

Initiation of Native Language in Education Policy: A Study on the Role of Language in Pre-Primary and Primary Level of Education in Bangladesh

Assistant Professor Farjana HOSSAIN

Department of Philosophy, College of Arts and Science (CAAS)

Assistant Professor Md. Habeeb Faruk KHAN

Department of English and Modern Languages

IUBAT-International University of Business

Agriculture and Technology, Dhaka, Bangladesh

farjana.hossain@iubat.edu

Abstract

This paper has focused on the language issue of the current education system and its impact on the indigenous population in Bangladesh. Recently a new policy has been adopted in Bangladesh featuring pre-primary education for the indigenous kids in their mother language. The research would analyze the reaction of indigenous people and effects on education regarding this new policy adopted by the government, and suggest some practical steps relevant to the findings. A qualitative study was designed as an in-depth interview where the data was acquired from the semi-structural form participated by twenty-five indigenous candidates. The finding of the research has showed a dilemma where they require their mother tongue to help them preserve their cultural and ethnic identity on one side and the anxiety of getting more isolated in the long run on the other. Taking this dilemma in consideration, this research attempts some practical suggestions that roam around the concept of considering indigenous languages as a third language to be included in the national curriculum.

Keywords: *Chittagong Hill Tracts, Language policy, Ethnic Identity, Internationalization, Multicultural Education.*

Introduction

Very recently Bangladesh government has taken an initiative on the application of indigenous language in education. Under this new policy, kids from five different indigenous groups of Bangladesh is getting their primary education in their mother tongue, whereas previously they had to continue their primary education in national language, Bengali. This paper is going to show the current educational system and policy in Bangladesh, collecting and analyzing the reaction of indigenous students regarding this new initiative, and finally figuring out their

hypothetical position in case of higher study in indigenous language. After analyzing their position, here we have tried to suggest some possible moves to overcome the upcoming situation.

The education system of Bangladesh has been divided as four major stages: pre-primary and primary education, secondary education, higher secondary education, and tertiary and higher education. Equal opportunity policy has been initiated in every stage; especially the Government is focusing on equality in primary education irrespective of ethnicity, socio-economic conditions, physical or mental challenges and geographical differences. A competency based curriculum was commenced in 1992 by the sector of primary education and it was being revised alter in 2010. Here it reserves special assistance for marginalized indigenous children. However, this curriculum follows a certain way to achieve the learning outcomes based on the grade and subject knowledge. Primary schools of Bangladesh are usually government operated and they follow the curriculum set by the government. These schools prefer the national language “Bengali” as their medium of instruction. Only English text books are different naturally, they are in English language. A point should be noted here, though this curriculum recommends special assistance for marginalized indigenous children, in language issue, the kids had to adjust with the national language which was totally a new language for them. Moreover they also learn a third language, English. However besides this general primary education, here found two different type of primary schools, and they are “English Medium School” (a type of urban elite schools) and “Madrasha” (type of rural religious-based schools) who follow the curriculum determined by the British and curriculum set by Madrasha Education Board respectively.

In general pre-primary and primary sector, academic year starts with new books freely distributed to the students by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). This practice of producing and distributing books is a decade old venture where the books are designed based on the British designed curriculum. Moreover, it is imperative to note that no supplementary books are recommended at the primary level of education. This year the “book giving ceremony” has added a new dimension as children from five different indigenous groups have got their books in their mother tongue rather than national language. Those five ethnic groups are Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo and Shadari.

Literature Review

Today the power of globalization is strong enough to intimidate many cultural minority and language groups. It is said that only hundred languages are used by 90% of world population, whereas rest 10% population use around six thousand languages (McCarty, 2005). So it is quite natural that indigenous kids need to compromise with mainstream language in any mainstream education system. For example, there is no organized education policy for the indigenous students in Canada in terms of using their mother tongue (Sarkar & Lavoie, 2014). So it is clear that the language issue in education system is not a matter of developing or developed countries, it exists all mainstream education system.

