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An ethnographic study on the “Use of English Language by the Students of Grade nine” in a Private Boarding School of Chitwan

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ABSTRACT

English in Nepal is generally believed to be used only for international communication. The medium of instruction in private boarding schools is English & in most public schools are also practicing English medium classes. Most of the private schools have applied compulsory English language policy. English continues to play a crucial role in the communication among the students in those schools. This study has made an attempt to analyse the reason behind adopting compulsory English language policy and also tried to explore the trend of following the language policy by the students of grade nine. The study concludes that parents in particular and the society as a whole is responsible for the compulsory English language policy and the students of grade nine do not follow the school policy for exercising the freedom.

Keywords: Language Policy, Bilingual, Family, Power, Economy, Globalization, Society

Background

I am teaching in a public college in Chitwan as lecturer since 1995 and father of two children. I am very much interested to study linguistics but technically unable to admit in master's level in English education. The craze of boarding school by speaking English also hammering me from childhood because I was the product of government school. My teaching profession also always pushed me to apply English language for the students of bachelor's level. I try to speak English language in my classroom to motivate them towards speaking English language in the classroom. As I became a parent of two children of boarding school; I was thinking the ground reality of speaking English language in boarding schools. One had already completed SEE & one was running in grade nine from a reputed English boarding school from Chitwan. I had been observing from last 10 years about their English language conversation formally & informally. I used to go daily in their schools for about eight years as a driver of children. I try to talk their friends & watch their mutual conversation directly as well as indirectly too. English language speaking among the students was not found comfortable for them to share their ideas & feeling in the school premises as well as outside the school. I found that they are compelled to use English language in schools. I got chance to see a lot of conversations between teachers & students. The talks among teachers & the formal conversation between principal with teachers are found not comfortable as they are doing by law only. Being a lecturer in a community colleges; the observations on college students as a teacher & program in-charge of faculty of education, my conclusion is “the basic problem of student of Bachelors of education is English language”. Most students fail due to misunderstanding the question or most of them don't understand the question because all students are evaluated by the questions set only in English medium. Most of the students come from Nepali medium schools & medium of teaching in bachelors (B.Ed) level is often Nepali language. The students of grade 9/10 are entering in adolescence & they try to disobey the school's rule if possible So I take decision to study about the “use of English language in grade 9” so that I can talk with my son's friends comfortably. There is no clear indication of language priority in general government schools & colleges but boarding schools has set their English language as a policy issue of the organization but it is found the hardly use English in informal settings.. As said by Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) , “the power to learn a language is so great in the young child that it doesn't seem to matter how many languages you seem to throw their way” p. 305 . I often questioned myself, why the teenagers did not follow the rules set by the school? Best on my experience and observations of the school I argue that the students of class ten do not follow the school rules because they are prone adolescents. They try to establish their own identity. They try to prove themselves as grown up adults and they see the world critically. They do not like to present themselves as good order takers and followers. As Woolfolk (2004) says that the central issue of adolescents is the development of an identity that will provide a firm basis for adulthood. They may get confused due to role confusion on this stage.

I am only the guardian of the school find myself on complex to talk with my child in English medium & speak in Nepali. School has set the policy that English must be the means of formal communication within the school premises. Then I put the question, Why did the school make the policy which is hard to follow? On the basis of these questions secondly, I argue that the motive to make compulsory English policy by a private school is guided by the profit making principles. The reason behind the policy must be related with the demand of the society or the parents. I get confused sometimes. There are supportive literatures for introducing second language in the school. Cooper (1987) suggested that studying a second language for a number of years may contribute to higher scores in other languages. "Generally speaking, students with learning disabilities can learn a second language and enjoy the many personal benefits" (Baker, 1995. P. 45). Foreign language learning is more important for gifted students (Brickman, 1988). Finding by Saville-Troike (1984) said mastering the vocabulary of a second language enhances student comprehension and abilities in reading, writing, mathematics and other subjects. Bamford and Mizokawa (1991) stated that individuals who learned a second language were more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who did not. But those literatures have not talked about 100% use of foreign language or second language use. I reflected on my guardianship. Most of the private schools are using English as medium of instruction and English is creating a bilingual society. In general English is taught as a foreign language but for private boarding schools it is used as second language. In this article I have borrowed the term "power" from sociology. For me power is the possibility of imposing the will of one to the other people. Power is exercised over others. It can be generated by physical means, mental capabilities and any other ways. I propose that power affects the way in which people think, plan and behave. So after all, the use of English and the formulation of compulsory English language policy is linked with power. The present study tries to link the Power and politics of English with the social world of students, parents, teachers and the business people.

