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Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education in Nepal

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Abstract

Nepal is a multilingual country consisting of 123 languages as reported by the census 2011 (CBS, 2012). Linguistically, all languages are equal. However, there are ideological differences among scholars and stakeholders of language. Critical theorists see language as a tool of dominating the minorities whereas utilitarians see language as a path from local to global world. From ethnic perspective, language is an identity and for politicians and activists, it is a means to activate people and a matter of ideology. For pedagogues, language of instruction has always been a dilemma and a sensitive issue. In this context, this review paper analyses the existing language policy of using mother tongue based multilingual education in Nepal, is just the continuation of assimilationist ideology in disguise and proposes language co-existence approach with a choice in language of instruction in policy and practice as a solution to maintain linguistic identity of ethnic groups. Furthermore, translanguaging can be used as a pedagogical solution in multilingual classrooms.

Keywords: Instruction, medium of instruction, monolingualism, policy, translanguaging

Introduction

Many children struggle at school when they are forced to learn in languages that are not their mother tongues (UNESCO, 2012). School systems that do not use learners' own languages or respect their cultures make it extremely difficult for children to stay in school and learn. For individuals, communities and even whole ethnic minority groups, this contributes to perpetuating cycles of marginalisation and discrimination (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008). A growing body of research worldwide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008; UNESCO, 2003; Malone, 2010; Phyak, 2013) demonstrates that instruction in the mother tongue, beginning in the first years of school and continuing for as long as possible, helps learners in numerous ways. Therefore, teaching children for a recommended six to eight years in their mother tongue and gradually shifting to national or other dominant languages increases student

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achievement. This type of education is called Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). This paper contributes to the understanding of MTB-MLE by reviewing the existing body of literature on the topic.

For the review of literature, three strategies were adopted: general search, focused search, and search through references. First, general searches were made in the Google search engine with the search terms "MTB-MLE" and "Nepal". Moreover, academic database search was conducted in Google Scholar, TUCL database, and ProQuest. The search terms included were: "MTB-MLE", "MTBMLE" and "Nepal " in all the databases. The specified search terms were used for all fields including title, abstract, key words, and full text. Second, focused searches in the databases were conducted. Third, search in the references from the latest articles were explored to find additional relevant articles. After performing the literature search, articles and books that didn't mention about MTB-MLE in Nepal were excluded.

Language Policy Dilemma in Nepal

Historically, education in Nepal has been delivered exclusively in the national language of Nepali and, more recently, also in English. Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC) 1956 recommended the use of Nepali as the medium of instruction which continued until restoration of democracy in 1990. Later, language commission formed in 1994 recommended for multilingual policy. Therefore, Ministry of Education developed and implemented a 'mother tongue-based multilingual education' (MTB-MLE) programme in 2007. But this was not translated in practice as planned in the policy.

National Curriculum Framework (CDC, 2007) and School Sector Reform Plan (2009–2015) both promoted mother tongue based multilingual education. However, revised education act in 2006 by the Ministry of Education also legitimised English as a medium of instruction policy which states that the medium of instruction for school education should be either Nepali or English or both. Though, it mentioned that mother tongues could also be implemented as medium of instruction at the primary level. English, which used to be taught from grade four also started to be taught as subject from grade one. This created great controversy at policy level.

Debate in the context of Nepal prevails on whether it is possible to incorporate all the minority languages in the school curriculum in addition to the language of nation. Many minority languages in Nepal are in the verge of extinction. From learning perspectives, mother tongue based instruction in the early grades enhances children's ability to learn better than second or foreign language (Awasthi, 2004). Therefore, cognitive scholars have advocated for multilingual education policy and practice. However, parents are guided by the utilitarian, neoliberal, and globalisation perspective. This controversy has perplexed educators for long.

