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English Teachers' Perspectives on Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education

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Abstract

Researches have shown several benefits of MTB-MLE and several challenges in its implementation. In Nepal, language policies are in the state of flux. Therefore, against the theoretical backdrop, this paper is an attempt to find out the perceived differences between MTI and MTB-MLE, outcomes of MTB-MLE, challenges of MTB-MLE and ways to overcome the challenges. The study adopted convenience sampling and semi-structured interview for data generation. It presents a relevant literature that guided the study to reach the conclusions. The study has thematically analysed the data and shown that MTB-MLE is useful to preserve people's identities, to enable people to cope up with global market, and to preserve the dying languages. Despite the challenges in the implication of MTB-MLE, the study has given the possible ways to overcome the challenges. The study has clearly mentioned its limitations and shown possibilities for further research as well.

Keywords: Multilingual, Education, Trilingual, English, Implementation, Mother-tongue, Nepal

The Research Context

Mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) refers to the use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction in the classroom without restricting learners' access to national and international languages. It is believed that if learners start with the language they are familiar with, their foundation becomes strong and later they can easily make transition to other national and international languages. Realising this, Nepal has

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adopted trilingual policy: Mother tongue, Nepali and English. Asserting that a child's mother tongue is a rich linguistic and cultural heritage that reinforces learning, Nepal is also in favour of MTB-MLE. However, when we see the language policies in Nepal, we find a lot of fluctuations. In the Panchayat era (1960-1990), there was 'one nation one language' policy. Later several ethno-linguistic groups became aware of the need to preserve their linguistic and cultural identity which also led to insurgency throughout 1990's (Yadava, 2007). The constitution of Nepal 1990 had mentioned about linguistic rights of the citizens but there was problem in implementation. In due course of time, there are provisions for mother tongue education in the Education Act 2007, and the National framework for Education for all (EFA) (Ghimire, 2011). The Education Act of 2007 was revised which stated that primary education should be in the mother tongue for grades 1-3 in all subjects except English and Nepali. (Yadava, 2007). Following this, government of Nepal (GoN) started to implement multilingual education (MLE) programmes. The Interim Constitution of Nepal recognized all the languages spoken in Nepal as the national languages (Part 3, Article 17, GoN, 2007). However, the role of the government to guarantee linguistic rights to all through education still seemed ineffective. The latest Constitution of Nepal in Article 31, section 5 (Government of Nepal, 2015) states that every children in every Nepali community has a right to education in their mother tongue and that it is the state's responsibility to provide children with this right. Recently, school sector development plan (SSDP) 2016-2023 of Government of Nepal gives priority to MLE and classifies schools on the basis of the mother tongue of their students (GoN 2016). With this latest policy of government, MTB-MLE is the most relevant policy that aims at producing plurilingual citizens with multiple competencies. However, I was interested in finding out the schools' and teachers' readiness to implement MTB-MLE. Therefore, the study addressed the following research questions:

- How do teachers display their understanding of MTB-MLE?
- What do teachers believe about the outcomes of MTB-MLE?
- How do teachers' perceive the challenges in the implementation of MTB-MLE?
- How can MTB-MLE be implemented successfully?

Literature Review

The use of mother tongue (MT) in the classroom creates justice and equality, thereby facilitating learning. Studies assert that the use of a child's home language is one of the most important factors in helping children learn to read and write and in learning academic content and other languages (Sanchez, 2013). MTB-MLE is important because it is believed that one does not learn in a language that he does not understand; thinking starts in a language a child grows up with. In a quasi-experimental research Awopetu (2016) found that using a