Objectives of the study

The primary objective of the study was to understand the perception of the students of grade nine about the use of English in their school. The secondary objective was to explore the reason behind the compulsory English policy of the school. Best on the two objectives I formulated two research questions which guided me throughout the study process. My major research questions were why the students of class nine did not follow the compulsory English language policy, and what the reason behind making compulsory English language policy in the school was.

Methodology

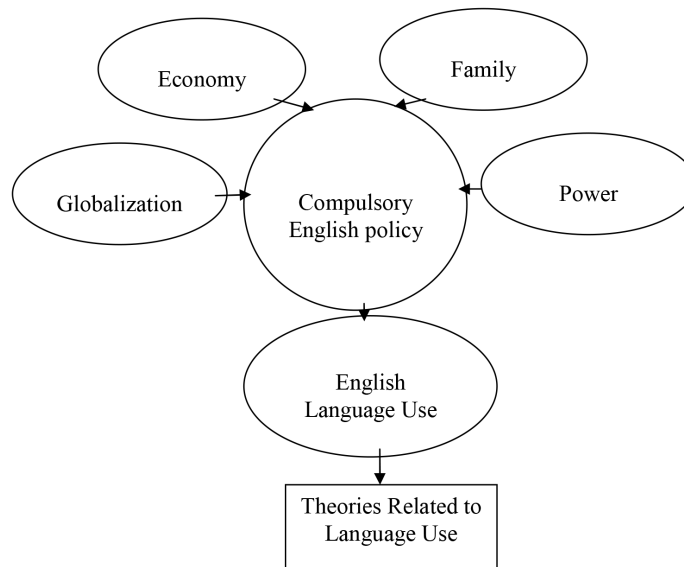
This ethnographic study was conducted at a private, boarding school located in Chitwan. All the courses except the Nepali Language course were offered solely in English. Students received intensive instruction in English to prepare themselves for this bilingual learning environment. Language policy of the institution and the courses offered in English made the students use English in the class. My study was focused on the use of English by the students of grade nine students in informal settings. I mostly talked to the respondents and observed before the start and after the end of classes. All four participants in this study - PCB, KTG, MSB, and RSG were the students of grade nine. These students were selected on the basis of their interest. All of them were recommended by the teachers as interactive and open minded students. All of them had studied in private boarding school from Nursery class. Their age was 14 and 15. Two of them were girls where as other two were boys. There was a mix of four different casts; Newar, Magar, Bramin and Chhetri. As the study was done in a private school the economic background of the student's family was almost the same. All of them said that there was not any problem for their family to maintain a standard of living in their community. Among the two girls one was the daughter of a British army personal and the next was of a businessman in Narayangarh. One of the boys was the child of a government officer and both the parents of next boy were working in Korea. I tried to maintain an ethical need and natural setting for the research.

