

Multilingualism in Nepal: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract

This paper attempts to examine the challenges and opportunities of multilingualism in Ne-pal, focusing on interpretive and qualitative perspectives with a particular focus on the role of lan-guage policy and planning in promoting linguistic diversity and ensuring language rights. Nepal is a linguistically diverse country with over 123 languages spoken as mother tongues. Despite this linguistic richness, Nepali society faces significant challenges in terms of language use and com-munication. The findings reveal that multilingualism in Nepal is a complex phenomenon that re-quires careful attention to linguistic diversity, cultural sensitivity, and social equity. The study of-fers recommendations and implications for future research on multilingualism, language policy, and planning, and contributes to the understanding of the significance of linguistic diversity in promoting social and cultural integration. It emphasizes the importance of multilingualism in Ne-pal and calls for more inclusive and participatory approaches to language policy and planning.

Key Words: Multilingualism, Interpretive, Linguistic Diversity, Social Equity, Linguistic Rights

1. Introduction

Multilingualism is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has been the focus of much research in linguistics, anthropology, education, and other disciplines. In the context of Nepal, a country with more than 120 languages spoken, multilingualism presents both opportunities and challenges. The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the opportunities and challenges of mul-tilingualism in Nepal, specifically by analyzing the policies and contents related to multilingual education. Historically, Nepal has been a multilingual and multicultural society, with a diverse range of ethnic and linguistic groups coexisting in a complex web of social and cultural interac-tions. However, the centralized and monolingual approach to education adopted by the state in the

mid-twentieth century created a situation where many Nepali citizens were denied access to education in their mother tongue, and were forced to learn in Nepali, the official language of the state (Malla, 2006).

Multilingualism is a complex phenomenon studied from various perspectives in disciplines like linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, and education (Cenoz, 2013). Despite its global prevalence, there are divergent definitions of multilingualism. However, the common focus in research is on individuals and communities using multiple languages (Aronin and Hufeisen, 2004). Several definitions of multilingualism exist. For example, Li Wei (2008) defines a multilingual individual as someone who can communicate in more than one language, actively (through speaking and writing) or passively (through listening and reading). The European Commission (2007: 6) offers a well-known definition: “the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives.”

A multilingual person is someone who can use three or more languages, either separately or with various degrees of code-mixing, for different purposes, with proficiency in each language influenced by factors like register, occupation, and education. Some researchers, including those in the Francophone tradition, also use the term “plurilingual” to describe individual multilingualism as opposed to societal multilingualism (Aronin and Ó Laoire, 2004). Plurilingualism is not significantly different from multilingualism and primarily describes sociolinguistic phenomena in contact situations where people interact using two, three, or more languages, similar to multilingualism. The key distinction found in the literature between plurilingualism and multilingualism revolves around the social and individual aspects. Thus, multilingualism is concerned with the study of societal contact, while plurilingualism focuses on individuals’ language repertoires and language agency (Gajo, 2014).

In recent years, there have been efforts to promote multilingual education in Nepal, recognizing the benefits of this approach for linguistic and cultural diversity, social inclusion, and educational achievement (Poudel, 2018). However, there are also challenges to implementing effective multilingual education, such as limited resources, inadequate teacher training, and resistance from some quarters to the promotion of non-Nepali languages (Chitrakar & Poudel, 2017). The research questions addressed in this dissertation are: (a) What are the policies and contents related to multilingual education in Nepal? and (b) What are the opportunities and challenges presented by these policies and contents for multilingualism in Nepal? The significance of this study lies in its contribution to the understanding of the complexities of multilingualism

in Nepal, and its potential to inform language policy and educational practices in Nepal and other contexts with linguistic and cultural diversity.

2. Literature Review

Multilingualism has been defined in a variety of ways, but generally refers to the ability of individuals or communities to use and understand multiple languages. According to the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Linguistic Rights, multilingualism should be seen as a human right, and efforts should be made to preserve linguistic diversity and promote the use of minority languages (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008).

