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Tamang as a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in Nepal: Prospects and Challenges

Purna B. Kadel¹ and Bishow R. Joshi²

¹Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University

²Sanothimi Campus, Tribhuvan University

Author Note

Purna Bahadur Kadel, Ph.D.  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8741-6196> is an associate professor in the Department of English Education under the Central Department of Education, Tribhuvan University. Dr. Kadel has been working as a director in the Open and Distance Education Center, Tribhuvan University, since 2023. He has carried out a number of international projects as a coordinator and a lead.

Bishow Raj Joshi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6755-3385> is a lecturer in English language teaching at the Sanothimi campus, Tribhuvan University. His research interests are English for specific purposes, teacher development, and second language acquisition. He has completed his Ph.D. dissertation in ESP and submitted it to the Dean's Office of the Faculty of Education, Tribhuvan University.

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Bishow Raj Joshi at the Sanothimi Campus. Email: bishowjoshi@gmail.com

Abstract

Nepal is a multilingual country in which most of the languages of indigenous minority communities are on the brink of extinction. Against this backdrop, it attempted to explore the lived experiences of teachers, experts, and policy makers concerning the prospects of implementing Tamang as a mother tongue-based multilingual education (MT-MLE); to identify the challenges faced in enforcing Tamang as an MTB-MLE among Tamang-speaking learners and to explore the linguistic, cultural, social, and educational advantages of using Tamang as mother tongue-based in Tamang-dominated schools. A descriptive phenomenological research design was adopted for this study, using a sample of eight participants: four teachers, two experts, and two policymakers. The participants' lived reflections were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed and interpreted using content analysis. This study revealed a dearth of appropriate teaching and learning materials, a lack of financial support from Nepal's local, provincial, and federal governments, and challenges in implementing mother tongue-based multilingual education. In addition, the prospects of this study were the motivation of the learners through local teaching and learning materials, the reduction in dropout rates and increased learning, the promotion of cognitive maturity, and support for socialization and self-identity through the MT-MLE, which is inevitable for preserving the endangered indigenous languages in Nepal.

Keywords: mother tongue-based multilingual education, indigenous minority, descriptive phenomenological research, endangered language, cognitive maturity

Tamang as a Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in Nepal: Prospects and Challenges

Nepal has diverse cultures, languages, ethnicities, and ecological zones. Linguistic, cultural, and ethnic diversity is the essence of Nepali society. Each language community aspires to conserve its language, so the language policies of Nepal have evolved in response to various political movements in the country, such as the first Jana-Andolan in 1990 and the second Jana-Andolan in 2006. Nepali is the main formal language across the country. It is the mother tongue of more than 44.86% of its total population (National Population and Housing Census (NPHC), 2021). There are 124 mother tongues that are recognized as national languages of Nepal (Language Commission, 2019). Approximately 55.14 percent of school-aged boys and girls speak non-Nepali languages as their mother tongues. The Tamang language is the fifth-largest ethnic group in Nepal, accounting for 5.62% of Nepal's total population (NPHC, 2021).

The Tamang people reside in the hilly regions of Nepal and the outskirts of the Kathmandu Valley. Tamang belongs to the Tibeto-Burman community (Yadava, 2007). Arrangements will be made and implemented at the local level to provide opportunities to learn in a multilingual medium, based on the mother tongue, in single-mother-tongue classes and mixed-language groups (National Education Policy, 2019). Multilingual education is instrumental in safeguarding the linguistic and cultural heritage of minority communities. By upholding these fundamental rights, the MT-MLE cultivates a society built on solidarity, cohesion, and peace. In particular, the girls and women from the ethnic community are deprived of the second and third languages, Nepali and English, respectively; therefore, they are linguistically, socially, and economically disempowered.