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mother tongue in early childhood classroom was effective in fostering children's learning abilities. The study that was conducted in one of the states of Nigeria, the nation of over 200 ethnic groups and more than 400 native languages concluded that there seems to be a direct relationship between the language of instruction used by the teacher and pupils' learning abilities. Studies have suggested that MTB-MLE promotes social and cultural development but in Sanchez-Danday (2021), parents faced different challenges in assisting their children who do not have a strong mother tongue foundation. This study recommended the conduct of an MTB-MLE re-orientation program for the parents and their involvement in the curriculum planning process and material production. In Jaca and Soledad (2022), it was found that MTB-MLE enhances the students' performance and participation in class. In a research aimed at finding out the utilization of the mother tongue both as a medium of instruction and as a learning subject, Cruz (2015) showed that majority of the instructional objectives in the mother tongue as a subject were not being met as indicated by the areas where they were found weak, particularly grammar awareness, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. Attendance to relevant trainings as well as the provision of evaluation instruments were perceived as serious problems encountered by the Grade I teachers with the implementation of the mother tongue as instructional base and learning subject. In a comparative study of MTB-MLE in Philippines and Cambodia, MTB-MLE was found to address numerous educational issues in both the countries by recognizing a child's mother tongue, culture, and context as the foundation of learning (Lang-ay & Sannadan, 2021). Further, the study showed that MTB-MLE encourages students to achieve more and allows them to relate their everyday reality to reality nationally, internationally, and globally. On the contrary, in Namanya (2017) children taught in the MT demonstrated a decline in English literacy level. The participants in Dimaculangan and Gonzales (2020) supported ELT and acknowledged the role of English as the global language; nonetheless, they were uncertain as to whether or not MTB-MLE would have a positive impact on ELT and on global competitiveness. Studies have also found that neither MT as a subject nor MT as a medium of instruction (MOI) has positive results (Gempeso & Mendez, 2021). However, the use of translation and code-switching was found to help in the comprehension and participation of the students. Cabansag (2016) talks of four benefits of MTTB-MLE: expressing better ideas, building self-confidence, better retention, and promoting friendly environment. Likewise, four challenges were found to be hindering the implementation of MTB-MLE, namely multilingual environment, difficulty in translation, inadequacy of instructional materials, and mandatory compliance to the Department of Education (DepEd) order. Oda and Vizconde (2021) examined the language use and the language attitudes of Kapampangan 5th graders in relation to the MTB-MLE policy. The results show that Kapampangan 5th graders use

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the Filipino (national language) and the Kapampangan (local language) in both the home and the education domains and that they have positive attitudes toward these languages. Furthermore, the analysis suggests that the MTB-MLE policy has a positive impact on the language use and the language attitudes of the learners. The study found that despite the MTB-MLE's promotion of local languages, learners still prefer Filipino to Kapampangan and use Filipino at home and in school. The young learners' tendency to prefer the national language to local languages may be attributed to several social factors, including exposure to media, proximity to Tagalog-speaking regions, and their use of Filipino in daily conversations. Rubi and Molina (2020) show that limited resources were the major problem encountered in implementing the MTB-MLE. The data gathered brought forth the conclusion that a sufficient supply of instructional materials is needed to fill the gap in the use of MTB-MLE in the schools. Moreover, the continuous support from the government is highlighted to achieve its goal of producing highly equipped 21st-century learners. In Kirsch and Aleksić (2021), it has been found that the educators and parents in Luxembourg have become agents of change; the implementation of a policy is not top-down but that actors (educators and parents) interpret and transform policies to suit their needs.

I was highly inspired by these works to find out perspectives of English Teachers on Mother tongue-based multilingual education.

Methods and Procedures

The study adopted qualitative approach and to discuss the findings I resorted to descriptivism and interpretivism. All the English language teachers of Kanchanpur district formed the population of the study. Convenience sampling was used keeping in mind geographical proximity, availability of informants at certain time, their willingness to volunteer and so on. Three teachers were selected and they were interviewed face to face. Semi-structured interview was taken as the tool to cover the domain of research questions, and the interview was recorded on the mobile phone which was later transcribed and analysed. My own local language and Nepali language was given priority in the interview, which was later translated into English. Before asking them questions directly I talked to them and told them that I needed their help for my study. Finally the transcribed data was written under different themes in the form of the informants' stories and the findings were thematically discussed.

Results

The data obtained from semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed by using thematic analysis. The findings of the study are discussed on the following themes: conceptualizing MTB-MLE, differences between MTI and MTB-MLE, outcomes of MTB-

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MLE, MTB-MLE for justice and equality, MTB-MLE for students' ease and interest, challenges in the implementation of MTB-MLE, and ways to overcome the challenges. In this study, pseudonyms have been used to conceal the identity of the participants and to maintain confidentiality. In this section, I have included teachers' views verbatim to maintain the authenticity and originality in the study.

