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journal or publication title	dialogos
number	16
page range	15-24
year	2016-02-29
URL	http://id.nii.ac.jp/1060/00007918/

Language Policy, Planning and Education in Multilingual Society

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Abstract

The use of language in education is the issue of continual debate in the recent time. There are people for and against the use of mother tongue or a second / foreign language in education in Nepal. According to the population census of 2011, in Nepal, there are 126 caste/ethnic groups, who speak 123 different languages. The Constitution of Nepal has provided each community with the right to get basic education in the mother tongue and to preserve and promote the community's language, script, culture, cultural civility and heritage. To implement the linguistic rights, the government has adopted the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) to attain the goal of "Education for All" (EFA) by introducing the Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTBMLE). According to this educational programme, the local mother tongue will be the medium of instruction for all subjects at the pre-primary level; the local mother tongue and the language of official use will be used as languages of instruction for all subjects, except Nepali and English, from grade 1 to grade 8. However, the implementation of the programme is facing a number of challenges. This paper will examine the most common arguments on both sides of the debate between mother tongue and a second/ foreign language for instruction, and try to find some possible directions for using minority languages in schools. It also explore the ways in which globalization is interpreted in the education system of Nepal and how the system responds to multilingual teaching and learning needs in primary schools.

Introduction

Recently, the word globalization has been referenced increasingly in the media, academic literature and everyday talk. “Googling” the definition of “globalization” yields more than 38.8 million “hits.” This result alone signals the difficulty of trying to define a term that has multiple meanings and interpretations, is used in a variety of ways by different people for different purposes. Pieterse (1995) speaks of globalization in terms of “the ideas that the world is becoming more uniform and standardized, through technological, commercial and cultural synchronization emanating from the West, and that globalization is tied up with modernity.” From the literature on globalization, there is no single definition that encompasses all the interests encapsulated in the term, several common threads--economic integration, technology, socio-cultural exchange, and political shifts-- are woven into the fabric of most definitions. These common threads provide a framework for understanding of the implications and potential impacts of globalization on education.

Globalization and Educational Change

Globalization in its several forms-economic, political, and cultural-has had major impacts on education. The global knowledge economy requires, and rewards, those who are better educated and more skilled.

The effects of Globalization on education bring rapid developments in technology and communications are foreseeing changes within school systems across the world as ideas, values and knowledge, changing the roles of students and teachers, and producing a shift in society from industrialization towards an information-based society.

The future of countries often lies within their ability to compete in a global market where industrial based economies are giving way to knowledge based industries, realizing the importance of "knowledge, skills and the intellectual capacity to meet the challenges of accelerated change and uncertainty"

There is no doubt that almost everywhere in the world, educational systems are now under pressure to produce individual for global competition, individuals who can themselves compete for their own positions in the global context, and who can legitimate the state and strengthen its global competitiveness. Pang(2006)

National curriculum framework for school education in nepal

Globalization

The twenty-first century is characterized as the age of globalization, Globalization compels schools of any country to develop capacity among students to acquire relevant knowledge, skills and attitudes so that they can compete in the world market and remain up to date with the changes in the world.

Localization

Education in the globalized context, however, should not be only about concerns at the global level. Education of any nation should be within the context of the national and local realities, needs, and priorities. There is also the need to consider issues of localization of curriculum, learning in the mother language and maintaining a balance. Hence, in order to meet the local, national and global requirements, there is a need to maintain a balance in curriculum.

Nepal: Linguistic and socio - cultural background

Geography, People, their Ethnicities and Languages

Nepal lies on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, with Tibet, the autonomous region of the People's Republic of China to the north and with India to the east, south and west. In length, the country is 885 kilometers from east to west, and its mean width is 193 Km, north to south. Nepal's total area is 147,181 sq. km. Elevations in Nepal vary from 60 to 8848 meters above sea level.

People, their Ethnicities and Languages

Nepal is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of its human heritage, culture and natural resources. Cultural and linguistic diversity are one of Nepal's national treasures. According to the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) 2011, the population of Nepal is 26,494,504. There are more than 125 distinct caste/ethnic groups and 123 languages in Nepal (CBS, 2011). Nepali people belong to several different languages, cultures, social, "caste" and ethnic backgrounds due to geographical variations in the country. The census 2011 noted 125 social groups and 123 languages. The Indo-Aryan language group is the largest in terms of the number of speakers (some 80% of all speakers) while the Tibeto-Burman branch has the largest number of languages. The rest are Austro-Asiatic and Dravidian, with one linguistic isolate. Most languages have fairly few speakers; fewer than 20 have more than 100,000 speakers. Nepal has a responsibility to conserve a rich linguistic and cultural heritage.

Current policy, practices and efforts in Nepal

The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) has clearly stated that Nepal is a

‘multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious, and multicultural nation’ (Part I, Article 3) and enshrined the following provisions:

Articles 5, 13 and 17 state the rights of citizens to equality, education and culture. They set the language policy with all languages as national languages and Nepali as the official language. They include the right to basic education in mother tongues as well as the right to preservation and promotion of languages, scripts and cultures.

