



DALIT STUDENTS' CRITICAL AWARENESS OF THEIR LINGUISTIC IDENTITY FOR PEDAGOGICAL SCAFFOLDING: A GEOLINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE FROM NEPAL

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Abstract. *This study explores the critical awareness of Dalit students in Nepal (belonging to the subaltern group of the untouchables in the Hindu caste system) regarding their linguistic identity and pedagogical scaffolding. Language as the medium of instruction plays a crucial role in having access to quality education. Children from marginalized communities, who do not have their own language, have a compulsion to use the language of oppressors. More specifically, Dalit students' perception, awareness, and ideology with regard to their linguistic identity, language learning, and medium of instruction at the plus-two level, despite their marginalization in the society, enhance broader understanding of the role of the linguistic factor for their pedagogical support. This qualitative study adopts interview and focus group discussion as major tools for generating data from purposively sampled Dalit students studying in the Kathmandu Valley. To generate the data, 22 semi-structured interviews of the key informants and two focus group discussions were conducted. Descriptive, exploratory and interpretive methods were employed to analyze the data from a geolinguistic perspective. The findings show that Dalit students studying at the plus-two level were aware of their sense of loss for not having their own mother tongue, i.e. a separate linguistic identity. They prefer the Nepali language as the medium of instruction for their pedagogical scaffolding as they understand clearly in this language. At the same time, the respondents preferred the English language for professional opportunities, foreign employment, and uplift of the socio-economic status of Dalits and as a tool for combating their power negotiation in society. This conclusion supports the need to deal with Dalit students in regard to their pedagogical scaffolding by addressing the issues of their linguistic identity at the plus-two level.*

Keywords: *Dalit students, linguistic identity, medium of instruction, pedagogical scaffolding, power negotiation, geolinguistics, languages of Nepal*

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КРИТИЧЕСКОЕ ОСОЗНАНИЕ СТУДЕНТАМИ-ДАЛИТАМИ СВОЕЙ ЯЗЫКОВОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ ДЛЯ ПЕДАГОГИЧЕСКОЙ ПОДДЕРЖКИ: ГЕОЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКАЯ ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ИЗ НЕПАЛА

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Аннотация. В настоящей работе исследуется критическое самоосознание студентов-далитов в Непале (принадлежащих к дискриминируемой группе неприкасаемых в индуистской кастовой системе) в отношении их языковой идентичности и педагогического скаффолдинга (поддержки в учебном процессе). Язык как средство обучения играет решающую роль в доступе к качественному образованию. Дети из маргинализированных сообществ, не имеющие собственного языка, вынуждены использовать язык угнетателей. В частности, восприятие, самосознание и идеология учащихся-далитов в отношении их языковой идентичности, изучения языка и средств обучения на уровне старшей школы, несмотря на их маргинализацию в обществе, способствуют более широкому пониманию роли лингвистического фактора для их педагогической поддержки. Представленное качественное исследование использует интервью и обсуждение в фокус-группах в качестве основных инструментов для получения данных от специально отобранных студентов-далитов, обучающихся в долине Катманду. Для получения данных было проведено 22 полуструктурированных интервью с ключевыми информантами и две дискуссии в фокус-группах. Для анализа данных с геолонгвистической точки зрения использовались описательные, исследовательские и интерпретационные методы. Выводы показывают, что студенты-далиты, обучающиеся на уровне старших классов, осознавали своё чувство потери из-за отсутствия у них собственного родного языка, т.е. отдельной языковой идентичности. Они предпочитают непальский язык в качестве средства обучения для своей педагогической поддержки, поскольку хорошо понимают этот язык. В то же время респонденты предпочли английский язык для своих профессиональных возможностей, трудоустройства за границей и повышения социально-экономического статуса далитов, а также как инструмент борьбы за их роль и права в обществе. Данный вывод подтверждает необходимость работы со студентами-далитами в отношении их педагогической поддержки через обращение к вопросам их языковой идентичности на уровне старшей школы.

Ключевые слова: студенты-далиты, языковая идентичность, средство обучения, педагогическая поддержка, борьба за права, геолонгвистика, языки Непала

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Introduction

Recent discourse in the language in education has global influence as it makes language a powerful tool in the formation of one's identity not only in politics but also in the field of academia. The reason behind this, uncritically and without the benefit of explicit and analytical reflection of linguistic identity-as-pedagogy, can actually serve to reinforce patterns of inequality [19] rather than support the pedagogical enhancement of children. Linguistic identity impacts deeply learning, employment, professional development, prestige and power negotiation in society. Critical awareness of these issues remains crucial to learners from marginalized communities. Education in the mother tongue, the local language, regional language, national/international language, and bilingual/multilingual education are the crosscutting issues in language education that Dalit children have to be critically aware of.