This study has not covered the perception of all the students and may not be generalized for other situations; however it has given me a real world experience. My study was best on an intensive field work with close observation followed by informal interviews. I spend about 12 hours in total in the field observing the behaviour of my respondents, talking to them and sitting with them. Beside that I have incorporated all other related experiences of mine in this study. It took two weeks for me to collect the data. I used both the languages English and Nepali. Sometime the respondents switched the language. A typical use of language mixing was seen. I recorded some of the conversations. Hence data collection was informal and unstructured. I tried to cross-validate and triangulate my study by gathering different kinds of data from Observations, interviews, program

documentation, and recordings. The name of the school and the students is kept secret. The respondents were given identification code. I have made every effort possible for not harming and exploiting those among whom the research is done.

Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual frame work describes the border concept of second language use by the students.



This frame work was possible to make after my field observation. All the themes are discussed in the research and finally I have tried to link the research with the relevant theories. I have tried to see the context of compulsory English as an exercise of power gain. So I have delimited my discussion on the theme power.

The Field Study

The scope of research into language is vast. It is beyond the scope of a brief project to cover such a huge body of research. Instead, this ethnographic study had focus on selected aspects of class nine students on use of English in the school

Compulsory English Policy in the schools

A questions to the respondent PCB was can you explain an experience of your life on use of English at the school? He was excited to share his experience. He was fifteen. His father was a government officer (LDO who had done Masters in public administration. His mother was house wife. She had done IA. He was considered to be the best student in academic performance in the class.

This is my 7th school. I am studying here from grade 8. I changed six schools before. It was because of my father's job transfer. I was taken with them all the time. I have got a bad experience about use of English in school. I was in Dharan, in a private school. I think I was studying in SKG. I was 6 years old. For speaking in Nepali I got huge punishment. I was asked to do up and down for 150 times by the teacher. I did. I think I counted up to 100 then I could not move. I could not go to school for 5 days then. Actually, my father took me out from there and I started attending next school."

He looked happy to share. He was fluent in English. He used some Nepali sentences in the middle. His case made me more interested to talk to him. I thought he was not supposed to be given such a huge punishment. I asked him. What did you feel about the teacher who punished you.

"Tully speaking I even do not remember the teacher now. But I was missing my friends. The next school was not that much strict so I forgot things soon. I made friends".

PCB was actually a very much open person. In my next talk to him on the way to canteen he answered my question of frequency of use of English in the school. I asked him that in which language they should be taught.

His straight answer was,

“Um....to make me understand mixed and to write in English. Principal and teachers warn us if they find us using Nepali inside the school premises... but I think our use is 25% English and 75% Nepali. If there is no teacher in the class we do not speak in English. The other cases are..... the principal is passing by or a strict teacher is passing by. We are very much happy in the toilet, because no teachers come there as they have a separate toilet. We are free to speak in Nepali”.

PCB clearly accepted that there was very low practice of English language in the class and in the school. He was sharing real experiences with me. He clearly told that despite of knowing the importance of English language they are not practicing it itself. I continued the conversation.

Me : Dont you feel like following the school rule?

PCB: Are the rules only for us(Ke niyam hamilai matrai ho ra?)

Me : what did you mean?

PCB:I have never seen teachers speaking in English outside the classroom.

Me: So that is the reason you do not speak English.

PCB: No no , I did not mean that, hamilai aaunchha(We know the language.)

PCB was very much critical to the teachers. He compared himself with the teachers. It looked like he was not ready to accept that teachers are different for the rule. He appeared as a rebellion.

Family and use of English

As I continued talking and observing the students of grade nine. My next respondent KTG . Her father was a retired British army and he was doing job at USA. He is an Electronic Engineer. She lived with my mother. Her mother was a house wife. I asked her to talk about English language use. She said,

“This skill may be better if we do it from our heart. My mother forces me all the time for English speaking. I am not a bachha (child) to be told all the time. May be, she thinks, I will be better with English. I do not use English for informal talks, no... no.. Sometimes I use. Um!, it is needed for formal subjective work.”

She indicated the family pressure and interest of use of English. There were two important points in her saying. She said that her mother forces her for speaking in English. I questioned myself, why does her mother force her? May be she wants KTG to have an access to the outer world. I asked her what the reason behind her mother's pressure was. She was pretty confused but answered me.

