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Medium of Education in Nepal: Mother Tongue Education or English Medium Education?

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Abstract
This article discusses the use of appropriate medium of instruction in multilingual classroom contexts, which is one of the most debated issues in education around the world. It first briefly overviews mother tongue education in relation to English language teaching in Nepal. Then, presenting a case study from Nepal, it offers theoretical insights about the use of mother tongue for higher education in general. Given that the issue of language of instruction is less often questioned in higher education around the world, it calls for such a discussion by drawing insights from the use of English, a foreign language, as the medium of instruction at different levels of education in Nepal.

Key words: Lingua franca, mother tongue education, multilingual situation, quality education

The world is a storehouse of languages where linguistic diversity parallels and reinforces social, cultural, geopolitical, and other kinds of diversity among people within and across communities. The numbers of languages spoken in the world are also associated with the socio-cultural as well as ethical values of their use. The increased attention to multilingualism has, however, not given rise to similar attention to the issue of language of instruction in formal education. That is, while educators, scholars, and the public alike theoretically agree that students at all levels must be competent in local languages in addition to national and international lingual franca, they seem to consider local languages an add on, or second thought, rather than as both a means and end of education.

Let us discuss case of Nepal in order to highlight the paradoxical case of language policy, which we believe is pertinent in many other national contexts due to similar global forces and developments. One hundred and twenty three (123) languages were identified in the census of 2011 in context of Nepal, an increase from 92 reported in 2001. Nineteen mother tongues were spoken by 96% of the population, while 104 languages were spoken by 4% of the total population. Nepali is spoken by 44.64% of the population in 2011, which was reported to be spoken by 48% in 2001. The majority of the population (59%) was reported to be largely monolingual and 41% of the population spoke at least one second language (Population Monograph of Nepal, 2014). The census-based approximations of Nepal's languages listed in Table 2.1 show the variation.

Table 1: A comparison of census enumerations of languages (1952/54 - 2011)

Censuses	1952/54	1961	1971	1981	1991	2001	2011
Number of languages	44	36	17	18	31	92	123

This table suggests two distinct trends. Of the seven censuses, five censuses were numerically larger (1952/54, 1961, 1991, 2001 and 2011) than two (1971 and 1981) in terms of the number of languages enumerated, with the 1971 and 1981 censuses having a lower number. In addition, there has been a steady increase in language enumeration from the 1991 to 2011 census. The existing rise in languages since the 1991 census may be attributed to a number of factors, and they have important implications for language policy. Since the restoration of democracy in 1990, there has been a drastic increase in ethno-linguistic awareness among linguistic minorities (including indigenous peoples) about their mother tongues. Subsequently, linguists and other social scientists have been consulted for a precise identification of Nepal's languages enumerated in different censuses (Yadava, 2013). While uncertainty about the number of Nepal's languages has been prevailing due to the lack of a detailed and comprehensive linguistic survey (LinSuN 2008; Sharma 2014), increased reporting of distinct languages reflects increased recognition of different languages, including by those who speak them.

On the contrary, there was a decrease in the number of languages in the 1971 and 1981 censuses due to the national assimilation policy ('one language, one nation') and the social exclusion prevailing in Nepal, especially during the Panchayat regime as well as earlier, apart from a lack of ethno-linguistic awareness in ethnic and other minority communities (Yadava, 2007).

The growing interest in mother tongues also coincides with national political movements seeking greater inclusiveness, rights, and dignity of minority community (Phyak, 2007). For example, Maithili is spoken by 11.7% of the population and ranks first in the Tarai and second (i.e. next to Nepali) in the national context. This language is associated with political struggle by its speakers in the past decade. Its core area are the 6 districts of the eastern and central Tarai (Sunsari, Saptari, Siraha, Dhanusha, Mahottari, and Sarlahi) while it occupies second position in Morang and Nawalparasi, and is also spoken significantly in the four central Tarai districts (Rautahat, Bara, Parsa and Rupandehi). Bhojpuri, spoken by 5.98% of the Nepalese population, also mostly in the southern plains, is the third largest language at the national level and second in the Tarai. Tharu is spoken by 5.77% of the population across the Tarai, although primarily in two districts (Bardiya and Kanchnapur) and constitutes the fourth largest language at the national level and ranks as the fourth Tarai language. The collective struggle for greater autonomy and rights of the people of the southern plains thus aligns with the second, third, and fourth largest language communities of Nepal.

The heightened awareness about mother tongues other than the national Nepali language has actually reduced the number of Nepali speakers across the last seven decennial censuses (1952/54-2011). Concurrently, there has been an increase in languages other than Nepali and their speakers. The various ethnic and minority communities have been determined to have their

mother tongues recognized as separate languages owing to the growth of their ethno-linguistic awareness; this has reduced the percentage of Nepalese claiming the national language as their mother tongue.

