

IMPACT OF INFORMAL SCHOOL LANGUAGE POLICIES ON INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN A MULTILINGUAL CONTEXT

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The duration of students' exposure to and use of a language in school significantly influences their future linguistic competence, regardless of the language studied (Allen, 2010; Swain & Watanabe, 2013). Nevertheless, researchers' observations and experiences concerning school language policy and multilingualism suggest that the situation of local or indigenous language learners in Nepali schools is often marginalized. We collected the data for this study in two schools of Madhesh Province, Nepal, following the principles of the ethnographic research method. We analyzed the data using a thematic analysis approach. The findings underscore the need to prioritize endangered languages by investigating the types of language policies implemented in Nepali schools and exploring school leaders' perceptions on indigenous and local languages, with particular attention to the two case schools examined.

Keywords: Community language, language policy, minority community, multilingualism

1. Introduction

Linguistic diversity is a hallmark of any nation, and Nepal proudly embraces this distinction with its rich tapestry of over 123 spoken languages (Phyak, 2021; van Staden, 2021). Nepal is not only renowned for its majestic mountains and valleys but also for its linguistic diversity. While Nepali serves as the main official language of the country, it is spoken by only 44.86% of the population (NSO, 2023). However, the Madhesh Province stands out as a unique region where other languages, such as Maithili, have significant prominence. Maithili is the second most widely spoken language in Nepal, with 11.7% of the population fluent in it. In the Madhesh Province, Maithili is recognized as the second official language. Language policy in Nepal, in general, aims to establish a specific language or set of languages as the official language(s) of the nation. For instance, the adoption of the Devanagari script, used for Nepali, is promoted for consistency in learning other ethnic languages spoken in Nepal (NLPRC, 1994). English is also emphasized as a medium of instruction in educational institutions, highlighting the formal

use of the language. Additionally, national and ethnic languages are given varying degrees of priority, but the primary focus remains on English language learning and policy formulation.

With this, our study delved into the fascinating dynamics of language usage and its profound impact on education within the Madhesh Province. To gain a comprehensive understanding, we examined two carefully selected schools, School A and School B (coded names), in the region. These schools implemented an English medium curriculum, making English the primary language for instruction and communication within their premises.

In our study, we closely examined the language choices and linguistic dynamics within two selected schools, with a particular focus on understanding the maintenance of the indigenous language, Maithili, within the school premises. We observed that a significant number of students (50%) primarily communicated in English outside the classroom, while 35% and 15% of students informally communicated in Maithili and Nepali languages, respectively, from Sunday to Thursday.

Interestingly, the use of the Maithili language was more prevalent among lower secondary and secondary students. It was also noted that 91% of students enrolled in school A spoke Maithili as their mother tongue. However, the official school curriculum did not address the use of the Maithili language. Despite this, the school did incorporate various cultural events where students performed drama, dance, and songs in Maithili. As researchers with a background in teaching, we observed and noted the language usage patterns among students, which led us to recognize the importance of understanding the challenges and strategies involved in maintaining linguistic diversity and promoting inclusive education in the Madhesh Province. Our research makes a valuable contribution to the broader discourse on language and education policies in multilingual societies, highlighting the significance of acknowledging and appreciating linguistic diversity to preserve cultural identity and foster inclusive educational environments.

Through our investigation of indigenous language policies and practices in selected schools, we aim to deepen our understanding of both formal and informal language policies, the use of English as a medium of instruction (EMI), and the obstacles and opportunities associated with language preservation and multilingualism. By addressing these areas, we hope to provide insights that can inform educational practices and policies, ultimately fostering an environment that values and supports linguistic diversity. The central research question guiding our study is: *How does school language policy contribute to language shift among the indigenous communities of Nepal?*

