



Policy Actors' Familiarity, Engagement and Perceived Important Factors Towards the Implementation of Multilingual Education in Nepal

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This paper explores meso-level policy actors' familiarity, engagement and perception in relation to the implementation of multilingual education in Nepal. The data were gathered through a census survey conducted online with the education officers (here known as meso-level policy actors) working at Education Sections of municipal levels across Nepal. A total of 163 respondents fully completed the online survey that explores how familiar they are with multilingual education, what they have been doing (or have done) and what they think is important for the implementation of multilingual education in Nepal. The findings revealed that the policy actors' engagement and familiarity with the national policy on multilingual education is below the average, indicating that policy communication and understanding in the implementation of multilingual education in Nepal's schools is inadequate. The findings also revealed that the policy actors' engagement is not focused on understanding multilingualism as a regular pedagogical process rather the attention has been diverted towards teaching local languages/mother tongues separately as subjects, ultimately reproducing the monolingual ideologies in education. This implies that a holistic understating is needed for the successful implementation of multilingual education policy in Nepal.

Keywords: Multilingualism, policy actors' agency, multilingual education, Nepal**Introduction**

While multilingualism is a key characteristic of Nepali communities, attempts towards benefitting the people with the use of such linguistic diversity in the regular life processes has not gained momentum. With more than 124 languages (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2022) documented in the recent census, Nepal boasts of having multilingual practice as the everyday life process of Nepali people. In this context, it is common to hear that different languages are used to serve different purposes such as business transactions, advertisements, media broadcasts, education, cultural celebrations and religious practices (rituals and traditions). In line with this linguistic diversity, Nepal's constitution has guaranteed that every linguistic community shall have rights to promote, protect and use their languages in governance as well as educational purposes (Government of Nepal [GoN], 2015). Along with the favorable legislative provisions, Nepal has produced a range of policies and initiatives to strongly position the local/ethnic languages alongside the national official and international languages in education systems. The primary goal of such provisions and attempts has been to help children learn better regardless of their ethnolinguistic background.

Although the policies developed until now project the positive attitude towards multilingualism, in practice oftentimes it has been framed as a 'challenge' or 'problem' to ensure that all children learn equally (Poudel & Choi, 2021, Poudel et al., 2022). This ideological force that positions the local ethnic/indigenous languages as deficit and bringing all these languages into the educational system is almost impossible has long been affecting the implementation of the well-intended policy goals. The equity in learning to contribute to Nepal's development has long been associated with the multilingual education discourse (MoEST, 2019).

Language of instruction debate in Nepal

Several studies have documented that in multilingual contexts such as Nepal, selection of a medium of

instruction has long been debated. The policy commitment to educating children in their home languages has not been implemented as expected due to the public pressure for using English as a medium of instruction (EMI), especially in the contexts where English is spoken as a foreign language. In Nepal too, there is a long history of EMI as it began with the establishment of the first school during the Rana regime. Since then, and especially after the 1990s with the mushrooming growth of private schools, there has been a significant increase in the use of English in education as a medium of instruction (MOI). In the private school context, English is often the *de facto* MOI, and the use of Nepali or other local languages has been largely discouraged. While in the public schools, there is the use of English and Nepali as the media of instruction, in the private schools the EMI is the exclusively used medium of instruction. This practice has triggered a debate on whether the choice of EMI in the schools is rational and what groups of people this is serving. As a result of this context, as in other multilingual contexts globally, children in Nepal are increasingly likely to be educated in a language that they are unfamiliar with because English is neither the community language nor the language at home of the majority of the children in Nepal. The consequence of this practice is the potential disadvantage for children who are weak in the English language. Despite several research studies reporting potential negative impacts of learning in the dominant languages (Adhikari & Poudel, 2023; Kim & Choi, 2023; Phyak 2021; Poudel & Choi, 2021; Poudel & Costley, 2023; Poudel et al., 2022), in a multilingual educational context of Nepal, instruction in Nepali and English continues unchecked. Amidst this trend, pedagogy in English (i.e., education in EMI) is often considered a marker of educational ‘quality’. This ideological construction in relation to EMI has instigated a debate around schools’ choice of language of instruction.