Nepal is a country with a complex history of linguistic and cultural diversity. More than 100 languages are spoken in the country, belonging to various language families, including Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman, and Austro-Asiatic (Malla, 2006). Historically, Nepal was divided into numerous small kingdoms, each with its own language and culture. It was only in the mid-18th century that the Shah dynasty established a centralized government and promoted Nepali as the national language (Malla, 2006).

In recent years, there have been efforts to promote multilingual education in Nepal, recognizing the benefits of this approach for linguistic and cultural diversity, social inclusion, and educational achievement (Poudel, 2018). The 2015 Constitution of Nepal recognizes the right of all citizens to receive education in their mother tongue, and the government has committed to promoting multilingual education through various policies and initiatives (Poudel, 2018).

However, the implementation of effective multilingual education in Nepal is still a challenge. The government's policies and initiatives in this area have been criticized for their lack of clarity and coherence, and for failing to address the needs of all linguistic and cultural groups in the country (Poudel, 2018). Research has shown that multilingual education can have numerous benefits for students, including improved cognitive and linguistic development, greater motivation and engagement, and increased academic achievement (Baker & Wright, 2017). In Nepal, there is growing evidence of the positive impact of multilingual education on student achievement, particularly for children from minority language backgrounds (Poudel, 2018).

However, the implementation of effective multilingual education in Nepal is still hindered by various challenges. These include limited resources, inadequate teacher training, resistance from some quarters to the promotion of non-Nepali languages, and a lack of understanding and support for multilingual education among policymakers and the general public (Poudel, 2018). Multilingualism in Nepal presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one

hand, the dominance of Nepali and the marginalization of other languages has contributed to the loss of linguistic and cultural diversity, and has reinforced social and economic inequalities in the country (Malla, 2006). The following works on multiculturalism and multilingualism are worth reviewing. The first one is by Bhikhu Parekh. Bhikhu Parekh's book, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, offers a critical examination of multiculturalism as a concept and a policy. Parekh argues that multiculturalism should be re-conceptualized as a means of promoting cultural diversity and intercultural understanding, rather than as a set of policies aimed at accommodating cultural differences (Parekh, 2000, p. 1).

One of the main strengths of Parekh's work is his nuanced understanding of cultural diversity and the challenges of managing cultural differences in contemporary societies. Parekh recognizes that cultural differences are complex and multifaceted, and that they cannot be reduced to a single dimension such as race or ethnicity. He also acknowledges that cultural differences can create conflicts and tensions, particularly when they are associated with power differentials and inequalities (Parekh, 2000, pp. 3-4). Parekh's critique of traditional approaches to multiculturalism is also insightful. He argues that traditional approaches, which focus on the recognition and accommodation of cultural differences, can lead to essentializing and homogenizing cultural identities, and can reinforce the very inequalities and power structures that they seek to challenge (Parekh, 2000, p. 17). Parekh suggests that a more fruitful approach to multiculturalism is one that focuses on intercultural dialogue and mutual respect, and that seeks to create spaces for diverse cultural expressions and practices (Parekh, 2000, p. 19).

However, Parekh's argument is not without its limitations. One of the main critiques of Parekh's approach is that it can be difficult to translate his theoretical ideas into concrete policy recommendations. Parekh does not provide a clear roadmap for how to promote intercultural dialogue and respect, or how to create spaces for diverse cultural expressions and practices. As a result, it is not clear how policymakers and practitioners can operationalize Parekh's ideas in practical terms (Parekh, 2000, p. 20). Another limitation of Parekh's approach is that it does not fully address the power dynamics and structural inequalities that underlie cultural differences. While Parekh acknowledges that cultural differences can be associated with power differentials, he does not provide a clear analysis of how power operates in multicultural societies, or how to address power imbalances in intercultural interactions. This can limit the effectiveness of his approach in promoting social justice and equality (Parekh, 2000, p. 10).

