

MLE PRACTICES IN NEPAL: A CASE OF RAJBANSHI

Surya Prasad Yadav

Multilingual education (MLE) is a new phenomenon in Nepalese education. It has been in practice in Nepal for almost half a decade. There exist MLE programs run by both government and non-government agencies. This paper is an attempt to undertake a case study of Rajbanshi medium school run in Jhapa district of Nepal.

Keywords: Multilingual education, Rajbanshi language, medium of instruction, Nepal

1. Background

This paper attempts to describe the situation of Rajbanshi medium schools, esp. demography of languages in the selected area, available reading materials, MLE awareness among local people, measurement of quality education in comparison to Nepali medium schools, and other related factors. Rajbanshi is an Indo-European language of Indo-Aryan group spoken by a vast majority of people in south-eastern Nepal in Jhapa and Morang districts and also in India and Bangladesh. The census 2011 states the number of speakers of Rajbanshi as approximately 122,214, that is, 0.46% of the total population of Nepal. Map 1 presents the area where Rajbanshi is mainly spoken in Nepal.



Map 1: Rajbanshi speaking area in Nepal

Source: SIL International, 2011

This paper has been organized into five sections. Section 1 presents a background of the Rajbanshi language. Section 2 deals with MLE in Rajbanshi language. In section 3 we present a comparison of Rajbanshi School and Nepali School. Section 4 describes challenges in Rajbanshi School and finally, section 5 sums up the study.

2. Socio-linguistic situation of Rajbanshi language

Rajbanshi is a cross-border language used in Nepal and its adjacent area of West Bengal, India. It is mostly spoken in Jhapa, an eastern district in Tarai region of Nepal.

2.1 Script

The *Devanagari* script is used in writing Rajbanshi language.

2.2 Written literature

The available resources in their language are: Phonemic inventory, Grammar, Dictionary, Textbooks, Literacy materials, Newspapers, Folklore, Magazines poems, stories, etc. (Source: *LinSuN field study, 2013*).

2.3 Literacy rate

The Rajbanshi language community has very low literacy rates.

2.4 Dialects

Rajbanshi language of Nepal appears to be made up of several dialects; however, they have mutual intelligibility (Epple and Grimes, 2001).

2.5 Multilingualism

Rajbanshi speech community is more or less multilingual community. They can speak more than one language. The languages spoken other than Rajbanshi include Tajpuriya, Gangai, Bengali, Nepali, Maithili, Santhali and several Kirati languages shifted from the northeastern hills of Nepal. Tajpuriya, Bengali, Maithili and Gangai are more closely related to Rajbanshi than other languages.

2.6 Domains of language use

Rajbanshi is used in different domains of language use such as counting, singing, joking, bargaining/shopping/marketing, storytelling, discussing/debate, praying, quarreling, abusing, telling stories to children, singing at home, family gathering, and village meeting (*Source: LinSuN field study, 2013*).

3. Mother-tongue-based multilingual education

Nepal is one of the linguistically diverse countries in South Asia accommodating more than 123 languages belonging to four language families (Indo-European, Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian in addition to Kusunda, a language isolate) spoken by 125 castes/ethnicities (CBS, 2012). Multilingual education is a new attempt in Nepal. Until 2007, no indigenous community was conferred right to get basic education in mother tongue. In order to ensure this right conferred by Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007), Nepal endorsed Multilingual Education Implementation Guidelines in 2010. The Constitution of Nepal (2015) follows those provisions made previously. Undoubtedly, legal provisions are conducive; however, multilingual education, though indispensable, has not yet been implemented effectively. Mother-tongues have not yet been used as medium of instructions in basic education. Local contexts (local cultures) are disregarded in textbooks. Consequently, students do not understand the content of the prescribed lessons. They are enforced to learn alien cultures in alien languages. As a result, they are led to show low performance in the test of knowledge. Moreover, many children repeat grades or leave school altogether being eventually discouraged. This reality is further illuminated by the quantified data: "8% out of 6-14 school age children are deprived of education and only 39.5 % completed class five of basic education in time." Immediate attempts have to be undertaken to prevent this situation from being further aggravated. Envisioning this situation, this project rightly embarked on implementing mother-tongue based multilingual education in Rajbanshi community with a view to assuring quality basic education, reducing drop-out rate, encouraging regular attendance, assisting cognitive development in the

children, transferring the values of traditions, cultures and life-crucial knowledge to the children and boosting up the speech communities to broaden use of mother tongue.