KTG: I do not know. But my father lives in USA.

Me: Your father being at USA is the reason then?

KTG : No , my mother is just SLC and she does not speak in English. She says she was left here in Nepal because she did not have good English. Actually I was born in Hong Kong. My mother says she had a bad time at Hong Kong since she was not able to speak other language than Nepali.”

KTG talked about the psychology her mother carries. It was evidence for me to say that English is related to access. She was trying to connect the language with earning. She showed proudness for her father being an army and working at USA.

Economic Activities and Use of English

The third respondent MSB was of sixteen. He was staying in hostel. Both of his parents were at Korea. Father was IA and Mother was SLC passed.

“My parents pay a lot of money for my school and living. My mother gets angry when I do not speak in English. In their view I should be a good student. I should earn money fast. Now a day English is everything. If someone forces me for speaking English, I feel angry sometimes. English is important but Nepali is also important.”

MSB tried to emphasize the importance of English. But he again revealed that he lost his temper for forcing him

to speak in English. His parents who are comparatively less educated started to tell him about earning money fast. Here money means to have power, access and prestige all. May be his mother wanted to see the power of English on him which she could not gather for herself. Then he said that he worries for his own English. He added,

“I sometime worry that my English is not so good. I studied in the village school (private) up to grade 6. So there was no English use. Only the books were in English. They (Teachers) used to translate the books for us. My parents think that I can make more money if my English is good. I speak in Nepali in the school my English is not very good. I think school is also forcing for English for money. They want to make the school better. I think they want to make more money. English develops our personality”.

Here was confusion in his idea. He was shifting from one thing to next. This low concentration also might have hindered their English practice. Without hesitation MSB accepted that he did not use English. Here I spelled the linkage between the two terms personality and money.

Globalization and Use of English

It was PCBs turn again. He said me in another informal talk that English was the global need.

“Um..... This is the era of English(Talking in Nepali, Jamana nai English ko chha.) parents want to see their child being liked. They want their children to be famous, talent. Each and every Nepali child wants to go to abroad now a day. They think there is no use of staying here.”

KTG further added to PCBs version. She was giving an example of global access too.

“I am comfortable to talk to the foreigner. I do not know why but I never feel like using Nepali. Actually I know that they do not speak in Nepali I think my English is good, I mean I am OK. English is needed for everyone. To use computer, to travel and to get a job in hotel we need English, I know where should I use it.”.

RSG the forth respondent among the students also focused on use of English as a global practice. She was fifteen, Newar girl from patan whose parents were only SLC passed but have their own business.

“My mother tongue is Newari, Second language is Nepali and next second language is English. My parents never talk about the need of English at home. May be they think I do have good English. Yesmy father calls me to talk to the tourists . We hardly speak in English in school in informal times as non of our friends speak. I speak in Newari with mother and in Nepali with others.”

The interesting fact here was a Newar family who runs its own business thought that their daughter who studies in grade was good in English. The evidence was she was able to talk to the tourists. They looked happy. But she was not much attracted to practice English in informal setting

I interviewed a Nepali language teacher who was sitting in the staff room that what the feeling of her was on compulsory English Policy of the school.

“English is necessary. That’s why the rich parents send their children to boarding school. I have also brought my boy here. I want my boy to speak fluently in English. “Samaya ko magh ho” it is the demand of the present. English is almost compulsory for access, to gain prestige, recognition and to make money. We should be stricter as well as motivating.”

She was extremely supportive to the compulsory English policy. She even talked about access, prestige, recognition and money. I perceived all those things relating to the power.

Power and English Use

I finally took the version of the class teacher who had the key role of implementing compulsory English Language policy. He was not much different than others. He explained his story.

