

## Looking Mother Tongue Instruction through Different Perspectives

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***Abstract:** Mother Tongue Instruction has been a debatable issue since long. There may be two options in the medium of instruction: either to teach especially primary and preprimary schoolchildren in their own mother tongue or continue using second or foreign language as the medium of instruction. Both of the approaches bear some pros and cons. This article tries to explore the perplexing debate in brief by analyzing the concept through different perspectives namely psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, political, cultural, gender, and pedagogical. It also gives a glimpse of the progresses made in Nepal to cater mother tongue instruction.*

### **Language**

Language is a powerful means of communication which has enabled us to be more developed in comparison to other creatures so far found in the world. It is 'the principal means used by human beings to communicate with one another' (Comrie, 2005). It is that divine gift for human being, 'species specific to man' (Britannica, 2005), that has enabled us to enjoy the pleasure available in the world.

Our identity lies in the culture we follow. One of the most powerful forms of symbolization and central feature of all human culture is language. Moreover, it is a 'part of culture' (Britannica, 2005) which is 'a system of symbolic verbal and sometimes written representation learned within a particular culture (Appelbaum & Chambliss 1995, p. 65)

The people who speak only one language are called monolinguals. 'Of course many people never do mastery significantly more than their own first language. However, multilingualism has become a common phenomenon in the world today. One having competence in only in his or her mother tongue is likely to loose many things as the world has been more interactive. One who has broader communicative horizon feels more comfort in the globalized world than the one who is confined to his own mother tongue.

## **Linguistic & Cognitive Development**

Language is 'a sign-system fulfilling the cognitive and communicative functions in the process of human activity' (Dictionary of Philosophy, 1984). Encarta (2006) defines the term 'cognitive' as the process of acquiring knowledge by the use of reasoning, intuition, or perception.

One of the critical concerns of schooling is whether linguistic development determines the cognitive development of a child. There is a debate among applied linguist and educational psychologist on the issue, nonetheless, we can claim that if the former has a beneficial role for the development of latter than mother tongue instruction becomes a crucial topic for our discussion.

One of the psycholinguist, Bruner, 1966 (as cited in Slobin, 1974) suggests that the school is a very important determiner of the use of language to facilitate cognitive growth. In school children must learn to use language in the absence of immediate context.

There are strong evidences to support linguistic development as not autonomous but a subordinate process of cognitive development. The work of Piaget's school (as cited in Slobin 1974, page 114) strongly suggests that language more often reflects than determines cognitive development.

The general finding has been that special linguistic training will be of no avail to a child unless his level of cognitive development has already reached the point at which it can embrace the relevant concepts represented by words.

### **Mother tongue instruction**

Mother tongue instruction may have two connotations: teaching mother tongue itself and imparting formal education in the first language of students. But while we talk about the mother tongue instruction we take the second meaning of the term.

There is debate whether students to be taught in their mother tongue or in the language that has international recognition. Both of the arguments may have their own rationale and theoretical back up. If we analyze them from different perspectives we may draw various conclusions. However maybe the conclusions more people are motivated towards mother tongue instruction in

the world today. One of the world organizations advocating mother tongue instruction is United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). But the attempts haven't got whole-hearted success. Although UNESCO has encouraged mother tongue instruction in early childhood and primary education since 1953, monolingualism in the official or dominant language is still the norm around the world (Arnold et al 2006, as cited in UNESCO 007).

It is obvious that the students, whose language is other than the language of instruction, may not feel as ease as their academic compatriot who gets this privilege. 'It is often held that children brought up bilingually in places in which two languages are regularly in use are slower in school work than comparable to monolingual children as a greater amount of mental effort has to be expended in the mastery of two languages. This is by no means proved; and, because much of a child's language acquisition takes place in infancy and in the pre-school years' (Britannica, 2005). From all these analogies we can say that mother tongue instruction can be fruitful to achieve the desired objectives of the curriculum.

