

# Smooth Transfer from Mother Tongue to Language of Wider Community

Bibek Panthee

Section Officer, Ministry of Education

## *Abstract*

*Language can be viewed as a tool of communication as well as the source of exercising power. Many things exist in language or live through language. It is vital for our survival. In multi-lingual Nepal, monolingual instruction is the dominant practice in schooling. It is always debatable which language should be used as a medium of instruction in education. Whether a mother tongue or national language or a global language should be given priority is still unanswerable. All languages have equal footing and they have right and choice to develop their mother tongues. We are now in the prompt need of promoting all mother tongues and at the same time, the need of contact language or national language to reach wider community is there. Why is mother tongue education essential in schooling? And, how could it be possible? How can we ensure smooth transfer from mother tongue to the language of wider community? These are the issues that this article attempts to explore.*

## *Keywords*

Mother tongue, National language, Global language, Medium of instruction

## **Context and premises of the issue**

Language is simply a means for expression. One definition or concept may not be capable of encompassing all the things that language is or does. All things exist in language. It is vital for our survival. Language is an invention with human efforts to share their ideas and views. So, it is always evolving, developing and flowing with human being. Gupta (2002) opines that languages are not things; they are aspects of human behavior. Here, it can be said that language lives in its use. So language of everyone becomes concern in day-to-day life as well as in education, as language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom (Benson, 2005).

A basic tenet of the language rights movement is that minorities should be educated through the medium of their mother tongues (Gupta, 1996). In addition, genuine ethnic problems in the education of pupils belonging to minorities manifest themselves in three main areas: language, culture, and discrimination (IEP, 1999). There is a growing body of literature that shows that while national governments in general have paid lip- service to the various policy statements, declarations and normative instruments they have been parties to, ironically, learners and parents often prefer second (colonial) languages as medium of instruction to their first or mother language, often seen as an impediment to social status and mobility (Owhotu, 2009).

Nepal is a multilingual country. The monolingual instruction is the dominant practice in education. This is a sensitive issue in both political and educational domains. Because languages

२४९

Teacher Education 2072

play the particular roles in ensuring national cohesion and integration, and the strongly symbolic significance of languages as a marker of identity and membership of a community (Beacco & Others, 2009) has also been gaining popularity. Therefore, the problem emerges from the mismatch of the reality of languages and educational practices in our nation. Many mother tongues are to be threatened, endangered and ultimately died. Why is mother tongue education essential in schooling? And, how could it be possible? How can we move smooth transfer from mother tongue to the language of wider community? These are the issues that this article tries to explore.

### **Efforts made to resolve the issue in Nepal and abroad**

Language is the everybody's concern in the modern world. Language is mostly used to transform knowledge at school (Avermeat, 2006). The concern on mother tongue is increased with the phenomenon of language shift, immigration, globalization and nationalization. There have been many efforts to preserve and promote languages of the worlds. The first international attempt is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights- 1948, which ensured the right to mother tongue. After that, there are many conventions and seminars on the concerns of the languages of the world. The rights over culture and language are the major issues of these discussions.

With the international attempt for education for all and school for all, mother tongue education came to be foregrounding issue all over the world, particularly those nations which have linguistic diversities like Nepal. But these international efforts are compatible or not in local context are to be questioned. Universal recognition of the ideal of human rights can be harmful if universalism is used to deny or mask the reality of diversity (Sen, 2004). In Nepal, we have included mother tongue education in EFA action plan. The interim constitution 2063 has committed mother tongue education at least in primary level. Education act and rule provide the same commitment on mother tongues in education. Our development policy and education plan are geared on the destination of insuring mother tongue in education. In some of the languages, curriculum and textbooks are also developed and are coming into effect in few respective places.

The comprehensive research on language management scheme in Nepal by Koirala (2010) explores the situation of languages in Nepal and other countries and paves the routes for federal Nepal with references to languages. He says that language has become the playground for political leaders as political game, for academicians as research game and for linguists as cultural game. The smooth transfer from mother tongues to the language of wider communication can be helpful for linguistic co-existence policy and simultaneous development of all languages. The role of teacher being as multilingual resource is vital to transform the prevailing situation of schooling. Language documentation, innovation in the model of language teaching, language transfer as an integral part of instruction, language resources centers, literacy on all languages, structural-functional relation with classical languages etc are the some of the approaches forwarded by him.

### **Theoretical and experiential arguments towards the efforts**

There are different arguments for and against mother tongue instruction. The determinists claim over mother tongue as they view mother tongue is the only way that child can imagine his

or her worldview. There are others who claim language of wider communication. Alexander and Busch (2007) advocate the solid grounding of the learner in his/her indigenous language. Mother tongue education, they hold, promotes indigenous knowledge and cultural identity while multiculturalism promotes relativity, comparative insight into linguistic diversity and balanced global citizenship.

