Critical Perspectives in Language Education Research: Exploring English-generated Inequalities from Marxist-influenced Theory

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the major threads of critical perspectives that are pervasively employed in Social Sciences in general and language education research in particular. First, it examines briefly about three critical theories (viz. Marxist-influenced, poststructuralist and postcolonial) with reference to language education related notions. Then, building on the theoretical underpinnings of Marxist-influenced theory, it delineates and discusses the English language-generated issues and inequalities prevalent in the multilingual context of Nepal. The authors argue that English as a medium of instruction (EMI) has created social and epistemic inequalities between the students from dominant languages and indigenous communalities in Nepalese society. EMI has been implemented in the schools at the cost of other indigenous languages and posed injustice to the students from diverse linguistic groups. It is claimed that critical pedagogy as being one of the threads of Marxist-influenced perspectives can be employed to mitigate such inequalities.

Introduction

Critical perspectives in language studies and language education research have received an increased attention for more than 30 years and posed critical questions against prevalent inequalities and injustices of our socio-political contexts (Kubota & Miller, 2017). More specifically, the critical turn began to take root in the Social Sciences in the 1980s and 1990s and influenced the fields of education and applied linguistics.

Critical perspective or criticality simply refers to the spirit of questioning the 'taken-for-granted-assumptions' on any phenomenon. It looks for the coherence and sufficiency of an argument, assesses evidence, questions appearances and false options and employs rigorous testing and justification. Dean (1994, p. 4) calls it as 'problematizing practice' that condemns the 'taken-for-granted' components of our reality. Citing Pennycook (2001), Kubota and Miller (2017) conceive criticality in various key notions as problematizing naturalized and normalized assumptions and practices; questioning power and inequalities focusing on broader social, ideological, and colonial milieus; problematizing gender, race, class, and sexuality; transcending fixed knowledge and seeking visions for change; and practicing self-reflexivity and praxis. Thus, a crucial component of critical work is always turning a sceptical eye toward assumptions and ideas that have become 'naturalized', and notions that are no longer questioned (Pennycook, 2001). It enables us to see that our ideas, interactions, language use, texts, learning practices, and so forth, are not neutral and objective, but are shaped by and within social relationships (Hawkins & Norton, 2009).Specific to the field of applied linguistics, the *critical stance* views language as inherently political; understands power more in terms of its micro-operations in relation to questions of class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on; and argues that we must also account for the politics of knowledge (Pennycook, 2001). He further cautions us that we need to see critical approaches not so much a static body of knowledge and practices, but as always being in flux and involving a complex cluster of social, cultural, political, and pedagogical concerns. Drawing on the critical stance of language education research, this paper attempts to briefly examine the critical theories primarily Marxist-influenced, Postmodern Constructionism including Poststructuralism and Postcolonialism with reference to the issues related to language studies and language education research. More importantly, it elucidates the issues of inequalities that the teaching of English language has generated in the Nepalese multilingual pedagogical contexts and discusses it with the

theoretical arguments building on one of the post theories, Marxist-influenced, to substantiate and resolve the issue.

Methodology

This paper has been prepared using the qualitative content analysis method in which we collected the data from a set of secondary sources such as books, research papers, articles and conference proceedings. After a thorough reading of a set of texts, we analysed and interpreted the contents to make meaning. Then, we framed the paper into different thematic titles and discussed each thematic title with both the theoretical underpinnings and practical implications. Subsequently, drawing on Marxist-influenced perspectives, we critically analyse how the prevalent practice of English language teaching in general and EMI particular has generated epistemic inequalities in the Nepalese multilingual contexts. Finally, we have suggested that Freire's (1970) critical pedagogy particularly problem-posing pedagogy should be employed in mitigating such inequalities and creating equitable learning atmosphere among the multilingual learners.

