language of Nepal and English as a foreign language (Taylor, 2010, p. 140).

In the history of Nepal, there has been a long debate on which language should be used as medium of instruction. Phyak, (2011, as cited in Poudel, 2018) states that nation state had adopted a monolingual policy from the time of unification of modern Nepal. The policy makers did not introduce local languages into schools thinking that it would weaken Nepalese national unity and developing process of different languages other than Nepali language would be less important during Panchayat period. In course of time, the education policy of Nepal has been changed after the restoration of Multi-party democracy and the government has mentioned the policy of teaching basic primary level students in their mother tongues. Phyak (2011, as cited in Poudel, 2018)) has added that the policy of government encouraged indigenous children to use their languages and it has also increased their participation in learning activities.

The constitution of Nepal (2015) has guaranteed the right for the language communities to operate mother tongue based schools to preserve their native culture and languages. This policy has encouraged the minority children to admit in schools and gradually the rate of drop outs decreased in rural areas of the country. However, it is still debatable that which language is more effective to use as the medium of instruction in basic level; Nepali or English or the mother tongues of the students. Many educators have advocated that children's mother tongue is more effective and it should be used as medium of instruction in school education. It is also debatable that among many native languages in the same multilingual community, all of them are not possible to use and which of them is more effective for the medium of instruction. The educators who support multilingual education argue that the children can benefit from the education in their own mother tongue which provides a more effective basis for learning the language of schooling than total immersion. Sirens and Avermaet (2013), argue that learning the students' mother tongue at school would improve the wellbeing of children from migrant backgrounds by supporting positive construction, which is known to have a positive influence on school results. They further added that teaching these native languages helps them to survive over time (p. 6). Therefore, learning and teaching more than one languages either local or national or international can help the learners to develop their personalities. In this perspective providing

educational support for minority languages should be an objective of the government education policy that acknowledges multilingual education and promotes the positive feature of multilingual society.

Methodology

Methodology deals with the different steps, strategies, and procedures of the research work. It particularly includes research site, study design, sources of data, designing research tools, selecting sample, administering the tools, other procedures of data collection and ethical consideration while carrying out the entire study.

This study was conducted as a phenomenological design under qualitative research. Wimpany and Gass (2000) have viewed phenomenological approach as a highly appropriate means to research human experience and its meaning should emerge as a result of co-creation between the researcher and the researched (cited in White head, 2002). This approach typically involves conducting interviews which has strong philosophical underpinnings (Grigi, 2009; Mustakas; 1994, as cited in Creswell, 2014; P.14). It is practiced to provide the description of individual experiences about the phenomenon. In this study, the live experience of individual teachers regarding the problems of selecting medium of instruction, the process of interaction between the teachers and the students in the multilingual classroom, and the difficulties faced by both teachers and students were described. For this purpose, I have followed the interpretive research paradigm because the study is based on multiple realities and the information is obtained mainly through in-depth interviews. I have selected three teachers from the same number of community schools located in Madhyapur Thimi Municipality, Bhaktapur, as the research site where the students come mainly from Newari, Tamang and Nepali speech communities. The primary data were obtained from the teacher participants and collected from the responses about the process of selection, implementation and problems of language/languages used as the medium of instruction in multilingual classrooms. I had also observed the classes conducted by the teacher participants.

For collecting raw data of this study, purposive samples had been selected. Only three teachers, who have been teaching in primary levels in different schools, were selected. The main instrument for collecting data was the interview guidelines. Others were class observation and informal conversation with the teacher participants. To collect the required data, I had selected three community schools, visited them, discussed the plan with school administration and built the rapport with the teachers.

Then I took the in-depth interviews with them, recorded their responses and observed the classes conducted by the teachers. After the class, short informal conversation was conducted with them to find more authentic information and the notes were taken. The interviews were conducted in Nepali language and it was first recorded then transcribed into Roman and later translated into English before they were coding into themes. The general inductive approach and thematic network analysis were used to obtain concepts and themes which are helpful to analyze the data through detailed and constant readings. According to Thomas (2006), "The general inductive analysis refers to approaches that primarily used detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes or a model through interpretations made by a researcher (p. 238)." Similarly, thematic networks systematize the extraction of low order (basic) themes which grouped together to summarize organizing themes. These organizing themes encapsulate the principle metaphors in the text as a whole that is known as global themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389). By following these processes, I have tried to encounter with the burning phenomenon of the study.

In the process of carrying out the study, collecting primary data through primary sources, I have tried to make a careful consideration of ethical issues in obtaining, using and interpreting the required data. The pro-consent of the informants have been taken seriously. This means I have ensured them that the information collected from them would not be misused for any other purposes. The names of the participants, their identity, and positions in academic institutions and status in the society have been kept confidential. As far as the information taken from secondary sources, the original authors have been acknowledged where I have extracted the ideas from various references.