Recently, the commitment to strengthening MTB-MLE features exist prominently in the Constitution of Nepal (2015), the Act Relating to Compulsory and Free Education (2018)

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and the School Sector Development Plan (MOEST, 2018). Present constitution declares that “all the mother tongues spoken in Nepal shall be the national language” (2015 article 6). The 2015 constitution redefines Nepal’s identity as a ‘multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural’ country. The constitution also guarantees the right of communities to protect, preserve and promote minority languages and states that citizens will not be discriminated based on their linguistic, ethnic, political and religious backgrounds. The existing policies have set high expectations and goals on multilingualism but lack the practical details of how to implement them. Therefore, implementing these policy commitments in over 123 languages across seven provinces and 753 municipalities present a unique set of challenges.

Prevailing Multilingual Model in Nepal

Language is one of the most contested issues in multilingual countries like Nepal. Decisions concerning what languages to use in education in multilingual contexts like ours are a major issue in language planning and language policy. Nepal has advanced the policy of mother tongue based multilingual education. It has also experimented this model in some schools of the country. The primary concept of mother tongue based multicultural education (MTB-MLE) is that the children having only the mother tongue background learn in the mother tongue at the preliminary class at school. According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Mohanty (2009), MTB-MLE is the use of three or more languages as the medium of instruction (MoI) in the same school.

The proficiency in L1 is considered a foundation for learning L2 and other international languages (Awasthi, 2004; Kandel, 2010; Malon, 2010; Phyak, 2011; UNESCO, 2003; Yadav, 2007). But traditionally Nepal followed alphabetical approach to teaching and rote memorisation and most teachers use Nepali language to recapitulate, ask questions, explain contents, evaluating lessons and giving examples (Koirala & Acharya, 2004). MTB-MLE is a recent practice for Nepal. Ministry of Education prepared multilingual policy in 2010 after it was piloted in 2062 BS in Dhankuta. According to Multilingual Implementation Guideline (2066 BS), Nepali model of MTB-MLE is as follows (Table 1):

Table 1

Nepali Model of MTBMLE

Grades	MTBMLE Provision
Pre-primary	mother tongue as MoI
1-3	mother tongue as MoI except English and Nepali language
4-5	mother tongue and official languages both as MoI
6-8	official language as MoI and mother tongue can be MoI if the school wants
Non-formal education	local mother tongue as MoI

This model is very similar to Malone (2010) and UNESCO (2010). Many studies have revealed that MTB-MLE in early grades improves learning achievement of students

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(UNESCO, 2003; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008; Kandel, 2010; Koirala, 2010; Phyak, 2012). Once the cognitive capabilities underlying skills in reading and writing in the first languages (L1s) have been fully developed, they can be applied to the learning of another language (August, Calderon & Carlo, 2002). But there is a lack of MT in learning that encourages dropouts, limited achievement, failure and class repetition (Awasthi, 2008; Yadav, 2007).

Based on the three models of multilingual education mentioned by Skutnabb-Kangas (2008), Nepali model of mother tongue based multilingualism falls under weak forms of multilingual education, other two being non-forms and strong forms. Non-forms use only one dominant language as medium of teaching and learning, even if they have many minority or indigenous children in their programmes. Weak forms have monolingualism, strong dominance in one of the languages, mostly the majority language or limited bilingualism. Strong forms aim to promote multilingualism and multiliteracy for all participants in the programme, whether they represent linguistic minorities or majorities.

Based on study of MLE programmes around the world the characteristics of the most successful and sustained MTB-MLE according to UNESCO (2010) are: minority language communities share responsibility for planning, implementing, evaluating and maintaining their programmes; government agencies, NGOs, universities and other interested agencies work together in supporting the programmes; adequate funding is provided for all programme components, especially training, materials development, and provision of wages for local teachers; and students, their parents and their communities recognise the benefits of the programme in helping them achieve their educational goals.