Conceptualizing MTB-MLE

MTB-MLE is a strategy or a policy where students are taught in their MT as well as in the target language (TL). In MTB-MLE, students' MT is taken both as a subject and MOI. The language policy where students make entry to learning through their MT, which is followed by other national languages and TL as MOI is referred to as MTB-MLE.

MTB-MLE refers to valuing mother tongue as well while teaching in a foreign language. – Niraj

MTB-MLE means using both mother tongue and the target language... It is a system of making students comprehend the content easily in their own local language and a way of giving them knowledge of foreign language as well. – Bikash

MTB-MLE has so many models but in preliminary stage students mother tongue is used as a medium of instruction. Slowly and gradually students are motivated to learn English. So, I think MTB-MLE is a planning or strategy to impart knowledge to students by means of students' mother tongue and target language. – Tarun

Thus, we can say that in MTB-MLE, policy makers and teachers try to strike a balance between learners' mother tongues, national languages and foreign languages so that learners will comprehend the content easily. None of the languages is overemphasized at the cost of the other.

Differences between MTI and MTB-MLE

MTI refers to students' MT only as a subject and MOI, whereas MTB-MLE refers to students' MT, national language and foreign language as subjects and MOIs.

MTI is a policy of teaching students using their mother tongue as a medium of instruction. It refers to preparing textbooks in students' mother tongue and even evaluating students' progress using their mother tongue. Examination, classroom instruction, material production and everything takes place in students' mother tongue. On the other hand, in MTB-MLE, instruction is done through learners' mother tongue as well as appropriate amount of target language. MTB-MLE does not necessarily require the materials in learners' mother tongue. – Tarun

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MTI means we do not value other languages. We solely use mother tongue in the classes. On the other hand, in MTB-MLE we do not totally use mother tongue at the cost of other languages. Instead, we use help of learners' mother tongue as well as other languages being learnt to develop competencies in the children. – Niraj

In MTI, only learners' mother tongue is used whereas in MTB-MLE, mother tongue, Nepali and English are used in such a way that they will get language skills as well as content knowledge. – Bikash

In MTI, therefore, students' MT is the medium of classroom instruction, examinations and material production. On the other hand, in MTB-MLE all the languages concerned are given primacy in accordance with the learners' levels and needs. MTB-MLE is the more liberal and developed form of MTI.

Outcomes of MTB-MLE

Many studies have shown that MTB-MLE gives fruitful outcomes ranging from ease in learning to career development to social equity. If students get opportunities to learn in the language they are familiar with, then that learning has delayed positive effect.

It can produce plurilinguals with multiple competences. Further, it makes the learners creative and critical thinkers... So, MTB-MLE is the best way of producing capable human resource. – Niraj

Researches have shown that if learners learn the basic concepts of mathematics and science in their mother tongue, their academic performance becomes better in the long run. If we rigidly stick to English, learners can pass exams but their cognitive development does not take place fully. Therefore, MTB-MLE guarantees better academic performance and develops multi-competence in the children. In the same way, languages can be preserved through MTB-MLE. – Tarun

Students can easily understand the instruction and can participate in classroom interaction in MTB-MLE context. Similarly, the problems of language loss, language endangerment and language death can be solved. – Bikash

Plurilingual skilled human resource with multiple competences can be asset for the nation, which is the major outcome of MTB-MLE. If we need to develop the basic concepts of various subjects in our children successfully, we need to embrace MTB-MLE. We can make our children academically sound through MTB-MLE because it works as a panacea for cognitive development. Likewise, MTB-MLE can stop the languages from running the risk of endangerment.

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MTB-MLE for justice and equality

Every child should have right to education; all the children of minority groups should be within the reach of education. Language should not be the barrier in the way of accumulating knowledge and education. Critically looking, educational discrepancies due to linguistic and cultural diversities cannot be digested. MTB-MLE, in this regard is thought to bridge the gaps between haves and have nots.

In MTB-MLE, learners don't have to struggle to pay attention to new language. This gives justice and equality to learners to access the knowledge. – Niraj

To make the students feel that their languages are equally important MTB-MLE is needed. – Bikash

I also think that MTB-MLE brings justice and equality because it respects learners' indigenous languages. – Tarun

If dominant languages always serve as the MOIs, have nots are always beyond the reach of education. National and foreign languages are very difficult for the minority groups, which makes their children not comprehend the subject matter. This results into their low socio-economic status at present and in future. The slogan 'education for all' can only be successful if MTB-MLE is implemented successfully.

