

# Promoting lifelong learning in multilingual context: a case from Nepal

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(December, 2011)

## Abstract

*Nepal is a multilingual country with low adult literacy rate (about 57% in 2008). Through different policy documents and motivation from some of the transnational organizations such as UNESCO, Nepal is on the process of adopting lifelong learning perspective as a major educational policy. In this context the article raises two issues: how to preserve and promote linguistic diversity and how to provide lifelong learning opportunities in such multilingual context. For addressing these issues, the article argues that multilingual lifelong learning policy –in all three modes of learning: formal, non-formal and informal - could be a suitable educational policy for Nepal.*

**Key words:** multilingualism, lifelong learning, mother tongue based education, and educational policy

## Introduction

Because of growing market competitiveness and the necessity for increasing knowledge and skills to adapt to the competitive world we need to learn. Learning in formal institutions - such as schools and universities - has been inadequate to compete in this globalised world<sup>i</sup>. Thus, it is the demand of twenty first century that we need throughout out life to be an active global citizen<sup>ii</sup>. Hence, 'learning' has crossed the boundary of formal schooling and has become a lifelong process. Lifelong learning has been an everyday vocabulary of the people who are directly or indirectly associated with education as a field of study and practice. It has been viewed as a "lifespan endeavour, whether in the formal, non-formal or informal mode, to enrich the quality of life" (Abukari, 2005, p. 143).

Some of the global and transnational organizations<sup>iii</sup> such as United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Organization for Economic Cooperation and

Development (OECD), European Union (EU), World Bank (WB), and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) are developing policies and programs to make lifelong learning a reality (ILO, 2004). As members of these transnational organizations, different countries in the world have adopted lifelong learning perspective as an important educational policy for their human capital formation. In the case of Nepal, initiatives have been taken to promote lifelong learning.

Regmi (2009) carried out a research on the readiness of different educational stakeholders – university professors, top-level bureaucrats, senior development activists, and educational policy experts – and concluded that environment for lifelong learning should be provided through the recognition of non-formal and informal learning in Nepal.

Some of the policy documents of Nepal such as School Sector Reform Plan (GON-MOES, September, 2007), Three Year Interim Education Plan (TYIEP, 2007-2010), Non-Formal Education Policy (NFEP, 2007), and Open and Distance Learning Policy Framework (GON-MOES, 2006b) have talked about recognition of non-formal and informal learning, which can be taken as a positive presage for opening up new avenues for lifelong learning in Nepal (Regmi, 2009).

However, there are many issues to be considered while implementing lifelong learning perspective as a major educational policy. Crossley (2010) claims that contextual factors of individual countries have to be given important consideration while exploiting such transnational educational policies.

One of the most important contextual factors in Nepal is multilingualism. There are around 125 languages and their respective dialects spoken in different communities of Nepal (UNESCO, 2007). The issues of multilingual education has been a crucial policy discourse since mother tongue instruction got space in the Constitution of Nepal in 1990 (Regmi, 2008). In the Constitution, in Article 18, Clause 2 it is stipulated that “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 - 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.

Notwithstanding the importance of multilingualism as an asset for imparting primary education in children's mother tongues, the country needs to be prepared for providing opportunity for thousands of adults speaking minority languages – the languages other than Nepali – to acquire basic literacy skills in their first language. This seems to be the most crucial urge as we see the figure of adult literacy (i.e. only 57.9% in 2008) rate with about 50% illiteracy among females. Besides that there is still high female youth (age 15-24) illiteracy (i.e. 25%) rate (The World Bank, 2008). This figure clearly indicates that lifelong learning couldn't be achieved unless Nepal makes a legal provision and implements it for educating adult illiterates. The objective of this article is to discuss the importance of multilingualism and considerations to be taken into account while implementing lifelong learning policy in such multilingual context. Let me discuss some of the theoretical issues associated with multilingualism and language learning.

### **Language learning**

Researchers have shown that bilingual or multilingual people can have the potential to develop better intelligence than monolinguals do (Nayak, 1990). Sociolinguists claim that a polyglot always has better position in society. In this era of globalization the importance of having mastery over more than one language has ever been widening (Graddol, 2006). In the context of Nepal, which is rich in linguistic diversity, there is a need of systematic strategies for inter-ethnic facilitation for learning each other's languages. As anticipated by different scholars, systematic strategic linguistic interventions of such kind would mitigate the probable problems in rebuilding the nation making it suitable for all castes and creeds. Then, an important question emerges; can we create such an environment to motivate different ethnic groups to learn the language of another group? For example, can we motivate the Tamangs to learn the language of Gurungs?