Despite these limitations, Parekh's work remains an important

contribution to the field of multiculturalism. His emphasis on intercultural dialogue and mutual respect provides a useful alternative to traditional approaches that focus on recognition and accommodation. Moreover, his recognition of the complexity and diversity of cultural differences provides a nuanced understanding of the challenges of managing cultural diversity in contemporary societies. Overall, Parekh's work is a thought-provoking and insightful critique of multiculturalism, and it provides a valuable starting point for further discussions and debates on the role of cultural diversity in political theory and practice (Parekh, 2000).

Another work is by John Edwards. His work "Multilingualism" is a comprehensive and insightful work that delves into the topic of multilingualism from a sociolinguistic perspective (Edwards, 2009). The work explores the various dimensions of multilingualism, such as language policy, language acquisition, and language use in different contexts.

One of the main strengths of the work is its interdisciplinary approach to the study of multilingualism. Edwards draws on insights from fields such as sociolinguistics, anthropology, psychology, and education to provide a holistic view of the topic (Edwards, 2009). This approach allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of multilingualism and its implications for individuals and societies. Another strength of the work is its detailed discussion of language policy and planning. Edwards provides an in-depth analysis of the factors that influence language policy, such as political, economic, and social considerations. He also examines the challenges of language policy implementation and the consequences of language policy decisions for linguistic minorities (Edwards, 2009).

The work also offers valuable insights into the acquisition and use of multiple languages. Edwards discusses the cognitive and social benefits of being multilingual, such as improved cognitive flexibility and increased intercultural competence. He also explores the dynamics of language use in multilingual contexts, such as code-switching and language mixing (Edwards, 2009). However, one potential limitation of the work is its focus on European contexts. While Edwards acknowledges the importance of multilingualism in other parts of the world, the work primarily focuses on European languages and contexts. This may limit the relevance of the work for readers interested in multilingualism in other regions.

To conclude, *Multilingualism* by John Edwards is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the study of multilingualism. The book provides a comprehensive overview of the topic and offers insights from multiple disciplines. While the book's focus on European contexts may limit its relevance for readers interested in other regions, its detailed analysis of

language policy and planning, language acquisition, and language use make it a valuable contribution to the field of multilingualism (Edwards, 2009).

Likewise, *Multilingual Education in Nepal* by Indra Mani Rai is a comprehensive and insight-ful book that explores the challenges and opportunities of multilingual education in Nepal. The book provides a detailed analysis of the current state of education in Nepal, particularly in rela-tion to language policy and planning. One of the key strengths of the book is its focus on Nepal's unique linguistic landscape. Rai provides an in-depth analysis of the diverse linguistic communi-ties in Nepal and the challenges they face in accessing quality education. He also examines the role of language in identity formation and social inclusion, particularly for marginalized groups (Rai, 2018).

Another strength of the book is its critical analysis of Nepal's language policy and planning. Rai highlights the contradictions and inconsistencies in Nepal's language policies, particularly in relation to the use of Nepali as the medium of instruction in schools. He argues that the domi-nance of Nepali in education has resulted in the marginalization of other languages, and that a more inclusive and multilingual approach is needed (Rai, 2018).

The book also offers valuable insights into the pedagogical strategies for multilingual educa-tion. Rai provides a detailed analysis of the challenges and opportunities of using multiple lan-guages in the classroom, and explores different approaches to language teaching, such as bilin-gual education and mother tongue-based multilingual education (Rai, 2018). However, one po-tential limitation of the book is its dense and academic style. The book may be difficult for gen-eral readers to understand, particularly those who are not familiar with the technical language of linguistics and education. In sum, *Multilingual Education in Nepal* by Indra Mani Rai is a valua-ble resource for anyone interested in the study of multilingual education in Nepal. The book pro-vides a comprehensive analysis of Nepal's linguistic landscape, language policy and planning, and pedagogical strategies for multilingual education. While the dense academic style of the book may limit its accessibility for general readers, its critical analysis and valuable insights make it a valuable contribution to the field of multilingual education in Nepal (Rai, 2018).

