

Opportunities for Multi-Lingual Education in Nepal

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Abstract

For decolonizers language is a tool of domination (Awasthi, 2004; Bourdieu, 1977); for language groups it is a subjectivity and inter-subjectivity (Koirala, 2007); for utilitarian it is a vehicle to take people from the local to the global world (Khadka, 2007); for knowledge seekers and promoters it is a means to generate the hidden treasure of the subalterns' wisdom (Guha, 2005); for linguists' it is a way to save language (Khadka et.al., 2006; Khadka, 2007); for activists it is a means to activate people (Yonjan, 2007); for existentialists language is the socio-political, cultural, and linguistic identity (CRED, 2005; Chirag, 2001), and for pedagogues it is a means to made easy and dignified learning (Mallikarjun, 2002). It means language is the response to the situatedness (Leve & Wegner, 1992). To resolve these concerns one needs language of co-existence, reciprocal learning and teaching.

Nepal has more than hundred languages with 15 scripts (Khadka, Magar, & Koirala, 2006; Koirala, Khadka, & Magar, 2008). Muslim children for example should learn at least three scripts together, the Urdu, the Devnagari, and the English. This situation looks for shared script.

The premises

People understood the language issue from different lenses. Critical theorists and their followers understood it as a “tool of domination”. Language activists and the militant groups understood it as “my language right or wrong”. Utilitarian and/or market oriented people inculcated language “as a tool to be viable from local to the global world. “Champions of the indigenous knowledge understood it as “means to generate the hidden treasure of the subalterns’ wisdom.” Linguists understood it as a “gradual process of conserving and improving the languages.” Politicians took it as a “ means to activate people.” People of the ethnic and the language community understood it as “socio-political, cultural, and linguistic identity.” Pedagogues understood language as a “ means to understand the child and help the child learn in his/her pace.” Each of these lenses has its closure to look at language issue. However I as a pedagogue see the importance of creating a mosaic of language use. In doing so I consider child as unit of understanding the language issue.

The language setting

Linguists do claim that there are 143 languages in Nepal (Yonjan, 2007). Each language group has created ghettoized settlement including many other forms of ghettos. In this sense Nepal is a land of ghettos, the specific language ghetto; the caste and sub-caste ghetto; the specific ethnic ghetto; religious ghetto, and the territorial ghetto. This ghettoized settlement constructed ghetto-mindset and the education of the ghetto also nurtured traditionally prescribed/described/ascribed/ acquired caste and ethnicity based occupations and education systems. Even the politicians could not penetrate these ghettos but

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became a shareholder of them. Paradoxically, school on the other hand embraced students of different ghettos. Consequently we have five types of classroom setting¹ (CRED, 2005) in terms of students' language background and three types of teachers from teachers' inter-ghetto mobility point of view². However the orientation of the formal education program, migration, communication, and exposure compelled teachers and students for boarder crossing in language issue. This boarder crossing demands inter-ghetto communication, the lingua franca no matter they are locally accepted, nationally imposed, and/or internationally imitated. The first force has emerged out of the necessity. For example Batar, Jhangad, and Tharu of Jhorahat, Morang created and used Dehati language as lingua franca at the local level. So did the Lepcha, Rai, and Limbu of Ilam who used Nepali as lingua franca. The second force has been the oppressive structural force of the state and its apparatus including teachers that advocated various language policies over the periods (National Language Policy Recommendation Commission, 2050 BS). This force did not and could not visualize what Darrida calls "difference and diffarance" (Powell, 2000) between teachers' and students' mother tongue and the multilingual settings of the Nepali classrooms. This I would call 'conceptual blindness' did not allow teachers, teacher educators, and administrators to look for 'boarder crossing' approach to language issue. It is where pedagogues could not think multilingual setting as an asset. Consequently this issue has remained as unsolved or differently solved. In other words, the country does not have a set of language setting in the classroom (CRED, 2005; Awasthi, 2004, CHIRAG, 2001). Each setting

has its specific characteristics. For example, in one school of Makawanpur district, the students were from Tamang and Chepang community. The teacher on the other hand was from Maithili speaking community. The teacher was teaching mathematics and science in Nepali language. Here Nepali had been the lingua franca between the Maithili speaking teacher, and Tamang as well as Chepang speaking students of a class. However the teacher was learning Tamang and Chepang language with the students. Because of his effort he was able to communicate with Chepang students in their language and at the same time he was trying to learn Tamang. This shows that there are teachers who are harnessing the strengths of multi-lingual setting and adjusting themselves.