From the very beginning of human civilization people remained curious to interact and when the languages developed in various forms they wanted to avoid communication gap by learning each other's language. Inter-group communication and diffusion of a group to more subgroups gave birth to several languages. But, unfortunately the number of languages in the world is in dwindling trend (Graddol, 2006). Nepal has also lost many indigenous languages in the past and some of the languages are on the verge of extinction. Preserving and promoting languages have been a burning problem in Nepal (UNESCO, 2005). One of the solutions could be motivating

people to learn the language of other ethnic groups. For this, we need to address some of the critical issues pertinent to the theories of language learning.

How language is learnt? Is learning first and second language same? How a child becomes a fluent user of his/her mother tongue at 4/5 years despite the complexity inherent in each language of the world? Do adults learn the second language in the same way that children learn their first language? Researchers have given plausible findings but the answers of these questions are still shrouded in mysteries.

Psycholinguists claim that language learning occurs in an order. There is a consistent route and rate of first language learning (Krashen, 1982). They further claim that second language acquisition also follows the same route and rate. Some psychologists claim that all individuals are different, and convinced by the same principle, psycholinguists, especially those following behaviourism as a guiding philosophical doctrine, claim that there are individual differences in the process of learning a second language – no two learners learn second language in exactly the same way (Ehrman, 2003). The major factors are: age, aptitude, cognitive style, motivation and personality. The question – how to create environment for learning each other's languages – remains unanswered.

There are several theories on Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Some of them are acculturation model, accommodation theory, discourse theory, monitor model, and universal hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). The acculturation theory acclaims that the best way of making people acquire second language is to provide opportunity to be exposed with the second language. If we believe in this theory, then, a probable solution could be motivating people to learning each others' culture and creating environment conducive for cross-culture acculturation.

Supporting to a large extent to acculturation model the accommodation theory of SLA asserts that acquisition of second language depends on the looseness and compactness of L1 group (in-group) and L2 group (out-group). If the learner groups have weak solidarity then their chances of interaction with another group are higher. Intra-group motivation weakens intergroup motivation leading to less chances of developing L2 competence (Krashen, 1982). This theory also asserts that the social statuses of the two groups play important role. This theory engenders another important issue that goes against communal cohesion in ethnic communities. In a nutshell, the

theory implicates that to create inter-ethnic language learning environment we should weaken the cohesion of a particular ethnic group so as to entice them to accommodate with another ethnic group. In the context of Nepal, is it justifiable to weaken the solidarity and cohesion within an ethnic group speaking a single indigenous language? Definitely, the answer is ‘not justifiable’. Now it is clear that those theories of second language learning fail to address the current situation of Nepal. Furthermore, it also becomes clear that creating environment for learning each other’s languages also becomes problematic.

Notwithstanding the importance of promoting multilingualism in Nepal by promoting the environment for learning inter-ethnic language learning I would like to focus on promoting lifelong learning in multilingual context. Let me relate the linguistic issues with the issues of lifelong learning as major potential educational policy of Nepal.

### **Multilingual lifelong education**

The term multilingual education was adopted in 1999 in UNESCO’s General Conference Resolution 12 to refer to the use of at least three languages, for example, the mother tongue, a regional or national language and an international language in education (UIL, 2010). The second and third requirements have been fulfilled by adopting Nepali as national language and English as international language in schools and universities. But the first criteria, which I believe is the most important in the context of promoting lifelong learning has not been addressed properly yet.

In lifelong learning perspective, we focus on how knowledge and skills acquired are relevant to ones’ life. Along with this we must consider the fact that good quality learning is not only about becoming more competent, polyvalent and productive but also about nurturing diversity and being well rooted in one’s culture and traditions. Getting educated doesn’t mean that a girl of an indigenous Nepali family, lets’ say the girl of Chepang community, becomes able to shun her Chepang wisdom and epistemology and assimilate with Nepali and European culture. This implies the pivotal role of languages in achieving quality learning. Language and communication or the medium of instruction are without doubt two of the most important factors in the learning process (UIL, 2010).

While considering multilingualism in educational policy formation process, a country has to face many challenges. For example, in the context of Nepal there are many languages, neither the country has adequate human resources to produce materials in different languages nor does it have strong educational infrastructure. It has been difficult to implement mother tongue instruction policy even at primary level. In such situations imparting adult education such as non-formal education, literacy education and informal education in minority language becomes really an ambitious project. However, it is an obligatory prerequisite for achieving literacy goal and produce literate labour force for the overall development of the country. But saying that there is no need to be discouraged and get pessimist. In fact “multilingualism is the norm everywhere; it is neither a threat nor a burden (UIL, 2010).