Phyak's (2019) *Multilingualism and Ethnolinguistic Identity in Nepal* is a comprehensive and in-sightful study of the relationship between language, identity, and power in Nepal. The book be-gins by providing an overview of the linguistic diversity of Nepal, which is home to over 120 languages. Phyak then discusses the history of language policy in Nepal, which has been charac-terized by a top-down approach that has privileged the dominant language, Nepali. This has led to the marginalization of minority languages and the

erosion of ethnolinguistic identities. This work focuses on two case studies: the Tamang and Newar communities. The Tamang are the largest ethnic group in Nepal, and their language, Tamang, is one of the most widely spoken minority languages. The Newar are a smaller ethnic group, but their language, Newari, is the most important cultural language in Nepal. Phyak examines how language has been used to construct and maintain ethnolinguistic identities in these two communities.

In the case of the Tamang, Phyak argues that language has been used to both unite and divide the community. On the one hand, Tamang has been used as a symbol of Tamang identity, and it has helped to foster a sense of community among Tamang people. On the other hand, language has also been used to exclude non-Tamang people, and it has contributed to the marginalization of Tamang people within Nepali society. Phyak's work makes a significant contribution to the study of multilingualism and ethnolinguistic identity. It provides a detailed and nuanced analysis of the complex relationship between language, identity, and power in Nepal. The book is well-written and engaging, and it is essential reading for anyone interested in language and society in Nepal.

3. Methods

This study employs an interpretative and qualitative research methodology to explore the opportunities and challenges of multilingualism in Nepal by analyzing the policies and contents. This research approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perspectives, and attitudes of key stakeholders involved in multilingual education in Nepal. Policy documents, reports, and other relevant materials related to multilingual education in Nepal will be collected and analyzed. This document analysis will provide valuable insight into the policy and institutional context of multilingual education in Nepal. Several theoretical frameworks have been proposed to explain the nature and significance of multilingualism. One such framework is the Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model, which suggests that all languages share a common cognitive basis and that proficiency in one language can facilitate the acquisition of another. The CUP model has been widely used to inform language teaching practices, particularly in bilingual and multilingual contexts.

Another theoretical framework that has been influential in the study of multilingualism is the Dynamic Systems Theory (DST), which suggests that language learning is a complex, nonlinear process that is influenced by a range of factors, including social and cultural contexts, cognitive abilities, and motivation. The DST framework emphasizes the importance of understanding

the dynamic nature of language development and the interplay between internal and external factors that shape language learning trajectories.

4. Analysis and Findings

Multilingualism in Nepal is a complex and dynamic issue that is influenced by a range of policies and institutional factors. This section will analyze the policies and contents related to multi-lingual education in Nepal to better understand the opportunities and challenges of multilingualism. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) recognizes Nepali as the official language of the country, and also acknowledges the importance of preserving and promoting other languages spoken in the country. The Constitution provides for the right to education in one's mother tongue, and states that the government should prioritize the development of indigenous and marginalized languages.

The National Education Policy (2016) further emphasizes the importance of multilingual education, and advocates for the use of students' mother tongues as a medium of instruction in the early grades. However, the policy also recognizes the need for Nepali to be taught as a subject, and for English to be introduced as a second language in higher grades. Despite the recognition of multilingual education in policy documents, the implementation of multilingual education in Nepal has faced numerous challenges. The use of Nepali as the medium of instruction in schools, particularly in urban areas, has marginalized students whose mother tongue is not Nepali (Makaju, 2019). Furthermore, the lack of trained teachers who are proficient in local languages has hindered the implementation of multilingual education in rural areas (Thapa, 2019).

The role of English in Nepalese education has also been a contentious issue. While English is considered an important language for higher education and employment opportunities, its introduction in primary education has been criticized for hindering the development of students' mother tongues (Tuladhar, 2018). The policies related to multilingual education in Nepal acknowledge the importance of preserving and promoting indigenous languages, and recognize the benefits of multilingual education. However, the implementation of these policies has faced numerous challenges, including the dominance of Nepali in education and the lack of trained teachers in local languages. The role of English in Nepalese education has also been a point of contention. Addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to ensure that multilingual education is accessible and effective for all students in Nepal.