Against this backdrop, ensuring equitable quality education and access to quality education for all children has been challenging, and to realize this goal, it is important to understand the awareness and commitments of municipal-level policy actors and the challenges faced by them in implementation of the multilingual education policy in the schools within their respective municipal units. This paper situates within this meso-level policy actors’ roles, their awareness and the constraints they face in enacting the MLE policy in Nepal.

Recent progress towards addressing the linguistic diversity

The Constitution of Nepal -2015 continued to adapt the provisions of the earlier Constitution (e.g., the one in 1991 and the Interim Constitution- 2007) reiterating the officialization of all the languages of the nation and their use in the education system and public communication. For instance, the Article (7) of the constitution made the following provision that laid the foundation for all the policies emerging thereafter.

Article 7: Official language:

- (1) The Nepali language in the Devnagari script shall be the official language of Nepal.
- (2) A State may, by a State law, determine one or more than one languages of the nation spoken by a majority of people within the State as its official language(s), in addition to the Nepali language.
- (3) Other matters relating to language shall be as decided by the Government of Nepal, on the recommendation of the Language Commission.

As the public document and a base for all the legislative decisions, the provisions stated in the constitution as mentioned above, and additional provisions made regarding the right to equality (Article 18), the right relating to education (Article 31) and the right to language and culture (Article 32) all guarantee the rights of the communities for the protection and promotion of their ethnic/indigenous languages. This not only guarantees protection but also penalizes any forms of linguistic discrimination and racialization. These broader policy commitments have also been translated into all the educational policy documents such as National Curriculum Framework- 2019, National Education Policy -2019, and School Education Sector Plan.

The role of language commission and policy recommendations

The constitutional commitment in promotion and protection of Nepal’s linguistic diversity has also been materialized by the establishment of Language Commission as a constitutional body. The article 287 of the Constitution of Nepal enshrined the establishment of Language Commission in Nepal and accordingly the commission was established to work in the areas mandated by the constitution. The Constitution stated the functions of the Commission to be as follows.

- (a) To determine the criteria to be fulfilled for the recognition of the official language and make recommendations

on languages to the Government of Nepal,

- (b) To make recommendations to the Government of Nepal, on the measures to be adopted for the protection, promotion and development of languages,
- (c) To measure the levels of development of mother tongues and make suggestions to the Government of Nepal, on the potentiality of their use in education.
- (d) To study, research and monitor languages.

Despite several ethnic/linguistic and political groups expressed discontent in the provision made in the constitution, there is significant focus on and commitment to support, protect and promote multilingualism within the Nepali education system. With the establishment of the Language Commission, a total of eleven languages have been recommended for use in education and governance at the local level making the provincial level administration expectedly multilingual. Table 1 illustrates the list of languages recommended for officialization in the provinces.

Table 1: *Provinces and languages recommended for officialization in Nepal*

Province	Official language	Official language for specific purpose and specific domains
Koshi	Maithili, Limbu	Tharu, Tamang, Magar, Bantawa, Urdu, Rajbanshi, Rai, Newar (Nepal Bhasa), Chamling, Sherpa, Santhali
Madhesh	Maithili, Bhojpuri, Bajjika	Urdu, Tharu, Tamang
Bagmati	Tamang, Newar (Nepal Bhasa)	Magar, Tharu, Maithili
Gandaki	Magar, Gurung, Bhojpuri	Tharu, Newar (Nepal Bhasa), Tamang
Lumbini	Tharu, Awadhi	Bhojpuri, Urdu, Magar, Maithili
Karnali	Magar	
Sudurpaschim	Doteli, Tharu	Baitadeli, Achami, Bajhani

(*Himalayan News Service, 2021*)

The progress with after this recommendation by the Language Commission is encouraging and created hope for language officialization in Nepal. For example, the Bagmati Province of Nepal has declared Newar and Tamang as two official languages alongside the Nepali language. This declaration has generated precedence for other provinces to work towards the officialization of languages at the provincial level.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims at exploring the meso-level policy actors' engagement and familiarity with multilingual education and their perception of the factors that are to be considered for effective implementation of multilingual education in Nepal's schools. This research was therefore guided by two research questions.

- What are the policy structures in place in relation to multilingual education in Nepal?
- What are the perceptions of the meso-level policy actors in terms of their familiarity, engagement, contribution and perceived important actions in relation to the implementation of multilingual education policy?