“To be frank, it is not easy to maintain a complete English environment. The hardest thing is to make teachers to use it. The senior students also use less English. What to say, I, am an English graduate, but I am tempted to use Nepali. May be I am trying to satisfy others by using English. Actually it is needed. Our interest is to make students fluent in speaking in English. One and only reason is this. They are pretty good in writing. For me it is to please the parents. After all they have paid for it. It is my job”.

The Principal's himself here was in confusion. He was also tempted means there was more charm in talking in mother tongue than a foreign language. He excepted the fact that English was made compulsory to please the parents. He further added curtail idea about English language use.

“The reason English is spread around the world is cause of Anglo-American imperialism. The power of the American media, in particular, Hollywood movies, also play a big part on spreading of English. Secondly, English became a well-known language due to its quite easy-to-learn grammar and somehow easy words. It is widely used because it is borrowing words from all the languages. Then, if you think of the US and it's blossomy commerce and trade, it is quite easy to understand why English is so important. And last but not the least, computers made a great deal in making English such an important language, because computer's language is English”.

The last conversation with the class teacher produced a big ground for discussion. I developed five themes in the study. I found some facts and some interesting questions to think about.

Analysis

The respondents were aware about the need of the English but they were not clear about the researched ideas about the benefits of second language. Students showed no interest of following school policy. They said they were competent so they did not need rigours practice. They talked about personal desire. Confusion was there on the respondents whether they should follow the policy or not. They resisted that their English was better than some of the teachers. Literatures I went through were in favour of learning foreign language. An obvious advantage of knowing more than one language is having expanded access to people and resources. Ultimately, knowing a second language can also give people a competitive advantage in the work force by opening up additional job opportunities. Research suggests that students who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems than those who do not (Bamford and Mizokawa, 1991).

I have some interesting observations of use of English in Neplease village society. Laures (Ex-armies) have prestigious position because they can read, write and speak simple English. In the villages an English speaking person who is able to write in English is considered as the ocean of the knowledge. A drunk starts to talk in English. In the beginning of teen age the students who cannot write a complete sentence write love letters in English. Here English is taken as the language to be learned. The respondents have accepted it in some ways.

As mentioned in the above data the students who were in the stage of early adolescence were not ready to follow the instructions. They were looking for the freedom. They were finding the compulsory English language policy itself a suppressing thing for them. They were ready to use English but they did not like any kind of imposing. All the data from the field have supported my arguments. Adolescents are rebellions by nature. Motivation through peers can be a solution for shaping their behaviour than forcing them to do a work (Santrock, 2006, p. 433).

I think exposure to a foreign language serves as a means of helping children to intercultural competence. The positive impact of cultural information is significantly enhanced when that information is experienced through foreign language and accompanied by experiences in culturally authentic situations. But what about imposing? Is not there a safe, stress free and happy learning strategy? Applying the compulsory English language policy , what are we doing? Should we go along with the global and local needs or we should just forget ant later one. Who told us that English helps to maintain high moral and prestige? How? We can still move to the depth of these questions. There are both sides. In our context the foreign language or second language whatever we say is the English. In this ground the introducing second language in school is good. Developing the language abilities of the students now in school will improve the effectiveness of the work force later. There is the need of fulfilling the need of adolescents.

Theoretical Analysis

Critical pedagogy (CP) is a teaching approach grounded in critical theory. Critical pedagogy attempts to help students question and challenge domination, and the beliefs and practices that dominate. In other words, it is a theory and practice of helping students achieve critical consciousness. Critical pedagogue Shor (1992) defined critical pedagogy as

“Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning, first impressions, dominant myths, official pronouncements, traditional clichés, received wisdom, and mere opinions,

to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, event, object, process, organization, experience, text, subject matter, policy, mass media, or discourse.” (Shor,1992. P. 129)

Critical pedagogy includes relationships between teaching and learning. It is a continuous process of unlearning, learning and relearning, reflection, evaluation and the impact that these actions have on the students, in particular students who have been historically and continue to be disadvantaged by traditional schooling.