In the past, especially during Panchayat era, in Nepal multilingualism was seen as a threat to nation states’ cohesion and economic development. Guided by the predominant European concept of nation building as – “one country, one culture, one language” (UIL, 2010, p. 15) – Rana System and Panchayat system discouraged minority languages and Nepali became not only a lingua franca but the language of instruction for all. As a consequence, ethno-linguistic minorities endured higher rate of illiteracy, a higher level of poverty and a poorer quality of life (UNESCO, 2007).

Even today language policy is a political decision, but political decisions should always serve the best and highest interests of the community or nation. Hence, while opting for lifelong learning policy, Nepal should develop multilingual adult education programmes so as to facilitate a large number of indigenous ethnic populace that would finally help to achieve the goal of universal basic literacy.

Multilingual adult education has a lot of advantages. Firstly, it may provide a better sense of belongingness to the people towards their community and the nation as a whole. Secondly, it will reduce barriers to participate in lifelong learning activities (Rubenson & Desjardins, 2009). Among three types of barriers – personal and family, institutional and dispositional – mother tongue based adult education can help to reduce the second and third types of barriers. To illustrate it, the institutional barriers are those structural mechanisms that are not favourable to the time and necessity of adults. Many indigenous adults remain busy during the day in their profession. What they need is the learning environment in the evening. And more importantly

what they need to learn is enhancement of their traditional skills to increase efficiency in their indigenous profession, let's say for instance in making baskets out of bamboo. To reduce such institutional barriers Nepal needs to design such programs that are according to the need and interest of the adults.

Thirdly, multilingual education would create demand, for example, for access to information in the respective languages and thus lay the foundation for active participation (UIL, 2010). This relates to the third barrier – i.e. dispositional barrier - of Rubenson and Desjardins (2009) taxonomy of barriers for participation in lifelong learning. Adults do not participate actively when they feel that the achievements from literacy and lifelong learning programmes are little or no use for them. They show their reluctance towards using other means such as Information Communication Technologies (Radio and TV for most of the ethnic adults in Nepal) to ameliorate their learning.

Language and education are closely related. Since language is a main means of human communication, almost all educational activities, including literacy, use language in some way. In multilingual settings, decisions about the relationship between language and education are not straightforward and never easy. Instead, serious consideration is needed to determine which languages to use in education and literacy programmes (UNESCO, 2007). The serious consideration in the case of Nepal is to respect linguistic diversity and provide lifelong learning opportunities without discouraging multilingualism.

The Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (EFA 1990) and the Dakar World Education Forum (2000) have positively influenced Nepal. They have made literacy and NFE programmes part of the EFA implementation activities and have thus helped adult literacy programmes to go beyond their conventional scope of illiterate adults to include a wider target group of people (children, girls and women) who are assisted to learn the competencies that would open their door towards the wider world of work and education. Nepal has also developed a National Plan of Action with a time frame to achieve a 6+ age group literacy rate of 90 percent by the year 2015 (UNESCO Kathmandu, 2006).

But there is not any such explicit policy provision to provide adult education (the literacy programme) in the mother tongue of adults who speak the language other than Nepali. Some

non-governmental organizations have been found taking initiatives on their own. World Education Nepal and its local partner non-governmental organization, Backward Society Education (BASE), have been piloting a Tharu mother tongue literacy project with support from UNESCO Kathmandu (UNESCO, 2007). The primary aim was to provide an opportunity for illiterate Tharu youth and adults to build literacy and numeracy skills through the medium of their first language. But there have been no programs particularly implemented for providing ethnic minorities with lifelong learning opportunities.

### **Lifelong learning and mother tongue**

Lifelong learning has three fundamental constituents. They are formal learning, non-formal learning, and informal learning. The European Commission defines the three constituents of learning as follows:

*Formal learning* is typically provided by an education or training institute, structured and leading to certification. Formal learning is intentional from the learner's perspective.

*Non-formal learning* is not provided by an education or training institution and typically it doesn't lead to certification. However, it is structured. Non-formal learning is intentional from learner's point of view.

*Informal learning* results from daily life activities related to work, family or leisure. It is not structured. Typically, it doesn't lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is non-intentional (or incidental/random)(UNESCO, 2005).

