



Practices and Ideologies of Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education: A Case Study of Tibetan in Nepal

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Abstract. Nepal accommodates 123 plus 6 languages, which make it a multilingual, multiethnic and multicultural nation. The state's policy embraces mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in primary school as children from diverse ethnic groups come to school in Nepal. This paper critically examines the practices of stakeholders, mainly students, teachers and a head teacher, on Tibetan MTB-MLE in public schools in Nepalese schools (Tibetan being a minority language in Nepal). A literature review is undertaken to demonstrate different views on mother-tongue-based education in Nepalese academia. The main objective of the study was to explore the stakeholders' practices and ideologies with regard to Tibetan MTB-MLE practiced in school in Nepal. The research follows a qualitative approach and employs a case study research design. A school in Kathmandu was purposely selected as the field of study. Interview, focus group discussion (FGD) and observation including the researchers' reflective diary were the methods of data collection. The data generated were transcribed and translated into English from Nepali prior to their thematic coding. The finding shows that Tibetan MTB-MLE has positive impacts on quality delivery of education. The Tibetan language has been used as the medium of instruction to make students understand the text and context. However, its implementation has not been effective due to a number of reasons such as lack of curriculum, textbooks, resources materials, appropriate teaching methodologies and proficient teachers in the school. The concern of the parents and management team members was yet to be investigated. The findings obtained can be applied to reforming policy, practices and teacher education in Tibetan MTB-MLE in Nepal.

Keywords: Nepal, Tibetan language, multilingual education, mother tongue, medium of instruction, language ideology, market ideology, critical awareness

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Практики и идеологии многоязычного образования на основе родного языка: пример тибетского языка в Непале

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Аннотация. В Непале говорят на 123 плюс 6 языках, что делает его многоязычной, многоэтнической и многокультурной страной. Политика государства включает в себя многоязычное образование на основе родного языка (МООРЯ) в начальной школе, поскольку в Непале учатся дети из разных этнических групп. В данной статье критически рассматривается практика заинтересованных сторон, в основном учеников, учителей и директора, в отношении МООРЯ применительно к тибетскому языку в непальских государственных школах (тибетский язык является миноритарным в Непале). Предпринимается обзор литературы для демонстрации различных взглядов на вопрос образования на основе родного языка в непальской академической среде. Основной целью исследования было изучение практики и идеологии заинтересованных сторон в отношении реализуемого в непальских школах МООРЯ на примере тибетского языка. Исследование следует качественному подходу и использует дизайн исследования на основе конкретной ситуации (case study). В качестве пространства исследования была намеренно выбрана школа в Катманду. Методами сбора данных были интервью, фокус-группа и наблюдение, включая исследовательский дневник. Полученные данные были расшифрованы и переведены на английский язык с непальского до их тематического кодирования. Результаты исследования показывают, что МООРЯ применительно к тибетскому языку оказывает положительное влияние на качество образования. Тибетский язык использовался в качестве средства обучения для того, чтобы учащиеся понимали текст и контекст. Однако его внедрение оказалось неэффективным по ряду причин, таких как отсутствие учебной программы, учебников, методических материалов, соответствующих методик преподавания и квалифицированных учителей в школе. Озабоченность родителей и руководства школы ещё предстоит изучить. Полученные результаты могут быть применены для реформирования политики, практики и подготовки учителей в сфере МООРЯ применительно к тибетскому языку в Непале.

Ключевые слова: Непал, тибетский язык, многоязычное образование, родной язык, средство обучения, языковая идеология, рыночная идеология, критическое восприятие

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Introduction

Nepal is multiethnic, multilingual and multicultural country accommodating 123 plus 6 languages. These languages are the treasure house of knowledge of diverse ethnic communities. Scholars argue that language is not only the medium of communication; rather, it is the mechanism of thinking, creating and generating a knowledge system to perceive the world [1]. The knowledge system inherent in indigenous languages is the most precious treasure of Nepal. Farr and Song have also opined that each and every language community has their own life history preserved in their languages [13]. The children deserve to acquire these cultural riches for their all-round development, and mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is the foundation. Such MTB-MLE includes four languages: the students' mother tongue or first language, a regional language, the national language and an international language [20, p. 2].

