

Multilingual Education in Linguistically diverse Nepal: The Role of Mother-tongue based Education for Better Learning Outcomes

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Abstract

Linguistically diverse, Nepal has 123 different mother tongues and for 55% of the people, Nepali (national language) is their second language of communication. This context poses a serious constraint on learning achievement for early grade students as the primary teaching language in all government schools is Nepali. Realizing this problem, Nepal has recently prioritized multilingual teaching at early grades in government schools. There are good intentions in adopting this approach to education, however there are limited studies on whether multilingual education (MLE) really contributes to learning outcomes of early grade children. This study is an attempt to explore the effects of providing MLE to pre-primary students. This study was conducted in Magar ethnic group in Rukum and Tharu in Kapilvastu districts of Nepal where the Khan Magar and Awadi are the mother tongue languages respectively. The data was gathered from the children, parents, teachers and school management committee members who were engaged in various MLE interventions at those districts. Semi-structured questionnaires were developed to obtain the information from the respondents. Out of wide contributions, this study found that multilingual education had positively contributed in four aspects of school education; i) students' performance, ii) teachers skills; iii) parents involvement in children's education, iv) classroom learning environment. These contributions were further seen to be long term in nature and directly related to the children's dynamic educational achievement. To a broader extent, the multilingual education also contributed to preserving the value of ethnic language and culture.

Keywords: Multilingual education, ethnic language, student performance, ethnic group, teacher skills, learning achievement

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Introduction

United Mission to Nepal is an International Non-governmental organisation which has been working in community development in Nepal for over 60 years. The focus is on helping the poorest people living in poverty (PPLP). Mother tongue based Multilingual education was incorporated into its Integrated Education projects (IEP) after requests from ethnic minority communities in its working areas of Rukum and Kapilbastu who had identified language as a barrier to the effective learning of their own children when they started school. The aim of the project was to improve access to quality education of children from ethnic minorities through the provision of mother-tongue based multi-lingual education (MTB-MLE).

Background and Context

Nepal is a linguistically very diverse country. According to the 2011 census (GoN 2011), there are 126 ethnic groups and 123 different mother tongues. 55% of the Nepalese people do not speak Nepali as their first language although this is the language of education in the government schools (Pradhan 2016). The original rationale for this “one nation, one language” policy in 1969 was that it promoted a national identity and that students would learn Nepali faster if they were immersed in it from the start of their schooling. However, increased awareness developed among ethno-linguistic groups of the need to preserve their cultural identity and agitation increased throughout the 1990’s during the civil war (Yadava 2007). Language issues became politicised at this time. The constitution of Nepal 1990 recognized the rights of people to their own language and script. The reports of the national Education Commission (NEC) and National Languages policy recommendation commission (NLPRC) also recommended mother tongue education. Subsequently, the Education Act 2007, the National framework for Education for all (EFA) and the national curriculum all now have provision for mother tongue education (Ghimire, 2011). Following the restoration of democracy in 2006 the revised Education Act of 2007 stated that primary education should be in the mother tongue for grades 1-3 in all subjects except English and Nepali. (Yadava 2007) The Department of Education has implemented MLE programmes since 2006. In 2012 the MLE framework of GoN gave guidance on MLE in schools. More recently, the 2015 Constitution of the country states in Article 31, section 5 (Government of Nepal, 2015) children in every Nepali community have a right to education in their mother tongue and that it is the state’s responsibility to provide this. Nepal is a signatory to many international policies safeguarding the rights of ethnic minorities, for example the UN declaration on the rights of Indigenous Peoples 2008 which includes the right to culture, identity and language. The most recent Government of Nepal (GoN) school sector development plan (SSDP) 2016-2023 prioritises MLE and classifies schools on the basis of the mother tongue of their students (GoN 2016).

Mother tongue based –multilingual education in Nepal

Ghimire (2012) defines mother tongue as the language of one’s ethnic group and refers to the language of instruction as being the language used for teaching. Mother tongue based Multilingual education (MTB MLE) is the use of the student’s mother tongue and two or more additional languages as the language of instruction in schools (Malone 2007). It is a method by which students start by learning in their mother

tongue language (L1). In this context, pre-primary and early primary students then learn to read and write their own language in the Devanagari script before moving to the second language (L2), in this case Nepali. They then learn the Nepali vocabulary and grammar when they can already read and write using the phonetic Devanagari script. It is based on the “first language first” principle (UNESCO, 2011) which is that children make a better start in school, and continue to make better progress, if they learn in their mother tongue when they enter school for the first time.