In this article I am going to see mother tongue instruction from various perspectives to unravel some of the perplexing mysteries intractably related to it.

### **Psycholinguistic perspective**

The language that a child acquires at first in a natural setting can be termed as mother tongue. According to Noam Chomsky (1951) all children do have equal degree of competence in their mother tongue and they are perfect in using it. According to Encyclopedia Britannica (2005), every physiologically and mentally normal person has learned the main structure and basic vocabulary of his mother tongue by the end of childhood. Krashen (1973) in his critical period hypothesis maintains that language learning becomes easier and faster at the earlier ages. The period from birth to 11 years is thought to be fertile than later years (a theory popularly known as lateralization).

One of the argument on the basis of above logic is that why not to use this fertile age and opportune our children with learning one or more languages that has gained an international status. The child who learns more language in his childhood is likely to get more benefit in this multilingual world than his compatriots who has left monolingual.

A child acquires his or her first language without any formal instruction, even without knowing himself/herself that he or she is learning language. Even the parents and the members in his/her surroundings don't care that the child is learning language. He learns the language comfortably and swiftly and becomes a full-fledged member of his or her speaking community. 'Language appears to develop in all children under normal circumstances, either as a unilingual or multilingual skill, crucially between the ages of one and five, and as a necessary interplay of innate and environmental factors. Any child can learn any language, under the appropriate conditions' (Educational Encyclopedia, 2000). The mystery, how the child learns his/her first language within four or five years, is still unraveled, however, it is obvious from the researches that a child can be bilingual if he is born in such community.

The argument here is that, can we create same bilingual circumstances in the case of second language (which is the medium of instruction) learning as well. Chomsky (1951) claims that all children from their birth possess ability to learn all possible languages in the world. This ability is located in the left hemisphere of our brain. He calls it Language Acquisition Device (LAD) that contains infrastructure of all languages which when exposed is learnt as first language. If Chomsky was true then it wouldn't be difficult for our learner to get formal education in second or foreign language. Thus through psycholinguistic, especially language acquisition, perspective foreign language teaching can be a good asset for motivating children to be multilingual from the very beginning of their school years.

### **Sociolinguistic Perspective**

Sociolinguistics is the scientific study of language in relation to society. 'Society and language are mutually indispensable (Britannica, 2005). The world is changing into a small global village and the global villagers are developing a global culture and likely to develop a global language. Along with increasing influence of globalization the number of language in the world is decreasing dramatically. Graddol (2007) states that the number of languages in 15<sup>th</sup> century was more than 14,000 now the number falls to 6000. 'There are about 6,000 languages spoken worldwide, but 90 % of these are in some danger of falling into disuse. More than half the world's population speaks one of just five languages - Chinese, English, Hindi, Russian, and Spanish' (Educational Encyclopedia 2000). We can take an example of Nepal where Sanskrit

language is limited only in ritual performances. Several languages have been dead and many of the existing languages are queuing to receive death in the foreseeable future.

In this way from sociolinguistic perspective by analyzing the dwindling number of world languages we can say that in the coming future there will be less languages and the medium of instruction won't be a great problem. But, this conclusion should be taken very cautiously because it engenders another threat for entire human civilization. The threat is that should we preserve linguistic diversity or let the homogenization of language in the name globalization go without any interruption.

### **Political Perspective**

Politics is the main system of a country. Each and every phenomenon of the nation is affected by the polity the nation adopts. The mother tongue instruction can be problematic when the nation is multilingual like Nepal. The strategy either to implement mother tongue instruction or second language instruction may decide whether the country to be left multilingual or force it to make monolingual. 'Multilingual states can exist and prosper; Switzerland is a good example. But linguistic rivalry and strife can be disruptive' (Britannica, 2005).