Assessing the successful results of piloting MTB-MLE from 2006 to 2008 with the technical assistance of the Finnish Government, the Government of Nepal initiated MTB-MLE in eight languages and in seven schools of six districts from 2007 to 2009. Mother-tongue-based education encourages learners to develop a robust understanding of their culture and language while equipping them with the necessary competencies to navigate the wider world [26]. However, the language policy for mother-tongue-based multilingual education in Nepal has been a subject of ongoing contention and challenges.

Mother-tongue-based multilingual education empowers learners and communities [33]. When children are taught in their mother tongue, they can learn better and can become more self-confident [3, p. 17]. Nevertheless, critical awareness of stakeholders remains crucial. Language plays a critical role as it reflects the shared aspirations and efforts to make the world a more equitable and sustainable place, which can be instrumental in achieving Millennium Development Goals. Ethnic languages were excluded from mainstream school education, which resulted in the extinction of indigenous languages in the past [4].

The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Nepal promulgated on 20 September 2015 has also stated that all the ethnic languages in Nepal are national languages and that mother-tongue-based education is a right of children. Phyak asserts that these policies respond more to Nepal's social, political, and historical context than directly to the population's needs [24]. Ultimately, linguistic diversity preserves human culture and identity [14]. A study carried out by Paudel [23] shows that teachers have a strong belief in the use of MLE for the promotion and protection of indigenous knowledge.

However, despite the importance of mother tongue-based education, a constant discussion has continued in Nepalese academia. Hence, it seems necessary to explore existing stock of knowledge on these issues in literature.

Literature review & theoretical ground

Mother-tongue-based multilingual education provides the minority language children with access to education. Experts of pedagogy opined that teachers can facilitate learners' study in their own mother tongue, which is easy, comfortable and natural. However, its teachers need to be empowered by being trained in terms of knowledge, skills and attitudes. Kumaravadivelu believes that macro strategies empower teachers with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and autonomy necessary to devise for them a systematic, coherent, and relevant alternative method that is informed by the pedagogic parameters of particularity, practicality and possibility [18, p. 213]. Pedagogic delivery plays an important role as minority students need empowerment. In this regard, Crookes states, "Clearly, the increased sensitivity to diversity, to the different tropes of oppression, is indeed likely to make radical pedagogical initiatives of all kinds more practical and more relevant to a variety of groups" [8, p. 333]. Pedagogical initiatives from marginal ethnic minorities broaden the practicality of the instructional materials. However, as mentioned by Kroskrity, standard ideology of language remains one of the perpetuating factors for them [16].

This study is based on analyzing the language ideology that stakeholders have in regard to minority and majority languages. In this respect, the ideological foundation of Kroskrity [17] is important. The ideological stances of the stakeholders represent their beliefs, feelings, conceptions, and perspectives about language structure and use relevant to the political-economic interests of individual speakers, ethnic and other interest groups and nation-states [ibid.]. First, language ideology represents the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group. What is true, morally good, or aesthetically pleasing about the language and discourse is grounded in social experiences. The ideological construct that the nation-state designs to valorize is derived from the mainstream culture and standard language ideology, which devalues nonstandard language and its associated cultural forms [ibid.]. The ideology of standard language devalues minority languages [8]. Mohanty, on the other hand, opines that multilingual education celebrates linguistic diversity [22]. A broad framework of educational provision essentially means the use of learners' first languages or mother tongues as the primary media of instruction. The recent political, ideological and socio-economic changes and phenomena around the world have spearheaded mother tongues towards the center of national and international debate and policy-making [31]. Practices shown in Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines, Singapore and East Timor where MTB-MLE or mother-tongue use is institutionalized in both mainstream and non-mainstream education proved the usefulness of the mother tongues as educational and cultural resources.

Southeast Asia is a hugely linguistically diverse region, but decades of linguistic colonialism and nationalism have resulted not only in the marginalization of vernacular languages or mother tongues but, more importantly, in the cultural, political and socio-economic oppression of their speakers [32]. The present study is based on these theoretical norms of stakeholders of a Tibetan mother-tongue multilingual school.

The Tibetan language is one of the minority languages in Nepal, with 5,053 people speaking it as their mother tongue [22, p. 39]. This language belongs to Tibeto-Burman branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. It follows the Sambota script and is mostly spoken by people living in the northern range of Nepal bordering Tibet. Swayambhunath is the area in Kathmandu where Tibetan immigrants live densely.