4. MLE in Rajbanshi

Rajbanshi Multilingual Education was implemented by an NGO, viz. Nepali National Languages Preservation Institute (NNLPI) in collaboration with SIL Int'l in Jhapa for four and half years (2012-2016). The main goal of this project was to provide high quality basic education in mother-tongue within the basic framework of MTB-MLE in order to sustain the MLE policy of Nepal. The project acquired land as donation from the community members and constructed three schools¹ (viz. Aamgachi School, Chilhara School and Harira School) buildings [single-storied, seven rooms, toilets]. Photographs 1, 2 and 3 present the buildings of these three MLE schools with some teachers and students.



Photograph 1: Aamgachi School

¹ At present, all three schools have been handed over to the local management committees (Annual Report, 2075-76).



Photograph 2: Chilhara School



Photograph 3: Harira School

Of these MLE schools, Aamgachi School is situated at Korabari-2 in Jhapa district. At present, it has 99 students of whom 45 are boys and 54 are girls. Figure 1 presents the list of the students of Aamgachi.

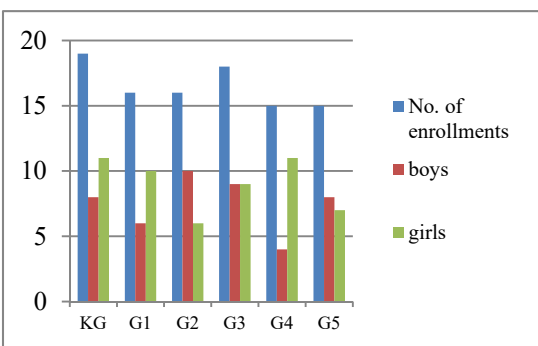


Figure 1: List of the students of Aamgachi

Similarly, Chilhara is the second MLE school of Jhapa district, which is situated at Khajurgachi-4. There are 95 students of whom 46 are boys and 49 are girls. Figure 2 presents the list of the students of chilhara.

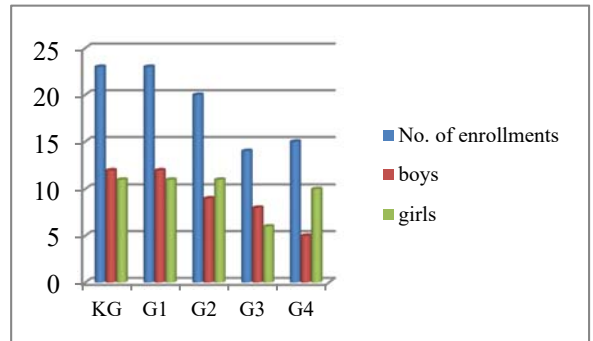


Figure 2: List of the students of Chilhara

Finally, Harira is the third MLE School located at Khajurgachhi-3 in Jhapa district. There are 103 students of whom 36 are boys and 67 are girls.

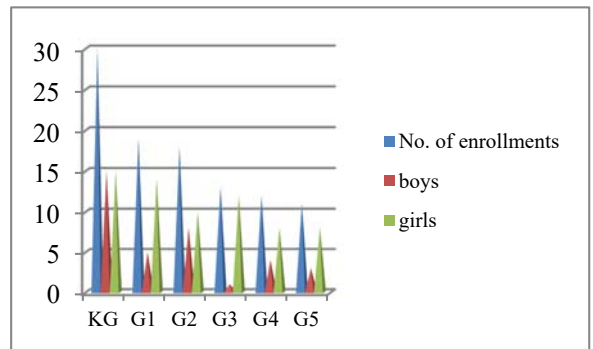


Figure 3: List of the students of Harira

Their aggregate enrollments are presented in the table 1.

Table 1 reports that there are 297 students in the three schools in total.

Of the 297 students, almost 95% are Rajbanshi speaking and the rest are Santhali, Tajpuriya and Gangai speakers. However, non-Ranjanshi speakers also understand Rajbanshi as their second language.