Nepalese society is based on the Hindu Chaturvarna system which stratifies the society into four strata, viz. Brahmins, Kshetries, Vaishyas and Sudras, Brahmins being at the top of the hierarchy and Sudras at the bottom [1, p. 66–80]. The Sudras, also known as Dalits, were made untouchables and expected to serve the people of the upper layers in the hierarchy. They were constantly reminded that their salvation lay in their service to upper class people. They had to undergo an abysmal history of discrimination since around 3,500 years back when the Varna System is supposed to have been institutionalized in the then Indian Subcontinent [ibid., p. 59]. It is shameful to say that Dalits of Nepal are still living a dehumanized life with untouchability, which is a unique phenomenon among Hindus unknown to humanity in other parts of the world. It is not found in any other society – primitive, ancient or modern [2, p. 38]. In brief, Dalits are the most marginalized people in the Hindu caste system and they are systematically discriminated against by the state mechanism. Hence, they are a backward community in terms of access to education and other resources. Eventually, their children were deprived of education by laws in the past. However, the Constitution, promulgated in 2015, showed concern about educating Dalit children. In the discussions on the education for Dalit children, the issues of the medium of instruction and their perception towards languages remain crucial.

Unlike other ethnic children who have their own mother tongue, which is the best medium of instruction socially, educationally, and psychologically [22, p. 10], Dalit students in Nepal themselves lack their own mother tongue as they do not have a separate language. The settlements of Dalits have spread throughout the nation but they lack a particular place, culture, language, region, and religion. Dalits speak the language spoken in the majority community. Thus, Hill-Dalits speak Nepali, Dalits of the Kathmandu Valley speak Newari, and Terai-Dalits speak Tharu, Maithili, Awadhi, Bhojpuri, Bajika, Hindi, and so on. In school education, the medium of instruction is Nepali and, if the school is private, it is English. Mother tongue based education has been piloted and implemented in Nepal since 2007 for children of ethnic minorities such as Tamang, Tharu, Magar, Rajbansi, Santhal, Newari, Rai, Limbu [23, p. 51–73] and so on but this issue is beyond the rhetoric of language education for Dalit children.

Contemporary literature focuses on mother tongue based education [19]. However, the schools in Nepal are using either Nepali or English as the medium of instruction despite the fact that the classrooms are culturally and linguistically diverse. The United Nations General Assembly declared 2019 as the International Year of Indigenous Languages with the aim to raise awareness of the crucial role languages play in people's daily lives including early learning, as well as promoting and protecting indigenous languages and improving access to education for indigenous people. This announcement remained silent for those who lack their own language.

This study explores Dalit students' critical awareness of their linguistic identity for their pedagogical scaffolding from the geolinguistic perspective. Geolinguistics is the study of language concerns, languages in contact and conflict, in relation to geography through objective oriented research in real-life situations [9], [12, p. 47–65]. In another sense, it is the politics of language in practical life that raises voices and empowers the minority communities. The way Dalit students at the plus-two level perceive the language in education and their linguistic identity with regard to their pedagogical scaffolding can enhance their critical awareness of language in education. This empirical evidence empowers the Dalit students in terms of why and how they study particular languages to assure their access to education. The Dalit students have

higher dropout, repetition and failure rates compared to other ethnic communities. The feeling of inferiority and humiliation while being exposed to dominant culture and language and denial of their linguistic identity also can cause social, educational and psychological disturbances in Dalit children [10]. On this ground, the researchers purposely selected the Dalit students studying in the Kathmandu Valley as informants. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted to generate primary data whereas the geolinguistic perspective paves the theoretical ground in the study. Geolinguistics studies the pursuit of researching, disseminating and publishing up-to-date knowledge on language issues/debates, plurilingualism/polyglottery, language teaching and learning from policy to pedagogy. The study focuses on an objective and solution-oriented approach to language contact and conflict in society from a temporal and geographical perspective [12, p. 47–65]. More specifically, it concerns itself with language planning, policymaking, and the politics of language education of both majority and minority languages in relation to specific geographical locations, with their impact on real-life situations being the core area of geolinguistics studies [14]. Dalit children's critical awareness of their linguistic identity for their pedagogical scaffolding tends to influence language in education, curriculum, and materials development for access to quality (language) education for Dalit children. The paper draws on the following theoretical grounds, empirical literature, methods, findings, discussion and implications concerning Dalit students' critical awareness.

Literature review

Language and identity are interrelated concepts as a person's identity is reflected in language. A language is a powerful tool to build up one's identity, which remains crucial to the marginal communities that do not have their own language. As a matter of fact, every human being needs a language to make sense of his own identity. Dalits form a historically disadvantaged group, which is socially, economically, and politically marginalized from mainstream state functions. This community does not have its own distinct mother tongue; rather, they speak the language of the majority communities around their settlements. Dalits of the Hilly Region speak the Nepali language whereas Terai-Dalits speak Maithili or Bhojpuri, Tharu, Awadhi, Rajbansi, Hindi, and so on. In the Kathmandu Valley, Dalits speak the Newari language. This has a direct impact on the schooling of Dalit children. School is a social space where children from different languages come together. The medium of instruction at school is Nepali, and the English language is taught as a foreign language. Language plays a key role in constructing and maintaining distinctive human identities. Democratic school practices emphasize equal treatment of all learners from different linguistic backgrounds in the school. However, the case of Dalit children is different, which has been depicted by many scholars.