2. Connecting the study with the existing literature

Language policies in education significantly influence students' linguistic development, academic achievement, and multilingual competence. Research shows that English-only policies, commonly implemented in international schools worldwide (Bidari, 2021), often serve as a formal medium of instruction, promoting English proficiency as a global lingua franca (Philipson, 2019; Poudel, 2021). While such policies may

enhance students' ability to communicate in English and gain global competencies, they can also neglect the linguistic and cultural needs of learners whose mother tongues differ from English (Yadava & Turin, 2007; Gautam, 2021). For example, in Qatar, English-medium instruction in mathematics, science, and technology replaced Arabic in K-12 education, but learners faced difficulties in comprehension and subject learning, leading to a reversion to Arabic as the primary medium of instruction (Mustafawi & Shaaban, 2019). Similar trends are observed in Austria, where English dominates primary education despite national policies promoting multiple languages, highlighting the tension between parental demand for English and the development of local and national languages (Ricento, 2019). These studies demonstrate that while formal English-medium policies may support multilingualism in English, they can inhibit the maintenance and development of native and national languages, potentially undermining broader educational and cultural objectives.

Conversely, informal language policies, such as family language planning and school-specific language policies, can promote multilingualism while also posing challenges for native language acquisition. Liu and Lin (2019) illustrate how Chinese families, motivated by the high status of English as an international lingua franca, implement deliberate strategies at home to enhance English proficiency while simultaneously maintaining the heritage language. Family language policies exemplify informal approaches that influence language use in daily life and foster bilingual or multilingual competencies (Curdt-Christiansen, 2022; Slavkov, 2017). Collectively, the literature highlights that language policies, whether formal, at the national or school level, or informal, at the family level, can both support and inhibit multilingualism, depending on their design, context, and implementation. Socio-cultural movements can also change the sociolinguistic dynamics through cultural movements, for example, the Hippie Movement of Nepal in the 1960s and 1970s promoted English and the Western way of life (Poudel & Baskota, 2025). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for

developing inclusive language policies that balance global competencies with the preservation of local and national languages. Supporting these linguistic dynamics is crucial for the development of local languages in Nepal, particularly to prevent hundreds of minorities and endangered languages from becoming extinct.

3. Method

This section presents a thorough overview of the research method employed in the study. This section encompasses a detailed description of the tools used, the site selection, and the participants. We adopted an ethnographic case study research method to collect and interpret the data collected to examine the formal and informal language policies of selected schools and the perceptions of school leaders regarding indigenous and/or local languages. Through in-depth site immersion and participant observations, the study aimed to understand the importance of language preservation, particularly in relation to the experiences of local and indigenous language learners and their stakeholders. By employing an ethnographic case study research method, we aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of the school context, the experiences of the participants, and the impact of language policies on language preservation efforts.

The study took place in two schools, School A and School B, located in the Madhesh Province. The specific district chosen for the study was Siraha, situated within the Mirchaiya municipal area. We selected these schools as representative sites to gather data and insights relevant to the research objectives. The schools selected had 750 and 600 students enrolled at the time of the research study, respectively. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, we used the data from a survey conducted by the "Department of Population Studies" in both schools. The survey revealed that 91% of the students belonged to the Maithili community and spoke Maithili as their mother tongue. Additionally, 8% of the students identified as belonging to the Pahadi community and spoke Nepali as their first language. The remaining 1% of students had an Indian background and spoke Hindi as their

mother language in school A. Likewise, a high number of students belong to the Maithili community in school B and speak Maithili as their mother tongue. Around 95% of students speak Maithili as their mother tongue, and the remaining 5% speak Nepali, Marwadi and other languages as per the school sources.

3.1 Data collection instruments

Rigorous classroom observation, field notes, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews with teachers and integrations with students were taken 2-3 times per week at intervals of four months.

3.2 Data analysis

We used a thematic data analysis approach to analyze the qualitative data collected from the observations and interviews conducted in the research sites. The coding process followed the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and defining themes, and finally producing the analysis report. The analysis focused on identifying recurring patterns, themes, and sub-themes related to the language policies and practices observed in the schools.