The linguistic boundaries between rich and poor are usually quite clear. The elite speak the language of education, governance and other official domains, while marginalized groups speak languages or dialects that are not valued or even recognized outside their communities (UNESCO, 2007). Despite the research consensus multilingual education in the early years is still unusual in the world. There must the policy of the government on the medium of instruction to delimit the common consensus on mother tongue instruction.

If we see the things from historical point of view the opposition to multilingual education is a result of colonialism, whose local political elites and international agencies have promoted colonial language to detriment of local ones. Some people also claim that in multilingual societies, bilingual education is generally too challenging to implement; it is too expensive; it would prevent children from learning other languages; social and political division (Robinson, 2005).

However, we can undoubtedly say that the medium of instruction has been the language of elites and reach people. So, forcing all the minorities to learn in such medium is no more than curtailing their fundamental rights. If a nation believes in social inclusion mother tongue instruction can be the best means for incorporating minority groups because 'a language can become or be made a focus of loyalty for a minority community that thinks itself suppressed, persecuted, or subjected to administration' (Britannica, 2005).

### **Cultural Perspective**

As stated above language is a part of culture. Culture covers a very wide area of human life and behavior; and language is manifestly a part, probably the most important part of it' (Britannica, 2005). Each linguistic group may do have their culture. Multilingual education can promote greater social tolerance among linguistic groups. By facilitating the integration of different cultures and traditions into the curriculum, the use of local languages can enrich the content of education for all children (Benson 2002, as cited in UNESCO 2007)

The heart of inclusive education lies in acculturating each other to live in the state of togetherness. So, in order to facilitate the children of all cultural groups the provision of mother tongue instruction is very much essential. It not only encourages them to learn by associating curricular knowledge with cultural knowledge but also preserves the cultural heritage of multicultural nation like Nepal.

### **Gender Perspective**

According to UNESCO report (2007) mother tongue instruction is also important for promoting gender equality and social inclusion. The researches show that girls in bilingual classes stay in school longer and more girls enroll in school when they can learn in a language that is familiar to them.

Similarly, researches in bilingual education in Africa and Latin America have found that girls, who learn in familiar languages stay in school longer, are more likely to be identified as good students, do better on achievement tests, and repeat grades often than girls who do not get home language instruction. If we see the case in Nepal as well the girls are like to be monolingual in their early years because they have less contact with the people who speak other language.

Especially the girls of minorities and indigenous communities are deprived of learning Nepali language than their male counterparts. So using their language as the medium of instruction might increase the enrollment rate of the Nepalese children.

### **Pedagogical Perspective**

There is no valid research to substantiate whether a particular language is better for the medium of instruction. Psycholinguists claim that all languages are equal, so far as language as a means of communication is concerned. Ying Lao and Stephen Krashen (1999) who carried out a research in China reported that, ‘in spite of the initial opposition from parents, students, teachers and administrators mother-tongue teaching has provided a positive, non-threatening learning environment for students, and the feeling that they are making progress in English. Students in Chinese-medium programs appear to be more active, appear to learn more subject matter, enjoy school more, and are improving in English’<sup>1</sup>

Similar stories can be heard in other multilingual nations including Nepal. Low enrolment rate and high drop out rate of students in Nepal is because of the difficulty created by the language of instruction. “If children of aadibasi/janajati (indigenous people) had the opportunity to learn, read and write in their own language, it would help reduce the dropout of aadibasi/janajati children from the schools” (Limbu 2003)

One of the biggest obstacles to Education for All remains in place: the use of foreign language for teaching and learning (UNESCO 2007). As stated above forcing children to learn a new language before they can learn anything else creates an educational handicap that should not exist. Use of the home language in school increases parent participation and influence. The parents would be happy when their children use their language in learning new knowledge because to a greater extent their identity lies in the language they have been using from the very beginning of their ancestral generation. Moreover, the parents are likely to help their children if they acquire education in their mother tongue.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.ncela.gwu.edu](http://www.ncela.gwu.edu)

Another advantage of mother tongue instruction is related to the teachers. The teachers from the same linguistic and cultural communities as their students may have greater academic influence and are less likely to exploit female students.