Objectives of the study

The study explores the practices and ideologies of mother-tongue-based multilingual education in a public school in Nepal. The critical perspectives and language ideologies of stakeholders: the head teacher, teachers, and students including a resource person on Tibetan MTB-MLE, were explored. The study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the existing practices of Tibetan-language-based multilingual education?
2. How do stakeholders perceive MTB-MLE?
3. What are the ideologies of stakeholders, mainly students, teachers, and the head teacher, concerning MTB-MLE?

Methods and materials

The study has employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. The study applied the interpretive research paradigm in which researchers attempt to understand human experience [6]. In this study, the researchers attempt to explore reality through the background, experiences and views of the participants [11]. Multiple methods have been employed to generate data from the field. Tibetan-language-based multilingual school in the Kathmandu Valley of Bagmati Province was purposively selected, and the respondents were the head teacher, four teachers, five students, a resource person (RP), a policy maker, and an expert. As Creswell opines, the qualitative design delves the inner thoughts and the understanding of respondents [10]. Semi-structured interviews, a focus group discussion, classroom observation and the researchers' reflective diary generated qualitative data. Interviews were conducted with the head teacher and teachers. Focus group discussions were conducted with teachers and students selecting them balancing the class and gender. Four classes of Math, Science, Social Studies and Nepali

at the primary level were observed. The data collected were transcribed, translated and thematically categorized and meanings were explored [7], [12]. Descriptive, interpretive and critical methods were employed for analyzing qualitative data [7].

Results and discussion

The cultivation of spiritual development in pedagogy with nature and culture

The Namgyal Lower Secondary School registered under the District Office of Education (DoE), Government of Nepal (GoN), was established in 1981. In 2000, it was shifted to Ichangu. The main objective of this charity-based Tibetan school is to teach Buddhist Education to Tibetan and Himalayan children. The head teacher explained that first this school was established for Tibetan Refugee children whose mother tongue was *BhotBhasa* ("Tibetan language"), and whose parents came from remote villages such as Jumla, Humla, Dolpa or Tibetan villages, and the school takes no fees from them. SOS Hermann Gmeiner School supports it financially and the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) recognizes all its activities.

Later, Nepali and English were also regarded to be important languages and it was decided that English would be the medium of instruction (MOI) at this school. Nepali and Tibetan are separately taught as compulsory subjects. Regarding the language teaching approach, Namgyal School adopts a multilingual mono grade approach of teaching. English, Nepali and Tibetan languages are taught as subjects and English is the MOI. Mentioning the students from the special community the school was first founded for, the head teacher stated: "Most of the Tibetan children have gone abroad for a better life. We now have a few Tibetan children and mostly Himalayan children". He added, "All the children are Buddhists with about 55% of the children being Nepalese and the rest being Himalayan and other Buddhists, but we do not have any Brahmin or Chhetri students". As Khanal explained, the cultural value system towards education could be one of the important contributors to the learners, making them motivated to learn and optimistic about their future career [15]. Teaching languages to Himalayan children requires special attention as they have distinct cultural beliefs.

Education plays a vital role in establishing fair and equitable treatment for all human beings. La Belle & Ward [19] suggest that societies need to build on diversities in lifestyles, values, and beliefs to enrich all individuals and groups by studying other cultures and learning other languages. One of the teachers stated, "Languages are important in the context of Nepal. Teaching language means teaching culture and identity, both of which are intertwined with social values. Tibetan, Nepali and English are taught in this school". Another teacher further commented that "the English language is the MOI in science, social studies, and mathematics in Grades 1 to 5. If they do not understand, the teacher explains in the Tibetan language". Despite her claim to provide both nature and culture in her school, while she admitted that languages play an important role, she was not clear about the hegemonic role of the English language. Though the head teacher criticized modern education as being materialistic, which does not ordinarily inculcate spiritual values into young minds, the role of the mother tongue and the MOI was not emphasized.

No language is inherently deficient or illogical and the association between some languages and their perceived deficiencies is social in origin, resulting from the unequal treatment of languages [21]. The head teacher in the interview noted, "If a country is developed, the national language is enough. For instance, Japanese people learn the Japanese language. But for us, English is the international language which we need to learn". However, she also observed that English education is not sufficient for our children. The global spread of English now is coming to be regarded as a form of monolingualism, contributing to the loss of other languages [19]. The head teacher criticizes modern education as follows:

"English education is a materialistic one, only suited for job opportunities and access to better facilities. English moral education is not fit at present. I am against modern education because current education does not inculcate culture, inner peace, good behaviour, manners, love, kindness, compassion, or lifestyles. Only if we emphasize these things, do we believe the purpose of education will be fulfilled".