The first step involved familiarizing oneself with the data. We immersed ourselves in the collected data, including observation notes and interview transcripts, to gain a deep understanding of the content and context. This process required repeated reading and listening to the data, taking notes, and identifying initial impressions and patterns. The second step was generating initial codes. Here, we systematically coded the data by identifying specific segments or phrases related to language policy, formal and informal language use, student experiences, and the identification of endangered languages. We assigned short labels or codes to these segments to capture the essence of their meanings. In the third step, we searched for themes. We organized the initial codes into potential themes or patterns connected to language policy, formal and informal language use, student experiences, and the recognition of endangered languages. During this stage, we reviewed the coded segments and searched for

commonalities or connections, grouping related codes to form potential themes. The fourth step involved reviewing and defining themes. The researchers refined and defined the identified themes by analyzing the coded data within each category. This process required examining the relevance and coherence of the codes within each theme and making informed decisions on the final themes to be included in the analysis. The finalized themes included language policy, formal and informal language use, student experiences, and the identification of endangered languages. Finally, the fifth step was to produce the analysis report. The findings within each theme were synthesized to create a coherent and comprehensive report. We organized the themes in a logical order, presented supporting evidence from the data, and provided interpretations and explanations of the findings in relation to language policy, formal and informal language use, student experiences, and the recognition of endangered languages.

4. Findings and discussion

When observing the language policy of these schools at the micro level, the use of English within the school premises is regarded as formal. In contrast, conversations conducted in English between Nepali subject teachers and students during Nepali classes are considered informal. Furthermore, School A has designated Friday as "*Nepali Bolne Din*" (meaning "*Nepali Speaking Day*"), during which the use of any other language is categorized as informal. On this day, teachers and students are encouraged to teach and communicate in Nepali, although participation is not compulsory.

The findings further suggested that Nepali is taught in every class as a compulsory subject. Teachers of Nepali teach, interact, and communicate with students in Nepali within the classroom; however, the school policy encourages the use of English by these teachers outside the classroom setting. In one of the schools, the administration believes that teaching Nepali as a subject supports the development of students' content knowledge. Conversely, relying solely on English is perceived as limiting the development of communicative competence in Nepali.

Consequently, the school reformed its language policy and introduced "*Nepali Bolne Din*" (meaning "*Nepali Speaking Day*") on Fridays. On this day, Nepali serves as the primary medium of instruction. The morning assembly is conducted in Nepali, speech programs are delivered in Nepali, and both teachers and students are expected to use Nepali inside and outside the classroom. Teachers of other subjects are also permitted to teach in Nepali, although this is not mandatory. Outside of this policy, Nepali is occasionally used on other school days to clarify certain content. In addition, the linguistic landscape of the school reflects Nepali through elements such as the national anthem, slogans, morning prayers, and national emblems on the school walls.

On the other hand, the second school does not have any special programs to support the national language like School A, other than teaching it as part of the national curriculum. Still, this allows native speakers to feel proud of their language and culture, and it also gives students from other language backgrounds a chance to use their multilingual skills. The school also informally uses the Maithili language in some activities, even though it is not an official subject.

4.1 Formal and informal language policies in school

In one of the schools, students who were found speaking languages other than English on school premises receive a "D-folder" card, where D stood for "Donkey," as a form of negative reinforcement. In addition, most of the linguistic landscapes, such as signs in classrooms, offices, staffrooms, playgrounds, wall paintings, toilets, and the canteen, were written in English. In the second school, students who failed to speak in English were punished by being made to stand outside the classroom for entire periods or in the principal's office for one period. In both schools, primary students generally communicated outside the classroom either in English or Nepali, with the use of Maithili being far less common. For children with special needs from the Maithili-speaking community, after-school study sessions were organized twice a week for about two hours. During these sessions, textbook content was

taught in Maithili after the completion of regular schoolwork. This practice was introduced to address language barriers that such children face, particularly due to the high degree of language shift in their community.