The conventional education system, that is the minority have to adjust with mainstream's education, is going to face challenge in this century (Ainscow & Miles, 2011). Readjusting the educational policy for migrated population, ethnic and religious minorities, local and international minorities is the highest challenge for 21st century. In conventional education system all learn through mainstream language, whereas research shows that in the primary level of education, it seems very hard for the children to understand any other language than mother language in terms of reading books and getting instructed in the class. Therefore, it may pose a serious threat to the cognitive development of the child and debar their self-confidence to a certain extent (Jhingran, 2009). Bangladesh is not out of this concept. Here the major challenge for indigenous kids is not only the reading material, but also the medium of instruction to be comprehended properly in classroom (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2008).

Bangladeshi society is primarily homogenous in nature where the percentage of Bengalese is about 98.8 and they are considered as mainstream. For these people, Bengali is the most dominating language. Rest 1.2% people are from different ethnic group who have their own mother languages (Barkat et al., 2009). If we consider the historical background of the education system of Bangladesh, it will be evident that no equal opportunity was provided to the people, especially to the children. Therefore, education system before 1759 was highly manipulated by religious sentiment like Hindus prefer *Tol* and Muslims prefer *Madrasah* to receive education. Even after 1759, Missionary education had been institutionalized by the British East India Company which took religious-centered education one step further (Riaz, 2011), and the conventional Muslims and Hindus never showed any interest in this new education system. In addition, the attachment between the locals and the regular schools was also very weak.

Nevertheless, the participation of the indigenous kids in the non-governmental education at urban centers founded by the church had been in Chittagong Hill Tracts since the time of colonization (Bleie, 2005).

Nowadays scenario is changing and the national curriculum and textbooks issued by the government are followed by the government primary schools located in the Chittagong Hill Tracts which is similar to the primary schools all over the country. According to a report by Reid in 2011, the reading and writing ability of the aboriginal students highly depends on how the schools and communities are connected to each other. In 2012, Bayat mentioned Lee's (2001) note, and that is language is a tonic to the psychological and cognitive maturity for a child. Nevertheless, the children without proper practice of the dominant language as a medium of instruction in their family life may face language difficulty at schools. Thinking overall on the issue, Government of Bangladesh has taken the initiative to ensure primary education in their native language and consequently, five different indigenous groups namely Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo and Shadari get their pre-primary and primary books in their native language. There are 46 different ethnic groups belong to Bangladesh, roughly around 1.2 percent of total population. This initiative is appreciable though it is a small step comparing with the ethnic diversity. However this new policy may almost solve or is going to solve the problems arisen by the previous scholars. At the same time, these kids are facing some difficulties like not getting sufficient teachers who can teach them in their language and lack of learning friendly environment.

Methodology

This research has been conducted using a qualitative method. In qualitative research, there is no need to consider a whole population or large sample because the purpose of this sort of study is to discover the meaning and understanding rather than generalize public opinions (Ledger et al., 2014). This research, being a qualitative one, has taken twenty-five indigenous people as a sample to analyze their reaction to the commencement of this new policy. For conducting this study, two academic institutions were chosen as the research sites by Chittagong Hill Tracts. One of the institutions was a government primary school, and another was a private higher secondary college. To achieve both variety and regularity, the sample was chosen with the greatest possible diversity in terms of linguistic beliefs and practices (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Here, the data was collected through an in-depth interview of twenty-five participants. Ten of the participants were current teachers at those institutions. Five of them had completed their graduation in a

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second language or national language (Bangla), five of them were continuing their graduation in a third language (English), and the rest of the twenty participants were current students. We chose them as participants because they had experience of primary education in another language than their mother tongue. At the same time, they were now in the teaching profession, so they knew the challenges of students. The researchers used Creswell's (2017) qualitative data analysis and representation technique to analyze the information. In order to examine the collected data, a multi-step data analysis technique was used. The authors transcribed the recorded interviews verbatim, and sections of the transcription that were in Bengali were translated into English. The transcriptions were returned to the 10 interviewees for cross-checking to verify validity and reliability. The transcriptions, including the translated sections, were thoroughly coded. As representatives of the entire collection of data collected, all of the preliminary codes were grouped into two main topics. To make sense of the obtained data, the themes were interpreted and explained in larger segments of discussion. These interpretations were then presented and thoroughly discussed, with the required comparisons made between themes and other contextual analysis.