Learners in the Tamang community cannot succeed in education when Nepali is used as the medium of instruction (NMI). Owing to being deprived of basic education, many individuals from indigenous and marginalized (IM) communities lose opportunities to study technical and higher-level subjects. Many are compelled to migrate to Gulf countries to work as low-paid blue-collar laborers (Shrestha, 2015; UNESCO, 2026). Moreover, due to limited access to education and socioeconomic disadvantages, they lack representation and leadership in politics, business, academia, and the social sector. Bishowkarma (2019) conducted a study to find out the attitudes of teachers and parents on Tamang language-based multilingual schools in Rasuwa district, in

which the study found that the use of Tamang as a mode of instruction increased access to learning and enhanced learners' participation in the classroom. In a similar vein, Regmi (2021) carried out a study to explore hurdles in implementing mother tongue-based education policies in minority speech communities. Tamang children were compelled to study through Nepali-medium instruction, thereby resulting in low educational achievement, repetition, and school dropout (Regmi, 2021). Likewise, Tamang et al. (2024) explored teachers' lived experiences regarding mother tongue instruction in English language teaching at the primary level, and their findings revealed that using learners' mother tongue facilitated comprehension, participation and confidence in learning English and other subjects. Based on the empirical research, this study was deemed rational to conduct. Research objectives and questions of this study were as follows:

- to explore the lived reflections of teachers, experts, and policy makers regarding the prospects of implementing Tamang as a mother tongue-based multilingual education in Tamang-dominated schools;
- to identify the challenges faced in enforcing Tamang as an MTB-MLE among Tamang-speaking learners;
- to explore the linguistic, cultural, social and educational advantages of using Tamang-based MTB-MLE in Tamang-dominated schools.

Research Questions

- How does the use of Tamang as an MTB-MLE influence students' learning experiences, participation, and educational achievement?
- What are the prospects and challenges of implementing Tamang as an MTB-MLE in Tamang-dominated schools?
- How do teachers, experts, and policy makers perceive lived experiences of the use of Tamang as an MTB-MLE in Tamang-dominated schools?

Literature Review

According to the Language Commission (2020), 24 languages were recommended to be used as a medium of instruction to promote the MT-MLE program up to standard three (Language Commission, 2020). In contrast, school management committees have been slowly shifting the mode of delivery from Nepali to English as a medium of instruction (EMI) from pre-primary to standard 12 to attract students in community schools since 2001, under pressure from the parents. The medium of instruction through English from pre-primary to class 12 in

community and institutional schools must have weakened the implementation of the MT-MLE programs in Nepal. Nepali and English have dominated the medium of instruction in community and institutional schools, respectively.

The Constitution of Nepal (2015) has granted the right to basic education in MTs (Article 31(1)), the right to use MTs, and the preservation and promotion of languages (Article 32(3)). The Constitution of Nepal (2015) established the right to education in the mother tongue; however, studies from 2023 and 2024 revealed that the implementation of this provision remains a considerable challenge (British Council, 2024; UNICEF, 2023). Moreover, Nepal ratified two major instruments of the United Nations regarding the language rights of indigenous minority people in 2007. If the MT-MLE program is implemented, all the IM children can have opportunities to complete their basic education through their mother tongues. Statistics show that net enrollment among all school children in Nepal has increased from 84.2% in 2004 to 91.9% in 2008 (Ahonen, 2020).

Learners from marginalized communities can be economically, politically, and academically empowered through the MT-MLE program. There is a common underlying proficiency of L1, L2, and L3, which permits the transfer of academic skills and conceptual knowledge to L2, L3, and L4 from L1 (Cummins, 1979, 1981). Multilingual education for minority students in many ways and situations is more effective in developing L2 and L3. Five to eight years of schooling may be needed in MT-MLE before second, third, and other languages are gradually introduced into formal education to develop basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Mohanty et al, 2009). In developing L2 and L3 literacy and skills, multilingual education for marginalized learners is more effective. In the context of Nepal, the mother tongue is being taught as a medium of instruction up to Grade 3, and Nepali and English are taught as compulsory subjects at the primary level. Education for all has specified the right of IM to quality basic and primary education through their mother tongues. The extinct of language is the losing of knowledge and human heritage so basic education should be given to each learner through his/her mother tongue. The ideology of pluralism contributes to preserving endangered languages and promoting multilingualism (Ghimire, 2011a). Multilingual pedagogy should be implemented, focusing on the mother tongue of the learners instead of monolingual pedagogy.