According to the previous literature (Hill, 1978; Thomason, 2015; McCarthy et al., 2019), we estimated that most endangered languages were threatened by processes that were fatal only to the languages themselves rather than to the people who speak them. Thomason (2015) suggested the exploration of social, economic, and political causes of language endangerment reveals that among the reasons for endangerment are the prestige of a victorious invader's language; the expediency of pleasing conquerors by speaking their language; the need to know a particular language in order to get a better job; ethnically mixed school systems and workplaces should promote linguistic assimilation; and an increase in the number of immigrants from non-English speaking countries (Phyak & Bui, 2014). The researchers have identified three different languages: English, an international lingua franca as a medium of instruction, Nepali, an official language taught as a subject and Maithili, a state language spoken informally by students. Regarding the range of formal and informal language policies, the use of English and Nepali language contributes to making formal language policy at the chosen school, while the use of Maithili is considered against the formal language policy in general (Poudel, 2024).

Moving ahead, the use of the Nepali language from Sunday to Thursday in the Nepali class schedule was valued as formal and was in accordance with the school's language policy. But the same language, if spoken inside and outside the classroom premises on specified days, was taken as informal and against the language policy set by the school. Quite contrary to this, singing of the national anthem and "*Saraswati Bandana*"¹ in Nepali on Sunday to Friday during the assembly hour was a part of the school language policy. In addition, students' and teachers'

practices of speaking in the Nepali language on Friday come under the formal language policy of the school. To promote the development of the Nepali language, the school implemented the use of the official language of the nation as an administrative and academic language on Friday as an integral aspect of formal language policy.

According to the survey done in school A and school B 91% and 95 % of students belong to the Maithili speaking community and speak Maithili as their mother tongue, respectively. They grew up speaking Maithili and had better proficiency in it. When they came to school, the school administration imposed a language which was foreign to them and in which they were not competent. In this context, as discussed earlier, students were likely to face different kinds of academic problems when they must learn an additional language (Nadif & Benattabou, 2021). Moreover, in the context of our educational settings, students were not allowed to speak Maithili in and out of the classroom, though it was the mother tongue of the majority of learners. Speaking of Maithili was taken as offensive and was rewarded with negative reinforcement. Recently, the school started to address the inclusion of the Maithili language as a medium of instruction for special students in tuition classes twice a week. The use of the Maithili language in special classes was formal and formulated under the school language policy, while the use of the same language beyond this class was informal and against the language policy of the school.

In summary, three languages were used in the schools, both formally and informally. The use of each language depends on the context, which determines what is valued as formal or informal, as well as what aligns with the school's language policy and what does not. Observing the linguistic scenario in these schools, it is evident that English functions as the formal medium of instruction and represents the official language policy of the schools. Nepali, while struggling for its presence outside the designated Nepali period, occupies a secondary position in the formal language policy and is used as a medium of instruction after English. Additionally, the inclusion of Maithili in special classes represents an informal initiative

¹ Saraswati Bandana is a pray dedicated to Saraswati, who is the goddess of knowledge and wisdom in Hindu mythology

within the school's language policy, despite being the language of the majority in the given context.

4.2 School language policy and endangerment of community language (Maithili)

In the context of a research school, English and Nepali languages came under the formal language policy domain. Speaking in the truest sense, English is the most powerful and dominant language after Nepali. The Maithili language is still not formally accepted as a language of instruction to date, and is treated with negative remarks when used by the students in school premises. However, in one of the schools, Maithili has been made a medium of instruction for special children, assuming that language could be one of the barriers to learning. This is an informal approach to the Maithili language inclusion in school. During their time as teacher-researchers at the school, the researchers observed that English and Nepali occupy a hegemonic position, with the school recognizing multilingualism only in relation to these two languages, while the third language, progressively endangered among the younger generation in formal and academic contexts, is largely neglected (Poudel, 2022). Maithili, despite being the mother tongue of most students, receives little priority, except in a few cultural programs.