Khanal [12, p. 47–65], in his study entitled *The Quest for Educational Inclusion in Nepal: a Study of Factors Limiting the Schooling of Dalit Children*, deals with the inclusion of the children from Dalit communities into the education system. He highlights the fact that Dalit children are disadvantaged and often sidelined within the formal education system of the nation. The focus of his study lies on the exploration of the barriers that hinder the education access, involvement and betterment of Dalit students at the secondary level. It is an ethnographic study that deployed a series of interviews and observations in a natural-cultural setting to collect the data. The study uncovers the challenges in implementing national policies, making resources available, and effective monitoring for the purpose of including Dalit children in education. However, the study left the issues of linguistic identity and pedagogical aspects untouched.

Kharel [13, p. 116–122] carried out academic research for her PhD thesis entitled *The Dialectics of Identity and Resistance of Dalits in Nepal* which was written for submission to the University of Pittsburgh. The major areas of the research were to uncover constraints and possibilities of everyday identities and organized/political identities based on gender, class and generation. The researcher employed theoretical grounds of intersectionality and matrix of domination, place and spatiality (everyday space and civil society political space), caste and social mobility, and dialectics of identity and resistance. The ethnographic study employed participant observation, interviews and documentary evidence on Deula, Bishwakarma and Pariyar community members including organized/political activists. Everyday experiences of dis-

crimination force both community and political actors to strategically reveal or conceal their Dalit identities depending upon the situation. Formation of the subjective and objective aspects of the relationship between the two spatial and institutional contexts implies an emerging Dalit identity [ibid.]. The study opened the avenues for the human rights perspective in the global context but the critical awareness of the linguistic identity of Dalit children for their pedagogical scaffolding was still unexplored. Dalit children obviously have certain constraints and possibilities in relation to their linguistic identities for their pedagogic support, which deserves exploration.

Cameron [5] also carried out another study on certain issues being debated about Dalits entitled “Many Dalits: debating identity in a new Nepal”. Important gestures of reform like political quotas, educational scholarships, and equal access to cultural resources are very important in moving social justice forward [ibid.]. She pointed, “An integrated, comprehensive approach toward social justice involving economic, civil, and educational and health rights should be ensured to Dalit communities” [ibid.]. The research remained silent on the emphasis to be placed on critical awareness and linguistic identity as a means of empowering Dalit children through pedagogy.

Folmar [10] had carried out yet another study entitled *Identity Politics among Dalits in Nepal*. The study sites consisted of Kami, Sarki, and Damai of Jharuwarasi and Sirubari in central and western regions. This ethnographic study was based on the theoretical ground of symbolic separation of the clean from the unclean and the exertion of economic, political, or materially-based power and the concept of identity politics and resistance. Folmar claims, “Establishing group identity, advocating its rights and maintaining its borders are central to the efforts of Dalit empowerment” [ibid., p. 51]. Pedagogical issues and the linguistic identity of Dalit children are yet to be explored as no research has been conducted earlier.

Koirala [15, p. 31] carried out the first ethnographic study on *Schooling and the Dalits of Nepal: a Case Study of Bunkot Dalit Community* for his PhD thesis submitted to the University of Alberta. Koirala got into the issue of Dalits and schooling from the broader perspective of Marxism and Max Weber’s power theory based on the sociology of education and social inequality. The case study design employed participant observation, discussion and household surveys to generate the ethnographic data. Koirala [ibid.] pointed out that schooling ensured Dalits’ social mobility, identified avenues to economic betterment, developed sociopolitical awareness, began to question untouchability and encouraged their children to attend school. Basically, the study left the linguistic identity of Dalit children unresearched. Despite the dominant impact of the first academically broader visionary research on the Dalit issue, Dalit children’s critical awareness of their linguistic identity for pedagogical scaffolding in their schooling was left to be uncovered.

Research methodology

The research process involves the nature of the study and the research problem [8, p. 105], [6, p. 32]. Linguistic identity and pedagogical scaffolding of Dalit students also have a distinct nature and need-specific methodology of the study. Dalit students are from a marginal community that deserves special attention in terms of education since they have been segregated in society as untouchable. Aligning to it, Dhungel argues, “Perfection of language leads to perfection of human beings” [9, p. 24]. The methodology covers overall philosophical assumptions, research designs, methods and data collection procedures, analysis, and interpretation [6, p. 32]. Mainly three approaches of research methodology are in practice in the social sciences, viz. qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method. Each approach has its own paradigm of worldview, designs and methods, analysis and interpretation strategy including the sampling procedure, tools, and techniques. The authors have also considered the nature of the participants and decided the methods in this study.