Arguments for MTB-MLE

Stakeholders are divided into two extremes either in favour of monolingualism or multilingualism. Believers of monolingualism are driven largely by patriotic notions, neo-liberalism, and by a concern that multilingualism will cause divisive forces to work, obstructing the social and linguistic unity to preserve national cohesion. For instance, the achievement gap between students from private and public schools in Nepal has created impression on stakeholders, especially parents, that English-medium schooling provides quality education. Many parents believe that English is the passport to future academic and economic prosperity. Monolingualism is said to be more cost effective as resources are easily available in national or international languages; these languages are said to be essential for mobility and for international brotherhood. In the context of Nepal, Nepali as a medium of instruction is guided by the belief of nationalism and English as a medium of instruction is taken as linguistic capital. Therefore, working class people who cannot afford elite English medium private schools are now increasing pressure, demanding public schools to supply English medium instruction education in community schools (Saud, 2020). As a result, many of the community schools are following the footsteps of private schools and adopting English as a medium of instruction. These beliefs are guided by market value of globalisation. Therefore, MTB-MLE is often not supported by parents as there is a strong desire for them

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to improve their children's English proficiency. They believe that their language can't open door to economic prosperity. They can teach their language at home themselves. Their desire for English language skills is based on the perceived high instrumental value of English due to its position as a global language. It is believed to be of greater use than local languages for access to the labour market and socioeconomic mobility. Additionally, English language skills are believed to enable access to the international community (Dhakal, 2016).

Dascal (1996, cited in Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008) has given a list of arguments in favour of language multiplicity. He has presented practical evidence and ethical, ontological, epistemological and cognitive arguments for that. First, in practical evidence he claims that cross linguistic communication is possible. It enhances understanding, dialogue, tolerance rather than conflict and dispute. He further mentions that transition although imperfect is possible. For him the world in fact is multilingual and many languages are a fact of life. Second, he presents ethical argument. For him, cross linguistic and cross cultural communication teaches one to value other. No language is 'primitive' and 'inferior'. His ontological arguments are that the reality of the individual depends upon social relationships. There is no 'I' without 'Thou'; there is no 'we' without 'you' and altering is also the construction of self-identity. His epistemological argument is to know what language is we must have data about as many languages as possible. His cognitive arguments are that innovation and creativity require the ability to shift perspective. He further maintains that bilingualism trains the mind for shifting perspective and viewing minds from others' point of view enriches cognition.

Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) further claims that languages are depositories of diverse knowledge for sustainability. That's why the existence of both linguistic and cultural diversity is a necessary prerequisite for sustaining the knowledge basis needed for the discourse of legitimating the support for maintaining bio diversity. For Skutnabb-Kangas, language is a means of domination as well as counter-hegemonies. She argues that minorities are made to shift from their own languages to majority languages and minds. The colonisation is made through glorification, stigmatisation and rationalisation.

MTB-MLE has some additional advantages (UNESCO, 2012). Firstly, when children are taught in their first language, it builds good foundation in the children and makes them more confident and well equipped to transfer their literacy and numeracy skills to additional languages. Secondly, evidence from linguistically diverse countries worldwide shows that children taught first in their most familiar language are more likely to excel in school. Thirdly, studies have found that children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are more likely to repeat school years. Therefore, MTB-MLE helps decrease grade repetition. Fourthly, fewer children drop out of school because children who start formal education in a second or foreign language are much more likely to experience frustration and failure, resulting in higher dropout rates for these children. Fifthly, when children learn in their mother tongue, parents and families can be involved and support their education because when children are learning in a second or foreign language, families are often

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excluded from the process. Seventhly it ends exclusion by including families and drawing on local cultural heritage. Mother tongue-based education contributes to communities' social and cultural well-being and fosters inclusiveness within the wider society.

Kandel (2010) presents two arguments that support MTB-MLE, namely educational and cultural. He argues that mother tongue instruction supports, promotes, preserves and maintains their language and culture and sustains learning. Other advantages of multilingualism as claimed by Malon (2010) and Kandel (2010) are: multilingualism gives status to ethnic and local community languages; it enables children to maintain links with their cultural backgrounds and to develop a close relationship with their families and their communities; facilitates access to curriculum and learning; improves communication between different linguistic and cultural groups; provides children with opportunities to share their literature, entertainment, religion and interests.