Kincheloe (2008). listed the basic concerns of critical pedagogy. I have tried to observe the presented scenario through the lens of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy says that all education is inherently political and all pedagogy must be aware of this condition. This point came true on the case as the principal wants to please both parents and the promoters. Students played hide and seek of language. When they found the teacher they used English. Class teacher himself questioned that whether he was doing the justice to the students or not. He was tempted to speak in Nepali but implementing the compulsory language policy. This phenomenon is related with the point that critical pedagogy is a social and educational vision of justice. Their primary concern is to teach their children English. It raised question that English is not for the poor, socially deprived and backward. This thing can be analysed through the next point of critical pedagogy. It says the issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and physical ability are all important domains. The private schools are trying to give the message to the public sector that they are superior because they have made students speak English. This issue can be dealt well through critical theory.

Every respondent were in confusion. They did not know why they were practicing English? How much? Where? When? What about their mother language? They were not clear that where the suffering is. Is English for going abroad, to be secondary citizens or it is for serving the local realities. Is English for day to day use or for show off. Is it for communication or for pleasing somebody else. Is it for life of to gain power? Here the teachers challenged the policy. The students neglected the policy. Critical pedagogy further says, schools must not hurt students--good schools don't blame students for their failures or strip students of the knowledge they bring to the classroom. Why the students are scared of the principal? But the students were open with me. They clearly said their parents try to force them their school tried to force them. This study reviled that the professionalism of teachers was respected. This was another proposition of the critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy says education must both promote emancipatory change and the cultivation of the intellect--these goals should never be in conflict, they should be synergistic. From the view of the class teacher it was so. Here the flow of power was questioned. English was taken as granted by the parents as a mean of gaining power. Students told that the school wants to gain the power by creating the propaganda around as the best school. As the class teacher said he/she wanted his/her boy to speak fluently in English. 21st century is the century of visible and able people for me. Some visible may not able and some able people may be hidden because they are not visible.

Bourdieu's theory of Language and Symbolic Power: According to catalogue (2009) Bourdieu argues that language should be viewed not only as a means of communication but also as a medium of power through which individuals pursue their own interests and display their practical competence. Bourdieu maintains that linguistic utterances or expressions can be understood as the product of the relation between a linguistic market” and it “linguistic habits.” Hence every linguistic interaction, however personal or insignificant it may seem, bears the traces of the social structure that it both expresses and helps to reproduce. Bourdieu's account also class and gender. It also opens up a new approach to the ways in which language is used in the domain of politics. This study and the discussion can be viewed from Bourdieu's point of view. The students who did not use the language were also trying to gain power at the same time the policy document itself neglected the desire of gaining the power. One of the respondent's mother got angry for her son for not using English this anger has got superficial meaning that she was using mother's power but if we analyze it from Bourdieu's theory of Language and Symbolic Power, she was showing the anger means she was trying to gain the power of recognition, prestige and fame etc. The students were happily talking with me in English, this mean they demonstrated that they have the power of language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the reason behind the increasing craze of English is the spreading of computer technology and the flexible and expanding nature of English language. Human beings are true practitioners of the freedom. Everyone tries to be free, use their mind and exercise the power. This study led me to draw conclusion on the basis of

this ground. The compulsory English language policy formed by the school was not guided by the literature or imperial evidences of the benefits of English language. But it was guided by the motive of satisfying the parents and the motive of showing themselves as good school in public. The students were not negative about the English language, but they were very much open and critical towards the school policy. They even questioned the trend of English language use by other school stakeholders. They were trying to exercise power and freedom by not using English in informal school time. It was because of their search of identity and because of the development of critical understanding. It cannot be judged as such good or bad activity. The pedagogical approaches school was applying might not be appropriate to motivate the adolescents. School should think and involve the students on policy formulation to avoid such problems.

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