The selection of the research approach depends upon the nature of the study, the problem to be addressed, the researcher’s personal experiences, and the audience. As authors intended to explore the linguistic identity and pedagogical scaffolding of Dalit students including the power negotiation in the society, qualitative study, an approach used to deal with detailed particulars before making generalizations and which means an inductive way of making inferences, has been deployed in this paper. In the words

of Creswell [ibid.], a qualitative study explores the human understanding of particular problems or phenomena in society. The study that we are going to accomplish aims to explore Dalit children's critical awareness of their linguistic identity for their pedagogical scaffolding. The nature of data in this study is both qualitative and quantitative. However, the authors have applied the qualitative method [7, p. 22].

In this study, Dalit children's awareness of their linguistic identity deserves exploring through a qualitative design. To borrow the words of Kvale, "In qualitative research, interviewing is appropriately used when 'studying people's understanding of the meaning in their lived world' " [17, p. 105]. In fact, interviewing is the best technique to use "to find out those things we cannot directly observe like feelings, thoughts, and intentions" [18, p. 72]. The Dalit students studying at the plus-two level in the Kathmandu Valley were the universes of population and purposive sampling procedures which were employed for qualitative information. The respondents for this study were selected through purposive sampling based on predetermined criteria, which is vital to understand central phenomenon [6, p. 32]. Interview guidelines and focus group discussion guidelines were developed for generating qualitative information. The researchers considered ethical issues such as the anonymity of respondents to secure their identity. The interviews were conducted at the participants' respective settings and the questions were asked focusing on their critical awareness of and attitudes to their linguistic identity for the purpose of determining their pedagogical scaffolding. At the same time, pseudonyms along with respondents' identity numbers such as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, etc. were used to ensure anonymity and secure their identities. The qualitative responses elicited from the respondents were coded, thematically categorized, and theoretically triangulated based on the objectives of the study. Descriptive, exploratory and critical methods were employed to analyze the data obtained from interviews. As per the objectives of the study, data were triangulated from a geolinguistic perspective.

Results and discussion

Since the academic discourse on critical awareness of the linguistic identity of Dalit students for their pedagogical scaffolding remained sporadic in literature, the study in this area from the perspective of geolinguistics remained absolutely vacant. Geolinguistics is a branch of linguistics dealing with the analysis and implications of the geographical location, distribution, and structure of language varieties within a temporal framework, either in isolation or in contact and/or conflict with one another. The essence of this approach lies in doing objective-oriented research on real-life language issues [14]. The researchers purposively selected Samaj Bikas Chhatrabas (Bijeswori Hostel) where more than approximately 200 Dalit students from different districts of the country live and study in both government and private colleges in the Kathmandu Valley. Among them, the authors interviewed 16 students studying at the plus-two level and five more students were purposely selected from other different colleges in Kathmandu. The data generated from the interviews and focus group discussions have been dealt with under the thematic areas of the linguistic identity, the medium of instruction, the language of profession and access to foreign countries and power negotiation in the society.

R1 (pseudonym: Jenish), aged 20, from Archalbot, Dordi Village Municipality, Lamjung, studies at grade XII. He lives in a community where the majority of households are Gurungs who speak the Gurung language. He can understand (but cannot speak) the Gurung language though he is a Nepali language speaker. This situation can be regarded as language in contact and conflict [ibid.]. Further, he commented, "Had we had our own distinct native language, it would have been better though I feel comfortable with using the Nepali language". Despite his quest for a distinct mother tongue, R1 prefers the use of the Nepali language to English. Regarding the question on the medium of education, he prefers Nepali medium to English as it is more intelligible to him though he finds the English language equally important. These statements of R1 depicted a crisis of Dalit students' linguistic identity as he desired to have his own distinct native language though he uses the Nepali language as his mother tongue. Geolinguistically, this seems to be a solution-oriented approach [ibid.].

Another respondent, R2 (pseudonym: Bikram), aged 22, who studied at the secondary level in Surkhet, finds the Nepali language easy and comfortable to speak. Compared to English, he prefers the Nepali

language as the medium of instruction since it is more intelligible for pedagogical support. He opined, "For the teaching-learning purpose, the Nepali language is more effective for me as I completed my school education from a government school where the Nepali language was the medium of instruction". As we think, imagine and act in the language [9], it determines the consciousness, which is the output of his linguistic surrounding in school life. Studying in a government school has created an impression to Dalit children that they are weak in English though they found speaking English essential for international communication. "The Nepali language is a source of assimilation in our society and I do not have my own distinct language, either". Bikram feels proud to be a Nepali speaker. Aligned with the words of Pradhan [21, p. 89], R2 uses the Nepali language in his everyday space and has become habituated with it [3, p. 13–17].

