

Ideologies of Policy Arbiters in Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Policy in the Nepalese Context

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Abstract

This article aims to identify the ideologies of school-head teachers towards a mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policy and analyse how these ideologies influence the implementation of MTB-MLE policy in schools in the context of Nepal. Adopting qualitative ethnographic research, two school-level policy arbiters (head teachers) were interviewed for the research data. Supplementary data were collected through telephone conversations. The data were discussed qualitatively, drawing upon Weinberg's (2021) role of micro-level policy arbiters in implementing MTB-MLE policy and three ideological frameworks by Bourdieu (1991): monolingual habitus, legitimate language, and symbolic power. Through the discussion of data, the article reveals that even though the MTB-MLE policy arbiters are well-informed about the value of MTB-MLE, they still seem reluctant to implement it. The policy arbiters are still implicitly or explicitly supporting monolingual or dominant language policy in education. The policy arbiters are influenced by the hegemony, globalization, and neoliberal ideologies of the English and Nepali languages. The article contradicts the coordination notion of Weinberg (2021) between policy arbiters; the issues of ideology seem to be stronger than the issue of coordination in MTB-MLE policy implementation.

Keywords: Ideologies, language policy, multilingual education, policy arbiters

Introduction

Recently, researchers in the field of language planning and policy have an increasingly resolute and genuine interest in mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE). MTB-MLE is a broad framework of educational provision, which essentially means using learners' first language or mother tongue as the primary media of instruction (Tupas, 2014). Even though the goal of MTB-MLE policy is to provide the learners with the opportunity to get an education in their own languages, the research shows that the true spirit of MTB-MLE is challenging to achieve. On this, Benson and Wong (2019) reveal that 50 per cent of the world's school children live in places where the home and school languages are not the same. However, they argue that even language may not be the only factor.

The issues in MTB-MLE are persistent in both global and Nepalese contexts as well. The constitution of Nepal 2015 has guaranteed the right to use all languages of the nation as the medium of instruction (Article, 31). Under this provision, National Curriculum Framework (2017) and National Education Policy (2019) have adopted MTB-MLE in Nepal, imagining to provide education in the mother tongues of the learners. However, Phyak (2021) argues that this multilingual imagining is hardly observed in public spheres, particularly in education, where the discourses on language policies reproduce "inequalities of multilingualism" (Tupas 2014). Similarly, the challenges that appear in the implementation of MTB-MLE appear in diversified forms. One form of a challenge, as Phyak (2021) states, is the discourse of multilingual education which unquestionably accepts the hegemony of English and Nepali at the expense of minoritized languages used by diverse communities across the country. The other challenges in MTB-MLE are related to the role of "policymakers" (Poudel & Choi, 2021) and 'policy arbiters' (Weinberg, 2020) agency. Similarly, Tupas (2014) argues that MTB-MLE continues to face structural and ideological challenges to its successful implementation. The ideological challenges involve the ideas, beliefs, and attitudes of the policymakers and policy arbiters which shape their dismissive or dispirited actions against MTB-MLE. The structural challenges include such ideas, beliefs and attitudes are embedded in how institutions work and think and how historical and socio-economic conditions have constructed social relations.

Thus, internalizing Weinberg's (2020) role of micro-level policy arbiters, this article basically aims to identify the ideologies of school-level policy arbiters (head teachers) towards the MTB-MLE policy. Then the article analyses how these ideologies influence the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy in schools in Nepal. To achieve the aims, the article will basically deal with two research questions: What ideologies do the head teachers have regarding the MTB-MLE policy? And how do these ideologies influence implementation of mother tongue-based education in school?

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

This article basically draws upon Weinberg's (2020) role of the policy arbiters' agency in implementing MTB-MLE. Additionally, the article analyses the data based on three ideological frameworks by Bourdieu (1991): first, monolingual habitus, which gives a theoretical basis for Nepal's national language ideology. Second, legitimate language underpins Nepal's mother tongue ideology. The third one is symbolic power which incorporates the neoliberal ideology of language.

Conceptualizing Ideology in Language

Language ideology can be understood in terms of perception, multiple views, and awareness of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group (Kroskrity, 2010). Similarly, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) assert that language ideologies contribute to the legitimation, production, and reproduction of power and inequality and accomplish it through social discursive practices in specific historical contexts. Studies carried out in different socio-historical contexts show the role of language in education for social reproduction, exclusion or inclusion in knowledge production, and for shaping how participants contribute either to furthering social reproduction or contesting it (Kiramba, 2018). Regarding language ideologies, Bourdieu (1991) proposes three conceptual frameworks: habitus, legitimate language, and symbolic power, which are relevant in discussing the ideologies in the discourse of LPP research.