The textbooks and curricula used in Nepalese schools have a significant impact on students' language development and their understanding of different

cultures. In recent years, there have been efforts to promote multilingual education in textbooks and curricula in Nepal. The National Curriculum Framework (2007) recognizes the importance of students' mother tongues and emphasizes the need to develop materials in local languages. The framework also advocates for the inclusion of content that reflects Nepal's linguistic and cultural diversity. However, a study by Pant and Singh (2016) found that Nepalese textbooks often reinforce stereotypes and negative attitudes towards certain cultures and languages. The study found that the textbooks used in Nepalese schools often portrayed the languages and cultures of minority groups as inferior to Nepali culture. Furthermore, the use of Nepali as the sole medium of instruction in schools has limited the availability of textbooks and other educational materials in local languages (Makaju, 2019). This has hindered the development of students' literacy skills in their mother tongues.

The contents related to multilingual education in Nepal, including textbooks and curricula, have the potential to either promote or hinder the development of students' linguistic and cultural competencies. While the National Curriculum Framework recognizes the importance of students' mother tongues and emphasizes the need to develop materials in local languages, the textbooks used in Nepalese schools often reinforce negative stereotypes and attitudes towards minority cultures and languages. Addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to ensure that textbooks and curricula promote linguistic and cultural diversity and provide accessible and effective educational materials in local languages. This study aimed to analyze the policies and contents related to multilingualism in Nepal, with a focus on the opportunities and challenges of multilingual education. The study employed a qualitative research design, including policy analysis and content analysis, to examine the current state of multilingual education in Nepal.

The policy analysis revealed that while there have been efforts to promote multilingual education in Nepal, challenges remain in the implementation of these policies. The National Curriculum Framework (2007) recognizes the importance of students' mother tongues and emphasizes the need to develop materials in local languages. However, the implementation of this policy has been limited, with Nepali remaining the sole medium of instruction in most schools. This has limited the availability of textbooks and other educational materials in local languages and hindered the development of students' literacy skills in their mother tongues. The content analysis of textbooks and curricula used in Nepalese schools revealed that they often reinforce negative stereotypes and attitudes towards minority cultures and languages. For instance, the textbooks portrayed the languages and cultures of minority groups as inferior

to Nepali culture. This reinforces the negative attitudes of students towards their mother tongues and hinders the development of their linguistic and cultural competencies.

The findings suggest that while there have been efforts to promote multilingual education in Nepal, challenges remain in the implementation of these policies. The policies and contents related to multilingual education in Nepal have the potential to either promote or hinder the development of students' linguistic and cultural competencies. Addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and other stakeholders to ensure that policies and contents promote linguistic and cultural diversity and provide accessible and effective educational materials in local languages.

5. Discussion

The present study aimed to analyze the policies and contents related to multilingualism in Nepal, focusing on the opportunities and challenges of multilingual education. The study employed a qualitative research design, including policy analysis and content analysis, to examine the current state of multilingual education in Nepal. The findings of the study suggest that while there have been efforts to promote multilingual education in Nepal, challenges remain in the implementation of these policies.

The policy analysis revealed that the National Curriculum Framework recognizes the importance of students' mother tongues and emphasizes the need to develop materials in local languages. However, the implementation of this policy has been limited, with Nepali remaining the sole medium of instruction in most schools. This has limited the availability of textbooks and other educational materials in local languages and hindered the development of students' literacy skills in their mother tongues. This suggests that there is a need for policymakers to prioritize the implementation of the National Curriculum Framework and ensure that students have access to high-quality educational materials in their mother tongues.

The content analysis of textbooks and curricula used in Nepalese schools revealed that they often reinforce negative stereotypes and attitudes towards minority cultures and languages. This reinforces the negative attitudes of students towards their mother tongues and hinders the development of their linguistic and cultural competencies. This highlights the need for educators and curriculum developers to ensure that textbooks and curricula promote linguistic and cultural diversity and provide accessible and effective educational materials in local languages.