The next respondent, R3 (pseudonym: Jiban) has conveyed the transition of his linguistic identity for pedagogical support. He noted, "In Bajhang, Dalits do not have a separate Dalit language. We speak the local Bajhangi language and feel comfortable while communicating in the Bajhangi language at school. We spoke Bajhangi which we preferred as the medium of instruction for us" (interview, December 13, 2020). When he passed the Secondary School Exam (SEE) and came to Kathmandu, his preference changed as there was no possibility of using the Bajhangi language and he started to prefer the Nepali language for his pedagogical support. He studies in an ICT college in Kathmandu where the medium of instruction is English. He provides clues for his challenge in learning English. Marking his intention to identify himself as a Nepali speaker, he spoke:

"Local language has no place in learning ICT in Grade XI and XII. I would like to identify myself as a Nepali speaker and prefer the Nepali language for my educational facilitation. I have cordial relationships with the Nepali language as it is our national language" (interview, December 13, 2020).

R3's ideology was further illustrated with his expression that the Nepali language is the language of the public service commission. Hence, it is more important for him as he wanted to attend the examination of the public service commission. Further, he added, "There is a strong affinity and hearty relationship of the mother tongue and birthplace with the particular place and period".

R4 (pseudonym: Santosh), aged 18, was studying at Oxford Engineering College in Kathmandu. He was from western Rukum. Society in his locality is mixed with ethnic castes where Brahmin, Chhetri, Magars, and Tamangs are major residents. R4 found Magars and Tamangs speaking their own languages and experienced a sort of closeness between them while speaking their language. Speaking the Nepali language is his compulsion and it has been the contact language among Magar, Tamang, Brahmin, and Chhetri communities. A sense of linguistic crisis was realized in his expression as he stated:

"I feel uncomfortable when I cannot speak Magar Kham with my Magar friends. I wish I had my own mother tongue. Especially when we have a conflict and quarrel with Magar friends, they start using the Magar language and we feel bad when we cannot understand what they are really saying to us. In that context, I wish I had my own language like theirs".

R5 (pseudonymed Rabindra) agrees with Santosh as he also prefers the Nepali language for pedagogical scaffolding being a product of a government school. However, he expressed, "The English language provides us access to foreign employment and other opportunities" (interview, December 13, 2020). Dalit students are aware of the fact that language is social capital as it provides opportunities in the society. However, they remain silent to the fact that power negotiation plays a critical role in getting an opportunity in the society [16].

R6 (pseudonymed Kiresh), aged 17, a student of grade XI, raised another issue of the linguistic identity of Dalits. Though he finds Nepali easier and more comfortable for his pedagogical facilitation, he believes that the English language broadens the horizon of knowledge and empowers us to contact globally. He opined, "It is better to have our own language. But, if we become competent in the Nepali and English

languages, we can communicate with foreigners, which might help us to earn money. And moreover, the chances of job opportunity can be increased” (interview, December 14, 2020). Professional opportunities are increased through national and international language competence.

One of the most prolific ideas was put forward by R7 (pseudonymed Ankit), aged 20, from Arghakhanchi, a student at grade XII in one of the colleges in the Kathmandu Valley. He connected linguistic identity with the power-sharing and struggle of the Dalit movement. Dalits could have struggled more efficiently if they had had their own single mother tongue. R7 argued, “Linguistic diversity also has made Dalit leaders less intelligible among Dalits, especially Terai-Dalits and Hill-Dalits. Dalits have been divided due to the difference in language in Terai” (interview, December 14, 2020). R7’s ideas on the linguistic identity of Dalits deserve a soul-searching consideration among advocates of Dalit freedom. His statements indicated that language policy can play a critical role in Dalit liberation. This ideology is analogous to the geolinguistic aspect, i.e. problems of language in contact and conflict can be solved through objective-oriented research in a real-life situation [14].

R8 (pseudonym: Subas), aged 18, from Tanahun district, studies in Kathmandu at Rainbow International College. He also feels sad for not having his own language. Though there are Magar, Gurung, Newar, and Tamang communities in his locality and they speak their own languages, he preferred the Nepali language and wants to identify himself as a Nepali speaker. However, regarding the pedagogical purpose, he stated, “Nepali medium remains crucial for others but I prefer the English language for pedagogical purposes as I am a product of an English medium school. I feel comfortable with English. More importantly, English has broader scope for professional career development in the future too” (interview, January 7, 2021).

Another respondent, R9 (pseudonym: Rubita), aged 20, from Tanahun, studying at grade XII, also agreed with the ideas expressed by R8. However, she showed grave concern for not having her own linguistic identity. As she states, “I feel uncomfortable for not having our own language, which restricts us from communicating with our people. We cannot feel proud of our own language and share ideas freely” (interview, January 8, 2021). Pedagogically, she explained, “Only the students who come from English medium schools should be taught in English and the others should be taught in the Nepali language”. Meanwhile, she was conscious of the importance of the English language for foreign jobs.

