

English in Nepali Education: A Marxist-influenced Critical Approach**Bhuban Bahadur Bohara****Tribhuvan University, Sanothimi Campus***bbhuwan@gmail.com***Narendra Raj Paneru****Tribhuvan University, Sanothimi Campus***nrajpaneru@gmail.com*

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Abstract

The present paper deals with Marxist-influenced post-modern constructionism and poststructuralist theories. Then, it problematizes the issues of language, language learning, and language education in Nepal in the light of critical theory. The paper makes a cursory review of the Marxist tradition of language study and connects it with the post-structural and post-modern considerations. It further deals with the existing scenario of language and language education in Nepal and problematizes the expansion of the English language in the cost of language genocide of the mother tongues. The woman with all the cats comes shopping here regularly.

Keywords *linguistic genocide, language capital, criticality, English-generated, inequalities*

Introduction

Classical Marxism had little contribution to the field of language philosophy as a consequence, the early discourse in this issue developed majorly in the anti-Marxist academia. However, Stalin's pamphlet, Gramsci's Prison Notebooks, Lenin's texts on slogans, and even the pamphlets published in German dialects by Engels are the early treatise in the Marxist academia that deal with the philosophy of language (Lecerle, 2006). The recent expansion of some of the earlier colonizer languages (such as the spread of Global English) offers plenty of inquisition in the field (Ives, 2008), which seeks theoretical insights from Marxist-influenced post-structural and

post-modern theories. However, Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*; appeared in the 1920s that incorporated linguistics into Marxism. Arguing the inseparability of language from ideology, he said, “Everything ideological possesses meaning: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words, it is a sign. *Without signs, there is no ideology*” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 9).

In the post-war era Habermas, Bourdieu, Chomsky, Althusser, etc. significantly contributed to the field from Western Europe and the US (Lecerle, 2006). The post-war interpretation of the Marxist philosophy of language was not identical to the understandings of the classical Marxist school, however, the theorists extended the Marxist theories from what Russian sources suggested earlier. They proposed more subjectivity in language philosophy, as Habermas says, “speech is almost always asymmetrical, due to the differences in the nature of men, and because of the practical demand of avoiding excessive expenses and excessive amounts of time and nerves” (as cited in Leinfellner, 1977, p. 184). These post-war works in this field and their theorization developed in the Western European Marxist tradition, mainly at the Frankfurt School, come under the domain of Critical Theories (Bohman, 2021), mainly contributed by thinkers as Adorno, Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Jürgen Habermas. This theoretical orientation, based on the assumption that we live amid a world of pain, and human endeavour can alleviate that pain, sees social inequality as a major issue and places social transformation at the centre (Pennycook, 2001). Despite considering mental processes and their underlying structures, including the perception of society, which is generally conceptualized in terms of the more or less intentional, interpersonal transmission of cultural elements, this theoretical inclination always insists on praxis as an essential feature of consciousness formation (Levy, 1991).

Critical Theories: A Critical Examination

In a broader sense, critical theory covers the disciplines of social sciences, offering a critical account of society, knowledge, and culture (i.e., political systems, arts, and literature). It encompasses queer theory, the theory of communicative action by Habermas, feminist theory, critical legal theory, psychoanalysis, neo-Marxian theories etc. Similarly, in a narrow sense, it refers to different generations of the Frankfurt School, including its members, followers, and surroundings. It attempts to adapt Marxist theoretical and practical tools to analyze twentieth-century capitalist

societies, which include political, economic, and social evolution (Maura, 2013).

Thus, as the theoretical inclination and background suggest, criticality addresses every kind of inequality, oppression, and struggle caused by resistance to any kind of structural blindness existing in the field.