Methods and Data

This paper utilizes a portion of data from a mixed methods study conducted in Nepal in 2023. The data analyzed in this paper were collected through a census survey across seven provinces of Nepal responded by municipal level education officers. Although this study also gathered data through interviews with school head teachers, teachers, municipality heads (mayors and deputy mayors), parents and other stakeholders of education, including development partners, only the findings from the survey data have been reported. The online survey was developed in the Nepali language and was sent to all the municipal offices coordinated by

the Centre for Education and Human Resource Development (CEHRD). While approaching the respondents, the focus was also made based on the language clusters across the three ecological belts (Himal, Pahad and Terai) in Nepal. The study covered 14 languages from the fifteen districts of the seven provinces.

In the survey, out of the 753 officers working in the municipal offices across Nepal, only 163 responded to the survey fully completed. Table 2 illustrates the summary of the participant details in this study.

Table 2: Respondent details in this study

Variable	Categories	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	130	79.8
	Female	32	19.6
	Other	1	0.6
Working unit	Metropolitan/Sub-metropolitan/Municipality	64	39.3
	Rural Municipality	99	60.7
Age	<35 years	80	49.1
	≥ 35 years	83	50.9
Mother Tongue*	Nepali	108	68.4
	Doteli	20	12.7
	Maithali	11	7.0
	Bajjika	8	5.1
	Other	11	7.0

The responses were quantitatively analyzed and presented in tables and figures. Data analysis followed a rigorous process of data migrating to SPSS, cleaning, checking data patterns and identifying the key values associated with the second research question. The key concerns covered in the survey questions were the education officers' familiarity with multilingual education, their involvement in the policy implementation process, key barriers they considered in MLE implementation and critical areas of intervention. These findings have been thematically reported in the section that follows.

Findings

The findings of the study have been drawn on two data sources. First, the policy-related findings were obtained through a document review of Nepal's language policy and education policy/plans since 1947 until 2019 when the National Education Policy was introduced, and second, the survey data have been presented in tables and figures followed by descriptions and interpretation.

Multilingual education policies in place (since 1947-2019)

Nepal's struggle for implementation of multilingual education policy has a remarkable history, as shown in Table 3. The review in Table 3 summarized by Poudel et al. (2022) has been used by the author as a primary reference, and the same is taken as a basis for the policy review reported in this paper. Table 3 illustrates the summary of policy priorities in relation to multilingual education and the medium of instruction in school education in Nepal from 1947 to 2019 when the National Curriculum Framework was endorsed and implemented.

Table 3: *Historical trajectory of policy and policy features in relation to multilingual education in Nepal*

Year	Policy	Features of the policy/Policy commitments
1947	Constitutional Law of Government of Nepal	The first constitution that came out of agreement between the Rana regime and King Tribhuvan Bir Bikram Shah. Designated Nepali as the national language, promoting Nepali nationalism.
1956	Nepal National Education Planning Commission (NNEPC)	The report of the first educational planning commission (also known as the Wood Commission) which worked in collaboration with the United States Co-operation Mission. All languages except for English and Nepali were banned.
1961	All-Round National Education Committee (ARNEC)	The education committee established by King Mahendra to develop a nationalist education policy in line with the political goals of the Panchayat system. Designated Nepali as the MOI.
1962	Constitution of Nepal	The constitution by the Panchayat government. Inherited the national language ideology and MOI policy from the previous government.
1971	National Education System Plan (NESP)	The five-year education plan to modernize Nepal's education system under the Panchayat government. Confirmed the national language as the MOI, while English-medium schools were encouraged to turn to Nepali medium.
1990	Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal	The constitution after promulgation of multiparty democracy, which guaranteed basic human rights. It inherited Nepali as the national official language, recognised all languages spoken as mother tongues as languages of the nation and gave autonomy to communities to operate primary schools in their mother tongue.
1992	National Education Commission (NEC)	The education commission established after the promulgation of multiparty democracy in 1990. Mother tongues were encouraged as the MOI, but Nepali was also allowed and continued to be used as the primary MOI in schools. Policy initiatives were influenced by equity discourses.
1994	National Languages Policy Recommendation Commission (NLPRC)	An 11-member commission formed by His Majesty's Government in accordance with the Constitution of Nepal, recommended to continue earlier provisions in relation to Nepali and gave freedom for communities to operate schools in mother tongues up to lower or upper secondary level. Addressed linguistic human rights issues, especially recommending the use of community languages in education.
2007	National Curriculum Framework (NCF)	The first comprehensive curriculum framework for Nepal's school education. Mother tongue was designated as the MOI in elementary schools, and Nepali and English could be used afterwards. Influence of ethnic identity and nationalism, as well as a globalisation agenda in language-in-education policy decisions.
2007	Interim Constitution of Nepal	The constitution ensured the right to use mother tongues in official business and education.
2015	Constitution of Nepal	The constitution promulgated after Nepal transformed from a centralised system of governance to a federal democratic country. The local governments and schools were given autonomy in making language-in-education policy decisions as per the local contexts and as recommended by the Language Commission and ensured the right to preserve mother tongues.
2019	National Curriculum Framework (NCF)	The first curriculum framework after Nepal changed to a federal state. The MOI of basic education is to be mother tongue or Nepali. English can be used as the MOI, except for in subjects which concern national identity (for example, civic education).