R10 (pseudonymed Sony), 18 years old, from Tanahun, studying at grade XII, focused on the linguistic identity, medium of instruction, and student achievement. In the interview, she revealed, “At the plus-two level, if the medium of instruction is the native language of the student, it will make communication more comfortable. Students can have a better understanding, which ultimately impacts student achievement” (interview, January 8, 2021). Her ideology of employment opportunities is also similar to that of other students as she said, “English has become essential in order to get a job in big multinational companies”. She was in favour of multilingual education even at the plus-two level. As she states, “In Rainbow International College, learners are from diverse linguistic backgrounds such as Newar, Tamang, Magar, Tharu, Gurung, and Brahmin-Chhetri too. Therefore, if a teacher teaches in only one language, other students may not understand properly” (interview, January 8, 2021).

R11 (pseudonym: Ranju), aged 23, from Gorkha, is studying at Amrit Science Campus, Kathmandu. She “feels a sense of loss” for not having her own language. She recalled, “I feel like kind of lacking for not having my own distinct language”. Her ideas were similar to those of other students. She further added, “For power negotiation and to enrich the access to resources, Dalit students have to learn multiple languages like Nepali and English though, pedagogically, the language which they understand better should be chosen at the plus-two level”. She opined, “The English language supports access to knowledge in science and technology originating and flourishing in the western countries, which ultimately contributes to better job opportunities in the foreign countries” (interview, January 10, 2021). She remarked, “The study of multilingualism (Nepali, English or any other language) brings better understanding in society, which is better for social peace and harmony too”.

Another student, R12 (pseudonym: Rojina), aged 16, from Gorkha district and a student at Shanti Vidhya Griha Lainchour, also preferred English for pedagogical scaffolding of Dalit students as it is likely to empower them (interview, January 10, 2021).

R13 (pseudonym: Unish Pariyar), aged 19, is a student of computer science at Rainbow International College. He is from Dhading and finds no alternative to learning the English language for pedagogical support and job opportunities. Similar expressions were made by R14 (pseudonym: Laxman Bishwokarma), from Argha Khanchi, who is a XII-grader at Rainbow International School, and by R15 (Rajan from Dolakha studying at the same college). R16 from Sindhuli, also studying at this college (pseudonym: Shyam), preferred both Nepali and English for pedagogical scaffolding of Dalit students. He commented, "English is used worldwide and the people with good English proficiency hold power and enjoy additional prestige. So, English is a must-learn language". Particularly, student R17 (pseudonym: Sunita), from Dhading, and R18 (pseudonym: Goma), from Ramchhap, of grade XII and grade XI, respectively, and student R19 (pseudonym: Savyata), from Arghakhanchi, studying at Rainbow International College, experienced "language as means of discrimination and exploitation. Language shows personal traits and determines the English language as a lingua franca in the global context". Comparatively, slightly different views were expressed by students from Gramin Aadarsha Campus, Nepaltar.

R20 (pseudonym: Deep Bashyal), 22 years old, from Dhading, studying at grade XII at Gramin Aadarsha Campus, noted, "Nepali is a medium of instruction in the classroom for pedagogical scaffolding whereas English is for combating Dalits' subalternity in a global context" (interview January 13, 2021). He finds that "if we have good proficiency in English, our backwardness can be abated as language is the identity of an individual". R21 (pseudonym: Tulasha), aged 22, from Dolakha, studying at Gramin Aadarsha Campus, preferred Nepali as the medium of instruction for pedagogical support though she wished to have her own distinct mother tongue. R22 (pseudonym: Shova), aged 22, of the same campus, further commented, "Language is an important factor of one's identity. Dalit students must learn the English language because having good command of English can be a strong weapon to uplift their socio-economic status in society" (interview, January 13, 2021). The ideas expressed have a strong link with the instrumental role in achieving social status in the society [3, p. 13–17].

Overall, 22 students studying at the plus-two level in the Kathmandu Valley from different districts preferred Nepali as a medium of instruction for their pedagogical scaffolding. Students from English medium school backgrounds preferred English. However, all of them agreed on bilingual education and focused on the English language for professional opportunities, foreign employment, and uplift of the socio-economic status of Dalits and as a tool for combating their subalternity.

Another tool used in the study was focus group discussion (FGD) among the plus-two level students at Rainbow International College, Dallu, and Samaj Bikash Hostel, Bijeswori, Kathmandu. Two FGDs were conducted by the researchers themselves after receiving permission and arranging time-schedule as per the convenience of the participants. FGD guidelines were prepared prior to the discussion and recordings were made in accordance with the objectives of the research. The first FGD was carried out on among 12 Dalit students from different districts on February 13, 2021, at Samaj Bikash Hostel, Bijeswori. After the introductory round, the authors proceeded with the major areas of research such as linguistic identity, pedagogical scaffolding, medium of instruction, and power negotiation for Dalit students in society. Regarding the first issue, the participants discussed matters intensely and concluded, "We feel sad that Dalits do not have their distinct linguistic identity like other ethnic communities; however, we feel proud of speaking the Nepali language as our mother tongue" (FGD1, February 13, 2021).