MTB-MLE for students' ease and interest

Many studies have shown that if learners get input in their MT, learning gets consolidated because they don't have to pay attention to new language. When they easily comprehend the information in the preliminary years of education, their horizon can widen in the later years and they become eligible to learn in other languages as well. Moreover, when they learn in the language they are familiar with, they show interest in learning. Thus, making learning easy and interesting frees their attention to grasp the information.

Nepal is full of linguistic diversity. In a single class, we find the students with different linguistic backgrounds. If teachers can facilitate the students providing them the knowledge in these languages to the children, a sort of linguistic and cultural tolerance develops. This makes learning easier and interesting. – Niraj

In MTB-MLE, learners get exposed to many different languages and they feel happier; when they are confused, they can learn from their friends. This develops positive attitude in them...MTB-MLE also makes learning practical and lively...Classroom becomes fun and students become more interested.– Bikash

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Students can develop the concepts subconsciously with fun because they don't have to worry about language. – Tarun

Besides fun in the classroom, MTB-MLE develops linguistic and cultural tolerance in the learners. When learners develop concepts in an interesting, funny and lively environment, learning goes in long-term memory which becomes spontaneous knowledge later on. Linguistically and culturally tolerant learners with positive attitudes towards learning and speakers of other languages are needed for the development of every nation.

Challenges in the implementation of MTB-MLE

MTB-MLE has a number of benefits if implemented successfully. However, its implementation is not without challenges. Lack of training to teachers, lack of textbooks, multilingual contexts, etc. are some challenges.

A teacher may not know all the languages of students in a multilingual classroom. Training the teachers to use MTB-MLE in a multilingual class is another challenge. Many languages do not have written forms; their grammar books, dictionaries, written literature is yet to be prepared, and so on. Similarly, policies are copied from some European countries; they are not made on the basis of need analysis or situation analysis... parents have become crazy for English and they want to send their children to private schools. They don't want their children to be taught in the mother tongue of their children or that of their children's friends. – Niraj

Teachers may not be competent in many languages; a teacher may not know the languages of his/ her students. Similarly, policies are made in paper, detached from the grassroot reality, needs and wants... Our guardians want EMI and they send their children to private schools... Teachers are also not ready for this because they have not received sufficient training... Neither the policy making-body nor the teachers are responsible, I think. They just think of their allowances not of bettering the education system. Policy makers don't have long term vision in Nepal. Policies are not made on the basis of local needs, geography and culture; they are copied from Europe. Our policy is experimental in nature because of lack of need analysis and situation analysis. Long-term effect of the policy is never taken into consideration while making policies. – Bikash

MTB-MLE is just a matter of politics; it is something to show off only. Leaders just want to show that they have adopted MTB-MLE, that they want to preserve all the indigenous languages, that they respect all the languages and cultures, and that mother tongues have supreme importance.... They are in policy-making body but their children go to EMI private schools... Policy is made theoretically but so many loopholes occur in its implementation. Policy is made for policy sake only and it is limited to papers... English is

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deeply rooted in our society and everywhere in this commercialised and globalized world. Low level guardians and even high level policy makers think that MTB-MLE will not impart English language competence to their children. – Tarun

From these aforementioned stories, we can say that implementing MTB-MLE is a challenging job. Parents do not want MTB-MLE but government wants MTB-MLE. Real needs of societies have not been studied and policy is made in hunch. Guardians of students from different contexts have not been consulted while making the policy. Training the teachers of multilingual classrooms is not done but policy is made. Training the teachers is indeed a great challenge. Similarly, several languages have not undergone through standardisation process; they are not codified and lexicalized. Policy makers have adopted the policy from the European context but they have not studied its applicability in Nepal.

Ways to overcome the challenges

There are several challenges in the implementation of MTB-MLE but they can be overcome if policies are made properly. Participants in this study sought so many challenges but they also talked of the possible ways of overcoming the challenges.