Table 2 Region- wise distribution of Nepali as a mother tongue (in percentage)

Ecological Regions			
Mountains	Hills	Tarai	Total
4.16	27.29	13.19	44.64

Table3 : Nepal's major languages (minimum 100, 000 speakers, CBS 2012)

S.No.	Languages	Speakers	Per cent	Cumulative per cent
1.	Nepali	11,826,953	44.64	44.64
2.	Maithili	3,092,530	11.67	56.31
3.	Bhojpuri	1,584,958	5.98	62.29
4.	Tharu	1,529,875	5.77	68.07
5.	Tamang	1,353,311	5.11	73.18
6.	Newar	846,557	3.20	76.37
7.	Bajjika	793,416	2.99	79.37
8.	Magar	788,530	2.98	82.34
9.	Doteli	787,827	2.97	85.32
10.	Urdu	691,546	2.61	87.93
11.	Avadhi	501,752	1.89	89.82
12.	Limbu	343,603	1.30	91.12
13.	Gurung	325,622	1.23	92.35
14.	Baitadeli	272,524	1.03	93.37
15.	Rai	159,114	0.60	93.97
16.	Achhami	142,787	0.54	94.51
17.	Bantawa	132,583	0.50	95.01
18.	Rajbanshi	122,214	0.46	95.48
19.	Sherpa	114,830	0.43	95.91

However, the new dynamics of national and local languages in relation to English has not translated into thoughtful conversations about language policy in the nation or about national educational policy at large. In fact, in the name of improving quality education, the government has either done nothing about or encouraged public schools that are switching to English medium instruction with absolutely dismal preparation or capacity for doing so.

Language Policy and English as a Medium of Instruction

Even though Nepal is a multilingual and multiethnic country with 123 languages and more than 103 ethnic communities, children in most ethno-linguistic communities are deprived of basic education in their respective mother tongues (eg. Bista, 2011). Linguistic minorities are regarded as vulnerable economically. They communicate in their native tongues within their households and communities while they have to use Nepali as a lingua franca for wider communication. Their children are, however, too young to have elaborate proficiency in Nepali. Hence, when they start schooling they are disadvantaged since they cannot compete with Nepali-speaking children who have acquired it as their mother tongue. Naturally, the children with mother tongues other than Nepali feel inferior, isolated, or incompetent and are forced to remain as a disadvantaged group in our school situation.

While Nepali is the only official language and a lingua franca at the national level, English has further been occupying increasingly dominating roles in education for a long time. All learners would tremendously benefit if there were resources, expertise, and effective pedagogies for teaching all subjects in English; however, the idea of implementing English as the medium of instruction sounds beneficial in theory but actually hurts in practice. In fact, the ideal of helping all students achieve fluency in English as well as other languages has had dangerous results in reality. Most significantly, one of the reasons that Nepal has not been able to reduce its illiteracy rate significantly and inability to achieve EFA (education for all) goals is its inability to employ heritage languages as medium of instruction in basic education.

If children with mother tongues other than Nepali cannot compete with Nepali-speaking children who have acquired it as their mother tongue, imposing English medium instruction makes less privileged students further marginalized. They are forced to remain as a disadvantaged group in our school situation (CDC, 2004, pp. 2-3).

Teaching in unfamiliar languages has hindered cognitive development in the children. Language not only helps promote equality and empowers people but also is a key factor for the social inclusion in ethno-linguistic communities. Many studies have already revealed that teaching in mother tongue in the early grades enhances children's ability to learn better than in second or foreign languages (e.g. UNESCO, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2003). It has also been reported that if children are taught in languages which are different from their home language, they drop-out from school, have low achievement and repeat classes due to a high failure rate. This state of affairs is still persistent in Nepal (Yadava, 2007; Awasthi, 2004).

Mother Tongue Education and Medium of Instruction

The increasing awareness about language minorities and their demands for preserving and promoting their mother tongues has taken the form of "mother tongue education," or the idea of teaching one subject focusing on students' home languages. But this approach shows a truly misplaced priority because it treats mother tongue languages as a second thought, as add ons, to education. One could say that the objective of mother tongue education is limited to the preservation and promotion of local languages and that education of the future generations is best served by responding to market forces; however, this would be a false dichotomy, creating more problems than solutions.