The most significant merit of mother tongue instruction is that once a child can read and write one language, the skills are transferable to other languages (UNESCO, 2007). For example, a child who acquires his primary education in Tamang Language (his mother tongue) and admits in lower secondary level where he has to study in Nepali language may transfer his skills of Tamang Language to learn in Nepali (second language).

### **Mother tongue instruction In Nepal**

During the Panchayat Era the nation focused on 'one language, one culture and one nation'. The rulers were enthusiastic to homogenize the heterogeneous situatedness of the nation by highlighting Nepali language and culture. So curriculum restricted other language other than Nepali language to be used as medium of instruction. The concept of mother tongue instruction came with the dawn of democracy in 2046. The constitution of Nepal 1990, article 18, Clause 2 stipulated, "Each community shall have the right to operate schools up to the primary level in its own mother tongue for imparting education to its children." In 2006 another historic metamorphosis took place in Nepal and a new constitution was formed which is known as Interim Constitution 2007. The constitution has also made a provision in article 17 that the primary education can be imparted in the mother tongue of the students.

As per the provision made in the constitution, the system of providing basic education in children's mother tongue as a medium of instruction has been initiated by developing curriculum, course books, and support materials in their mother tongues. The mother tongues and primary curriculum textbooks developed so far are: Rai, Bantawa, Limbu, Tamang, Newari, Maithili, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Tharu, Magar, Sherpa, Gurung, Chamling. The dictionaries are also prepared the languages like Bantawa, Rai, Gurung, Yakkha, Sherpa, Dura, and Majhi.

Besides the advantages discussed above it may foster hundreds of indigenous languages of different ethnic groups on the verge of extinction. This attempt not only facilitates the siblings of minorities but also preserves the invaluable linguistic and cultural identities of the multilingual country of our kind.



We need to be prepared both academically and mentally to implement the strategy of mother tongue instruction. The curriculum developed from mother tongue instruction point of view may include diversity in national education system. The system can be more inclusive to mainstream minorities in the national level.

## **Conclusion**

Various researches have figured out that mother tongue instruction has positive influence in cognitive and linguistic development of children. Though the psycholinguistic perspective seems to support foreign language instruction as it bears some fruits because the students can learn second language easily at earlier stages looking through other perspectives it seems that mother tongue instruction is the best means of imparting education at primary level.

Looking mother tongue instruction through sociolinguistic lens I came to know that the number of languages in the world is alarmingly dwindling. The world is getting more globalized and a global variety of language is likely to be developed. In this circumstance teaching in global language is good. However, to preserve linguistic heritage of a particular society or community we should use the mother tongue of that community. It will create social cohesion and work forward for preserving and promoting local language.

Politically, mother tongue instruction is vehicle for social integration and means for reducing social stratification by accounting the language of socially backward people. So-called standard language is the language of elites. Mother tongue instruction is better for creating social equality.

Mother tongue instruction preserves cultural diversity and helps to promote gender equality by empowering women of underprivileged groups.

In this way we can say that mother tongue instruction in the country like Nepal is a good approach for creating favorable academic environment, especially for the people in minority whose languages are disappearing due to the influence of dominant national language and global variety of language.

## Recommendations

On the basis of my study on the mother tongue instruction I would like to give some recommendations to the concerned personalities.

- Linguistic minorities should be encouraged to preserve their linguistic and cultural heritage
- Rather than teaching all subjects in the mother tongue certain periods of curriculum should be allocated for studying in the mother tongue
- Mother tongue teaching shouldn't encourage learners to neglect foreign language.
- There is no harm in creating a multilingual learning environment in primary level.
- There should be the provision of studying indigenous language in the college levels
- Despite various problems like producing instructional materials, producing qualified teachers, assessment process and many more mother tongue instruction is a better approach to meet the EFA millennium goal.

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