The Onset of Critical Turn

In the 1980s and 1990s, critical turn began influencing the academic works of education and applied linguistics. This turn was majorly influenced by two prominent European conceptual approaches namely; Marxist-influenced critical theory and postmodern constructionism including poststructuralist theory. Despite being argued as distinct theoretical approaches, both collide in many cases and influence each other in problematizing the given social structures and human experiences. The major difference between them is the earlier influence of earlier work on critical perspectives in the field of inquiry, and the latter has gained greater popularity and has been widely used in critical applied linguistics research. Apart from these two approaches of European origin, there has been the post-colonial theory that emerged from resistance to European colonialism (Kubota & Miller, 2017). These theories are entwined together in the field of language enquiry and education. Pennycook's ideas of critical applied linguistics emerged dominantly in critical language studies, has been influenced by postmodernist constructionism, especially Foucauldian poststructuralism, taking insights of traditional areas of critical thought from Marxian structuralist analyses of society, studies in political economy, or theories of imperialism. This approach provides insights into macro-political understandings of the contexts in which language use and language education occur (Kubota & Miller, 2017; Pennycook, 1997).

As criticality is to question the existing beliefs and assumptions seeking a more logical evaluation of the reality, critical applied linguistics focuses on critiques of inequality, oppression, and discrimination as well as related politics and ethics, rejecting the fixity of envisioning the research and politics (Pennycook, 2001). In doing so, criticality is supposed to problematize naturalized and normalized assumptions and practices; questioning power and inequality; focusing on broader social, ideological, and colonial milieus; problematizing gender, race, class, and sexuality; transcending fixed knowledge and seeking visions for change, and practising self-reflexivity and praxis (Kubota & Miller, 2017).

In the post-war era, there had been plenty of contribution theorizing language ideologies from Marxist-influenced and post-modern constructionism including poststructuralist theories. The Marxist-influenced approaches such as the Freirean concept of critical pedagogy and critical discourse analysis (CDA) analyze any phenomenon in terms of binary concepts of oppressed and oppressor. They take power as a repressive force imposed by the dominator over the dominated. They believe that every production (mental also) is controlled by the capitalists, leading to false consciousness (Kubota & Miller, 2017). Whereas, Pennycook's post-structuralist notion of critical applied linguistics approach sees the impacts of historical effects of truth within the discourse, extending the observation to the modernist-emancipatory positioning and the postmodern-problematizing positioning (Pennycook, 2001).

Criticality: Addressing the Language Concerns

After the expansion of the English language as a global language, its use in education, media, technology, or academia has immensely grown. This has foregrounded new concerns in the field of language research; such as many languages are losing potential child speakers every year, endangering the language of concern; attributed as 'language death' (Crystal, 2012); sometimes claimed as linguistic genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009, 2012); or linguistic imperialism, a sub-category of cultural imperialism, that is a phenomenon of domination of few languages internationally as a legacy of European colonialism and imperialism (Phillipson, 1992; 2009). These concerns have raised heated debate in third world countries, which are still struggling to free themselves from the impact of Western colonization. On the one hand, there are lucrative opportunities for learning an international language such as English as the expanding domain of such languages has proven to be a prominent personal asset, attributed as linguistic capital. In such cases, people are likely to favour the language yielding a bigger linguistic capital in comparison to one yielding a smaller one. This symbolic power, as Loos (2000) argues referring to Bourdieu, is an "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it" (p. 2). This symbolic power enables one to transform one form of capital into another, such as; a good education (cultural capital) means speaking a foreign language (linguistic capital), which may help to get a good job at a multinational that pays well (economic capital) and gaining prestige (symbolic capital) (Loos, 2000).