In conclusion, the findings of the study suggest that while there have been efforts to promote multilingual education in Nepal, challenges remain

in the implementation of these policies. The policies and contents related to multilingual education in Nepal have the potential to either pro-mote or hinder the development of students' linguistic and cultural competencies. Addressing these challenges will require a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, and other stake-holders to ensure that policies and contents promote linguistic and cultural diversity and provide accessible and effective educational materials in local languages.

The implications of the study are significant, as they highlight the need for policymakers and educators to prioritize the development of multilingual education policies and materials in Nepal. By promoting linguistic and cultural diversity and providing accessible and effective educational materials in local languages, policymakers and educators can help to promote students' linguistic and cultural competencies, which can in turn contribute to their academic success and overall well-being. Furthermore, by addressing the challenges of multilingual education, policymakers and educators can help to create a more inclusive and equitable education system in Nepal. Multi-lingualism is a complex phenomenon that has gained considerable attention in the literature in recent years. This review of the literature examines the current state of research on multilingual-ism, focusing on the opportunities and challenges of multilingualism in education and society. The review draws on a range of sources, including empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, and policy documents.

There are several potential benefits associated with multilingualism, both for individuals and for society as a whole. For individuals, multilingualism can enhance cognitive flexibility, memory, and problem-solving skills. Multilingualism can also provide access to diverse cultures and communities, which can broaden individuals' perspectives and promote social and cultural understanding.

Moreover, multilingualism can bring significant benefits to society, particularly in terms of social and economic development. For example, multilingualism can facilitate international trade and business relations, as well as promote cultural exchange and diplomacy (Grin, 2003). Multi-lingualism can also enhance social cohesion and promote the inclusion of linguistic and cultural minorities (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). While there are many potential benefits of multilingualism, there are also several challenges associated with multilingualism in education and society. One of the main challenges is the lack of recognition and support for linguistic and cultural diversity, particularly in educational settings. Many educational systems prioritize the use of dominant lan-guages, such as English, and provide limited support for minority languages and cultures.

In addition, multilingualism can create communication barriers and misunderstandings, particularly in contexts where individuals have different levels of proficiency in a shared language (García & Wei, 2014). Multilingualism can also be associated with negative stereotypes and attitudes towards linguistic and cultural minorities, which can contribute to discrimination and social inequality (Fishman, 2006). Given the potential benefits and challenges of multilingualism, there is a need for educators to develop effective strategies for promoting multilingualism in educational settings. One approach is to adopt a bilingual or multilingual approach to education, where students are taught in their mother tongue and in one or more additional languages. This can help to promote the development of students' linguistic and cultural competencies and enhance their academic performance.

6. Conclusions

Multilingual education in Nepal is a complex and dynamic issue. The government has made efforts to promote multilingual education, but there are still challenges to overcome. One challenge is the dominance of Nepali in education. Nepali is the official language of the country, and it is often the only language used in schools. This can hinder the development of students' mother tongues, which can have a negative impact on their academic success. Another challenge is the lack of trained teachers in local languages. This means that even if schools want to use students' mother tongues as a medium of instruction, they may not have the teachers who are qualified to do so. The textbooks and curricula used in Nepalese schools can also be a challenge. Some textbooks reinforce negative stereotypes and attitudes towards minority cultures and languages. This can lead to students developing negative attitudes towards their own cultures and languages.

Despite these challenges, there are also opportunities for multilingual education in Nepal. The country is home to a wide variety of languages, and this diversity can be a valuable resource for education. By promoting multilingual education, Nepal can help to preserve its linguistic and cultural heritage. In conclusion, multilingual education in Nepal is a complex issue with both challenges and opportunities. Addressing the challenges will require a concerted effort from policy-makers, educators, and other stakeholders. By working together, they can create a more inclusive and equitable education system in Nepal that promotes linguistic and cultural diversity.

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