Schools should be given freedom to adopt bottom up approach. Schools should not always be controlled by the centre. Before that concrete policies based on ground reality and grassroots scenario have to be made. Most important of all, universities should produce teachers for MTB-MLE. Proper budgeting for education sector is also needed to make MTB-MLE successful. – Niraj

From policy-making level to classroom level, everyone has to be responsible. Political instability, shortsightedness, election agenda, and hypocrisy of leaders are the worst factors. So, these things need to be improved. Teachers need to be trained regarding how to manage trilingualism in classrooms. Management of teaching aids, technology and other equipments is also necessary. Likewise, awareness of the guardians should be raised regarding the importance of MTB-MLE. – Bikash

We cannot stay idle thinking that we are not fit for MTB-MLE. Teachers should be trained regarding how to instruct using MTB-MLE, how to deal with multilingual classrooms, what sort of materials can be explored, what models of MTB-MLE have come so far, and how evaluation can be done. – Tarun

MTB-MLE can be successfully implemented if all the stakeholders are responsible. Schools should not always be directed by the centre because one-fits-all policy does not work in the present context. Schools should be allowed to make liaison with the local stakeholders to make appropriate policies. Responsibility goes to universities as well to produce teachers for MTB-MLE context. Education should be aloof from political influence

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and election agenda. Likewise, proper budget should be allocated so that teachers can be given appropriate training regarding the use and exploration of technology and teaching aids as well as the suitable models for MTB-MLE classrooms.

Discussion

MTB-MLE is a language policy in which a balance is made between learners' mother tongue, national language(s) and foreign language(s). Nepal has adopted a trilingual policy in education where education is imparted in learners' mother tongue, Nepali and English. This policy is not in practice everywhere, however. Teachers clearly know what MTB-MLE and MTI mean, what the benefits and possible outcomes of MTB-MLE are. MTB-MLE can produce plurilingual skilled human resource with multiple competences. It makes the children academically sound and it develops the cognition of the students which aligns with Sanchez (2013), Awopetu (2016), Cabansag (2016) and Jaca and Soledad (2022). However, as opposed to Cruz (2015), Namanya (2017), Gempeso and Mendez (2021), the study did not show any harms of MTB-MLE. As given in Lang-ay and Sannadan (2021), the study found that MTB-MLE makes learners linguistically and culturally tolerant. It can also preserve the languages from getting extinct, and it develops positive attitudes in the learners towards learning and speakers of other languages (Lang-ay & Sannadan, 2021; Oda & Vizconde, 2021). MTB-MLE was found to produce globally capable and competitive human resource which is incompatible with Dimaculangan and Gonzales (2020). Teachers also revealed that there are so many challenges in the implementation of MTB-MLE, which resonates with Cabansag (2016) and Rubi and Molina (2020). It was found that teachers need to be given continuous support and training (Rubi & Molina, 2020) but training them is also a big challenge (Cruz, 2015). As found in Rubi and Molina (2020), the schools in Nepal seem to have very less resources, which makes implementation of MTB-MLE challenging. The study also saw no involvement of parents in policy making and curriculum development. Therefore, it highly recommends their involvement, which supports what Sanchez- Danday (2021) says. The study suggested that parents and teachers should be given freedom to adopt bottom-up approach so that they can cater to the local and grass root needs (Kirsch & Aleksić, 2021). MTB-MLE was also found to be funny and interesting for the learners, and it was found to create justice and equality as well.

Conclusion

MTB-MLE seems to be of paramount importance in this globalized and commercialized world where people need to be globally competitive without losing their original identity. In this era of multilingualism and plural competences, we cannot imagine of monolingual MTI or EMI. In many parts of the world at present MTB-MLE has gained

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popularity because it has been found to be useful to preserve people's identities, to enable people to cope up with global market, and to preserve the dying languages. The study has found the outcomes of MTB-MLE along with the challenges in the implication of MTB-MLE. It has also given the possible ways to overcome the challenges. However, the study was limited to the data generated from the interview of three teachers of Kanchanpur who were conveniently sampled. Therefore, there may arise the issues of representativeness and generalizability. This small scale study is also prone to criticisms because the data was generated on the basis of teachers' perceptions, not my own observation. Further research is, therefore, needed that employs random sampling and observation as a tool that explores what is happening in the real field.

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