Those who believe in multilingualism are inspired by a belief in the importance of cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity and in the benefits deriving from pluralism. From cognitive perspective, scholars argue that teaching learners in the language other than their mother tongue has detrimental effect on learners. Linguistic diversity is “not only valuable”, argues Skutnabb-Kangas (2008), but also “necessary for the future of planet as is biodiversity”. But the ideology of monolingual reductionism rationalises the reduction of the number of languages and this ideology is connected with and supports the mythical homogenous nation state, i.e. a state with one nation and one language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2008). She further mentions that monolingual reduction glorifies monolingualism, stigmatises multilingualism and rationalise linguistic homogenisation. She fears that one state-one nation-one language might lead to one religion-one culture-one leader, totalitarianism and fundamentalism.

Studies in MTB-MLE in Nepal

A number of studies (Fillmore, 2020; Fillmore, 2019; Rai, 2018; Gyawali & Khadka 2016; Ghimire, 2011; Joshi, 2020; Khatri, 2012; Paudel, 2021; Paudel, 2018; Phyak, 2021; Sah & Li, 2020; Shintan & Cozens, 2018; Sharma & Phyak, 2017) have been carried out in Nepal to study about mother tongue based multilingualism in Nepal.

A study by Shintan and Cozens (2018) in Magar and Tharu community showed that multilingual education contributed to the four aspects of school education: students' performance, teachers' skills, parent's involvement, and classroom learning environment. Despite these benefits, Khatri (2012) explored policy and practice gap in implementing the MTB-MLE in Nepal. Initially, MTB-MLE policy was formulated as a plan to implement multilingual education in 7500 schools by 2015. However, there were only 21 schools during the study time. Many of the schools which adopted the programme were not practising due to the lack of resources, manpower and training on one hand and on the other hand, due to low community support. The plan was to use MLE as a medium of instruction. However, mother tongue was found to have been taught only as a subject in more than half of the schools.

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This shows that there is no clarity and stability in the language policy. Although policy documents articulate the right to have basic education in learners' mother tongue, this is not implemented in practice. Education policy and laws are increasingly favourable towards using children's home language as a medium of instruction. Ministry of Education developed and approved MTB-MLE implementation guidelines in 2010 and various MTB-MLE were introduced. However, such efforts are very limited in practice and such programmes are not as effective as expected (Kandel, 2010).

Limbu (2009) and Clean Development Consult's (2014) study found inadequate and scarcity of relevant instructional materials. Moreover, the study showed that although stakeholders from all the sampled schools agreed for the continuation of MLE, parents showed strong willingness to have taught their children in English medium (Bishowkarma, 2015; Limbu, 2009). This shows that parents are guided by the market need. They feel that Nepali at the national level and English at the international level are needed to get better opportunity. This view is validated by the research (Dhakal, 2016).

Sharma and Phyak (2018) examined the consequences of multilingualism in education and tourism and argued that that neoliberalisation not only created linguistic hierarchies but also helped to promote and commodify ethnolinguistic identity and language skills. However, Paudel's (2021) phenomenological study revealed that extensive use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI) was perceived by the stakeholders in the study as a threat to the existence of local languages. Increasing normalisation of EMI policy has violated the students right to speak in their home language (Phyak, 2021). Moreover, limited expansion of multilingual education in Nepal has fuelled ideological battlefields (Ghimire, 2011). Policy commitments are slow to translate in practice and implementation of MTB-MLE in more than hundred languages is 'wicked-hard policy' (Fillmore, 2020, p.248). Rai's study (2018) also concluded that disempowering stakeholders on the importance of multilingual education and government's limited effort on promoting training and instructional materials were the primary challenges for promoting multilingual education in Nepal.

Although MTB-MLE is the prevailing model of multilingual education in Nepal; Phyak (2016) criticises this approach as the continuation of colonialist ideology that still perpetuated inequality arguing that such practice is merely the continuation of assimilationist ideology in disguise. Therefore, ideological shift in policy and practice of multilingual education is required for the justice of ethnic minorities to preserve and promote their linguistic identity.