Critical Examination of the Critical Theories

Critical theory, historically attributed to the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory (Habermas, 1976), is particularly concerned with the issue of power relations within the society and interaction of race, class, gender, education, economy, religion and other social institutions that contribute to a social system. Among the various critical approaches, Marxist-influenced, Postmodern Constructionism including Post-structuralism and Postcolonial theories have tremendously impacted in the contemporary discourses on social sciences in general and language education research in particular. These critical theories have observed and interpreted the phenomena of language education research relating them to social cultural and political milieus of the society and contributed to bring transformation in the existing context. In what follows, we present the major theoretical underpinnings of these critical theories in connection to language education research phenomena.

Marxist-influenced Theory

Marxist-influenced orientation was in vogue prior to postmodern constructionism especially poststructuralist stance of analysing social and political issues. Tyson (2006) writes that getting and keeping economic power is the prime motive behind all social and political activities, including education, philosophy, religion, government, the arts, science, technology, and the media. Moreover, Marxist-influenced theory considers that all human events and productions have specific material/historical causes. It is conceived that an accurate picture of human affairs can be obtained only by understanding concrete conditions in the world. Therefore, Marxist analysis of human events and productions focuses on relationships among socioeconomic classes, both within a society and among societies, and it explains all human activities in terms of the distribution and dynamics of economic power (Tyson, 2006). The notion of ideology is central to the Marxist-influenced theory. Ideology provides a lens through which we can see how our realities are "articulated from a particular social class but constructed as a world-view" (Holborow, 2012, p. 29, as cited in Kubota & Miller, 2017). Ideologies are also used to rationalize vastly unequal material conditions, contain contradictions, and stand "coextensive with language but distinct from it (Kubota& Miller, 2017). In a similar vein, language (i.e., sign) in Marxist-influenced theory is viewed as an ideological construct and an arena of the class struggle. Moreover, language and politics are inseparable maybe even indistinguishable. As Voloshinov (1973, p.98) writes "Linguistic creativity... cannot be understood apart from the ideological meanings and values that fill it". In the same line, Marxist theory affirms that no speech act is individual; they are always social, even if the addressee exists only in the speaker's imagination. Marxist *praxis,* or methodology dictates that the theoretical ideas can be judged to have value only in terms of their concrete applications, that is, only in terms of their applicability to the real world (Tyson, 2006). Nonetheless, Marxist-influenced came under critique that it explicates the

phenomena from the binary relations of the social class which is challenged by the philosophical underpinnings of postmodernist perspectives.

Postmodern Constructionism

The postmodern constructionism largely termed as poststructuralist perspectives came into existence in the field of critical inquiries critiquing of emancipatory modernist vantage points led by Marxist-influenced binary perspectives on the socio-political phenomena. Morgan (2012) writes that poststructuralist theories of language, which achieved prominence in the late 20th century influenced by such scholars as (Bakhtin, 1981), (Bourdieu, 1977; 1982; 1991), (Derrida, 1978), (Weedon, 1997), and (Foucault, 1980). These theories build on, but are distinct from, structuralist theories of language associated predominantly with Saussure's linguistic insights which state that signs are the building blocks of language structure comprising the *signifier* (sound image) and the *signified* (concept or meaning).Poststructuralists often critique that the notion of language as explicated under structuralism cannot account for *struggles* over the social meanings that can be attributed to signs within a given language. The signs, truth, facts, and immigrant, for example, can have different meanings for different people within the same linguistic community. Thus, while Structuralists conceive of signs as having arbitrary meanings and linguistic communities as being relatively homogeneous and consensual, the poststructuralists take the position that the signifying practices of societies are sites of struggle, and that linguistic communities are heterogeneous arenas characterized by conflicting claims to truth and power (Morgan, 2012).In poststructuralist theory, language is seen as central to the circulation of discourses— systems of *power/knowledge* that define and regulate our social institutions, disciplines, and practices. In poststructuralist perspectives, language is not neutral rather a key site for ongoing creation and contestation of identity and its performativity (Butler, 1990 as cited in Morgan, 2012). Poststructuralism focuses its inquiry on "seeing historically how effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor

false" (Foucault, 1980, p. 118, as cited in Kubota & Miller, 2017). Kubota and Miller (2017) cite (McNamara, 2012) that poststructuralist turn has provided applied linguistics with a critical tool to examine how meanings and subjectivities are constructed in discourses and in relations of power. Therefore, poststructuralist perspectives focus on the subjectivities and multiplicities of meaning of the phenomena being investigated in the language education research.