Table 1: The aggregate enrollments in the three schools

Classes	Aamgachhi		Chilhara		Harira		Total
	boys	girls	boys	girls	boys	girls	
KG	8	11	12	11	15	15	72
G1	6	10	12	11	5	14	58
G2	10	6	9	11	8	10	54
G3	9	9	8	6	1	12	45
G4	4	11	5	10	4	8	42
G5	8	7			3	8	26
Total	45	54	46	49	36	67	297

4.1 Work plan

All the three schools have a work plan to provide mother tongue-based education. According to the work plan, they use three languages-Rajbanshi, Nepali and English; however, the medium of instruction is Rajbanshi whereas Nepali and English are taught as subjects. Table 2 gives a clear picture about them:

Table 2: Inclusion of the languages in the work plan

	KG	G1	G2	G3	G4	G5
Raj	Raj	Raj	Raj	Raj	Raj	Raj
Nepali	-	Nepali	Nepali	Nepali	Nepali	Nepali
English	-	-	English	English	English	English
MOI	Raj	Raj	Raj/Nep	Raj/Nep	Raj/Nep	Raj/Nep

Note: (Raj=Rajbanshi, Nep=Nepali & MOI=Medium of instruction)

Table 2 present the list of the languages used in the multilingual education in Rajbanshi.

4.2 Reading materials in Rajbanshi

Nepali National Languages Preservation Institute (NNLPI) has prepared some reading materials for the mother tongue-based education; however, all these reading materials have not yet been published.

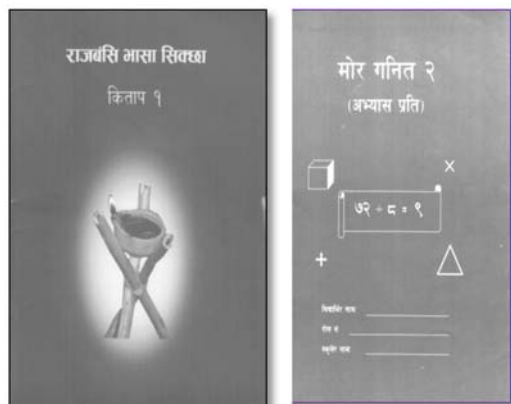
Table 3: List of the reading materials

Sub	Raj	Nep	Soc	Math	Eng
KG	- <i>Mor pahila kitab (a-dh)</i> - <i>Mor pahila kitab (t-h)</i> - <i>Mor pahila kitab (a-h)</i>			- <i>Mor pahila ganit kitab -aakhar or ranger sikacha</i>	
G1	<i>Rajbanshi bhasa sikcha kitab 1</i>			<i>mor ganit kitab (kilas 1)</i>	
G2	<i>Rajbanshi bhasa sikcha kitab 2</i>		<i>sahyogi samgri (Nepali, samajik, bigyan)</i>	- <i>mor ganit 2 (abhyas, prati 1)</i> - <i>mor ganit 2 (abhyas, prati 2)</i>	My First English Book -My Alphabet Book
G3	<i>Rajbanshi bhasa sikcha kitab 3</i>			- <i>mor ganit 3</i>	English Supplementar y Textbook Grade 3
G4	<i>Rajbanshi bhasa sikcha kitab 4</i>	<i>Nepali byakaran abhyas pustika kachha 4</i>		- <i>mor ganit 3</i>	English Supplementar y Textbook Grade 4
G5	<i>Rajbanshi bhasa sikcha kitab 5</i>	<i>sahyogi samgri (Nepali and ganit)</i>		<i>sahyogi samgri (Nepali and ganit)</i>	English Supplementar y Textbook Grade 5

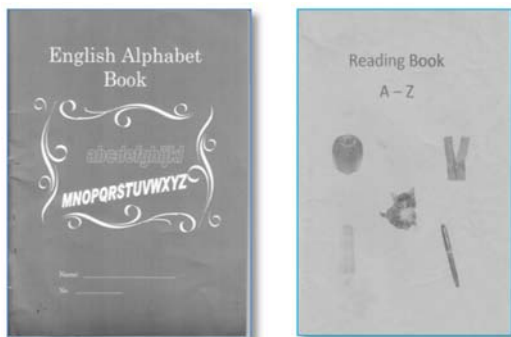
To prepare these reading materials, some selected knowledgeable individuals from different fields of Rajbanshi background were invited and involved so that they represent their local culture and contents.