The formal language policy of the school aspires for students to use the same language in speaking and writing. In my chosen context, students are gradually transforming their knowledge and use of English and Nepali. This transformation, according to Heinrich (2015), brings about language shifts, i.e., the loss of language at the societal level, resulting in the loss of linguistic diversity. With reference to Heinrich, the Maithili language has been experiencing the same phenomenon in the context of Nepal and in educational institutions in Madhesh Province among the younger generation Maithili children. This shift has encouraged a move from bilingualism or multilingualism towards monolingualism. The use of English and Nepali as formal languages has encouraged students to use these two languages as a medium of instruction and communication in learning and social interactions.

Specifically, the extensive use of English motivates students to become competent and proficient in both speaking and writing in the language. For instance, an English-Speaking Council has been established to promote the development of English outside the classroom, while Friday is designated as Nepali Speaking Day to encourage the use of Nepali as a national language. However, no similar policy exists for the inclusion and development of the Maithili language. Consequently, students are often hesitant to speak their mother tongue and tend to use it in a low voice, frequently checking whether teachers are present before speaking. It is also common for students to report peers who are found speaking Maithili. Such school language policies and practices reinforce monolingualism. For example, students who speak Maithili or Nepali on school premises are often warned with a D-folder card, where D stands for "Donkey." This represents the practical implementation of the school's language policy. Receiving a D-folder card while speaking their mother tongue leads students to compare themselves and their language to a donkey, gradually fostering negative attitudes toward their mother tongue. Over time, they reduce informal use of the language and internalize the belief that speaking English and Nepali to a lesser extent is necessary to be considered human and socially accepted within the school. This linguistic trend contributes to the erosion of linguistic diversity and accelerates the shift toward monolingualism.

5. Key recommendations for embracing multilingualism in School

School language policies should incorporate local and national languages to address students' academic needs, as neglecting students' mother tongues can create learning difficulties (Mustafawi and Shaaban, 2019). In School A, some students who are suspected of having learning difficulties are provided instruction in their mother tongue on a trial basis, hoping for some positive changes in their learning abilities.

In addition to Nepali Speaking Day, schools could designate a day for Maithili or include some regular activities in Maithili to promote inclusion and support family language maintenance.

The D-folder card system should be abolished to reduce negative attitudes toward students' mother tongues. No language in the world deserves such negative labelling like this.

Linguistic landscapes should reflect the Maithili language, culture, and traditions, such as classroom posters and wall slogans, to enhance visibility and aesthetic appeal.

School administrations, parents, and students should collaborate to encourage the use of mother tongues and develop home language policies, as the maintenance of language depends on use both at home and in school (Fang, 2017). The situation observed in the researched schools reflects this issue and warrants urgent attention.

The study also reveals that students are gradually shifting toward English and Nepali due to school language policies. As these policies do not support the Maithili language, this shift is reflected in students' language practices.

6. Conclusion

This ethnographic study of two schools in Madhesh Province, Nepal, highlights the complex dynamics of language use and policy in multilingual educational settings. The findings reveal that English and Nepali occupy hegemonic positions within the schools, while Maithili, the mother tongue of most students, is largely marginalized. Formal and informal language policies, classroom practices, and school-wide initiatives, such as the D-folder system and the designation of Nepali Speaking Day, reinforce the dominance of English and Nepali, shaping students' attitudes toward their mother tongue and contributing to language shift.

The study underscores the urgent need for inclusive language policies that recognize and support local and minority languages. By integrating Maithili and other indigenous languages into formal curricula, classroom practices, and the linguistic landscape of schools, educational institutions can foster linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and equitable learning opportunities. Promoting multilingualism not only preserves endangered languages but also enhances students' cognitive, social, and cultural

development, preparing them for participation in a diverse and globalized society.

Ultimately, the research calls for collaboration among school administrations, teachers, parents, and policymakers to create an educational environment that values all languages, supports mother tongue maintenance, and mitigates the shift toward monolingualism. Addressing these challenges is crucial for fostering inclusive, culturally responsive, and linguistically rich educational experiences in Nepal and similar multilingual contexts, supporting the maintenance of family language.

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