English alone will not fulfill these needs of education. Has English created any job opportunities for minority language children? This is the critical question at the basis of the head teacher's ideas. By and large, the school system of both public and private schools does not fulfill the needs of the new generation. Awasthi argues that the development of indigenous people and ethnic minorities is linked with their freedom of choice and freedom of using "alternative combinations" in order to address their linguistic and cultural needs in harmony with their local material conditions and value systems [2, p. vi]. At present, the English-based modern education system devalues the culture, customs and inner peace of the new generation. Love, kindness and compassion are more important for them than job opportunities. People may earn money from their job, but they are not happy. Actually, this is a drawback of our education system. The head teacher further explained:

"Language education preserves culture, customs, and traditions and provides moral ethics for mental peace. We need cultured new generations. In our school, children have the freedom to choose the language they express themselves in. They can write in Nepali, English or Tibetan. Up to Class 5, they can read and write in any language. We have excellent results".

Using one's mother tongue in academic institutions is a necessary human right that is vital for the linguistic, psychological, cultural, social and economic survival of minorities and for basic democracy and justice [29]. Tupas opined that mother-tongue education is effective for indigenous children [30].

Students' cabinet: A strategy of ensuring learner engagement

In school, the parents have not been directly involved in the educational process of the Himalayan children and Tibetan children who have been studying at the school. Though the school does not have a formal link with the children's communities of origin or the parents, the education of the students was strategically focused. As the belief is that current education is materialistic and produces self-centered students, there is also the belief that the school curriculum, its teaching and learning, should reflect the learners' cultures, experiences, and perspectives, so that they might learn better and might be more highly motivated. The school provides opportunities for children to choose the language they like and empowers learners through various activities. The Tibetan language school also has some special competencies given in figure 1 with the permission of the school principal.

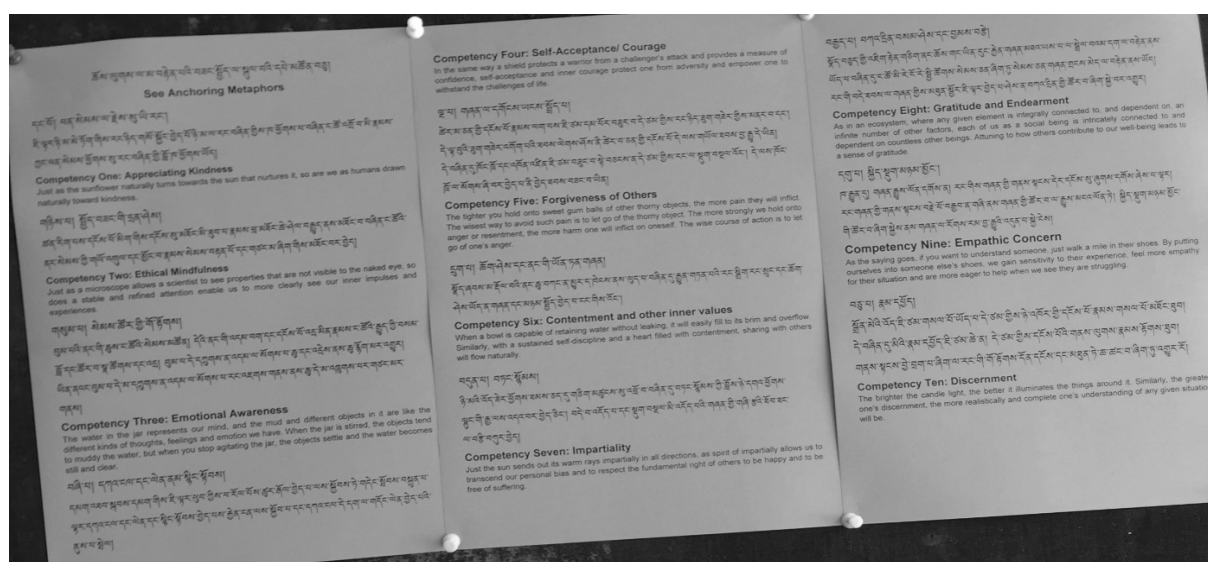


Figure 1. Code of conduct in the Tibetan language school
Source: School Notice Board, field visit, 2025