There is no doubt that learning another language opens up access to other value systems and ways of interpreting the world, encouraging inter-cultural understanding and helping reduce xenophobia (UNESCO, 2011, p.11). But this objective is "not" achieved by forcing a foreign language as the medium of all instructions: instead, that objective is itself undermined because

students do not develop English language proficiency from having to learn everything in it. Mother tongue can and should be used as a medium of instruction and not just gas a subject of study. Letting students and teachers use the language of convenience and allowing multiple languages to flourish is the best way to improve the quality of education. The expert view is that mother tongue instruction should cover both the teaching of and the teaching through this language (ibid). When children speak a home language that differs from the language of instruction in school, schools and teachers should adopt the most effective approaches. Research confirms that children learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual and multilingual education (UNESCO, 2008, p. 6). Schools and teachers can draw on such research to adopt practices that best fit their situations.

Most developing countries have multilingual societies with one or two dominant national languages, and yet multiple languages of instruction pervade a majority of education systems. In any multilingual society, a system where instruction is carried out in a language students do not speak is referred to as submersion; the very term reminds us of forcibly holding a learner under water (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, p. 105). However, research has shown that mother tongue-based schooling significantly improves learning (see e.g. Benson 2004b; Trudell 2005; SIL 2006; UNESCO 2006; Kosonen 2009; Young 2009). The use of a familiar language to teach children literacy is more effective than a submersion system as learners "can employ psycholinguistic guessing strategies" to learn how to read and write (Benson, 2004a, p. 1).

By the time students begin school, they have begun gaining confidence in their ability to communicate meaningfully in their mother tongue. They have built a foundation of knowledge and experience through observing and interacting with peers and adults in their community. Those having the knowledge of the medium of instruction actively participate in classroom activities. This will help to achieve quality education. Thus the full benefit of education can only be realized if the education is imparted in mother tongues. On the contrary, if the education is begun in the second language, they remain passive in the learning process. The students are not able to achieve quality education when they do not have mastery over the language and culture in which they are taught (Dhakal, 2013, p. 35). The learners enrolled at primary level tend to drop from the schools. The majority of school dropouts are found in grade 1 and 2. Fifty percent of the world's out-of-school students live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition (World Bank, 2005). Most students in Nepal who do not speak Nepali as a first language have been found to struggle in school and have on average lower test scores (CERID, 2005). Because they are taught in a language that they do not fully understand, non-Nepali speaking students often miss concepts and do not succeed to the same level that Nepali speaking students do.

English Medium Education in Nepal

The history of English language teaching in Nepal, which is about a half a century long, shows that the use of this language is deeply enmeshed with power, privilege, and politics. We cannot separate that politics -- in its economic, social, cultural, and other forms -- from the justifications about the benefits of English medium in today's education landscape.

Let us take a quick look at the political background of English language educatoin in Nepal. The first English language education program for the general public opened to the people in 1951. Earlier education was limited to the members of the royal family and there were not any

public schools across the country. After restoration of social equality in the nation, Tri-Chandra College started teaching English courses under the supervision of Patana University, India in the early fifties (Bista, 2011, p. 1). Though the Ranas were against providing public education for the sake of their regime, they could not be away from the influence of British Empire. After visiting Britain to maintain diplomatic relationship with the British Empire, Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana established the first English school in his own residence in 1854 A.D. and the English language officially made an entry into Nepal. But the intention was to make the Rana children know English so that the British Empire would be pleased and the Rana Regime would long last. Thus, the introduction of English in Nepal had a deeply rooted interest of the Rana autocrats. In the words of Sharma (2006),

> It was tantamount in the miniature form to the macro global interest of British Empire to root and expand its rule through the introduction of English as an official language and language for instruction. In a colonial context, it is obvious that the role of English in the 18th and 19th centuries was associated with the interest of British Empire. Now it is the post-colonial context in which English is working as a powerful agency to erase the colonial gap between 'we' the west' and rest of the world as the other. (p. 25)

Until 1947, there were only 13 secondary schools. Trichandra College was the first college founded in 1918 introduced English at higher level. With the establishment of the democratic regime in the country, numerous primary, secondary schools and colleges were established. ELT had not got its status before implementation of National Education System Plan (NESP) 1971. It was NESP that defined English as one of the UN languages and included English in the curriculum as a compulsory subject. In the same year 1971, Tribhuvan University started B.Ed. programme in English Education (Awasthi 2003 as cited in Sharma, 2006, p.25). At present English has been prescribed as a compulsory course from the primary level to the Bachelors' level. In private schools, English is introduced from pre-primary education.