The ideology of pluralism advocates that the MT-MLE should be implemented in order to preserve every national language spoken in Nepal and guarantee the linguistic rights of every learner from the IM community to maintain language ecology. Constitution of Nepal, 2015, in Part 1, says that every language spoken as a mother tongue in Nepal is a national language. More importantly, each province is given authority in the 2015 constitution to select one or more national languages that are spoken by the majority of people as the language for formal, educational, and commercial purposes in the province, as provided by provincial law.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive phenomenological research design. Descriptive phenomenology originated in Husserl's philosophical tradition (Abraham & Padmakumari, 2025). The reason behind the use of this research design was to collect the lived experiences of the participants.

Participants

We selected 4 teachers with two to ten years of experience in the MT-MLE program in the Rasuwa and Dhading districts of Bagmati Province as a sample. In addition, we selected two experts and two policymakers as the participants purposively. The academic credentials of the teachers involved were from plus two to master's degree levels.

Moreover, the teachers were from Tamang communities in Dhading and Rasuwa districts. Dhading and Rasuwa districts of Bagmati province of Nepal were selected due to the majority of the Tamang community in Nepal. Two experts who were highly academic in the field of the Tamang language were the main practitioners and researchers from the Tamang language community. The experts were PhD holders in the Tamang language. Policymakers have been working in the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology for a long time, and they were the high-ranking officials of the Language Policy Making Commission of the Government of Nepal. The lived experiences as data were collected from eight participants who had faced and experienced their own lived reflections.

Research Tool

An in-depth interview guideline has been used as a research tool to collect data from the participants. We managed the spare time of the participants to conduct the in-depth interviews in a relaxed manner (Creswell, 2011). The in-depth interviews were recorded on a cell phone.

Data Analysis

The data were transcribed and subsequently translated them into English. The data were coded and decoded. The basic themes were developed from the organized themes. Subsequently, the main themes were developed from organized themes in this study. The data were analyzed and interpreted thematically.

Ethical Consideration

We took permission from the headmasters of each school before administering the in-depth interview with the participants. The consent was taken from each participant prior to employing an in-depth interview. All 8 participants were assured that the main purpose of conducting the in-depth interview was to collect data based on their lived experiences. They were convinced that the data collected from them would be used only for this study, but not for other purposes. The participants were given pseudonyms as Yaba, Top, Thir, Phal, Paras, Sankhe, Shere, and Aite to maintain confidentiality and anonymity in this study.

Findings

Dearth of Appropriate Teaching and Learning Materials

In this context, Aite asserted that “there were considerable financial supports from the Finnish Government to enhance MT-MLE programs in Dhading and Rasuwa districts earlier”. There were many teaching and learning materials in the Tamang language, which were translated from English and Nepali into the Tamang language. The MT-MLE learners of Tamang were provided with colorful, authentic materials in the Tamang language.

However, owing to the lack of language experts in Tamang, there is no standard codification of the Tamang language as Nepali in Nepal. The constitution of Nepal in 2015 recognized the pluralistic ideology that supports language policies for social justice through maintaining language ecology and ensuring linguistic human rights through the MT-MLE program. The philosophy of multilingualism contributes to preserving jeopardized languages and promoting non-monolingualism (Ghimire, 2011a). The philosophy of learners’ L1 advocates that MT-MLE should be implemented in order to preserve every national language. Although the MT-MLE is essential for developing cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), the monolingual ideology of the incumbent government did not implement the MT-MLE in community schools. EMI policy of the government effectively discouraged the implementation of the MT-MLE program. People from the IM community have been discriminated against by

the different regimes for more than 250 years (Hough, 2020). In this context, Yaba claimed that “the teaching and learning materials are to be included from the heritage of indigenous language and culture from the local level and incorporated into the curricula of the primary level”. As far as the local teaching and learning materials are concerned, there are no authentic teaching and learning materials for running Tamang as a medium of instruction in five schools in Dhading and one school in Rasuwa. To make the campaign of mother tongue-based multilingual education successful, the resources of the MT-MLE are essential, such as teaching and learning materials.