Results and Discussions

In the process of my research work, first I visited the schools; built rapport with the school administrations and teacher participants, interviewed with them; observed one class room activities of each participant; involved in informal communication about the issues; and took the notes, and collected the raw data. By using these research tools, the data were obtained, analyzed and interpreted. According to the nature of qualitative research, different themes were drawn, collected, the raw data were categorized, and they were analyzed thematically. For this process, first I had drawn the local themes; they were used to constitute the organizing themes and they are embedded in the structure of the global themes. These

global are the major findings of my study. The local and organizing themes are embedded into the structure of the global themes. The major findings as global themes drawn from the study are summarized as follows;

Classroom Activities in Multilingual Context

In multilingual classrooms settings, first I observed the class activities conducted by the teacher participants. All these three teachers used only Nepali language as the medium of instruction even in English classes. The majority of the students who had Newari and Tamang as their mother tongues could understand information delivered by the teachers but they felt some difficulties to response them. For class presentation, the teachers mainly presented their lessons by using lecture method, discussion method, and question answer method. One of them also used demonstration method, and classroom interaction between teachers and students and among the students. All the teacher participants managed group work, pair work and individual activities for the students. Among these three teachers, two of them neither speak Newari and Tamang nor understand these languages. Hence, they could not help the Newar and Tamang students by using their native languages. One teacher whose native language was Newari used Nepali as the medium of classroom instruction and sometimes he could cope with the students of having Newari language in the classroom interaction. The students from Tamang communities felt much difficulties in his classroom interaction because he could not facilitate them and they tried to express their ideas in Nepali language but felt much difficulty in grasping and delivering the right information.

In the classroom observation, I had found that some of the students who were the non-native speakers of Nepali language were not feeling much comfortable in grasping the exact information. They tried to understand the information provided by the teachers from the friends of their own language community. Sometimes they made much noise and the whole class seemed out of control. When the teachers wrote some information on the white board, all the students copied hurriedly. In the process of writing, native and non-native Nepali speakers did not show any difference. All the students showed positive responses when the teachers used the visual materials though, non- native Nepali speakers were much careful in their writing activities. When the teachers handled the class by using teaching materials as pictures, flashcards, tables and charts, all the students were equally interested and much motivated in the subject matter presented by their teachers.

Difficulties Faced by Teachers

In the interview, all the teacher participants agreed that they usually face difficulties in handling the multilingual classrooms. The teachers mainly encountered the challenges in delivering the exact message of the text. In the course of interview, one teacher participant says, “I have been suffering from the challenge where I used to deliver the information to the students in Nepali language but they raised questions that they could not catch the exact information”. He further expressed that he did neither understand Newari and Tamang nor his expression in Nepali language made them clear on the subject matter. Some of students who were non-Nepali native speakers failed to express the exact information given in the texts and they hesitated to answer the questions asked by the teachers. Similarly, these teachers could not make the students much clear about the matter for those who felt difficulty in delivering information in Nepali language clearly. They did not show much interest in classroom interaction. When the students remained silent and did not show positive attitudes towards the classroom activities, it was the main problem for the teachers to improve the academic condition of such students.

According to these teacher participants, they always feel difficulties to form the effective groups for the students’ involvement in classroom interaction. The teachers try to promote the involvement of multilingual groups so that all the students could share their different views and come up with the common idea on the subject matter. But the students who come from non-Nepali native groups do not show much interest in sharing their ideas with the students of the native Nepali speakers. The teachers sometimes feel tired to manage the appropriate and effective heterogeneous groups to promote every student’s equal participation in classroom interaction. In multilingual classroom settings, the teachers also feel difficulty in managing appropriate teaching materials for all students because all linguistic and socio-cultural groups (communities) are not equally familiar with the particular materials. Sometimes overuse of mother tongues by the students can hamper the classroom activities.

When one group of the students starts to communicate in their mother tongues, the teachers feel difficulty to maintain the discipline and sometimes the classroom activities are interrupted. In this matter, one of the teacher participants has expressed his experience that once he was teaching the cultural aspects of Tharu community, the students from Tamang linguistic background did not understand it and they started to

explain their understandings but none of them were able to clarify it. Then he had to postpone the class and brought the extra materials to make them clear the following day. It shows that the teachers are facing much difficulty in selecting appropriate teaching materials when handling multilingual classroom.