Findings and Discussion

PRE-PRIMARY AND PRIMARY EDUCATION IN NATIVE LANGUAGE

In pre-primary and primary level, the dropout rate is almost 40%, and the dropout rate is high in Chittagong Hill Tract area where a large number of indigenous people live (UNESCO, 2005). The participants believe that pre-primary and primary education in native language will decrease the dropout amount. The indigenous kids had two major challenges: first, they had to learn a new language as medium of instruction, and second, contents became uninteresting and tough for them because of language barrier. They highly appreciate the new policy. The debate arises from next step, whether they want native language only in primary level or in secondary and later too.

LACK OF APPLICATION:

The participants get divided into two sides in their opinion. One group highly appreciate teaching their mother tongue, and they believe that it is important for preserving their language, culture, particularity; or we can say overall identity. The other group emphasizes the national language as well as international language as they do not prefer to keep themselves isolated from the mainstream. They prefer a national language over their mother language to get a better job or to attend higher studies because educated indigenous people, having

good command over Bengali and English, get preferences in government job recruitment. They also claim that they are capable of learning three languages: their mother tongue, Bengali (national language), and English (international language) which may help them get jobs in the national government system and globally. It seems effective for them because job is of paramount importance in Bangladeshi socio-cultural context. They think that Bangladeshis are open minded and government also reserves especial opportunity for them. These two domains of thought are related with the theoretical perspectives of Essentialism and Social Constructionism. Essentialism depicts the characteristics which are natural and inherent in objects regardless of any social or historical context. Their inner sense is fixed and perpetual. On the contrary, social constructionism shows the characteristics deeply based on social, political or historical context. Their inner sense is changeable with the change of social perspectives to keep pace with time. So we can relate the first thought of keeping own identity alive with the essence of essentialism, and second one of getting internationalized with the essence of social constructionism.

However, based on their opinion we find a major dilemma, a dilemma of preserving ethnic identity versus internationalization (Sugimura, 2015). The dilemma is not only an issue for the Bangladeshi indigenous people, but also an issue worldwide. In Germany, the new Turkish generation prefers to go to German speaking school rather than Turkish school as they prefer to make themselves ready for global world, and they do not want to be isolated with their own culture. By the name of globalization or internationalization, does the mainstream (even the minority people) merge the cultural diversity?

LANGUAGE POLLUTION:

Five indigenous languages out of forty-six seems a small step, but Bangladesh government has planned to extend it gradually. One of the main challenges of extending this policy is many indigenous languages do not have any alphabets; some of them had lost their alphabets and a very few of them are oral language, so there is no question of alphabets. Initiation of new alphabets could be a suggestion for these oral languages, but this raises another problem to polluting the oral language. At the same time, those people need to cope with the current reality, and this is a pragmatic demand. Again, other minority people who have their own alphabets also do not know how to use their alphabet (Mullah et al., 2007). However this initial step not only solves the previous problems (problems like drop-out, equal language facilities, etc.), but also raises some new possible difficulties that we found this research.

Conclusion

Currently in many countries, indigenous students are provided with extra care in terms of institutional education. Keeping this in mind, Bangladesh, as a developing country, is also taking the initiatives to help the indigenous children learn in a more comfortable environment using their mother language in primary level of education. In this way of deformation, Bangladeshi government is also getting support from international donor agencies. This policy results in a nice step to start equal educational opportunity for the indigenous people; five indigenous groups has got their pre-primary and primary education books and notebooks this year in their own mother languages and we also know that Bangladesh government has arranged free primary education for all since 1992.

First and foremost, introducing multicultural education in national curriculum might be a possible solution in this regard. The national curriculum of Bangladesh is highly dominated by Bengali culture; the stories, culture, history, name of characters all are just about Bengalese. Government may initiate a multicultural curriculum where ethnic histories, cultures, stories can also be included. Multicultural education may help the mainstream to be more open to overcome the mono-cultural attitude, and can ensure equal rights of education among the indigenous population to keep their heritage intact and being a global citizen at the same time. Besides, sufficient number of trained teachers can facilitate the learning process to make the initiative successful. The initiative also requires good coordination between National Curriculum and Textbooks Board (NCTB) and the Directorate of Primary Education to implement the plan more effectively. Finally, a third language can be added in national curriculum from 46 different indigenous languages of Bangladesh. It may preserve their identity and particularity, and may not make them isolated. By initiating third language it may possible to solve the language pollution case. Oral languages may be practiced by mainstream and other indigenous students.

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