"Neoliberal ideologies" (Block, 2010) can be discussed in terms of Bourdieu's (1991) symbolic power. The symbolic power of language

affords even limited proficiency in legitimated languages more social capital than proficiency in non-legitimated languages. Symbolic power is the “invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it, or even that they themselves exercise it” (p. 164). Neoliberalism takes language as power, commodity, language resource, and language as capital. This ideology takes English as a global language that helps people achieve financial goals. The implementation of LPP in Nepal has also been influenced by the neoliberal ideology of the English language. Phyak and Ojha (2019) reveal that English is taken as the language of the global market. This ideology against multilingual education policy drove public schools to adopt English as a medium of instruction policy. The neoliberal ideology that opens more space for English and Nepali languages is forcing policymakers and policy actors at the micro and macro levels to neglect the MTB-MLE in the context of Nepal.

National language/ monolingual ideology in LPP can also be connected to Bourdieu’s (1991) concept of habitus, which represents “a set of dispositions which incline agents to act and react in certain ways” (p. 12). Similarly, Gogolin (1997) opines that monolingual habitus frames only one given language as legitimate and tends to blind people to multilingual and multicultural life. It also connects to Bourdieu’s (1991) ‘legitimate language’, which involves standardization, in particular, and sets the ground for evaluating languages as legitimate. Nepalese LPP is also implicitly and explicitly influenced by national language or monolingual ideology. Even though the Constitution of Nepal, 1990, 2006, and 2015 recognize Nepal as a multilingual country, Nepali and English as a dominant ideology is deeply rooted in the minds of LPP stakeholders, such as policymakers, and policy actors. This kind of ideology in LPP and implementation contributes to what Skutnabb-Kangas (2008) terms as ‘linguistic genocide.’

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative ethnographic research design in which in-depth interviews were taken with the participants to obtain information. A semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain additional information, such as student details, teacher details, and SMC details. As a research site, two community schools from the Kailali district located in the densely populated area of Rana Tharu ethnicity have been

intentionally selected. One school, SSS (pseudonym), is from Godawari Municipality, and the other, DMTS (pseudonym), is from Dhangadhi Metropolitan city of Kailali district. As research participants, the head teachers of both schools were purposely selected. Both participants were physically approached and interviewed (for 40 minutes each) to collect the data for the research. Additional information was collected through telephone conversations. The interview was conducted in the Nepali language as both of them felt comfortable using Nepali. The data were noted, recorded, transcribed in written format, and then translated into English. Then, the data were presented and analysed according to the following theoretical framework.

Findings and Discussion

Head Teachers' Ideology in MTB-MLE

Since this article primarily aims at identifying the head teachers' ideology in MTB-MLE policy, the interview was taken with two secondary level school head teachers (head teacher of SSS and DMTS) who show a similar ideology in understanding the value of MTB-MLE in the school they work in. The first question concerned their opinion on their understanding of the MTB-MLE policy. In this regard, the head teacher of DMTS responded:

Our constitution has given the right to learn in students 'mother tongue. It makes learning and understanding easy. Students may feel more comfortable in learning in their own language rather than Nepali and English. Mother tongue education policy also helps in preserving and promoting the local language through education. (sic)

This view of the head teacher shows that he has a positive attitude towards the MTB-MLE policy. He seems to be fully aware of the value of mother tongue-based education. His positive attitudes also signal that local ethnic languages are of equal value to Nepali and English languages. The head teacher of SSS also showed a similar response in his understanding of the value of MTB-MLE. He further added:

We have visited some schools of Sindhupalchok and Dang where Tamang and Tharu languages respectively have been used as a medium of instruction successfully. I have also attended three training programmes which focused on the value of mother tongue education. (sic)

This response reveals that the head teachers have been given training and exposure for implementing MTB-MLE in their schools. They have also observed that MTB-MLE is successfully implemented in different ethnic and linguistic contexts.