For this, people tend to learn the languages yielding more linguistic capital, which threatens the endangered languages to go extinct. In many third-world countries, the majority of children are taught in the language spoken either by a minority of children or no one in the class, identified as language genocide (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009; Brock-Utne, 2012). This slightly causes them to shift to the privileged language. This may ultimately cause the extinction of the less privileged languages, which ultimately leads to language loss. A BBC report says that in the last century, only around 400 languages were lost. This shows the extinction of one language every three months. If the same trend remains, by the end of this century, 50 percent of the remaining six thousand five hundred languages in the world will go extinct. The present linguistic scenario of the world also shows the unequal distribution of the languages, where the top ten languages in the world claim around half of the world's population (Nuwer, 2014). This shows that a large number of the world population has shifted to more privileged languages in past decades as they have to shift to newer areas for opportunities (Wurm, 1991). This situation created inequality between the new and existing speakers of the privileged languages and between the speakers of the privileged and non-privileged languages. This is the concern of critical theory.

A language may die in certain conditions, such as; if it loses all the speakers and fails to pass to the next generation, if the speakers of that language lose favourable conditions, or when the language is disconnected from livelihood (disbalance in language ecology, political influence, etc.), if the speakers fail to realise that their language is an important component of their uniqueness, or if it is not passed from the parents to their children (Wurm, 1991; Crystal, 2000; Almurashi, 2017).

English and English-Generated Inequality(-ies) in Nepali Society

English has expanded all over the world in recent days and has become an unrivaled lingua franca (Medgyes, 2001), ranging its expansion to various countries as a second or foreign language offering a wider range of communication possibilities in the field of science, information technology, business, entertainment and diplomacy, and other opportunities of employment and economic success (Tollefson, 2000). Expansion of English as an international language began with the extension of the British Empire. The colonial power of the British helped the spread of English outside Europe. In the early phases of the spread of English, it transmitted to the colonies with the native speakers migrated from the mainland (Caine, 2008); however, from the 20th century onwards, the spread became more vibrant as it

efficiently connected all parts, and turned it into a global village (Crystal, 2012).

Presently, English has emerged with two contradictory forms in the global arena. On the one hand, it has enabled people from different parts of the world to make the world hear their voices and speak against global exploitation; eased the political and cultural understanding across the cultures, and on the other hand, it has become a tool for the imperialist interests to impose the powerless nation to follow the norms set by the powerful ones (Ha, 2008). However, English has become manifold in recent days because people are seeking to acquire more global jobs, and more effective international communication (Pandey & Pandey, 2014). These phenomena have a deep impact on the different aspects of Nepali society too, where the stronghold of the ruling elites in the language policy-making left the language concerns of the common people unaddressed (Giri, 2009).

(In)equalities and Education

English has created a new layer of inequality in Nepal. When we look at history, there are some pieces of evidence Nepali society got acquainted with English since the mid-17th century, and after the establishment of Durbar High School, education in English was introduced (Pandey, 2020). For a long time, English education was privileged mostly for ruler class children and admission to this school had been seen as the door to elevation to the higher class. And, since then, English proficiency has been taken as an additional asset to one's personality in Nepalese society (Bista, 1991), providing one opportunity to elevate one's social status. This laid the foundation of a new type of systematic inequality in Nepali society, as English became a tool to distinguish the upper-class people from the common people (Shah & Li, 2017).

Commodification of English

In recent days Nepal evidenced massive commodification of English. It has become the most favourable language in the informal and non-government sector. However, this has posed a challenge to financially deprived families who cannot pay for expensive education in English. There exist at least two categories of education in the country, that is to yield two different classes on the basis of the privileged access to the schools providing education using English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI).

During the Panchayat era, the Nepali language was the only privileged language in the country, projected as the s language of education, administration, and the sole lingua franca (Upadhyaya, 2011). During this era, the state policies were

oppressive towards other minority languages. Neo-liberal policies adopted after the restoration of democracy in 1990 saw the expansion of the English language in education as schools run from the private sector opened marketizing EMI. These schools, opened mainly for business purpose, and hence not accessible to economically challenged population (Phyak, 2016; Shah & Li, 2017).