English is at the heart of educational planning in Nepal. While discussing the significance of ELT, Kansakar (1998) states, "Since the teaching of English in Nepal has assumed greater important in view of the development needs of the country, ELT has now become an essential component in Nepal's educational strategy"(as cited in Sharma, 2006, p.25). In Nepal, there has been an increasing demand for English to start at the beginning of primary education. To meet this demand, Nepal government decided to introduce English as a subject from grade one starting in the academic year 2060 B.S. Although the importance of the English language is realized, Nepalese learners of English have not got sufficient mastery over English. In the schools run by private sectors, English is introduced from nursery level and all subjects except Nepali are taught in English. Thus, English has become a medium of instruction. In public schools, English is taught from grade one. Since the early 1990s, English is being more dominant and almost exclusive as the medium of instruction in higher education.

Private schools are generally more committed to quality education. However, as Sharma (2014) highlights,

> beyond a certain number of private schools in Kathmandu and a few other major cities, the rest of them do a terrible job of educating students other than producing high percentage of passes in the SLC exam. No research, no common sense, no sanity can justify that all science and math and social studies teachers across the country, many of whose English is not fluent, must teach their subjects in English; nor can any educational

reasoning justify why students who don't use and develop English fluency outside school have to read/write and explore all knowledge in that language. (n.p.)

English-medium teaching in European higher education has shown exponential growth since the early 1990s (Coleman, 2006; p. 6). This new form of education may be regarded as a major instrument of innovation and internationalization of European higher education (Maiworm & Wächter, 2002; p. 9). The main reason why universities adopt English-language programmes is to attract foreign students and to make their own students fit for the international market. The dominance of English is a worldwide phenomenon, even though its importance as a lingua franca in European higher education is fairly recent. European languages may be losing grounds to English as the language of education and scientific advancements, even though their importance in other domains of society and culture remains unaffected. Teaching in English is also more prominent at (post-) graduate level than at undergraduate level.

In the case of Nepal, there has been some controversy about the place of English/ Nepali as the medium of higher education. Along with Nepali, English is the second compulsory language in the Nepalese schools. But this position of English as the second language in education does not mean that it is the second language used by all students in Nepal for social communication outside the classroom. About two decades ago, Subba (1997, p.81) noted:

1. English is never used exclusively as the medium for class lecturers anywhere at any levels of courses offered.
2. English is never used exclusively during examinations students have option to use Nepali during examinations in the subjects of Law, Commerce, Social Sciences, Education, and even in Forestry, Agriculture and some branches of Engineering.
3. English is used during examinations by students in Science, Medicine (except Ayurvedic) and some branches of Engineering.
4. Nepali is mostly used for class lecturers in class lectures of subjects like Social Sciences, Education, Law and Commerce.
5. Nepali is alternatively used for class lectures in class lectures of Science, Medicine, Engineering, Forestry and Agriculture.
6. Nepali is mostly used by students during examinations in all subjects at all levels where an option is allowed.

Today, even more textbooks, reference works and journals are in English. Schools and colleges have increasingly adopted English as the medium of instruction. However, notonly students but teachers as well are lacking in English language skills. Our grounding in the language is even weaker at lower levels. Many university professors feel comfortable using Nepali in classes, as Subba (1997) noted. While English is considered the language of higher education in Nepal, practically, Nepali remains the practical medium of instruction in most institutions.

Conclusion

Educational administrators and managers understand language as a subject, but teachers have been forced to use language as the medium of instruction as well. Linguists and language activists understand language as rights of the people to learn in their mother tongues. But we are not developing common consensus from the learners' points of view. Here the question that arises as to who has the right to decide language for the learner. Is this the right of the student to choose the language that s/he likes? Is this of the parents to decide the language for the learner? Is this of the local government/ proposed provincial government/national government to select a language of instruction? Is this of the teachers to prescribe a particular language to the student?

(Koirala, 2010, p.32). As Nepali and English have grown more dominant in Nepali society, they have started to replace other languages. Minority languages are seen by some, including speakers of those languages, to be less valuable. For most people, they have limited economic or communicative utility, providing minority groups little incentive to invest time and energy in learning and preserving them.

Since quality education is now being assessed in terms of teaching in English medium particularly in private schools and some of the public schools of Nepal, and since this has remained an unquestioned medium in higher education, it is imperative to study on the issue of access and quality of education through mother tongue education in Nepal. It is urgent that we start confronting the myths because we have crossed limits and entered a farcical social juncture whereby community schools are beginning to switch to English medium in order to convince parents that they too can deliver "quality" education just by making that switch. We are not yet even asking the questions about higher education. It is even higher time that we did so.

Research from around the world shows the same trends and tendencies of simply adopting a dominant world language as the means of instruction without making sure that teachers are proficient in it, that students can understand the instruction, and that the society will ultimately benefit from using a foreign language for teaching and learning. But the conversation about the dangers of this trend is not loud and clear yet. As such, many more educators who have faced the challenges and are committed to quality of learning need to join the conversation on this subject from around the world.

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