Section 7 of the Seventh Amendment of the Education Act of Nepal states that Nepali Language shall be the medium of instruction in the schools. Provided that mother tongue can be used as a medium of instruction at the primary level (Section 7.1). Notwithstanding anything contained in the above provision, while teaching language as a subject, the medium of instruction can be the same language.

The Three year Interim Plan includes a trilingual policy: Nepali language as the official language, mother tongue, and English as an international language. Basic education can be provided in the mother tongue(s).

These acts and documents recommend that the mother tongue based multilingual education should be included in the education system.

What is Multilingual Education (MLE)? Why is MLE required in Nepal?

Multilingual Education (MLE) is the use of three or more languages as languages of instruction, in subjects other than the languages themselves, at a single school in a multilingual community. For language education to be classified as MLE, more than two languages must be used as languages of instruction. That is, at

least three languages must be used for content-based instruction, not just taught as subjects. In the Nepali case, those languages include: children's L1, which may be indigenous/minority languages; Nepali, the official language of Nepal, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). Multilingual education begins with the mother tongue.

The UNESCO book "**The use of vernacular languages in education**" recommends that the mother tongue should axiomatically be the best medium of education at least during the first 6 years. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas also advocates the rationale for mother-tongue based MLE:

If teaching is in a language that the Indigenous/Tribal/Minority (ITM) child does not know (e.g. Nepali), the child sits in the classroom the first 2-3 years without understanding much of the teaching. S/he may repeat mechanically what the teacher says, without understanding, without developing her capacity to think with the help of language, and without learning almost anything of the subjects that she is taught. This is why many ITM children leave school early, not having learned much Nepali, not having learned properly how to read and write, not having developed their mother tongue, and almost without any school knowledge. If the child has the MT as the teaching language, s/he understands the teaching, learns the subjects, develops the CALP in the MT, and has very good chances of becoming a thinking, knowledgeable person who can continue the education. *(Source: Tove Skutnabb-Kangas)*

The Department of Education, DOE, is implementing a Multilingual Education (pilot) project in six districts in seven primary schools with non - Nepali speaking students. The mother tongue of the indigenous students will be the medium of classroom teaching. The implementation plan for the project covers

development of locally based MLE & MTE materials, MLE capacity building, cascading, raising the awareness of linguistic and cultural diversity.

Jagat Sundar Bvane Kuthi (a Newar Bhasa Primary School) was established with the following objectives (Shrestha and Hoek,

1. To run pre-primary to primary classes to teach health, literacy and other subjects through Newar Bhasa;
2. To provide support for the protection and development of Newar literature and culture;
3. To give support to the parents and children who wish to learn through Newar Bhasa;
4. To help HMG/N develop educational materials in Newar Bhasa for all subjects in primary classes;
5. To expand Newar Bhasa medium primary schools in other Newar communities.

Jagat Sundar School operates from nursery to class 7, and aims to run up to class 10 in the near future. Its medium of education is Newar Bhasa. But, Nepali is taught through Nepali and English through English.

Students' comments:

Student A: "When we are allowed to speak in mother tongue we feel very comfortable"

Student B: "I was a very weak student till I was in class three, and that was because I had a language problem."

Parents' comments:

Parents think it would be much better if English is also used with MT as they fear that children's competence in English might lag behind.

The parents and teachers agreed that the MLE policy is good as it helps their children learn easier and faster. However, they also said that 'we need English. So we decided to start English for the ECD classes. We are worried about due to this policy whether our children become poor in English and Nepali at higher level'.

Discussions and Findings

Although the parents, teachers and students feel positively about MLE, different stakeholders have reported various challenges with the MLE programme. Parents said that there is a lack of awareness among parents. There is a huge attraction towards learning English as private schools are being opened in communities. Parents also questioned whether mother-tongue education will be sustained or not. They were concerned about the future of their children as a result of being educated in their mother tongue. Teachers said that training and textbooks were available only during the project. It is important to continue to provide these resources. There was a common view among SMC members, Head Teachers and teachers that there is a lack of human resources to effectively teach in mother tongues. They also reported that parents are not convinced with the value of the MLE programme. Some other issues that emerged from the discussion with various stakeholders have been summarized as follows: The sustainability of the programme depends on the commitment from the MOE.

- In linguistically heterogeneous communities, MLE is very difficult to implement.
- The concern of the MOE regarding MLE since the completion of the

Finnish funding has seemed to decrease.

- There is a lack of proper budgeting for the implementation of the programme.
- There is a lack of proper coordination among various stakeholders, especially with the Athpahariya's association and the SMC. There is an issue of who takes the lead for recruiting teachers, and producing materials for MLE.
- Government's policy towards the implementation of MLE is not consistent.
- The most crucial challenge is that parents, teachers, children and other stakeholders are still resistant and suspicious about the sustainability and effectiveness of the policy.
- Another practical challenge is related to classroom management in schools where more than two local languages are spoken. In such schools, children from one linguistic background (e.g. Santhal and Uraw in Jhapa and Sunsari respectively) are kept separate in a combined class of two grades and taught all subjects by one or more teachers.

Conclusion

This study introduced effects of globalization on language education in Nepal. It also examined educational and language policies and multilingual education program being practiced in six primary schools. It is found that there are some cognitive achievements at early grades of basic education. How to maintain a balance with the local languages and global requirements, however, is still an issue.

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