Lack of Financial Support from Local, Provincial, and Federal Governments

In this context, one of the participants, Sankhe, argued that MT-MLE in the Tamang language was executed in five schools in Dhading and one school in Rasuwa with the financial and technical support of the Government of Finland; however, the school could not sustain it effectively after the completion of the MT-MLE project supported by the Government of Finland.

It is a great shame that the government of Nepal fails to sustain MT-MLE in Nepal after the Finish Project. The main cause of failure of the mother tongue-based multilingual education is the lack of permanent and reliable sources of financial support to regulate the remuneration of the teachers, manage the teaching and learning materials, and maintain administrative expenses at school. In a similar vein, Shere confirmed:

MT-MLE programs have been running for 14 years in different languages across the country smoothly despite the fact that there are many challenges, such as a lack of trained teachers in the same mother tongues, a lack of scripts in their mother tongues, inadequate teaching and learning materials for the particular languages, and the allocation of adequate budgeting by the federal and local governments in Nepal.

The Government of Nepal could not become successful in institutionalizing the MT-MLE as its regular programs. More importantly, the local teachers are not trained to handle the MT-MLE in the context of Nepal because of the lack of allocation of sufficient budgets to train teachers of MT-MLE in Dhading and Rasuwa districts for the last 14 years. Nepal, as a democratic federal republic, initiated the MT-MLE in 2006 to provide equal educational opportunities to all children of IM, regardless of their diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds.

Challenges and Hurdles in Implementing MT-MLE

There are a number of challenges and hurdles to enforcing mother tongue-based multilingual education in Nepal because of the lack of trained professional teachers. The lack of a script for the Tamang language is another challenge to running the Tamang as a medium of instruction in schools. The Tamang language is taught and learned through the Devanagari script, which is the script of the Tamang language. One of the participants, Thir, stated that “I think that most of the IM languages are running with a traditional oral system without standard scripts of each national language.” Languages such as Nepali, Hindi, Maithili, Tibetan, Sherpa, Newari, Limbu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, and Lapcha have a long tradition of written literature. Most of the Indo-Aryan languages of the Indo-European family, such as Nepali, Maithili, Bhojpuri, Avadhi, Hindi, and Rajbanshi, now use the same Devanagari script. We think that the dictionaries in Tamang, Nepali, and English are essential to enhance MT-MLE for them.

Mother Tongue Instruction as an Instrument for Motivation

In this context, Thir stated that “using the local Tamang child literature and indigenous knowledge helps them comprehend and memorize the basic knowledge in the society”. Mother tongue-based multilingual education can be enhanced through the local learning materials, which could be available in the society. The threshold hypothesis suggests that any child’s language competency in L2 is dependent on the competence in their L1 (Cummins, 1979).

In this context, Phal stated that “I make them understand the alphabet and concepts of the world through the proverbs of the Tamang language and different types of old indigenous practices of Tamang cultures and society, which make the learners very excited and motivated”. This confirms that MT-MLE can lead every child to grow into this beautiful world of many languages capable of nurturing, liberty, sheltering, expanding, and emancipating (Mahanty, 2009). UNESCO acknowledged multilingualism as a resource for the learners of indigenous minority communities, so indigenous people in different parts of the world strive to revitalize their languages.

Reducing the Dropout Rates and Increasing Learning

In this context, Shere noted that “there is an enormous rate of dropout of the learners who belong to IM society before introducing the MT-MLE program in Rasuwa and Dhading districts.” There is a high rate of dropout of learners from minority and indigenous Tamang communities owing to the lack of professionally sound MT-MLE teachers, shortage of teaching

and learning materials, and a poor foundation of linguistic cognition of their L1. The cognitive and academic aspects of L1 and L2 are interdependent. The development of proficiency in L2 is partially a function of the level of L1 proficiency at the time when intensive exposure to L2 begins (Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1976). L1 and L2 cognitive academic language proficiency are manifestations of the same underlying dimension measuring the cognitive/academic aspects of L1 and L2 that assess the same underlying dimension to a similar degree (Cummins, 1979). CALP underpins the development of cognitive/academic skills at both L1 and L2.