Formal learning came as an outcome of mass schooling that all the nations including Nepal are using to provide the need for educated human power in their respective country. The non-formal is used as a complementary programme to formal schooling. When formal education is perceived as inadequate to provide access to different people for getting educated the nation implements non-formal education programmes. But both of them don't take learning as a lifelong process. In the case of formal education, it is assumed as though learning starts as school and ends at university. But much human learning takes place outside those institutional boundaries.

Formal education normally uses a dominant language as the medium of instruction. Those who use that language as mother tongue always become the fortunate citizens of that country. But for



many people who use languages other than national or official languages always suffer in formal education. But in the case of informal learning, it is always the mother tongue that becomes the medium of learning. Hence it becomes a well evidenced argument that if we have to create lifelong learning environment in every family, in every rural homes, in every ethnic community and in every multilingual nation of the world we must focus on multilingual lifelong learning. We must provide opportunities to the ethnic adults to learn in their own languages.

Obviously, first language acquisition is also one of the most important aspect of human learning and without doubt it is one of the crucial portion of lifelong learning when we take lifelong learning as cradle-to-grave learning as it starts at birth and ends with death. Without any investment, every child learns his/her first language. But with systemic language planning and empowerment of only one or a few languages in multilingual country like Nepal, the nation has deprived of children to be lifelong learners. To state this in more straightforward way, when the state provides job opportunities to those who can use Nepali as a medium of official communication – furthermore when the state provides legitimacy to only one language as a medium of instruction – then, parents are automatically compelled to speak the dominant language at their home. This tendency has curtailed the chances of getting their ethnic languages acquired by their new generations. It has directly affected child learning and truncated the spectrum of lifelong learning from the very first birthday of an ethnic child.

Thus we can draw three different implications from the discussion above. Firstly, Nepal has to continue promoting mother tongue instruction at primary level, which has been legalised through constitutional provisions. The primary level curriculum and textbooks developed in mother tongue so far – according to Regmi (2008) Curriculum Development Center has developed curricula in 12 different ethnic languages. Much time and resources have to be spent on this regard so as to facilitate hundreds non-Nepali speaking children. Teachers are to be trained and university has to make provision to produce graduates who can teach in different languages at least at primary level.

Secondly, Nepal needs to make non-formal adult education policies in different indigenous and ethnic languages so as to reduce illiteracy among those indigenous adult communities. The Non-formal Education Center (NFEC) that holds sole responsibility to provide basic adult literacy in

the country should take strong initiatives on this regard. The non-formal and literacy programs so far developed have neglected the importance of providing mother tongue based programmes.

Thirdly, due emphasis has to be given to informal mode of learning as it holds the largest part of human learning. Informal learning do have different variants such as the acquisition of indigenous and generational knowledge, incidental and experiential learning, learning from day-to-day activities, learning the first language, and while facing real-world problems. These learning are taking place without any interventions from outside agency such as governmental and non-governmental institutions and organization. But this is not the time to 'let it go as it is'. We have to be prepared for global competition and we have to base out economy on knowledge as advocated by some of the transnational organizations such as OECD, EU and even UNESCO. For this Nepal needs to provide multitude of opportunities to learn whenever, wherever and however Nepalese adults feel comfortable to learn. And those opportunities, without doubt, should be provided in the mother tongue of the adults because - it is my strong argument that - there is no other better medium of learning than the learners' first language or the mother tongue.

### **Conclusion**

Learning is a lifelong process. The objective of educational policy of every country including Nepal is to provide opportunities for learning throughout the life of each citizen. The formal and non-formal educations are important but not sufficient for enhancing lifelong learning. The most important constituent of lifelong learning is informal education that happens mostly in the first language (mother tongue) of every citizen. One of the important challenges is providing lifelong learning opportunities to the adults who speak minority or indigenous languages and most often they are illiterate in the case of the countries like Nepal.

Because of dwindling trend of indigenous languages and the wisdom and epistemologies associated with them, there is an urgent need for a legal action to protect and promote those endangered languages. Motivating people to learn the languages of other ethnic groups could be a strategy, however, it becomes rhetoric rather than a reality. The article purposes that continuing to the provision of mother tongue instruction at primary level in schools, the government of Nepal should provide opportunities for mother tongue based non-formal and informal learning programmes to achieve the lifelong learning goal.

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### Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Because of the increased international integration of economic and educational activities

<sup>ii</sup> The world is a global village and all are interconnected in one way or the other and influence each other

<sup>iii</sup> The word 'transnational' is used instead of 'international' in order to show the influence of these organization not only between two or more countries but beyond them