Postcolonial Theory

Another theoretical influence on criticality is postcolonial theory. It offers an antithesis to European superiority as embodied in colonial violence, socio-political domination, economic exploitation and racism. It explicates about how the colonial power relations between the colonizer and colonized constructed as a complex and contradictory psychology between the self and the view of the other. Tyson (2006) states that postcolonial criticism is particularly effective at helping us see connections among all the domains of our experience-the psychological, ideological, social, political, intellectual, and aesthetic—in ways that show us just how inseparable these categories are in our lived experience of ourselves and our world. He reiterates that postcolonial criticism seeks to understand the operations—politically, socially, culturally, and psychologically—of colonial and anti-colonial ideologies.

Result and Discussion

English as Medium of Instruction (EMI) Generated Inequality in Nepalese Context

Nepal is a multilingual, multi-ethnic and multicultural country. The 2011 census reports that 123 languages are spoken as 'mother tongue' by 125 ethnic groups in Nepal (CBS, 2012). The six more languages have recently been added after the survey report of Language Commission of Nepal Submitted to Nepal Government in 2019 to count the 129 languages. Among the languages of Nepal, Nepali language is spoken by the majority of the people (44.6%) as their 'mother tongue and many other languages are spoken by very few speakers including English on the 76th position by 0.01% of total

population. Since the Constitution of Nepal (2015) has provisioned to all local languages (mother tongue) spoken in Nepal as the national languages, only Nepali language is dominantly used in the official functions of the state. The constitution has also guaranteed the right of communities to protect, preserve and promote minoritized languages, this rhetoric of multilingualism has seldom been experienced by the people in education, government offices and other public spheres (Yadava, 2007, cited in Phyak & Ojha, 2019).

The above corpus clearly shows the linguistic, ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the Nepalese society which is in turn directly represented in the schools' classrooms. Almost all Nepalese schools' classes are composed of the children representing from multiple communities. Nonetheless, the medium of instruction in the schools to instruct such diverse students is predominantly occupied by either Nepali or English language. Local and indigenous languages are yet to be employed extensively as the medium of instruction to address the linguistic and cultural diversity in the classroom. Instead, majority of the public schools have employed English as medium of instruction (EMI) albeit lacking explicit plan and policy. They are shifting towards EMI with an unsubstantiated myth of enhancing quality of education and attracting the attention of the parents to enrol their children in the public schools competing with private schools. This growing but unplanned trend of switching to EMI has unquestionably generated a number of social and epistemic inequalities among the students from the diverse linguistic and cultural standpoints. As English language is a second or sometimes third language for Nepalese students, majority of the students feel difficulty in learning and doing classroom tasks in English-only monolingual pedagogical strategies. Consequently, EMI cannot incorporate all students equally in the instructional activities where only linguistically and intellectually sound students can take part actively in the classroom instruction and get more learning benefits. The other less proficient students remain back due to the unintelligibility of language of instruction. The students have

been unnecessarily restricted to learn through their native language because of the EMI policy. This situation corroborates with Skutnabb-Kangas (2000)'s notion of' assimilationist subtractive submersion education' in which instruction is conducted through a dominant language (here in English) instead of the children's own language. It is also claimed that the unplanned practice of EMI in Nepalese multilingual contexts has threatened the 'Linguistic Human Rights' (LHRs) (Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999) of the students from the minority communities because the students are compelled to accept the instruction through the medium of a dominant/majority languages(English and Nepali)at the cost of their mother tongues(Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).Thus, the EMI can be generalized as a marker of inequality and injustice for the students representing from linguistically minoritized communities. Similarly, implementing EMI has created tension among parents having low economic status though they strongly prefer it. In this vein, Poudel (2019) says in the context of Nepal that English is the most influential language among upper and middle classes. It has created the strata in society as EMI educated are mistakenly taken as superior and non-EMI educated are as inferior. Moreover, switching to the EMI without enough preparedness, contributed to a comprehension crisis in content learning, low proficiency in both English and Nepali, and loss of mother tongue for the students, resulting in wider achievement gaps between the rich and the poor (Sah & Li, 2018). So, the practice of EMI has paved the way to strengthen epistemic inequality between the students of diverse backgrounds.