These reading materials are presented in table 3.

Among the list of reading materials you can see some reading materials visually in the photographs 4 and 5.



Photograph 4: Some subjects of Rajbanshi reading materials



Photograph 5: Subjects of English reading materials

4.3 MLE awareness among Rajbanshi speaking people

Rajbanshi people seem to be aware of MLE programme and its importance. They have offered free land, sent their children to MLE schools and helped them prepare reading materials based on local contents.

To elicit Rajbanshi people's responses to MLE, a question was asked, "what language do you prefer for your children's medium of instruction at primary level?", almost all the male respondents (36 = 100%) responded that they would want their children to study in their mother tongue as a medium of instruction at primary level.

Similarly, out of 36 female respondents, 94% responded that they would want their children to study in their mother tongue. It shows that Rajbanshi has positive attitude towards the mother-tongue-based MLE education whereas only 6% responded that they would want their children in the English language as a medium of instruction at primary level. Table 3 presents the preference of medium of instruction at primary level.

Table 4: The preference for medium of instruction at primary level

	What language do you prefer for your children's medium of instruction at primary level?	Total respondents: 72	
		Male [n=36]	Female [n=36]
1.	Mother tongue	36(100%)	34(94%)
2.	English	-	2 (6%)

Source: LinSuN field study, 2013

5. Education through Rajbanshi and Nepali languages: a comparison

It would be ideal to compare the two sets of schools—Rajbanshi and Nepali/English medium schools with a view to finding out their relative importance with respect to educational achievements. Presently it could not be feasible as Rajbanshi MLE schools have been recently established. It can be done after a couple of years.

However, we draw some insights from the relative merit of education through the medium of mother tongue when we compare it with a language used as subject of instruction at the same levels of a school.

As shown in a report (Report 2015), students have better achievements in mother tongue language skills than in L2 language skills.

Similarly, it has also been found that the materials in languages like Nepali and English are better understood if they are explained through the medium of mother tongue than through the medium of L2.

Under the MLE environment, children learn quickly because they can talk in their MT about concrete everyday things in a face-to-face situation.

They attend their classes more regularly as they feel more homey through their interaction in their home language. They are familiar with their culture and local settings. Photograph 6 presents some creative figures.



Photograph 6: Some creative figures (Made by KG students)

6. Challenges

The curricula used at Rajbanshi MLE schools (except Aamgachhi) have not been approved by the government. As a result, it may create a problem for children to pursue their further school education.

Rajbanshi MLE schools have just operated functioning and they are not equipped with all the required reading materials for all the levels. Hence, they are mixed up—some subjects in

mother tongue and other subjects in L2. It may give rise to undesirable consequences.

7. Conclusion

The establishment of Rajbanshi MLE schools is a welcome step. It may prove to be a success story and help advocacy for adopting and implementing MLE in other languages of Nepal. However, there is a need to convince the government and other stakeholders for extending their support for consolidating the MLE framework in the country.

References

- Central Bureau of Statistics. 2012. *National Population and Housing Census 2011: National Report*. Kathmandu: Central Bureau of Statistics.
- Eppele, John & Jonathan D. Grimes. 2001. *The Rajbanshi of Nepal: A sociolinguistic study*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Eppele, John W., M. Paul Lewis, Dan Raj Regmi and Yogendra P. Yadava. eds. 2012. *Ethnologue: Languages of Nepal*. Kathmandu: Linguistic Survey of Nepal (LinSuN).
- Government of Nepal. 2007. *Interim Constitution of Nepal*, Kathmandu.
- Government of Nepal. 2015. *Constitution of Nepal*, Kathmandu.
- NNLPI. 2015. *A Rapid Assessment Reports: Languages of Nepal*. Lalitpur: Nepali National Languages Preservation Institute.
- SIL International (Nepal). 2075-76. *SIL International (Nepal) Annual Report 2075-2076*. Kathmandu: SIL International (Nepal).
- Yadav, Surya Prasad. 2013. *A Sociolinguistic Survey of Rajbanshi and Tajpuriya*. A report submitted to Linguistic Survey of Nepal.