

Linguistic Human Rights and Trilingual Educational Policy of Nepal

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Abstract

Resource-based approach and right-based approach in education are the two contending issues among the academicians who have their own opinions about whether to ensure individuals' linguistic human rights or to treat language as a communication resource. However, this article aims to justify the suitability of the right-based approach in the trilingual educational policy of Nepal by providing arguments from cultural, social, economic, and educational perspectives. Firstly, it introduces right-based and resource-based approaches in education. Secondly, it concentrates on how this approach relates to present Nepal's trilingual educational policy in practice. Finally, it advocates for the rigorous implementation of this policy of the government of Nepal for the cultural, social, economic and academic development of the learners and conservation of their linguistic human rights. It further explicates the role of translanguaging, bilingualism and multilingualism as some of the strategies or approaches that can be used according to the local context and needs of the learners.

Keywords: Bilingualism, multilingualism, trilingual policy, linguistic human rights

Introduction

Individual's linguistic human rights approach is more viable for Nepal because a child's linguistic human rights are linked to the right of using his/her mother tongue or native language whether it be in social interaction or the classrooms. Researches have proved that educating children through the medium of their mother tongue or local language makes learning effective and eternal. And more importantly, it preserves their linguistic human right. For instance, Thomas and Collier (2002) have stated that "the more L1 grading schooling, the higher L2achievement" (p.7). Pennycook (2006) suggests that it is necessary to reevaluate and restructure the social, political and economic hierarchies between linguistically privileged and disadvantaged groups of people. Therefore, this article defines the concept of linguistic restrictionism as obsolete and aims to justify the chosen approach on the basis of cultural, social, economic and educational frameworks. It also advocates for the preservation of biodiversity by preserving minoritized languages.

Right-based and Resource-based Approaches in Education

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Heller (2010) introduces Skutnabb-Kangas as the best-known proponent of the universalist movement, who considers language as a human right. She adds that the language endangerment movement advocates for linguistic diversity as linguistic knowledge that includes untranslatable information, and speakers should be able to regulate their own space using their own language. When the first multidisciplinary book about linguistic human rights (LHRs) got published in the mid-1990s, “the area of linguistic human rights (LHRs) started crystallizing as a multidisciplinary research area. Academic discussion of human rights within international law and language rights had, prior to that time, remained largely separate” (Skutnabb-Kangas, T., & May, S., 2017). They accuse that negative, stigmatizing attitude, the invisibility of particular languages, even those with substantial populations, and a lack of linguistic education and awareness among decision-makers all contribute to marginalization. Therefore, it is necessary to raise a voice for the linguistic rights of IMs (indigenous people and minorities) to protect them from physical and mental harm along with economic, social and political marginalization. Skutnabb-Kangas and May (2017) argue:

All strong multilingual education models use mainly an IM language as the main teaching language during the (many) first years. The longer this period is, the better the results are in terms of high levels of bilingualism or multilingualism and general school achievement. (p. 87)

In the context of Nepal, the implementation of a trilingual educational policy (mother tongue, Nepali, and English) is more democratic than the resource-based approach because it can stop linguistic genocide and education-related crimes.

The resource-based approach, on the other hand, mainly revolves around the commodification of language in the context of new economic globalization. It is influenced by the concept of neo-liberalism that is based on the economic value of language. Heller (2010) argues that language is treated as a resource in the new economy, and thus as a commodity with monetary worth. This approach assumes that individuals worry about the kind of linguistic repertoire they need to benefit from present conditions for themselves or their children, whereas governments worry about whether their population has the language abilities they need to function in those situations. According to Helen (2007), the focus of language as a communicative resource approach is on communicative processes and practices rather than on communities and identities. Overall, this approach argues for repositioning sociolinguistics away from the fundamentally nationalist ideas from which it sprang, as well as the new forms of social organization in which we are currently engaged. This approach believes in the standardization of linguistic habitus in the form of various evaluative frameworks like TESOL, IELTS,

TOEFL, GRE tests. It reveals the fact that the unequal distribution of language capital underpins the linguistic power relationship. Therefore, the purpose of the academic institutions that fall under this approach is to regulate the education system with monolingualism, creating an invisible, inner and outer dichotomy between linguistically privileged and disadvantaged groups.

Cultural, Social, Economic and Educational Issues in Right-based Approach

Unlike the monolingual language policy of the Panchayat system that viewed linguistic and cultural diversity as a threat to national unity rather than a resource, the present School Sector Development Plan (2016-2023) advocates for the institutionalization of trilingual language policy in education and believes in 'unity in diversity'. Although there are various views regarding the relationship between language and culture, it has been established that language and culture are closely interrelated because culture is reflected in grammar, lexical items, and dialectical variations. When the dominant language is used as a medium of education, it results in the loss of linguistic diversity because the indigenous and minority languages get disappeared. Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010) consider such an act to be a crime in the form of "linguistic genocide" (p. 89). Therefore, they recommend that the state should preserve and promote indigenous languages to respect people's 'linguistic human rights.' Likewise, Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010) also show the interconnectedness of language, culture and biodiversity by referring to the World Resources Institute, the World Conservation Union, and the United Nations Environment Programme (1992). However, some contending views speak for the homogenization in the use of language and do not care for the negative impact it leaves on minority languages. These languages are on the verge of extinction and when the children are deprived of their mother tongue during their school sessions, these minority languages are bound to be extinct. Thus, it is necessary to preserve all the minority languages to save our identity which is shaped by our mother tongue and culture.