Source: Poudel et al. (2022)

Table 3 illustrates that there is a smooth transition in the policy development toward bringing in the national and ethnic indigenous languages into education. For instance, the policy in 1956 aimed at restricting the

mother tongues in education, which was changed in the 1991 Constitution that provisioned an equity-oriented policy so that all languages spoken within Nepal were terms as languages of the nation and that further recognized the possibility of the use of these languages in education. Similarly, the same constitution allowed the communities with autonomy in decision-making to educate their children in their languages. Following the promulgation of the constitution, the National Languages Policy Recommendation Commission (NLPRC) was formed that recommended the implementation of the constitutional provisions. This commission made several recommendations regarding the preservation and protection of the languages of Nepal. Some of the provisions relevant to education are worth noting here as they help to show how the notion of Mother Tongue Medium of Instruction (MTMOI) has been conceptualized at the policy level. Most of the recommendations made by the NLPRC sound more practical and influencing the ways in which language in education policy management is taking place today. One such example can be seen in the current Sector Education Sector Plan (SESP) that emphasizes equitable quality education through teaching and learning in children's mother tongue or the language they feel most comfortable with.

As one of the foundational policy works in Nepal, this commission has played a significant role in advising schools and different stakeholders on how to design and develop curriculum materials and how to phase in the use of different MOIs. They have not only recommended for choice of the medium of instruction but also made several recommendations towards improvement of teacher training for adopting multilingual and mother tongue-based pedagogy and development of the resources. Among other things, they have provided guidelines on how MT schools should be opened and resourced, and on how school districts and communities should organize their provision according to their own needs and community practices. This commission made important recommendations for the establishment of three types of schools: mother-tongue primary schools, bilingual primary schools and national language primary schools. This commission assumed that the mother tongue use is to be more specifically emphasized in the primary level schools, and a smooth transition to teaching and learning in English and Nepali was expected to start at lower secondary and secondary levels of school education. Mother tongue primary schools were classified as schools in which the student population would be largely monolingual and the school could therefore choose a local MT as the main MOI. In bilingual schools there would be an option of operating in a national language as well as the national language (Nepali). National language primary schools applied to schools in areas with high levels of multilingualism and where the use of Nepali as the MOI would operate as a lingua franca or shared language.

Policy actors' familiarity and engagement with MLE policy implementation

The stakeholders were asked about their familiarity with the multilingual education policy and their involvement in the implementation of the mother tongue policy. Table 4 summarizes their responses.

Table 4: *Familiarity and involvement in implementation of multilingual education policy*

Familiar with policy on mother tongue education			Involvement in implementing mother tongue education policy		
Response	Frequency	Percentage	Response	Frequency	Percent
Unfamiliar	13	8.0	Not involved	51	31.3
Somewhat familiar	86	52.8	Slightly involved	92	56.4
Familiar	64	39.3	Very much involved	20	12.3

Source: Poudel & Costley, 2023

Table 4 reveals that 56.4% of education officers were partially familiar with the multilingual education policy that exists at federal and local levels. The finding also indicates that around one-third (31.3%) of participants were not involved, whereas very few (12.3%) were very much involved in implementing the mother tongue education policy. The implication of this finding is that there is still a long way to go towards developing awareness on mother tongue-based multilingual education at the level of policymakers. In the municipal offices, the education officers are in the role of education policy decision-making and the low percentage of them having familiarity with the policy means that the implementation of the policy remains either unnoticed or weakly presented.

