

Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education

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"Language is not everything in education, but without language, everything is nothing in education."

Prof. Ekkehard Wolff, 2006

In our constitution, education policies and laws are favorable toward using children's home language as a medium of instruction in basic education. Since the Ministry of Education approved School Sector Reform Plan 2009-2015 and Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Implementation Guidelines 2010, various mother tongue based multilingual education (MTBMLE) initiatives have been introduced by government and non-government agencies. Children from the minority language speaking communities are getting benefits from the programs. However, the implemented MTBMLE programs are not effective as expected. It will be too early to say MTBMLE program is failure in Nepal.

What is MTBMLE?

Multilingual Education typically refers to "first-language-first" in education, that is, a child's schooling begins in his or her mother tongue and later transitions to additional languages. Typically MTBMLE programs are conducted in developing countries where speakers of minority languages tend to be disadvantaged in mainstream education. "Multilingual education helps linguistically marginalized communities bridge to the broader society, allowing them to acquire the national language without losing their own identity." (Dr. Kimmo Kosonen, 2009) Still, there are many misconceptions about multilingual education in Nepal. "MTBMLE program is for All Non-Nepali speaking students." (MoES, DoE, Inclusive Section, 2007-09) why not for Nepali speaking children? Does the State allow make discrimination among children based on their gender, caste, race and languages? It is important that we have the same level of understanding and a similar definition for MLE, especially among key stakeholders (parents, teachers, government and non-government agencies), in order to implement strong and effective MTBMLE programs.

Why MTBMLE?

According to June Jordan "You will never teach a child a new language by scoring and ridiculing and forcibly erasing his first language." At the beginning of education, mother tongue instruction is very important not only to develop a strong educational foundation, but also to strengthen the cognitive development of learners. Unless the mother tongue is used in education, there is a big gap between the student's home and the school. By developing literacy skills in the first language, MTBMLE helps strengthen the first language and provides a smooth transition from L1 (First language) to L2 (National language) or L3 (International language) to be used as a medium of instruction.

There are two lines of argument that support MTBMLE: educational argument and cultural argument. Both arguments are important in education. MTBMLE needs to focus on providing quality education for children to support, promote, preserve and maintain both primary language and culture. If children have an opportunity to begin their education in their own language and gradually transit to additional languages their learning achievement will be effective and sustainable. It also helps to promote unity amidst diversity among the different language communities in the country and

¹ Pushker Kadel works as Program Director in Language Development Centre (LDC) Nepal, Kathmandu.
Email: pushker.kadel@gmail.com

develop a congenial environment among them. When people are started to respect each other language and culture, it automatically create the peace and prosperity in the society.

Some advantages to multilingualism include: (Multilingual Education Trainer handbook)

- Gives status to ethnic and local community languages
- Enables children to maintain links with their cultural backgrounds and to develop a close relationship with their families and their communities
- Increases people's employment opportunities in the modern world
- Facilitates access to the curriculum and to learning in school
- Improves communication between different linguistic and cultural groups
- Provides children with the ability to share in a wide range of intercultural experiences such as literature, entertainment, religion and interests

Dr. Susan Malone (2010), emphasis on the importance of MTBMLE "Most students who enter MLE programs are already comfortable using their mother tongue for daily communication. a language education program that helps build a strong educational foundation in that language, bridge successfully into one or more school languages and then use both or all their languages for life-long learning." So, MTBMLE program will work as a strong bridge to enable the students continue their education with good foundation and able to respect each others' language and culture.

"The effectiveness of multilingual education is not confined to basic education only. Adult (parents) literacy programs based on multilingual education are quite useful as well." (Zubair Torwali, 2009) To provide quality education for the children, parents must be literate in their own language and in the second language. In the beginning, MTBMLE must support implementation of parent literacy activities. Literate parents will eventually be able to support their children's reading and writing at home. Children learning achievements depends on whether they are able to get support from their parents.

What are the Challenges of MTBMLE?

There are a variety of formidable challenges to planning, implementing and sustaining quality MLE programs. According to Dr. Susan Malone (2010), these include

- Multiple languages, many with multiple dialects
- Lack of practical orthographies
- Lack of mother tongue speakers with teaching credentials
- Lack of written literature
- Multiple mother tongues
- Large classes sizes
- Lack of curriculum and instructional materials

Compounding the challenges mentioned above, in my opinion there a number of additional obstacles that may be faced during implementation. They are:

- Poor coordination among different government agencies
- Misconception and differences in understanding about MTBMLE
- Parents are confused about the concept of MTBMLE, thus are not supportive
- Debates on whether language or script more important than the other
- How to promote language and culture in higher education system through MTBMLE and how it will be defined
- Hesitation among the teachers in the government schools because of fear of

losing their jobs

- Parents are eager to send their children to English medium schools
- How to make MTBMLE inclusive: People raise the questions, does MLE help to meet EFA goal? We normally answer yes, if so why MTBMLE is for only non-dominant language speaking children?
- No fair distribution of financial resources from the supporting agencies (The plan and allocation of the resources are not transparent)

According to Policy Strategy for MLE in Nepal: Report by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas and Ajit Mohathy, Consultancy visit 4-14 March 2010, there are several specific challenges to Nepal. The main challenges are

1. What has been suggested for Nepal in various reports in relation to mother tongue, Nepali and English?
2. Developing stage of language policy in the context of a federal policy
3. Curriculum and materials
4. Evaluation and research

In my opinion, to face the mentioned challenges, State should be developed same education system for public and private schools with supportive and effective regulation system. MTBMLE should focus to provide inclusive and quality education to the children and as well help to promote diverse language and cultures.

Conclusion

MTBMLE is an emerging issue in Nepal. We need to find out the success and strengths of the MTBMLE. Aside from knowing the good implications of MTBMLE, we should also know failure stories (unsuccessful practices) for us to plan and implement a successful, effective and strong MTBMLE program. Unfortunately, we are only considering about successes and doing research on successful programs. Western scholars did most of the researches and studies. They have good ideas and concepts about MTBMLE issues but they are unfamiliar with our contexts. In order to know more about the progress, challenges and opportunities surrounding MTBMLE, we the practitioners have to work together to share our experiences, skills and knowledge at the national and regional levels through MTBMLE forums. The UNESCO paper, "Education in a Multilingual world", notes "... while there are strong educational arguments in favor of the mother tongue (first language) instruction, a careful balance also needs to be made between enabling people to use local languages in learning and providing access to global languages of communication through education." (Catherine Young, 2010) So, we need to support to implement module MTBMLE program with good coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders under the State education system and policies.

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