Discussion

Most of the school students have multilingual background in Nepal. Students who belong to the low socio economic strata and are disadvantaged by lack of monetary, infrastructure and educational resources at home join community schools and the elites join institutional schools. These school children have multilingual environment at home and in society. But the schools they attend either have Nepali language or English as the medium of instruction. Institutional schools are using English as a medium of instruction. Community schools that

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used to teach in Nepali medium are now under great pressure to adopt English as a medium of instruction due to parents' pressure as they believe that private schools have better achievement than community schools because of English medium instruction. Therefore, a significant number of community schools have shifted to English medium instruction. This has created great controversy in policy and practice. Increasing use of English as a medium of instruction violets the 'right to speak' in home language (Phyak, 2021). Though government has formulated multilingual policy, it is almost non-existent in private schools. Teachers are poorly trained and are not encouraged to use multilingual repertoire of the students in a systematic and well planned manner. In many cases even if teachers try to utilise students' L1, it is mostly at the lexical level or a mere word-to-word translation to help them get on with content but hardly ever engage in the meaning making process or multilingual communication as such. Lack of multilingual resources and teachers trained for multilingual environment, the policy is yet to be translated into practice.

In Nepali education system, English has been used from basic level to advanced level either as a core subject or optional subject. Additionally, it is also used as medium of instruction as well. Importance of English as a lingua franca for global communication and Nepali as a lingua franca at National level can't be ignored. However, from cognitive perspective, teaching children in a language other than their mother tongue limits their cognitive growth and academic success. Additionally, teachers' proficiency in English at basic level is questioned (Paudel, 2021). Though it is said to be English medium instruction, pedagogy is heavily based on translation in Nepali (ibid.). The teachers have limited proficiency to explain in English and the students become neither good in English nor in Nepali. Institutional schools are often reported to have punished the students for using their mother tongue in the school area. Such practice further limits and challenges mother tongue based multilingual education at primary level. Moreover, English medium instruction is forcefully implemented without plan, preparation, and teachers' motivation. Some teachers argue that the use of English as a medium of instruction has decreased the learners' understanding of the content, increased cognitive load, and encouraged rote learning (Paudel, 2021).

The challenges to planning, implementing and sustaining quality MLE programmes, according to Malone (2010), include multiple languages many with multiple dialects; lack of practical orthographies; lack of mother tongue speakers with teaching credentials; lack of written literature; multiple mother tongues; large class sizes; and lack of curriculum and instructional materials. Kandel (2010) presents some other hurdles of MLE in Nepal. They are : poor academic condition among different government agencies; misconception and differences in understanding about MTB-MLE; unsupportive parents; debates on whether language or script more important than other; how to promote language and culture in higher education and how it will be defined; hesitation among government teachers fearing the job loss; parents' eagerness to send children to English medium schools; no fair distribution of financial resources from the supporting agencies and lack of transparent plan and allocation of the resources.

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Linguistically all languages are equal and they are possible to be used for all purposes. MTB-MLE helps promote unity in diversity, respect each other's language and culture that creates cultural mosaic of linguistic co-existence (Koirala, 2010). Therefore, linguistic diversity should be celebrated. Maintaining every body's mother tongue is not only beneficial to the individual but also prerequisite to sustain ethnic identity.

Conclusion

There are opportunities, challenges, and gaps in multilingual language education policies and practice. The present constitution and the state educational policies have gradually recognised and embraced multilingualism. This has created opportunities for all languages to grow. However, this is yet to be realised into practice. A number of community schools implementing English as a medium of instruction across the nation is increasing following the footsteps of institutional schools. This instance of neo-liberal ideology is the main challenge to implement multilingual language policy in practice. The way forward is grey area yet to be explored. It requires a large scale linguistic survey to explore the situation of languages spoken in Nepal. Language co-existence approach (Koirala, 2010) can be followed in policy and practice to preserve, maintain, develop, and give justice to all the native languages spoken in Nepal. The medium of instruction should not be imposed. Rather it should be based on the choice of the concerned speech community, learners, and their parents (Dhakal, 2016). Linguistic identity should be maintained and cultural and linguistic diversity should be celebrated. In multilingual classrooms like ours, translanguaging can be a possible pedagogical solution.

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