



Impact of Neoliberalism on Language Educational Policies

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Abstract

This article scrutinizes the pervasive influence of neoliberalism on education, language education policies, and language of instruction. Employing a content analysis design informed by established principles of qualitative research, the study explores the juncture of neoliberal ideologies with educational practices. Neoliberalism's emphasis on deregulation, privatization, and market-driven approaches shapes educational systems globally, with reflective implications for language education. Scholars note the transformation of education into a commodity, driven by the prioritization of economic growth and individual competitiveness. Within this framework, English proficiency emerges as a key determinant of access to economic opportunities, leading to the proliferation of English language teaching institutions. Moreover, neoliberal policies influence language of instruction decisions, with governments adopting market-oriented strategies such as English medium instruction. The article underscores the need for critical examination of neoliberalism's impact on education, highlighting the tensions between market-driven principles and educational equity. By elucidating the complexities of neoliberalism's effects on language education, the study contributes to a nuanced understanding of contemporary educational practices and calls for the preservation of inclusive and accessible education for all.

Keywords: Impact, neoliberalism, educational policies, language of instruction

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1. Introduction

Neoliberalism, encompassing politics, social studies, and economics, aims to shift economic control from the public to the private sector, favoring free-market capitalism while reducing government spending, regulation, and public ownership. Scholars (e.g., Block et al., 2012; Fairclough, 2006; Flew, 2014; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Slaughter & Leslie, 1999; Springer et al., 2016) find it challenging to define neoliberalism due to its complexity, flexibility, and inconsistency. They note disparities between neoliberal theory and practice, seeking to delineate the term's shared characteristics.

Scholars such as Barnawi (2018) and Harvey (2005) have defined neoliberalism as emphasizing free markets and trade as its characteristics. Barnawi describes neoliberalism as a “philosophy of economic and social transformation taking place according to the logic of free-market doctrines that dictate the way economies and societies function” (p. 1). While, for Harvey, ‘neoliberalism,’ is a “theory of political economic practices that propose that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p. 2). They both highlight the dominance of free-market principles in neoliberalism and the importance of individual entrepreneurial freedoms and strong private property rights within societal and economic structures.

The impacts of neoliberalism are manifested in both national and local educational policies, with its core beliefs of deregulation, privatization, and reduced state intervention in social services shaping educational practices by treating education as a commodity and promoting market-oriented strategies. This study, employing a content analysis design, explores how the adoption of neoliberal ideologies by educational stakeholders at both the school and national levels influences language education policies.

2. Methods of the Study

This research employed a content analysis methodology, adhering to established principles that prioritize delving into underlying meanings, emphasizing contextual considerations, and allowing for nuanced interpretations within context (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023; Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2013). The methodology systematically examined textual information, following a predefined procedure. Initially, relevant documents related to neoliberalism—(Harvey, 2005; Piller & Cho, 2013; Savage, 2017) were chosen. Then, a coding framework was devised, based on predetermined categories focusing on aspects of education, language education, and language as a

medium of instruction, linking them to neoliberalism. Guided by qualitative analysis methods, this process facilitated the systematic interpretation of the coded information, enabling the recognition of patterns, connections, and themes specifically pertinent to language education policies.

3. Results and Discussion

The overviewed information has been organized under neoliberalism and education, neoliberalism language education, neoliberalism and Language Instruction Policies, along with the conclusion of the overview.

3.1. Neoliberalism and Education

For some past decades, the peoples' social, cultural, political, institutional, educational, and daily lives have been operating within the framework of neoliberalism (Chun, 2017; Connell, 2013; Ha, 2017; Harvey, 2005; Roberts & Peters, 2008). The neoliberal concept, in reality, seems to have placed different demands on education and brought about changes to the concept of education in countries globally. One of the most noticeable changes in the field of education in the twenty-first century is the emergence of contested concepts such as the 'knowledge (based) economy' and 'knowledge as intellectual capital' (Burton-Jones, 1999).

Phillipson (2009) adds that concepts such as 'intellectual capital', 'knowledge economy', 'knowledge worker' and 'knowledge industries' represent "an extension of Western high modernity in [their] emphasis on specific forms of legitimated knowledge based on faith in science, technology, and law" (p. 20). It indicates that the significance of education to individual and social wellbeing is being redefined, reinterpreted, and justified according to the ideologies of the 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge capitalism'. Within these perspectives, governments have used terms such as 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge capital' as the organizing principles of their educational policy reforms; at the same time, as Barnawi (2018) states, front-runners of global educational policies like the IMF and World Bank further disseminate the notion of education as a commodity to be used for human development.

The education field cannot stay unaffected by neoliberal strategies such as privatization, the commodification of public assets, internationalization, profitseeking corporatization, deregulation of the market, opening up to the world market, and increasing competitiveness when these strategies have been introduced by governments, policy makers, and corporate agencies. Within this agenda,

education is being considered a foundation of knowledge and skill backing to economic growth, and “the role of schools is to prepare students as enterprising workers and citizens with the prerequisite skills, knowledge, and values to survive in a volatile and competitive global labor market” (Down, 2009, p. 52).

International capitalist organizations, according to Rutkowski (2007), also endorse neoliberal educational policy agendas across the globe through different means, including (a) the construction of a multilateral space for ‘soft’ laws to be formed; (b) the construction of the means to directly implement policy through loans and grants; (c) the construction of a multilateral space to create and exchange policy knowledge, and (d) the construction of the concept of being experts [in guiding education policies]. The major aim of neoliberal education today is the production of social workers who can contribute to the nation's economic growth. To promote global culture as well as economic homogenization, language is a fundamental means in the spheres where neoliberal policies exist.