Talking about language of instruction, there are two types of instructions. One is the instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called “submersion” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). Another is the immersion in which language of instruction belongs to the parts of the speakers. Since research has consistently shown that the use of the first language of the learner in formal and non-formal learning contexts results in increased access and equity, improved learning outcomes, reduced repetition and drop out rates; social-cultural benefits of identity and lower overall costs (Owhotu, 2009). In this sense, it is imperative to provide education through mother tongue in the schools.

The hegemony of one language creates many barriers in the process of learning where there are diversities of languages in the school community. The homogenization of one language in multi-linguistic community can potentially lead to negative effects in terms of equal opportunities for learning (Avermeat, 2006). He adds that dealing with socially disadvantaged learners essentially means being able to deal with diversity and heterogeneity in mainstream classrooms and we can see language learning as a process of social construction, diversity and heterogeneity is an advantage rather than a disadvantage.

One of the benefits of mother tongue education is that learners can gradually transfer skills from the familiar language to the unfamiliar one (Benson, 2005). He claims that use of a familiar language to teach beginning literacy facilitates an understanding of sound-symbol or meaning-symbol correspondence while submersion programs may succeed in teaching students to decode words in the L2, but it can take years before they discover meaning in what they are reading. For him mother tongue education is better than submersion instruction.

His comprehensive report on the benefits of mother tongue education shows that since instruction of content area is provided in the L1, the learning of new concepts is not postponed until children become competent in the L2. Unlike submersion teaching, which is often characterised by lecture and rote response, bilingual instruction allows teachers and students to interact naturally and negotiate meanings together, creating participatory learning environments that are conducive to cognitive as well as linguistic development.

Ghawi (2003) also points out that L1 is the language of cognitive development in children. He says that educational achievement can be enhanced through mother tongue education. In addition to cognitive and educational achievement, identification with the culture of a mother tongue is a necessary component of a self- fulfilling life (Gupta, 1996). It also helps in affective domain, involving confidence, self-esteem and identity, is strengthened by use of the L1, increasing motivation and initiative as well as creativity. L1 classrooms allow children to be themselves and develop their personalities as well as their intellects, unlike submersion classrooms where they are forced to sit silently or repeat mechanically, leading to frustration and ultimately repetition, failure and dropout (Benson, 2005).

२४

Teacher Education 2072

Beacco and Others (2009) in this context claim that the learner's progress in school may suffer if competence in the first language is not adequately developed in the first instance. At the beginning, mother tongue is essential for smooth running of child development. The proponents of smooth transfer from mother tongue to language of wider community claim that students become bilingual and bi-literate. Benson (2005) writes that bilingual programs encourage learners to understand, speak, read and write in more than one language. In contrast, submersion programs attempt to promote skills in a new language by eliminating them from a known language, which may actually limit learner competence in both.

Mother tongue education is not an easy phenomenon. It can bring various types of challenges at the beginning of the stage. IEP' report (1999) lists like: a lack of resources for materials development; a lack of skilled teachers able to teach in minority languages; the low prestige of minority language in many cultures; and an inadequate provision of space in the curriculum for everyday and formal language usage in the minority language. Gupta (1996) says that it is hard to imagine that all languages could be equally privileged in a country. But these challenges are the opportunities to exploit.

Every one accepts that education through mother tongue is the right of child. The policy makers believe that there should be this right practiced at least at elementary level. If we provide education through mother tongue in elementary level, students will be advantageous. But there are some myths in our context. One language one nation is the long- standing myth. This is the outcome of colonial mind set which link one language with the solidarity of the nation. Although, we have managed provisions for mother tongue education, our culture is not radically changed.

Another myth is that mother tongue cannot carry modern concept. This is the impact of modernization theory, which attempts to divide society in the dichotomy of modern and traditional, civilized and savages and Nepali language versus others. In fact, there are no modern and traditional, this is the outcome of the culture of dominant group to exercise their hegemony over the other. Next myth claims that second language is only the global language. All are these myths because they are no inherent features in any language that make language global or local, traditional and modern. Languages are the product of human being and they can improve, change, develop and modify, as we desire. These phenomena are associated with human being but not imminent features of language itself.

२४४

### **Charting out alternatives**

Teacher Education 2072

In the context of diverse languages the medium of instruction in schooling is the persistent issue. Mother tongue in elementary level can be the best alternative. However, there needs to be a contact language which helps in unity in diversity. In this sense, a second language could also be used as lingua franca and a medium of instruction in countries with so many tribal languages such as South Africa and India (Ghawi, 2003). This is the similar case in Nepal too. And there needs global language in the era of global village. But, how can school meet all these objectives? The paper attempts to suggest a scheme of providing instruction through mother tongue to national language and then global language gradually.