The knowledge of the English language is regarded as the symbol of societal prestige, a passport to academic success and a key to a reputed job opportunity. According to Giri (2011), besides English, Nepali is regarded as the language of cultured, educated, and enlightened people, while other languages are regarded as illiterate speech as well as jungle dialects (Malla, 1979). Such narrow-minded attitudes of the so-called elites undoubtedly create a negative attitude in the minds of linguistic minorities that can result in the sense of alienation, negative attitude and social conflict among the people with linguistic habitus and have nots. Upper-class people and the speakers of dominant languages have linguistic capital with symbolic and invisible power, which the speakers of marginalized languages or dialects are deprived of. If all the languages are equally provided space in academia and the identities of IMs are recognized not only in the policies but also

in practice, they are sure to build positive attitudes in their minds. Consequently, peace and harmony in society become inevitable. As far as the concept of social prestige, job opportunity and academic success are concerned, they are possible through systemic planning for multilingual education. Researches have figured out that the children who receive schooling in their mother tongue or local language during an elementary level, have exciting developments in their cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains. Moreover, “language should be seen as related to nation, people, and culture” (Risagar, 2015, p. 87).

The opposing argument that treats language merely as a communicative resource underpins neo-liberalism as it believes in the concept of language industry devoid of linguistic human rights. It has nothing to do with the maintenance of linguistic diversity. Rather, it focuses on the commodification of language in the globalized new economy. The focus is mainly on the commodification of language in the new economic globalization. Language is perceived as a mediational tool responsible for conveying a message through social interaction as Vygotskian sociocultural theory explains. It is a false belief even in the minds of the minorities that the more repertoire one has in a mainstream language, the more job opportunities wait for them. The knowledge of the dominant language does not guarantee success. If the students are taught in their mother or local language environment, they can also embrace success. The only condition for this success is that the government should take decisive initiatives to create opportunities as we have witnessed in the immersion programmes like the French immersion programme in Canada. Such kinds of programmes are organized to create job opportunities for people with minority language competence. Then, there will be no languages like elite or minority. The demarcation between the inner circle and the outer circle students will be erased and the dream of future economic prosperity will come true.

Students drop out of school because of various reasons like family-related reasons, school-related reasons and work-related reasons. Among them, the compulsion to use dominant unfavourable language in the school premises, which is related to school-related reasons, demotivates the indigenous and disadvantaged students from staying in the school. Ramírez et. al. (1991) report that the minority language pupils who get the most of their schooling in English or second language rather than their native language are more likely to lag behind and drop out. Therefore, they insist on the use of bilingual education programmes as they encourage the students to demonstrate better academic performance. On the contrary, some schools restrict the use of local language or mother tongue inside the school premises in the name of maintaining quality education. We have witnessed some of them imposing fines on the students for violating the rules. They have an illusion that employing EMI uplifts the quality of education. Even

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some parents consider the schooling through mother tongue at the early stages hinders the learning of their children. Consequently, according to Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson (2010), this type of schooling creates linguistic, pedagogical and psychological barriers for IMs resulting in the extinction of indigenous languages. Besides, loss of the world's linguistic diversity, poor literacy in both L1 and L2, high cost of expenditure, poor numeracy, high failure and drop-out rates are other notable negative consequences of ignoring the linguistic human rights of the students. Therefore, it is necessary to teach them in their mother tongue minimally during their basic level education for their holistic development that will ensure quality education in the long run.

Conclusion

The demands of indigenous people and minorities (IMs) are legitimate and the state should address them as far as possible. However, Nepal is linguistically and culturally a diversified country, and it is almost impossible to declare more than 131 languages as official ones. Unlike the past, the government of Nepal has tried to show itself as a democratic country by embracing a trilingual educational policy in School Sector Development Plan (2016-2022). This plan has guaranteed the linguistic human rights of Nepali students because it has set the provision of teaching children in their mother tongue or local language in the initial phase for at least three years and then mother tongue with Nepali and finally English in the secondary level. Neither the linguistic minorities should posit unnecessary demands nor the state should trick the citizens with “avoidance, complacency, delaying, and discrepancy in planning and implementation, and lack of political consensus on the part of bureaucrats and law-makers” (Giri, 2011, p. 207). Moreover, English as a medium of instruction (EMI), which is monolingual in nature itself, is the product of western researches and this kind of pedagogy cannot be relevant to our local context. The teaching methods like the direct method and communicative approach, which restrict the use of bilingualism and multilingualism, were propounded by the native speakers of English and the pedagogues who returned from there spread these methods in South Asian countries like Nepal. Rather, translanguaging, additive bilingualism and multilingualism are the strategies or approaches that can be used according to the local context and needs of the students. Therefore, it is logical to accept the trilingual educational policy of the government of Nepal for the cultural, social, economic and academic development of the students and conservation of their linguistic human rights.

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