3.2. Neoliberalism and Language Education

The spread of a language, in general, is associated with political, economic, and/or ideological movements. Barnawi (2018) claims that the persistent growth of global markets has led to ‘the movement of basic primary resource extraction and manufacturing production’ into different parts of the world, ‘the development of new consumer markets’, and increased attention to ‘symbolic capital’ in value-added products and niche markets. Subsequently, countless social actors have become involved in economic activities that Heller (2010) calls ‘market exchanges’. These market exchanges have also led social actors with different linguistic, religious, ideological, cultural, and social backgrounds to communicate and interact. Therefore, Barnawi (2018) asserts that language has become tied to the new global economy—as a commodity and resource. Among the languages in the world, English has taken more space to communicate with people from different linguistic, religious, ideological, cultural, and social backgrounds around the globe for various purposes at present.

In the context of the neoliberal education policy agenda, which values English as a language of ‘global economic capital’, ‘international communication’, ‘academic capitalism’ (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), ‘global academic excellence’ (Bourdieu, 2010), and the ‘corporatization of universities’ (Piller & Cho, 2013), education policy processes are constantly changing across the world. The English language is considered a shared medium of communication among nations, providing an approach to science, information technology, and job opportunities in the worldwide market economy (Ha & Barnawi, 2015; Phillipson, 2009; Piller & Cho, 2013). Shin

and Park (2016) further stated that “specific conditions of production under neoliberalism give rise to new opportunities for profit-making in which language occupies a central role” (p. 445).

Students compete with each other based on how good their language skills are. It means mastery of language skills means access to better job opportunities. Barnawi (2018) states that these consumers of language are also a primary source of revenue for providers (language schools); hence, English education has become a service. In this way, as Shin (2016) opines, the accountability of education is largely “determined by the ability to provide students with skills required in the labor market. As such, education and business are increasingly conflated” (p. 511).

As an impact of neoliberalism on English education, English language teaching institutions have played a significant role in maintaining the ideology of neoliberalism by constantly marketizing and selling their services to consumers in the market economy. Regarding the impact of neoliberalism on language education, Bernstein et al. (2015) have stated its influence in six different aspects: (a) language as a technicized skill, (b) culture as a commodity, (c) language teachers as expendable and replaceable knowledge workers, (d) language learners as entrepreneurs and consumers, (e) the creation of a global language teaching industry, and (f) the emergence of new linguistic markets: global English. An additional impact of neoliberalism on English education is exhibited in English language textbooks (Gray, 2002; D. Rai et al., 2023), classroom pedagogical practices (Chun, 2009), language tests/exams (Kubota, 2011), and in the projection of language learners as neoliberal subjects. Using EMI in educational institutions is another impact of neoliberalism in non-native English speaking contexts (Karki, 2023).

3.3. Neoliberalism and Language of Instruction Policies

Over the past decades, the notion of ‘policy’ has been defined differently by various scholars in the field of education. Traditionally, informed by the rationalist approach policy is whatever states or governments decide to ‘do’ or ‘not to do’ for their nations to solve social problems (Dale, 1992). In contrast, today, informed by poststructural, post-colonial, feminist, critical theories, and the like, policies are created based on political and economic contexts. Ball (1993) views it as a dynamic process (and product) involving major aspects, including text, discourse, and effects. He further stated that policies “are always contested, value-laden and dynamic, and are a product of various compromisers. They are encoded in the representations of what is mandated and what ought to be done” (as cited in Rizvi & Lingard, 2010, p. 12).

Policies are often expressed in a textual form but within the framework of a broader discourse. In this respect, the notions of values and authority guided by neoliberalism are fundamental aspects to any discussion of policy and practices in given social and educational settings. The examination of policy involves the “decoding of texts in relation to the context in which they are embodied and in the context they construct, and to the effect they have on practice, linked to broader social effects, sometimes called ‘policy outcomes’” (Barnawi, 2018, p. 15).

In response to globalization, governments in different parts of the world today are paying more attention to English education than ever before throughout their policies, curricula, pedagogies, and practices. They have started adopting English medium instruction (EMI) policy at different levels. Nepal cannot stay untouched by the globalized context and reflecting the fundamental doctrines of neoliberal governance, community schools of Nepal have also started reshaping their policies in line with market-based practices since the 1990s, and it is one of the most prominent changes to education. Savage (2017) called this shift ‘quasi-marketization’ in which the public services are redesigned in ways that require such services to operate more like the private sector, by introducing market-based ideas and practices. This is how neoliberalism as a covert language policy contributes to the mechanism for expanding the English language globally (Piller & Cho, 2013, 2015), and the same policy also influences the community schools of Nepal and they implemented the EMI program in Nepal though the students are not entirely motivated to learn in English (K. R. Rai et al., 2022)..

4. Conclusion

The influence of neoliberalism on education, language education, and language of instruction policies is undeniable, shaping the setting of educational systems worldwide. As scholars contend with defining neoliberalism and understanding its multifaceted nature, its impacts permeate various aspects of society, particularly evident in the prioritization of market-driven principles and the commodification of education. Within the territory of language education, neoliberal ideologies highlight the significance of English proficiency as a gateway to economic opportunities, driving the spread of English language teaching institutions and reshaping language policies. Furthermore, neoliberalism’s influence extends to the language of instruction policies as governments adopt market-oriented approaches such as EMI, reflecting the broader trend of quasi-marketization in public services. In navigating the complexities of neoliberalism’s effects on education, it becomes imperative for stakeholders to critically examine the underlying values and implications embedded within policy discourse, ensuring a nuanced understanding of its impact on

educational practices and social dynamics. Addressing the challenges posed by neoliberalism requires a concerted effort to safeguard educational equity and uphold the fundamental principles of inclusive and accessible education for all.

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