Nepalese children start school in pre-primary grade full time from the age of four without any pre-school transition and this is particularly challenging for those from ethnic groups who do not understand Nepali which is the language of instruction. The Nepali language is written in the phonetic Devanagari script and has a literate tradition unlike all but 8 of Nepal’s indigenous languages. Some communities like Tharu have a predominantly pictorial, rather than a written culture. Awadhi has a literate tradition and the Magar community has its own Sino-Tibetan Akkha script (Yadava, 2007). The Tharu and Magar groups are in the process of standardizing their written language by deciding, for example, which dialect words to use. (Turin 2004). Some communities, such as Magar, have a script which only a few older members of the community are able to read and therefore, when considering how to help non-Nepali speaking children to access the Nepali curriculum and textbooks, the choice of script is a crucial one. Multilingual education (MLE) textbooks and teachers for this project were provided up to grade 3. By grade 4 children are expected to be sufficiently competent in the Nepali language to be able to access mainstream education in Nepali. Because Devanagari is a phonetic script, it lends itself to Mother tongue based (MTB) MLE because children can learn to read and write in phonetic Devanagari script but using their own first language words and sounds. Once basic reading and writing have been mastered, Nepali words are introduced, and children start to read and write in both languages and by grade 4 (aged 8) they are educated in Nepali language except for weekly subject classes in their own ethnic language. Teacher training in scaffolding both languages was therefore an essential part of this project.

Key components of MTB-MLE are teacher training, provision of MTB teaching and learning materials, classroom management and set up, parental involvement, literacy assessment curriculum and transition management (Pinnock, 2011). This project focussed on the first four of these components. Local Khan Magar or Tharu/Awadi speaking Teachers were recruited after consultation with community stakeholders including parents and school leaders. They were trained to teach in the ethnic language while scaffolding Nepali literacy skills and verbal Nepali throughout the first four years of schooling with the aim that by grade 4 the students would be able to access the curriculum and textbooks in Nepali. From grade 4 their ethnic language and culture is taught as a single subject only. The teachers were also taught to produce their own MLE materials. UMN, in collaboration with GoN Curriculum development centre in Kathmandu (CDC 2007), worked with communities in the working areas to produce contextualised, locally produced MLE text books for grades one to three. These had each line of text printed in Nepali in one colour print and one or more local languages in a different colour. Devanagari script was used throughout. The contextualised illustrations and stories were by local authors in the local context and printing and binding was done locally.

The two project working areas were ethnically and geographically very diverse. Kapilbastu is situated on the southern Terai plains which border India and school students are 60% Tharu and 30% from the Awadhi ethnic group. In contrast, Rukum district is in the high foothills of the Himalayas where access to many areas is challenging and 90% of school students are from the Magar Kham ethnic group.

Research question and purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether MTB-MLE in this context really contributed to the learning outcomes of the children, and in what ways did it affect different aspects of school education.

The research questions addressed here are 'Does the MTB-MLE in our context really contribute to increase the learning outcomes of the children?' and 'How does MTB-MLE affect different aspects of school education?'

Methodology

In this research, a mixed methodology was used. The annual examination scores of children in the major three subjects of math, science and social studies from grade one to three were evaluated using descriptive analysis (Bickel & Lehmann, 2012). This data was used to analyze the progress in learning achievements of the children in multilingual education implemented schools. Qualitative analysis (Wylie, 1999) was used to examine other aspects of school education such as student performance, teacher skills, parents' involvement in children's education and classroom learning environment. Focus Group Discussion (FGD), Key Informant Interview (KII) and observations were used to collect the information from teachers, principals, school management committee, students and parents of MLE schools of Rukum and Kapilvastu district of Nepal. The content analysis (Elo, & Kyngäs, 2008) method was adopted to analyze the data. 3 schools out of eight 8 schools in Rukum and 2 schools out of 5 schools were selected for this study using the purposive sampling method (Tongco, 2007).

Key Findings

The research findings in five different areas are discussed and presented below:

Learning achievement

Learning achievement in three subjects; math, science and social study of children from grade 1-3 of three schools of Rukum was analyzed using the average annual examination percentage scores, (verbal and written) of the three years before the introduction of MTB-MLE and for the three years afterwards (figure 1). The presented average scores clearly show that there is progress in learning achievements of the children in all three subjects. Because of the MLE interventions children have increased their learning achievements by 8.6-13.5% in three subjects and children have scored particularly highly in science subject.