Dominance as Linguistic Capital

English has gained the status of a dominant linguistic capital in Nepal (Shah & Li, 2017), which embodies the cultural capital. When a particular language becomes a linguistic capital, it provides an advantageous and privileged social status to an individual who owns it (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). This elevation of the English language to the status of linguistic capital made it popular among the community schools as a medium of instruction, whereas English as a medium of instruction (EMI) was already popular among institutional schools (Shah & Li, 2017) that has significantly pressurized the policymakers in the realm of constitution-assured mother-tongue education (Phyak, 2016).

Threat of Linguistic Genocide and Language Death

Despite the constitutional provisions of the right to education in the mother tongue, most Nepal children are being taught in languages other than their mother tongues. This prevents their access to education and “can also be seen as language genocide” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009, p. 4). In the case of Nepal, linguistic genocide is manifested at least in two layers of linguistic imperialism, the first due to the implementation of Nepali language in education barring other languages and the other because of hegemonic expansion of English, and its use in Nepali education, that has limited the domain of the various vernaculars and Nepali to backfoot.

Language Elitisms

As English has been used as a tool as well as a resource for social mobility, linguistic superiority and educational and economic benefits, it has “established itself as a language of power today” (Giri, 2009, p. 39). This made many of the parents favour schools offering EMI, as “parents, students, and teachers regarded EMI as a privileged form of linguistic capital for developing advanced English skills, enhancing educational achievements and access to higher education, and increasing the chance of upward social and economic mobility” (Shah & Li, 2017, p. 109). This benefits the elites as they have access to well-resourced schools and can pay for the extra classes of their children. This fosters a kind of language elitism where the

languages spoken by the non-elites are left on their fate, and all the resources are utilized in the learning of elite-preferred languages instead of researching, investing, and maintaining the vast linguistic resources for their linguistic, cultural and human potentials (Giri, 2009). The growth of this elitism is English-generated as it is the most preferred linguistic capital.

Theoretical Argumentation

Nepal was never colonized by Western empires neither the English language holds any official position in the nation. Yet, it has emerged as the most favoured language. Its expansion is hegemonic as it is not forced but accepted. In the constitution, Nepal has accepted the multilingual policy. Despite it, hegemonic control of the elite languages like Nepali and English dominate the linguistic realm of the country. In education, as well as in the important documents like the citizenship card, the English language is preferred in place of the local languages (Giri, 2009), this troubles the citizens who are illiterate in English. On the other hand, students not being taught in the language they speak leads them to lose their access to education and the phenomenon (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009, 2012).

The expansion of English in third world countries has brought many opportunities to the individual having a considerable proficiency of this linguistic capital. This expansion has made English a product and the countries like Britain seems to be keen to promote its supply in the form of books, dictionaries, textbooks, educational know-how, advisers, and to ensure cultural, economic, and political benefits to Britain (Phillipson, 2009). The core English speaking countries has presented English as a product and promote it aggressively by providing foreign aids to the target countries. They marketise English as “the language of development, modernity, and scientific and technological advance” (Phillipson, 1992, p. 11). For this, Phillipson terms this planned expansion ‘linguistic imperialism. But in the case of Nepal, linguistic imperialism is posed by English, there has been a similar treatment from the side of the Nepali language, which has pushed many of the minority languages at the margin.

Conclusion

As “English has clearly been interwoven with British colonialism throughout colonial and postcolonial history” (Pennycook, 1998, p. 8), it has gained global expansion since the expansion of the British empire (Caine, 2008). In Nepal too, English has hegemonic influence since the first English school, Durbar High School

incorporated, and it was “further strengthened with the introduction of English to education in the 1950s when Nepal embarked on planning formal education for the first time” (Giri, 2009, p. 38). Since then, the influence of the English language has been growing day by day. Though this expansion has brought newer opportunities for people, it has created new layers of discrimination and inequalities in Nepali society. The use of languages other than the mother languages of the children is believed to be barring their access to education and leading to language genocide. Implementation of the mother-tongue based pedagogy can be a solution in this regard (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009).

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