Promotion of Cognitive Maturity

In this context, Sankhe proposed that “if the early basic level education is provided through learners’ first language, all of the knowledge and understanding in the first language can be transferred into L2, L3, and L4 from L1 very easily.” Learners who have received primary level education through L1 could perform better even at the secondary and university levels, so primary level education should be provided through the MT-MLE for the development of the critical and creative thinking skills of the learners.

Every language has different surface features; however, cognitive academic language features are located in a centralized manner in the human brain (Cummins, 1979, 1981). L1 and L2 have the same common underlying proficiency (CUP). L1 and L2 have the same foundations of common underlying proficiency, so the concepts, knowledge, and skills in L1 can easily be transferred into L2, L3, and L4 (Cummins, 1981, 2016). If the learners are cognitively mature enough to grasp the concepts in L1, they can be transferred into L2, L3, and even L4. In the same vein, Thir claimed that “Tamang learners who were educated through MT-MLE completed SEE, SLC, and graduation with good grades.” They are even critical and creative in every walk of life, so MT-based multilingual education is very scientific and inevitable in promoting the learners from the backward community as well as the learners from the mainstream community. If the indigenous children receive primary education through their mother tongues, their cognitive level and critical thinking skills can be improved since language, culture, and indigenous knowledge are inseparable (Ball, 2011; Gandhi, 2014).

Support for Socialization and Self-Identity

In this context, Yaba stated that “the culture of the particular community is reflected in their languages. Moreover, the indigenous knowledge of the Tamang community can be passed

to the new generation if they are provided with primary education through their mother tongue. Furthermore, the children who have been educated through their mother tongue are very logical and creative and can argue with people for a long time logically and creatively.

The loss of the mother tongue is the loss of identity and socialization, so primary education from preprimary to Grade five is very scientific and advantageous for the well-being of Tamang learners. Indigenous knowledge, such as knowledge of family, education, and society, is essential for learners to internalize knowledge of every aspect of life. In fact, the L1 competency of Tamang learners can be developed to be ready to acquire a second language. The deprivation of basic education through the MT-MLE results in a deplorable lack of serious thinking, and learners can lose their capacity to speak in their mother tongue (Rafael, 2015).

Discussion

Primary education should be provided through mother tongue-based multilingual education from preprimary to Grade 3. In the context of Dhading and Rasuwa, all languages are introduced from Grade one, which is called MT-based multilingual education; thus, the MT-MLE in Nepal contradicts the theory of the MT-MLE. The findings of this study highlighted several critical themes related to the challenges and benefits of implementing mother tongue-based multilingual education (MT-MLE) in the Tamang community in Nepal. The primary issues revolved around the lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials, the lack of financial support from different levels of government, and various hurdles in implementing MT-MLE.

The findings show that MT-MLE plays a significant role in improving the learning achievement of indigenous and linguistically minority learners despite several implementation hurdles. One of the findings was the shortage of appropriate teaching and learning materials for Tamang learners in local level. Similar studies in Nepal have shown that inadequate instructional resources and insufficient teacher preparation weaken the effective implementation of the MT-MLE program (Tamang & Pandey, 2025). This issue aligns with Ghimire (2011b), who also emphasized the need for authentic and culturally relevant teaching materials to support linguistic human rights and social justice through the MT-MLE. Despite efforts to provide translated materials, the absence of standardized codification of the Tamang language hampers the quality and consistency of education. This problem is not unique to Nepal. Skutnabb-Kangas and

Dunbar (2010) argue that education through the mother tongue is crucial for social and economic success.