Theoretical Arguments and Relevance to the Issue

In order to address the EMI generated inequality in the Nepalese multilingual contexts, we propose Marxist-influenced theory and its related threads as an appropriate theoretical lens. As Marxist-influenced perspective observes and explicates the phenomena from economic and ideological lens, it can be appropriate to critically analyse and situate the English language generated disparities and inequalities prevalent in educational practices. EMI has been one of the strongest factors for creating division in

the education system by which the whole education system has been compartmentalized into public Nepali medium and private English medium. The dual system of education has created educational gap between the students from the rich and poor family background. The children from the rich family background can have access to English medium schools and they can invest much for the betterment of educational achievement. While the children from poor family cannot invest for their education and they are enrolled in the poorly managed and under-resourced public schools. In this line, Devkota (2018, p. 2) contends as "English Language Teaching (ELT) including English-as-a-medium-of-instruction (EMI), is one of the modern educational dimensions that influences not only the school policies and pedagogies but also the social constructions that reproduce social inequalities and exclusion of the school children from marginalised communities". This very context is corroborated with Marx's economic notions of 'haves' and 'haves not'. Therefore, in line with Marxist-influenced perspectives, all the human activities and attempts including education can be well accelerated with the dynamics and distribution of economic power among the social classes. Thus, Marxist-influenced perspective would be relevant to situate the issues of EMI considering the social, political and more importantly economic realities of the society.

In the same way, EMI policy in the Nepalese multilingual context has promoted monolingual bias among indigenous students and strengthened teacher-fronted instruction. It is not effectively enacted in the class due to the lack of adequate proficiency of English in the learners. This situation corresponds to the Freire (1970)'s banking model of education in which teacher transmits and deposits the knowledge to the mind of the students. In this regard, as one of the offshoots of Marxist-influenced theory, Freire (1970)'s critical pedagogical perspective particularly 'problem-posing pedagogy' would be appropriate to mitigate the challenges and inequalities generated by the EMI policy in the Nepalese multilingual educational context. As critical pedagogy suggests that learning is *situated* and *cultural* (Canagarajah, 1999), EMI policy should also be situated

and negotiated with the prevalent indigenous languages of the community. It should not be employed at the cost of other indigenous languages and cultures promoting the monolingual bias and creating social and epistemic inequalities among the students under the same educational system.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the threads of critical perspectives as intellectual and academic endeavours to critique the prevalent 'taken-for-granted assumptions' on the phenomena in general and language education research phenomena in particular. Moreover, it delineates critical turn as the act of problematizing the naturalized and normalized assumptions and practices and questioning the power and inequalities focusing on broader social, ideological, and colonial milieus. More importantly, the major critical perspectives viz. Marxist-influenced and Postmodern Constructionism including Poststructuralist and Postcolonial philosophical ideas on language education research related phenomena have also been observed and explicated in the paper. Building on the Marxist-influenced theoretical and ideological lens, the EMI- generated social and educational inequalities have been illuminated with reference to Nepalese multilingual context. It is affirmed that EMI policy and its unplanned enactment have created social and educational inequalities in the Nepalese society. It is also evident that EMI generated instructional strategies seem to be less effective to address and incorporate equally and equitably all the multilingual learners in the classroom learning. Therefore, Marxist-influenced perspective with reference to Freire (1970)'s critical pedagogy is supposed to be appropriate to settle down the inequalities generated by EMI in Nepalese multilingual context.

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