My experience with the Pahari students of Badikhel of Lalitpur district and the research done in this area (Khadka, 2007) gives another scenario; the scenario that teachers put blame on students and students on teachers. More importantly Nepali speaking teachers believe that Pahari children know Nepali language. This belief of the teachers shows their hesitance to learn Pahari language. Here the language setting is not that matters but the attitude of the teachers to learn Pahari language and value it in the classroom.

The testimonies above show that planners, teachers, pedagogues, language activists, and linguists have ignored the child. In other words they have valued the language, culture, politics, and identity but have failed to value the child of different language groups simultaneously.

The trend

I could capture seven trends in school setting. One, we are composed of cosmic I of the ancestors; historical I of Hermeneutics; critical I of Karl Marx; humanist I of Sartre; and socio-culturally negotiated I of the field. These "Is" have advanced described, prescribed, ascribed, and deconstructed identities as default of the

1 One language setting, two language setting, three language setting, four language setting, and five language setting, and multi lingual setting.

2 My field experience of Bara, Banke, Baglung, Surkhet, and Sindhupalchok shows that there are teachers and students speaking the same language; teachers and students speaking different language but communicating in Nepali language; teachers learning students' language and communicating with students easily.

multilingual groups. These identities again have perpetuated the ghettoized mindset even in the academic field. Because of this situation, inter identity dialogue has been limitedly encouraged rather ghettoized academia and linguists have been working. So they have presented Nepali as killer language and at the same time promoted “intermediary killer language” in different parts of the country. Here the question arises, how many “intermediary killer languages” we want for this country? Linguists and politicians may answer it easily but a pedagogue is always silent. By borrowing the language of Paulo Freire I thus claim that the academia including teachers have perpetuated “the culture of silence.” So the activist of the particular language has been talking about his/her language. But the teacher has to deal with many languages in a classroom. The question to the teacher thus is how to help students of different language groups simultaneously.

Two, when the teachers go to take training on how to teach language, they are taught about a specific language, i.e. teaching English and teaching Nepali. Here the training organizers ignore the language groups of the classroom. So they do not bother to link the grammar of the Tharu, Maithili, Tamang, and Sherpa with the grammar of Nepali and/or English. This what I call “classroom language blindness” of the teacher and the trainer victimizes students. The linguists on the other hand have nurtured this process of victimization as well. Here I would argue that we are the flag holders of a language but the ignorers of the classroom setting and the teacher composition of the country.

Three, the language activist tries to treat all the languages one to one. From egalitarian point of view they are very right. At the same time they are opting for Language University/language college/language school/language learning center in different languages of the country. But this voice is not coming as it should come forward. And yet they are not thinking to develop language corner in each school if there are more than one language groups.

Four, linguists and language activists are producing books, magazines, and newspapers in different languages. But at the same time they are ignoring the fact that a student, a teacher, and a community elite also can write books in different languages simultaneously. This mothering approach of the linguists and the language activists may take half a century to reach at all the students of different language groups of Nepal.

Five, language activists have advocated for mother tongue teaching in one place and sent their children to English school on the other. Even their children communicate in third language, the language of the television, Internet, and radio. Linguists and the language activists at this point might have ignored the need of simultaneous/early/middle/latter/late language immersion approach to teaching. Even the pedagogues and the teachers are not oriented in this issue.