Moreover, the lack of financial and institutional support from local, provincial and federal governments has hindered the sustainability of multilingual education initiatives. Joshi and Eslami (2024) argue that weak governmental commitment and limited policy execution continue to obstruct equitable multilingual education in Nepal. Initially, the MT-MLE programs in Dhading and Rasuwa districts were supported by the Government of Finland; but sustaining these programs became difficult once external funding ceased. This mirrors global trends where external funding often kickstarts educational programs, but local and national governments struggle to maintain them without continued financial assistance (Hough, 2020). The failure to institutionalize the MT-MLE programs as regular government initiatives is a significant barrier, highlighting a gap between policy and practice (Yadava, 2013, 2020a). The lack of financial support manifests in several ways, including inadequate infrastructure, insufficient teacher salaries, and a lack of resources for developing new educational materials.

The challenges in implementing the MT-MLE also extend to infrastructure and human resources. There is a notable lack of trained, proficient teachers in both the Tamang language and the required academic subjects, such as science, mathematics, and social studies. This is a common issue in multilingual education settings, where the development of teacher capacity is critical yet often underfunded (Yadava, 2020b). Additionally, the lack of standardized scripts and trilingual dictionaries for the Tamang language complicates teaching and learning processes. While some languages in Nepal have developed written traditions and standardized scripts, many indigenous languages remain primarily oral, creating challenges in formal education settings (Thir, 2011). The lack of written resources means that teachers must create their own materials, a time-consuming process that detracts from their teaching responsibilities. According to Mahanty (2009), using culturally relevant materials helps children relate more to their education, enhancing their engagement and retention. UNESCO (2024) emphasizes that first language-based multilingual educational resources strengthen foundational learning and improve comprehension among children from non-dominant language backgrounds. Likewise, the children who were taught in their mother tongues during early grades develop stronger literacy skills and remain engaged in schooling for longer periods (UNESCO, 2024; UNICEF NEPAL, 2024).

MT-MLE has been effective in reducing dropout rates and improving learning outcomes. The Tamang learners who participated in MT-MLE programs demonstrated better retention and academic performance than did those who did not, supporting the threshold hypothesis, which posits that proficiency in the first language aids in the acquisition of second languages and overall academic success (Cummins, 1979). MT-MLE education enhances cognitive flexibility, problem-solving abilities and deeper learning by aligning classroom knowledge with children's lived experiences and cultural realities (Dhakal, 2021; UNESCO, 2024). Providing education in the mother tongue from an early age supports learners' cognitive and metacognitive development. This is supported by the interdependence hypothesis, which suggests that cognitive academic language proficiency in one language can transfer to others, facilitating overall intellectual development (Cummins, 2001). Socialization and self-identity were also significant findings of this study. MT-MLE education is a means of preserving linguistic diversity and indigenous cultural heritage (UNICEF Nepal, 2024; UNESCO, 2020).

Conclusion

This study concludes that mother tongue-based multilingual education is an essential and effective approach for promoting the languages of Tamang learners. The major challenges identified were a lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials, inadequate financial support from local, provincial, and federal governments of Nepal, and practical hurdles in enforcing MT-MLE programs. The teaching and learning materials are the means of motivation for the Tamang learners. Thus, local Tamang indigenous food, culture, rituals, traditions, local folk songs, and local fairy tales of the Tamang language are to be used as the sources of Tamang as a medium of instruction in mother tongue-based multilingual education. The local culture has been justified as a means of instruction in the Tamang community.

Tamang learners' learning rates have been increased due to the enforcement of Tamang as a means of instruction from Grade one to Grade three since the cognitive and academic aspects of Tamang and Nepali are interdependent. As a result, the dropout rates of Tamang learners have been reduced. MT-MLE requires coordinated efforts from government agencies, educational institutions, local communities, and policymakers to ensure adequate funding from local, provincial, and federal governments of Nepal. It is concluded that the MT-MLE educational program can become a remarkable and powerful tool to improve educational equity of IM communities and to preserve vulnerable endangered languages in Nepal.

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