We need a democratic language policy as one of the most urgent priorities for enhancing the

possibility of realizing the goals of promoting and maintaining linguistic diversity and spreading literacy skills as widely as possible (Alexander and Busch, 2007). A balanced approach to the use of first and second languages in the curriculum would produce better results in learners' cognitive achievement and a balanced socio-cultural identity (Owhotu, 2009). Avermeat (2006) makes comprehensive lists of alternatives on how we can go smooth transfer from mother tongue to the language of wider community. He says that instead of stigmatizing a certain group of children and their (home) environment by putting them in separate classrooms and providing separate 'prevention' programs, schools need to constantly reflect upon the quality of their language teaching for heterogeneous groups. Rather than homogeneous pull-out classes we advocate additional pupil support within the mainstream classroom through: co-operative learning in mixed-ability groups; relating knowledge, content and topics with different socio-cultural background; contextualized language learning; a more interaction based approach where the teacher is no longer the central person who knows everything but a mediator for children who bring in experiences, knowledge from their social background; and finally, a more constructivist instead of a transmission or instruction-driven model, where children can express their own meaning, can make links between their own knowledge and that of other children in order to acquire new knowledge.

Other alternatives are experimentation in small scale, in a national scale by top-down methods and bottom-up introduction through non-formal education practices are some approaches for introducing mother tongue-based schooling (Benson, 2005) and then move to the language of wider community. In this context, Alexander (1989) suggests that bottom-up practices are good foundation for strong programs because they allow all stakeholders to contribute to raising the status of the mother tongue in the community and classroom.

There is still another alternative in which two languages can go simultaneously in the school. This could include good quality bilingual education, which ensures an additive as opposed to subtractive approach to bilingualism (Beacco and Others, 2009). Subtractive approach is the colonial approach, which could result to be the death of mother tongues ultimately. So we need additive approach which role is supporting to each other. The latter approach is the only way to promote linguistic diversities in Nepal. This approach views diversities as a wonderful place for learning.

Participatory approach also enables those who are often marginalized and excluded by more top-down language planning process and by their separation and isolation from the production of knowledge and the formation of policies and practices to be included in decisions that affect their lives (Kothari, 1990). Thus, participation and inclusion of target groups not only in policy and programs of their mother tongues but also for awareness raising, documenting and revitalizing their mother tongue are necessary parts of language development.

## Conclusion

The process of choosing a medium of instruction is pedagogical as well as political issue. It has also long lasting impact on everybody life. Language is not only a tool for expression; it is also the source of exercising power over other. All things exist in language through communication. It is vital for our survival. In multi-lingual Nepal, the monolingual instruction is the dominant practice in education. It is always debatable which language should be used as a medium of

instruction in education. Whether a mother tongue or national language or a global language should be given priority is still unanswerable. All languages have equal footing, no doubt. All have right and choice to develop their tongues. We are in the prompt need of promoting all mother tongues and at the same time need of contact language or national language to reach in wider community. Global language is also imperative in the era of globalization. As it has been already discussed, the smooth transfer from mother tongue to the language of wider communication (national to global language) is the conclusive part of this small paper.

## References

- Alexander and Busch, B. (2007) (eds.). *Literacy and Linguistic Diversity in a Global Perspective: An Intercultural Exchange with African Countries*, Council of Europe, May, 2007.
- Alexander, N. (1989) 'Language planning from below'. In Herbert, R. (ed.), *Language and Society in Africa: The Theory and Practice of Sociolinguistics*, 56-68. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.
- Avermeat, P. V., (2006). *Socially Disadvantaged Learners and Languages of Education*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe
- Beacco, J. C. and Others, (2009). *Regional, minority and migration languages. Languages in education, languages for education*. Council of Europe.
- Benson, C. (2005). *The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality*. Centre for Research on Bilingualism Stockholm University.
- Ghawi, M. (2003). *L2 Influence on L1 at the Elementary School Level*. College of Education: King Khalid University.
- Gupta, A. F. (1996). *Language & Politics 2* [www.leeds.ac.uk/english/staff/afg/langpol2.doc](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/english/staff/afg/langpol2.doc) - Retrieved January 24, 2015.
- IEP, (1999). *Multicultural Education and the Education of Minority Pupils* [www.osi.hu/esp/rei/Documents/MinoryPolicyPaper.doc](http://www.osi.hu/esp/rei/Documents/MinoryPolicyPaper.doc). Retrieved January 24, 2015.
- Kanun Kitab Khana, (2065). *Interim constitution of Nepal 2063*. Kathmandu: Author.
- Koirala, B. N. (2010). *National and foreign rational on the management and development of languages in references to federal Nepal*. (Unpublished report submitted to UNESCO)
- २४६ Kothari, U. (1990). Power, knowledge and social control in Participatory development. In croke, B. and Kothari, U. 4<sup>th</sup> eds, *Participation: the new tyranny?* London: Zed. pp. 138-152.
- National planning commission, (2065). *Interim planning, 2064-2067*. Kathmandu: Author.
- Owhotu, V. B., (2009). *Policy Shift, Inconsistency and the Reality of First and Second Languages in Learning Contexts in the West African Sub-Region*. Nigeria: University of Lagos.
- Sen, A., (2004). *Development as freedom* (8<sup>th</sup> impression). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (2000). *Linguistic Genocide in Education—or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.