Contribution of policy actors' in addressing children's language learning needs

Another concern in this study was the self-rated perceived contribution of the policy actors in putting multilingual policy into action. As they are the key actors of the policy enactment process in the local level government units (i.e., municipalities), their contribution to the policy work and its translation into the classroom are of paramount importance. Table 5 illustrates the status of their contribution to the practice of multilingual policy in Nepal's schools.

Table 5: *Contribution of policy actors to the practice of multilingual education policy*

Contributions	Frequency	Percentage
Visited schools to explore children's learning needs	68	43.87
Helped to develop school actions in addressing such needs	56	36.13
Initiated development of curriculum at local level	85	54.84
Trained teachers at ECE level to improve their instructional practices as per the language need of the student population in their respective classes	35	22.58
Prioritized the recruitment of mother tongue teachers from local communities using municipal funds	24	15.48
Disseminated information on the benefits of educating children in their home or the most familiar language	55	35.48
Facilitated schools to form parent groups in supporting mother tongue education	11	7.10
Allocated funds for resource management for implementing education in mother tongue	16	10.32
Conducted surveys to map out languages in the municipal area	21	13.55

Table 5 illustrates the contribution of the policy actors in several areas relating to the formation and implementation of the MLE policy in Nepal. The key action going on recently in Nepal is the development of the local curriculum that also includes language and local cultural specificities (i.e., the contents) in the curriculum. The National Curriculum Framework in Nepal provisioned a subject to be taught as a part of the local curriculum (MoEST, 2019). The impact of this policy can be seen in the engagement and contribution of the policy actors, as evidenced by the survey responses summarized above. It means that 54.84% of their contribution is in the initiation of development of curriculum at the local level. This was followed by their contribution to visiting schools to explore children's learning needs (43.87%). It was also found that with insights from the visit to the schools of their catchment areas, they also helped schools to develop action plans (for example, supporting the schools to develop School Improvement Plans). The other contribution that the policy actors made was disseminating the information about benefits of learning at home or in the most familiar language(s). This also shows that although the majority of the policy actors were not familiar with a particular policy in relation to multilingual education, they were positive about the use of children's mother tongue or the most familiar language in the classroom for the enhancement of learning. Similarly, as illustrated in Table 5, among nine areas of their contribution, they were least involved in facilitating schools to form parents' groups to uptake mother tongue education. Hence, policy actors' least involvement means that there is a less likely chance for the policy to be implemented as expected.

Factors considered important for the successful implementation of MLE

Perception of policy actors towards factors considered important for the successful implementation of the MLE program has been reported in this section. Table 6 illustrates these factors.

Recruiting local teachers having knowledge of mother tongues, training of early childhood education and development teachers focusing on content of children's mother tongues, the development of local curriculum based on local content and language, use of mother tongues in assessment practices, allocating adequate resources to mother tongue-based multilingual education, improvement of home-school relations through collaboration, and exploration of children's language-related needs are major variables under this section. These were measured by using mean, SD, and one-sample t-test.

Table 6: *Status of factors in implementing successful mother tongue education*

Statements	Mean	SD	t	P
Recruiting local facilitators/teachers who speak children's mother tongues (IMP01)	4.17	0.86	17.44	0.00
Training of ECED facilitators and early grade teachers to enable them to deal with curricular content in children's mother tongues (IMP02)	4.25	0.90	17.60	0.00
Development of local curriculum based on local content and language for pre-primary to grade 3 (IMP03)	4.27	0.85	18.99	0.00
Allowing children to use their mother tongues in assessment practices (IMP04)	4.10	0.90	15.51	0.00
Allocating adequate resources to mother- tongue based multilingual early childhood education (IMP05)	4.13	0.81	17.83	0.00
Improving home-school relations through collaboration with parents (IMP06)	4.20	0.79	19.32	0.00
Exploring children's language-related needs through the engagement of experts (IMP07)	4.10	0.92	15.32	0.00

Table 6 shows that the level of importance of all items was found to be significantly high for implementing the successful mother tongue education program at the school level because of having $p < 0.05$. However, training of ECED teachers for enabling to deal with curricular content in children's mother tongues (Mean=4.25, SD=0.90) and development of local curriculum based on local content and language (Mean=4.27, SD=0.85) are more and allowing children to use their mother tongues in assessment practices (Mean=4.10, SD=0.90) and exploring children's language-related needs through the engagement of experts (Mean=4.10, SD=0.92) are less important as compared to the remaining items on the table.