The document in figure 1 above was like a citizen charter in a government office. Based on Buddhist religious philosophy, the head teacher illustrated 10 competences that children should bear, viz. appreciating kindness, ethical mindfulness, emotional awareness, self-acceptance/courage, forgiveness of others, contentment and other inner values, impartiality, gratitude and endearment, emphatic concern and discernment. With these spiritual and functional actions, the head teacher claimed inculcating spiritualism in children. Everyone should follow the rules based on the Buddhist culture and tradition. Regarding the teaching approach, the head teacher preferred student-centered teaching methods. He stated:

“We activate students through a student cabinet. We name them the education minister, finance minister, minister of information and communication, etc. They organize meetings monthly. The same cabinet members organize different functions such as Teacher’s Day. Students organize all the procedures of celebration such as decorations, speeches, and other necessary arrangements. Even assemblies, writing essays, one-act plays, educational tours, and the report writing programme are conducted at the initiative of students”.

The critical engagement of children in various activities of the school makes the school environment lively and meaningful according to the views of the teachers and head teacher. School Sector Development Program (SSDP, 2016) emphasized subject knowledge, child-centered and active learning, inclusive education, formative assessment, and differentiation to meet the learning needs of every student with approaches that support teachers in applying theoretical knowledge to classroom practice through supportive communities of practice [27, p. 29]. The school engages students in different activities through its cabinet system. Various performances and activities are conducted, dividing the responsibility among the students. Dividing responsibility or work division is one of the strategies to empower students as, according to Crookes, critical engagement empowers learners [9]. Along with this, the school empowers children through pedagogical activities as well. An English teacher elaborates on one of the teaching strategies:

“We encourage individual tasks and group work, even writing stories. We give a title and tell them individually to add ideas. We encourage adding even pie-charts, drawings of natural things, or reports of group activities. For example, we give general topics concerning something or other to do with electronic things. Then they go to work on it and keep moving and moving. We facilitate them. Finally, they have a group presentation”.

Engaging activities, individual work and group work help them in learning languages efficiently. Problem-posing education encourages critical learning. Such learning “aids a person in knowing what holds them back” and imagining “a social order which supports their full humanity” [28, p. 48]. Presentation skills and negotiating leadership also empower the learner’s analytical and critical thinking ability. Pedagogically, textbooks and teaching materials are obligatory. As for teaching materials, one of the English teachers in the same school stated: “We use various teaching materials such as books, charts, multimedia and so on. Apart from these materials, we have a computer lab, a science lab, and lots of teaching aids”. The teacher further stated, “We have direct and indirect download service from YouTube which we present in the computer lab. Despite these resources, we put emphasis on making spiritual leaders of our students”.

Table 1

Practices of MTB-MLE in the classroom

Namgyal Basic School/ Kathmandu	<i>BhotBhasa</i> (Tibetan language)	Lecture, discussion, translation, field trip, project method, practical work, group work, individual work	Textbook, wall pictures, realia, chart papers	Question answer and text-based exercises, demonstration, field report, project report presentation
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Table 1 shows that the school is a charity-based Private Trust, regularly supervised by the Ministry of Education and follows a syllabus prescribed by the Curriculum Development Centre (CDC). They are committed to educating Himalayan children who live high in the mountains. The head teacher explained: “Buddha was born in Nepal and Buddhism is a religion indigenous to Nepal. We need land, buildings, and other infrastructure to sustain and to provide quality education. The Government of Nepal provides no support to us. Instead, we have to pay an education tax and other fees to the Government of Nepal”. The head teacher severely criticized the government’s financial investment in education and maintained that there needed to be a positive political climate, a commitment to the preservation of ethnic and cultural rights, and a willingness to be prepared to put some money where the political implications of language maintenance have been thought through [12, p. 102]. Despite government carelessness regarding multilingual education, one of the teachers put forward her ideas on multilingual education as follows:

“MLE has multiple advantages. It takes language as a source of knowledge and it preserves the culture, customs and identity of ethnic communities. The loss of language is a loss of culture. The loss of culture means a loss of our identity. If we lose our language, our culture and identity disappear. Hence, language is a fund or a source of knowledge. If we don’t preserve our language, our culture and tradition and identity will disappear. Customs, culture, festivals, food, festive dances with costumes will all disappear if we lose our language. Therefore, language should be preserved”.