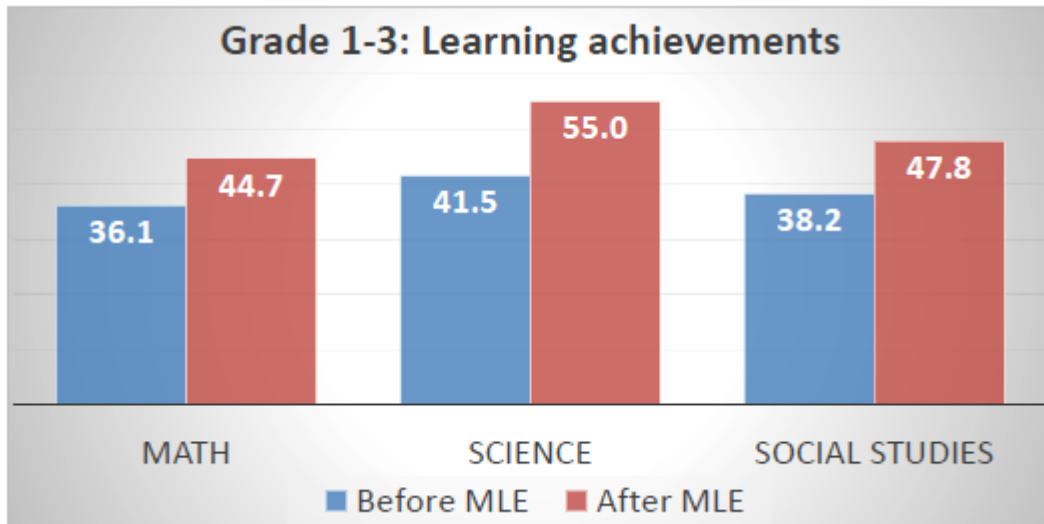


Figure 1: Effect of MLE interventions on learning achievement (percentage examination score) in Rukum District

In the same way, annual exam scores obtained in three subjects; math, science and social study of children from grade 1-3 of two schools of Kapilvastu are presented in figure 2. The learning achievement scores are the average annual exam percentage scores. The presented average scores clearly show that there is progress in learning achievements of the children in all three subjects because of MLE interventions. The children have increased their learning achievements by 4.9-9.9% in three subjects and children have scored highest in social studies.

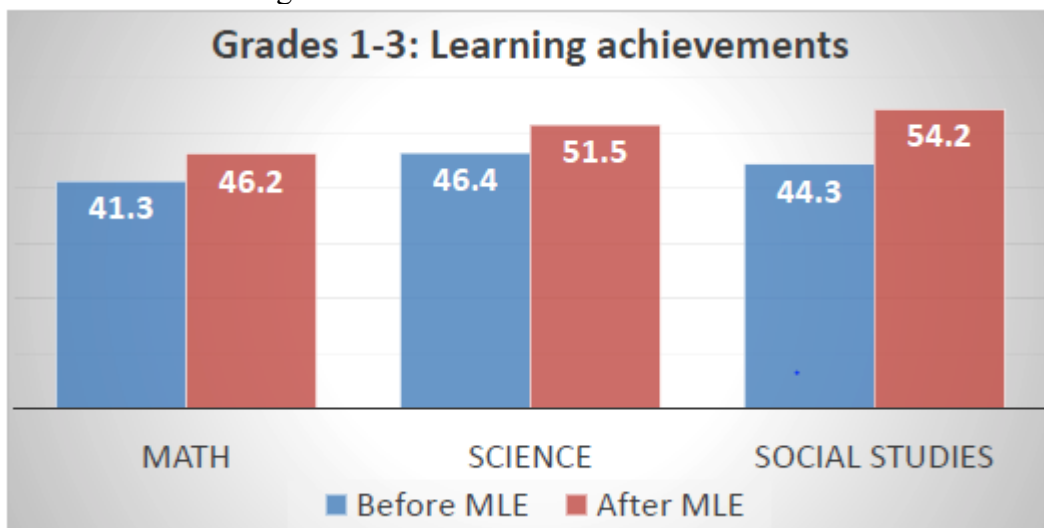


Figure 2: Effect of MLE interventions on learning achievement (percentage examination score) in Kapilbastu District

When comparing the effect of MTB-MLE interventions in Kapilbastu district with that in Rukum(Figure 3), it was found that MLE interventions had had a greater positive effect on learning achievement in Rukum (10.6) than in Kapilbastu.(6.7).