On the next issues of pedagogical scaffolding and medium of instruction, the participants were divided into two halves. Four of them strongly stated that they felt it easy to learn in the English medium for their pedagogical scaffolding. The rest of them were of the opinion that: "We understand things in the Nepali language as we have spoken it since our childhood. English is a really tough language for us" (FGD1, February 13, 2021). Explaining the reason behind this, the former group mentioned that they had studied in English medium schools whereas the other group's students had studied in Nepali medium based public schools. As far as power negotiation in society is concerned, almost all the participants strongly agreed that both Nepali and English language deserve learning as they have to negotiate power in society. A conclusion they made in the discussion was, "We have struggled in our society with Nepali speakers and other ethnic language speakers. Moreover, we have to grab employment opportunities in foreign countries too. Therefore, we have to be perfect in both English and Nepali languages" (FGD1,

February 13, 2021). Eventually, the participants concluded, “We need Nepali medium for our better pedagogical scaffolding for other subjects whereas English is a must for computer use, IT and other technical subjects” (FGD1, February 13, 2021).

The next FGD was held on February 16, 2021, and was led by Babu Ram Bishwokarma at Rainbow International College at Dallu, Kathmandu. Only eight Dalit students participated in the discussion. All of them were studying at the plus-two level in management, humanities, and education streams. The author proceeded with the issues of discussion after the introduction and clarification of the purpose of discussion in the group. The participants unanimously agreed, “We do not have our separate mother tongue but we feel happy to learn Nepali from childhood. It is our national language, too. Therefore, the Nepali language must be the medium of instruction at the plus-two level, too, as we understand it better” (February 16, 2021). Three of the participants further argued, “Nepali is a lingua franca among ethnic languages whereas English is the contact language in a global context”. Later, all of them concluded that bilingual education at plus-two level seems inevitable. Regarding the issue of power negotiation, five of the students openly stated, “To do politics in Nepal, we must be perfect in the Nepali language whereas to highlight our agenda regarding untouchability in the global arena, we must learn the English language” (February 16, 2021). The participants were conscious of not having their own distinct mother tongue and would feel proud to have one, and believed that for access to leadership, resources, and empowerment that language learning is important.

The study aimed to explore the critical awareness and attitudes of Dalit students towards their linguistic identity for their pedagogical scaffolding. Students from different colleges studying in the Kathmandu Valley who were living in Samaj Bikash Hostel, Bijeswori, Kathmandu, were interviewed for their perceptions, understanding, critical awareness and attitudes towards their linguistic identity. Thematic areas of the findings were categorized into four, namely: the awareness of linguistic identity, the medium of instruction for pedagogical scaffolding, the language for professional career development, and the language of access to study abroad, to obtain employment opportunities and to enable power negotiation in society.

Awareness of linguistic identity. In respect to the linguistic awareness of Dalit students, almost all the sampled students expressed an linguistic identity crisis as they do not have their own distinct mother tongue like other ethnic communities and wished to have their own language. Students accepted Nepali as their mother tongue in society. Their sense of loss in respect to their linguistic identity crisis seemed to have led them to accept the language available and spoken in their particular societies. This approach of Dalit students seems geolinguistically appropriate and more practical as they cannot create different languages but rather must assimilate into the linguistic contours of whatever society they find themselves [12, p. 47–65]. The result was similar to a study by Koirala [15, p. 116–122] as Dalit students have taken Nepali language as a tool to make themselves literate. The dominant languages for Dalit students are a source of humanization and civilization in the society despite not having their own separate language. The language ideology of Dalits has an impact on the medium of instruction in terms of their choice of pedagogical support. Dalit students appreciated that one of the important identities of Nepal is its linguistic heterogeneity. The languages spoken in Nepal are the properties of not only the concerned ethnic and linguistic groups but also the heritage of the nation as a whole. This critical awareness of Dalit students shows their geolinguistic consciousness of the issues of multilingualism in society and their appreciation for being able to use the Nepali language, while adjustment to any language situation displays their respect and celebration of multiple languages as well as alternative ways to adapt to a multilingual community despite the lack of their own language.