Crystal used the metaphor of language being “a national treasure”, “a cause for celebration” or “a natural resource” [12, p. 98]. Vygotsky argues learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing “culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions”. Human activities that take place in a cultural setting construct knowledge, which is based on prior knowledge in the context of human network-based activities. Goal-oriented instruction and collaborative teaching makes it possible [34, p. 91]. MLE provides the best possible environment for culture-sensitive education. However, the efforts made by the government are not enough. MLE in the school was working effectively perhaps precisely because it was not implemented as per the policy of the government.

Ideologies of stakeholders on MLE: A strategy of pedagogy for politics of power

Discussions with stakeholders reveal that the dynamics of MLE begin with pedagogical policies and practices. However, in a deeper sense, it is embedded in the culture and language issues being voiced in the minority language communities. In an interview, an expert strongly argued, “Teaching must be from known to the unknown; pedagogy must be culturally responsive. Education should show respect to all the cultures of children in society. The cultural identity and cognitive level of children must be explored for meaningful learning”. Rayes-Blanes and Daunic put emphasis on the cultural factor and recommend that culturally responsive pedagogy should be imperative [25]. In case of Tibetan-language-based MTB-MLE, it has also been expected to preserve Tibetan culture inculcating Buddha’s spiritual knowledge in modern children.

Market ideology: Hegemonic counter discourse on MLE

It is commonly said that the present lifestyle of people is guided by material prosperity. The ideological perspective of people being shaped and reshaped by material and technological luxury has been influenced by western culture and, basically, through the English language. MTB-MLE policies and practices in Nepal are dominated by Western epistemologies of language [24]. One of RP argued,

“If MLE is taught even at higher levels, the time dedicated to this over time would hinder the learner reaching state designated test results. If the Tibetan language is also emphasized at the higher level, then Tibetan students’ dropout rate would ultimately increase, so emphasis should not be placed on the mother tongue at the higher level”.

He further opined:

“Educated, wealthy people and diplomats have sent their children to boarding schools. Parents also emphasized Nepali and English for access to state services and the job market. They believe that if we emphasize only Tibetan, the children will be like us, but they won’t be as competent as people speaking on radio and TV programs, as people believe that people with prestige can speak on radio and TV”.

Cultural capital can be passed on and potentially reconverted into economic capital because, in the modern age, educational credentials have become increasingly essential for gaining access to prestigious positions in the job market [5]. Bourdieu strongly argues that encouraging the symbolic power of English threatens the teaching and learning of the mother tongue [ibid.]. The Tibetan language in context of Nepal cannot be preserved without implementing it with a strong policy supported by proper resources.

Conclusion

Namgyal Lower Secondary School has made an effort to maintain multilingual education. The use of minority language in school can be a source of advantage for minority parents because they feel proud of the respect given to their own language. A community atmosphere, administrative encouragement and interesting ways of teachers’ presentation motivate children to learn languages. Ensuring the acquisition of the *BhotBhasa* mother tongue by Himalayan children was the main goal at first in Namgyal Lower Secondary School. Yet, changing trends and market ideology has driven them to learn other languages like Nepali and English. Besides this, the medium of instruction also has been changed to English.

Thus, the implementation of Tibetan MTB-MLE has not been effective due to a number of reasons such as lack of curriculum, textbooks, resources, materials, appropriate teaching methodologies and proficient teachers. Despite the disbelief in modern education, the head teacher has to run English, Nepali and Tibetan language education. The textbooks in Tibetan are not sufficient, according to teachers. The concern of the parents and management team members was yet to be investigated.

However, the teachers are hopeful of engaging their students in nature and culture through this charity-based school in the Tibetan language. One of the teachers agreed with the head teacher’s idea to use children’s mother tongue as the medium of instruction. In the classroom, translation from Tibetan to Nepali and English was frequently used. Moreover, Tibetan was not the medium of instruction. The school was following multilingual education only in the form of teaching subjects. The real value of mother-tongue-based education was still to be practiced. Community and parental participation in the school were not foreseen. It showed the detachment of the community from the school, though the administration and the teachers claimed to be inculcating a spiritual education.

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