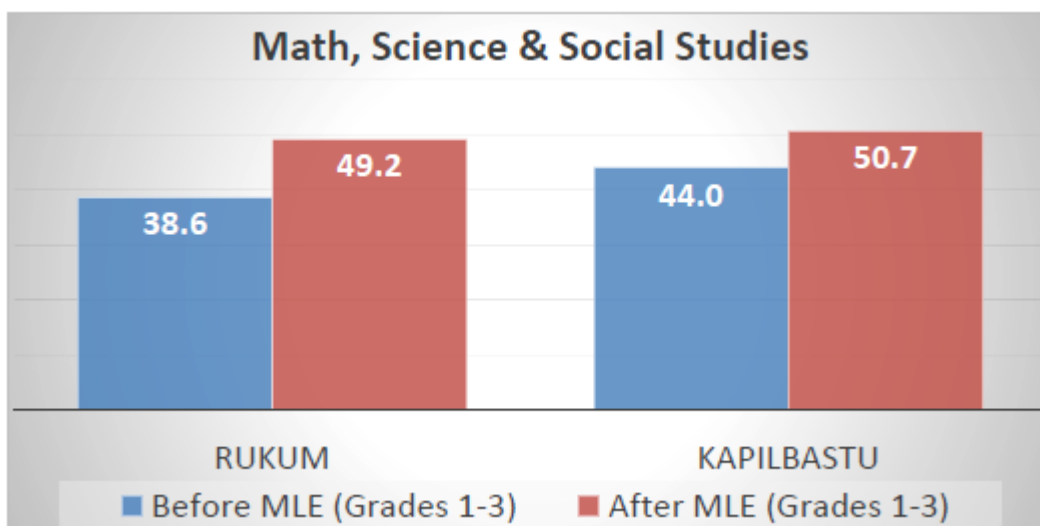


Figure 3: Comparison of the effect of MTB-MLE interventions (percentage examination score) in Rukum and Kapilvastu Districts

Students' performance

It was found that MLE interventions had positively contributed to increase students' performance and active participation in different activities. The participation of the students in learning activities such as quizzes, speaking competitions and games was increased. Their level of understanding has also increased, teachers reported that “they understood their lessons well as their textbooks have both mother tongue and Nepali texts”. A teacher said, “*Mira* could not recognize and read letters in the past, sometimes she even missed class, but she is good these days and her Nepali vocabulary has also improved. She is now in 4th position when she used to be in the last position.*” *name changed. The curiosity to learn new things has increased and comprehension ability was enhanced after the schools started the MLE. In addition, the enrollment rate of students in the MLE school areas increased from 90% to 98% and student dropout decreased from 13% to 5% in year 2017. The MLE classes also helped them to learn Nepali language.

Teachers skills

Teachers built their capacity and developed skills because of MLE interventions in the schools. It was found that because the teachers were given training on child friendly teaching learning, they were using child friendly teaching methods such as songs, games and activities instead of traditional lecture based and rote learning approaches. A teacher said, “*I was myself a teacher at a school nearby I had no experience (of child friendly teaching) before this training, we just had the children parrot the content.*” Teachers learned material development skills and produced their own big books and posters with text in different languages. Classroom management skills such as classroom set up, group work and class monitoring were learnt and practiced by the teachers. Because the subject textbooks were revised based on local contexts, local teachers were more confident with teaching the subject content and illustrating it with local examples. Additionally, through the process of using the mother tongue to scaffold the learning of Nepali, teachers have learned transferable language teaching skills.

Classroom learning environment

Because of the MLE-MTB interventions, traditional early grade classrooms with concrete floors and rows of high wooden desks were converted into child friendly classrooms with carpets, cushions and low tables and posters on the walls. In addition to an improved physical environment, the classroom learning environment also changed. Because the medium of instruction was in the student's mother tongue, they were much more confident to ask questions and interact with teachers if they had any concerns. Local materials were collected and used in teaching learning activities in conjunction with the contextualized MLE text books. Because those materials were familiar to children, this increased the children's engagement in the teaching and learning process. A corner library was also provided to each class so the children borrowed books to read at home. Therefore, the MLE programme has had a transformative effect on the classroom teaching and learning environment.

Parental involvement

Another important result of the MLE programme was increased parents' involvement. This study found that parents had been involved in identifying MLE needs at the beginning, providing inputs to contextualize the textbooks, improving classroom set up and learning environment such as providing locally made cushions. Mothers were also involved in forming mothers' groups to support children's learning at school. Because early grade teaching was taking place in the mother tongue, parents have been able to support their children's learning at home with homework, stories and listening to them read aloud.

Conclusion

MTB-MLE has positively contributed to increase students learning outcomes. The study showed an improvement in student learning achievement, teacher's skills, the teaching learning environment and parental engagement in children's education. These contributions were further seen to be long term in nature and directly related to the children's dynamic educational achievement. To a broader extent, the multilingual education also contributed to preserving the value of ethnic language and culture.

Different dialects from a mother tongue need to be considered while developing curricula and textbooks. MLE is easier to implement if the local language is more homogeneous. The active involvement of parents, teachers, community leaders and government officials in implementing MLE gives them a greater sense of ownership and makes for sustainability (e.g. financial support from the community for publication of books). Schools should give priority to local language speakers while hiring new teachers for the primary grades. Due to high teacher turnover, it is better to have at least two teachers trained in MTB-MLE per grade to avoid disruption to students.

This study was limited in scope because it was a retrospective analysis and therefore a more detailed study has been instigated recently in Rukum District which will take place over the next three years.

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