Difficulties Faced by Students

In multilingual classroom situations where the classroom instruction is monolingual, the students whose mother tongue is different from the language used as the medium of instruction can face many difficulties. According to the teacher participants of my study, the most prominent problem of these students is ineffective communication with the class teacher and other friends. Because of this difficulty, they cannot grasp the sufficient information given in the text. It shows that they feel uneasy to comprehend the text and sometimes they do not show much interest in classroom interaction. The other students who have good command in the language used as the medium of instruction in teaching and learning activities are not much cooperative to them. As the result, the students whose native language is different from the medium of instruction do not perform well in the examination. This finding supports the view expressed by Poudel (2018) as he said, “Nepali speaking people excelled over other ethnic and minority languages in education because they could use Nepali in all domains, whereas the indigenous people faced difficulty in expressing their ideas in Nepali since it was not their mother tongue.” It shows that the students whose mother tongue is not used as the medium of instruction feel difficulty in comprehending the text and do not show positive attitudes towards learning.

In the context of multilingual classroom, the students whose language is not used as the medium of instruction feel inferiority to their friends. They hesitate to take part in the classroom activities, do not show much interest to share their ideas and are disinterested to involve in group and pair works with other classmates. One of the teacher participants of my study expressed his experience as, “Some of the students particularly girls from the language minority groups do not show positive attitudes to continue their study because of their language problem.” In other words, they feel inferiority complex with other friends due to the non-native language used as the medium of instruction. Many studies show that the dropout rate of the students from the indigenous children whose language is neglected and not used as the medium of instruction is higher than those whose language is accepted as the medium of instruction (Ball, 2014).

Ways to Minimize the Difficulties

Multilingual classroom is a kind of beautiful garden where the gardener must give equal guidance to all the flowers. This means the students from different linguistic backgrounds should be nurtured in an appropriate way so that they can develop their possible potentiality in acquiring knowledge, skills and attitudes. But in my observation, the classes of our primary level are not managed in this way; therefore, the teachers and students are feeling the difficulties as mentioned above. To minimize such difficulties, different activities can be done by teachers. According to the teacher participants, some activities are helpful and they frequently use them to minimize the difficulties in multilingual classroom. To clarify the meaning of the text, the teacher should use the students' mother tongues. For sufficient discussion on the subject matter, multilingual groups should be promoted so that the students from marginalized linguistic groups show their active participation in classroom interaction. If necessary, the teachers should present plenty of teaching materials so that the students can receive efficient information in the subject matter. Interaction between teachers and students and among the students both inside and outside the classroom can be helpful to minimize the difficulties faced by both students and teachers.

To reduce the problems in multilingual class, Shintan and Cozens (2018) have suggested the four aspects of school education. They are; students' performance, teachers' skills, parents' involvement in their children's education and classroom learning environment for preserving the values of ethnic language and culture. The findings of my study support their views and my research participants emphasize the activities to promote students' performance. For it, the teacher training is important that develop the teachers' teaching skills. The parents should be conscious about their children's activities both inside and outside of the school premises. In multilingual classes, students' language and culture should be incorporated in classroom activities.

Conclusion

In a multilingual society, people speak different languages and every language community tries to promote their own languages. But the state cannot give equal priority to all the language groups because of the political, economic, cultural, national and international reasons. The social groups whose native languages are thought to be neglected from the states for official purposes, preservation, and as the medium of instruction in educational institutions feel that they are isolated from the

main stream of the nation. Therefore, the nation should address the genuine voices of the minority ethnic groups in the formation and development of its language policy including the education system.

Nepal had adopted one nation, one religion, one culture, and one language policy from its unification. The languages, cultures and traditions of minority people had been dominated by the state for a long time. After the successful political revolution in 2006, the state nation has started to address the voices of the minority groups for preservation of language, culture and tradition. The constitution of Nepal (2015) has addressed that all the children from different linguistic communities have the right to get primary education in their own mother tongues. But this provision is not implemented because all the governments (local, provincial and federal) are not showing much interest in applying mother tongue based multilingual education despite of the local need. In practice, many local governments have declared to use English as the medium of instruction from pre-primary level to higher level education. This decision cannot preserve the language right of local people. It neither follows the spirit of the constitution nor preserves and promotes the heritage languages of different ethnic communities.

This study shows that children learn effectively if they are given primary education in their mother tongues. They feel comfortable to learn new things in home like environment where they use their own language, follow their own activities as they are in their own homes and they can feel the teachers are like their parents and all the friends are like their own brothers and sisters. To promote the students' knowledge in multilingual classroom, the government should make the provision of appointing at least one or two teachers from the local community who have good knowledge of language of the local children. They can understand the difficulties of the students and the students can share their problems with them effectively. The curriculum must be suitable and based on the need of the local people. In this way, we can improve the educational condition of the children in multilingual society by using students' mother tongues, presenting the appropriate teaching materials, appointment of the teachers who have the sound knowledge of students' mother tongue and providing training to teachers time and again. These provisions can be the effective means to minimize the difficulties faced by both teachers and students in multilingual classroom settings.

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