Discussion

This study explored multilingual education policies in place in Nepal and the meso-level policy actors' familiarity, engagement, contribution and policy actors' perceived factors important for the MLE policy implementation. Referring to the first research question about the policies in place, a thorough review was made and the summary matrix was adopted from the earlier study published by Poudel et al. (2022). The conclusion of the policy review was that there is a smooth transition in Nepal's language policies towards ensuring linguistic social justice. The rights to the protection and promotion of ethnic/indigenous languages of the communities in Nepal was guaranteed in the constitution as well as in educational policy documents (Gautam & Poudel, 2022; Seel et al., 2017; Poudel & Choi, 2021; Poudel & Costley, 2023). Further to this, while the policy provisions are favourable in creating equitable learning opportunities for all children irrespective of their language backgrounds, the limited understanding and engagement of the policy actors surveyed in this study has questioned the missing link in communication between the policy formulation and policy implementation. Studies have also pointed out that such missing links might create policy failure (e.g.,

Choi & Poudel, 2022). Moreover, as the findings of this study indicate that the communication of the policy intentions was inadequate to the policy actors responsible for enforcing policy implementation, which put the policy into a limbo or an inefficient translation of the policy into practice continued over decades of favourable policy commitments, therefore resulted in language inequalities (also see, Kim & Choi, 2024; Tollefson, 1991).

As shown in Table 6, the policy actors emphasized the importance of development of local curriculum which can also include children's mother tongue as a subject. This provision of teaching and learning of mother tongue as a subject has also been equally emphasized in the broader policies (e.g., the National Education Policy- 2019; National Curriculum Framework- 2019). A similar study in the Philippines came up with similar findings and claimed that multilingual education has largely been implemented in the name of teaching a mother tongue subject as a part of the curriculum rather than taking it as a regular process of school education. As inequalities of multilingualism exist across several contexts (Tupas, 2015), this has prevented smooth and successful implementation of the multilingual education despite the policies advocating for an equitable learning opportunity for children from diverse language backgrounds.

Conclusion and Implications

This paper has presented the review of current multilingual education policies in place in Nepal and explored the meso-level policy actors' (e.g., education policymakers at the municipal level) engagement in and familiarity with multilingual education policies in Nepal's schools. It further analyzed the factors the policy actors think important in the effective implementation of multilingual education in Nepal. The findings showed that the implementation of MLE in Nepal was neither facilitated by policy actors' engagement nor their familiarity with the benefits of the policy, which left the MLE with an incomplete agenda. It was also reported that considerable attempts were made in the development of the local curriculum and that was falsely understood as an initiative for multilingual education since the inclusion of local languages as subjects of the curriculum is about teaching languages separately and then using languages and linguistic resources in educating process – the primary concern of multilingualism. As reported in Table 6, the policy actors' perception that both 'development of local curriculum' and 'training early childhood development teachers to enable them to teach in children's mother tongues' as the highly important concerns not only signal their partial understanding of multilingual education as a process but also indicate that the monolingual ideologies continue to exist among them in relation to celebrating linguistic diversity in school classrooms. On top of that, disparities in the understanding of the MLE policy were observed among the policy actors, which affected the complex nature of policy implementation.

These findings imply that clear and consistent communication among policy developers and policy actors is required for a policy (e.g., MLE here) to be successfully implemented. Given the complex diversity across educational contexts in Nepal, the increasing encroachment of English in Nepali society and the constitutional provisions ascribing special status to indigenous languages, further comprehensive research to explore the most viable forms of language policies would be desirable, especially building on the findings of this study that shows limited engagement and familiarity of language policy actors in the implementation of multilingual education in Nepal.

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