Six, educational administrators and managers understood language as a subject. Teachers on the other have used language as medium of instruction. Linguists and language activists understood language as rights of the people to learn in their mother tongues. But we are not developing common consensus from a child’s point of view. Here the question comes who has the right to decide language for a child. Is this the right of the child to choose the language that s/he likes? Is this of the parents to decide the language for the child? Is this of the local government/proposed provincial government/national government to select a language for a child? Is this of the teachers to prescribe a particular language to the child? There are many actors and actions to raise many other questions related to the decision makers of the language choice. But how many of us discussed it? I think no one bothered to do so. In this sense could we label us as the “colonizers of the child?” This question applies to all of us no matter we are linguists, language activists, teachers, teacher trainers, teacher educators, pedagogues, politicians, education administrators and planners.

Seven, Nepali NGOs including indigenous organizations in collaboration with INGOs

introduced mother tongue literacy classes in different parts of the country. But these programs were not continued for number of reasons and one of them was the interest of the learners to learn the second language other than their first language (Khadka, 2006).

The assessment of the above trends explicitly shows that child of different language groups are not taken care simultaneously but fragmentarily. This fragmentary view of linguists and the language activists has done injustice to the child who studies in multilingual classroom setting. Here again child has not been the unit of analysis but language, culture, identity, and politics.

The opportunity

Robert Chambers once asked the question, whose reality counts, whose knowledge counts? Borrowing the same question a teacher and a pedagogue can ask the question to the linguists and language activists whose language should I use in the multilingual classrooms of Nepal. An aware student may ask the same question to the teacher, pedagogue, and the advocates of proposed provincial language of Nepal whose language I am supposed to learn in my multilingual classroom. This unanswered question can be answered through language coexistence approach to teaching. This approach believes that language learning is a fun, an identity, a means to compare the word/the grammar/the syntax of a child's first language with many other languages of the classroom, a way to involve students in research, and a means to ensure students' inclusion in the world of languages. This applies to all of us who aspire for learning more than one language. But how many of us are aware of it. How many teachers do compare Nepali language with English language? How many of us do the similar job with Bhojpuri, Nepali, and English language who teaches in the Southern parts of Nepal? This means we failed to link approach, method, and technique of learning/teaching of different languages even in the classroom. This applies to all the teachers of Nepal who deal with

more than one language either through teaching or through dealing with the students of different language groups. At this point, I foresee the following opportunities for us who advocate for multilingual education and think around a student who has different mother tongue than the language of the books and the language of the teachers. Such opportunities with us are:

1. We can prepare teachers to learn students' mother tongue from the students and facilitate his/her language-learning process. Such teachers and pedagogues are around with us though few in numbers.
2. We have teachers and students who want to teach and learn different languages simultaneously as the people of Karnataka, India (Mallikarjun, 2002). They are also interested in learning different models of language immersion and submersion in early and late age of the students.
3. We have teacher educators and the pedagogues who are willing to develop multimodal teacher preparation program and language evaluation systems as in Hungary (Vicsi & Vary, nd).
4. We have teachers, pedagogues, and linguists who are interested in language apprenticeship model of teaching in multilingual setting as in England (Jones et. al., 2005).
5. We have teachers/students/local elites who are interested in producing multilingual dictionary as Khadka et. al. (2006) developed at the national level.
6. We have energetic teachers, pedagogues, linguists, and curricula developers who want to produce multilingual materials including curricula and textbooks by following the approach of preparing materials for the schools of Barbados.
7. We have the people who want to give up the idea of thinking language from language, culture, politics, and identity perspective. Instead they are the ones who think language from child's point of view and help him/her

learn others languages which s/he needs for survival at home, community, nation, and the globe.

8. We have the pedagogues and teachers who know how to prepare teachers to use students' cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1977) and help them learn each other's language simultaneously.
9. We have people who want to run language learning school/college/university/learning centres as the Sanskrit university though they lack financial resources
10. We have pedagogues, teachers, linguists who want to undertake language survey and macro as well as micro research in language issue.
11. We have IT advocators in classroom who are working for one laptop per child. These advocators have already started to develop multilingual laptop for the students of elementary grades.

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