Even though both schools have 60 to 70 per cent of students from the Rana Tharu community, the schools are not able/unwilling to implement Rana Tharu as a medium of instruction. Regarding this issue, the head teachers of both schools seem reluctant to use Rana Tharu as an MOI. In response to the question of why the school has not adopted Rana Tharu as an MOI at the primary level, the head teachers of both schools responded in the same way (responses of both participants are combined together):

Using Rana Tharu as an MOI is practically irrelevant in our school. The classes are multilingual. The students from other than Rana Tharu community will not accept Rana Tharu as MOI. On the other hand, all students including the Rana Tharu community prefer to learn in Nepali and English because Nepali is the national and official language and English language helps them to prepare for better careers in Nepal and abroad. (sic)

The response of the head teachers reflects several contradictory ideologies towards MTB-MLE. Even though they accept the value of MTB-MLE, their ideology in actual implementation is quite different. This ideology reflects what Bourdieu (1991) says, 'symbolic power'. Both head teachers believe that it is even better to teach in English than the local language because learning in English can help them find better financial and employment opportunities. This shows that they are guided by a neoliberal ideology that takes language as a commodity and capital (Block, 2010). The head teacher of SSS even dogmatically says that all students prefer to learn in Nepali and English. It seems that the school uses Nepali-only-medium of instruction not because of the students' interest but because of the teacher's own monolingual ideology. This ideology reflects Bourdieu's (1991) 'monolingual habitus' in MTB-MLE policy implementation.

I asked both participants about the perception of other stakeholders, such as parents, SMC, organizations working for the Rana Tharu community, and government officers, in implementing the Rana Tharu language as an MOI. The head teacher of SSS and DTMS responded:

Two INGOs, Backward Education Society (BES) and Save the Children, once organized a meeting with SMC and me about using Rana Tharu as MOI. They also showed the basic level curriculum prepared in the Rana Tharu language. But after that meeting neither, SMC chairperson nor parents and education authority took care of it. Political parties and local politicians are also careless about it. (sic)

In the case of SSS, some INGOs have attempted to implement Rana Tharu as MOI. However, parents, SMC, and government authorities have not played any role in implementing MTB-MLE in the school. However, in the case of DMTS, there seem to be no ideologies directly influencing implementing or not implementing Rana Tharu as an MOI. It implies that society still supports or is forced to support monolingual ideology. It is also possible that the government's ideology to legitimize the hegemony of the dominant language (Pennycook, 2002), such as English and Nepali, is invisibly functional in the failure of MTB-MLE. The interview also reveals an interesting fact. In policy arbitration, coordination between two agencies (head teacher and SMC chairperson) is essential (Weinberg, 2021). However, in the case of SSS and DTMS, the head teachers seem to be the only policy arbiter that influences the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy based on their own ideology.

Apart from the ideological orientations, the head teachers expressed their own practical problems in implementing Rana Tharu as the MOI in their schools. Regarding the question, what other factors contribute to their inability to implement Rana Tharu as a medium of instruction in their school, they responded (responses of both participants are presented combinedly):

It is difficult to run Rana Tharu as a medium of instruction in our schools because the classes are multilingual. The curriculum and course books are still not completely developed. We have lack of physical infrastructures. We also do not have sufficient and trained teachers to teach in the Rana Tharu medium. And importantly, there is a chance of decreasing the number of students in school because of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction. (sic)

The head teachers of both schools believe that implementing MTB-MLE in multilingual classes is difficult. Similarly, they blame the physical infrastructures, financial resources, and unavailability of the teacher as the barriers to implementing MTB-MLE. However, this ideology of the

head teachers seem contradictory in itself. While talking about the Rana Tharu language as MOI, they show such factors as the issues but have implemented English Medium Instruction (EMI) without any issues and challenges (they could have started Rana Tharu medium instruction in the same setting where they have started EMI). They claim that the number of students in EMI is increasing and also claim that the number of students will decrease in school if MTB-MLE is implemented. Such beliefs of the head teachers still seem to be influenced by the hegemonic ideology of the English language, neoliberal ideology, monolingual ideology, and ideology of legitimized languages.

Conclusion

Internalizing Weinberg's (2021) notion of coordination between two policy arbiters (head teacher and SMC chairperson) and Bourdieu's (1991) theoretical framework of monolingual habitus, legitimate language, and symbolic power, the article reveals that even though the MTB-MLE policy arbiters are well-informed about the value of MTB-MLE, they still seem to be reluctant to implement it into practice. The article also reveals that the policy arbiters are still implicitly or explicitly supporting monolingual or dominant language policy in education. Additionally, the article reveals that the policy arbiters are influenced by the hegemony, globalization, and neoliberal ideologies of the English and Nepali languages. The article also contradicts the 'coordination notion' of Weinberg (2021) between policy arbiters; the issues of ideology seem to be stronger than the issue of coordination in MTB-MLE policy implementation.

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