Medium of instruction for pedagogical scaffolding. The data above show that Dalit students have distinct ideas regarding the medium of instruction for their pedagogical scaffolding at the plus-two level. Though demands for mother tongue based medium of instruction and linguistic rights of minorities are picking up with ever greater force, Dalit students hold two opinions as per their access to education. The students from public or government schools demanded Nepali as the main medium of instruction at the plus-two level for their pedagogical support whereas Dalit students from private English medium schools preferred English as the medium of instruction for the sake of better understanding. This ideology is analogous to the ideas of scholars who claim that the English language has been perceived as

a language of power and opportunity. R15 observes, “English is used worldwide and people with good English proficiency hold power and enjoy additional prestige. English is a must-learn language”. However, in the meantime, R15 also argues that the medium of instruction plays a vital role in language learning, emphasizing that a common language understandable to learners is critical to the pedagogical scaffolding of Dalit students.

The language of professional career. Dalit students basically focused on their professional careers while framing their linguistic identity. As the medium of communication in the public service commission is Nepali, Dalit students preferred the Nepali language to enhance their professional careers. Students from government schools basically emphasized Nepali as they have brought the habit of speaking it from home and junior level at school. R22’s version that having a strong background in English supports the uplifting of one’s socio-economic background corroborates the ideas of Bourdieu: language as symbolic power [3, p. 66–68]. Good knowledge of English as expressed by most of the Dalit students enhances their opportunities for developing their professional careers. That means knowledge of language remains social capital [ibid., p. 13–17] for Dalit students. R11’s argument that English is necessary for science, technology and job opportunities abroad supports language hegemony in the multilingual context of Nepal, while she also claims that multilingualism (simultaneous use of Nepali, English and other languages) would promote mutual understanding, peace and harmony in society.

Access to study abroad and employment opportunities. The findings indicate that Dalit students accept the English language for their access to study abroad and for employment opportunities in multinational companies. Dalit students’ understanding of English language education contradicts some scholars. Enabling access to education in the language in which the child feels most comfortable significantly increases that child’s chances of success in life. However, their acceptance as a medium of instruction the language they felt comfortable with was appreciated by them. Dalit students’ ideology regarding the English language seems analogous to the ideology that to possess language is to possess a technique, not necessarily quantum knowledge about the world. Basically, for access to a job in a better company one should have a good command of English.

Power negotiation in the society. Dalit students’ understanding of language has a direct relation to power negotiation. Their focus was on the socio-economic uplift, which remains possible only through quality education. Quality education is possible only in an intelligible language. The preference of the English language for Dalit children has ideological value. Their ideological basis reveals that English brings modern ideas and thus develops interpersonal channels as well as social and cultural values in the society. Moreover, Dalit students must learn the English language because having a good command of it can be a strong weapon in uplifting their socio-economic status. This logic seems relevant to the idea that English is a gateway to better communication, better education, and a means to achieving higher living standards and better understanding. R7 accentuates that language differences have complicated Dalits’ cooperation in pursuit of their rights. Until and unless Dalits have a critical awareness of their languages, they cannot protest against their suppression, oppression, and exploitation. Critical pedagogy is necessary for their awareness. Language education for pedagogical scaffolding empowers Dalit children to negotiate power in the society.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the critical awareness and attitudes of Dalit students towards their linguistic identity for their pedagogical scaffolding. Students from different colleges studying in the Kathmandu Valley and living in Samaj Bikash Hostel, Bijeswori, Kathmandu, Rainbow International College, and Gramin Aadarsha Campus were interviewed along with two separate FGDs for exploring their perceptions, understanding, critical awareness, and attitudes towards their linguistic identity. Thematic areas of the findings were categorized into four, namely: linguistic identity, the medium of instruction for pedagogical scaffolding, the language for professional use, and the language of access for study abroad and opportunities in foreign countries.

All the respondents realized the need for reconstructing their linguistic identity [14] as they wished they had their own distinct language at least for their school education [19]. Fundamentally, the reason behind their longing for their own language, as expressed, is efficient communication, which is a pivotal component in pedagogical delivery in the classroom. Dalit students, in Bajhang and Doti, use Bajhangi and Doteli at home and wished to have the same language as the medium of instruction at school. They prefer Nepali in the social space [21, p. 63–89] as a contact language. In this situation, Dalit students perceive the Nepali language as a lingua franca in the social space whereas Bajhangi or Doteli are seen as necessary for pedagogical scaffolding at school. Dalit students meant to continue using the Nepali language as the medium of instruction even at grade XI and XII. Meanwhile, Dalit students took Nepali and English as languages of power, with the help of which they meant to empower themselves professionally both at home and abroad.

The findings indicate the positive attitudes of Dalit students toward the local language, the national language, and the international language. However, the objective of language use remains completely different. Basically, local languages are for the purpose of pedagogical scaffolding whereas national and international languages are for empowerment, professional enhancement, and power negotiation in the society. Nepali is the most preferred language for their pedagogical scaffolding even at plus-two levels though they believe English empowers and enhances them professionally. The findings have broader implications in language policy, curriculum designing, etc. A limited number of informants on a small scale and only interviews and FGD as tools for data collection are the limitations of this study. The way Dalit students negotiate the power with the mainstream society by using the language of their oppressors remains unexplored, but which opens up grey areas for further research.

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