

## The Medium Question in Nepalese Higher Education

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"Language poses multiple problems for education because it is both curriculum content and learning environment, both the object of knowledge and a medium through which other knowledge is acquired" (Cazden 1973).

### Introduction

This study surveys the problems of the language medium in the education system of Nepal. The discussion presented here is a shorter version of a sociolinguistic study of the Nepali language as the medium of higher education in Nepal. This study is based on a survey I carried out with the assistance of two researchers in 1979. The survey covered three multipurpose campuses located in the Far Western, the Middle, and the Eastern Development regions, and in Tribhuvan University's Institutes of Agriculture, Forestry, Engineering, Medicine, Law, and Education.

The purpose of this survey was to provide a clear picture of the language medium currently used in classes and examinations in order to help planners establish Nepali as the exclusive medium in higher education in Nepal by 1983 (2040).

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The basic conclusions of this study are that English currently remains the medium of instruction within tertiary education in Nepal; but a vast number of students do not have adequate English language skills, which places them at a disadvantage. The best solution to this problem would be to allow those students to use Nepali who opt for it.

### Methodology

This survey was not based on a statistical research methodology. A decision was made not to employ formal questionnaires so as to avoid gathering "forced" reactions and feelings from students and teachers. Instead, the team undertook long sessions of informal talks with students and teachers, both in groups and individually, to note their attitudes and reactions to problems relating to the language medium question. A tape recorder was used to record actual language use in lectures and class discussions. Question papers and answer scripts were examined in order to find out which of the two languages (Nepali/English) was in most use.

### Education in Nepal

The fundamental idea of the National Education System Plan is to tailor education for development. For this reason, a proactive and problem-oriented education plan has been prepared. In our view, however, this plan remains to be fully adapted to the country and its needs. Our hope is that education in Nepal does not become an abstract and idealized concept which is removed from the real situation and problems of the country.

The objectives of the NESP have been outlined by Mohsin (1975):

"The National Education System Plan undertakes to facilitate socio-economic mobility through the restructuring of the educational system into self-fulfilling units and by interjecting into their curricula a substantial applied and practical bias. Keeping this in view, significant emphasis has been focussed on the decentralisation of educational facilities to the country-side and on ensuring wider access to potentially talented students from disadvantaged strata and under-developed region."

In view of this statement, we should ask ourselves how far we have come in achieving our educational aims, or to what extent education for development in Nepal is actually carrying out its assigned tasks.

#### Higher Education in Nepal

It is difficult to define the goals of higher education, since higher education throughout the world is in a state of transition and change. However, there should be some basis for policy in higher education relating to questions, such as who should benefit from higher education and what should be the aim and content. According to the NESP (National Education System Plan) page 12, the main goal of higher education is to produce trained manpower.

#### Curriculum

Any educational curriculum should be purposefully designed to meet the needs of the specific society involved. But, before committees decide upon the design of our curriculum, we urgently require information relating to our country's problems, social conditions, national

demands and students' needs. A curriculum for Nepal should be based and rooted in the social context of our country. A foreign-derived curriculum may not function well for the needs of Nepal.

### Quality in Education

Lately there have been many reports about the deteriorating quality of education in Nepal. The concept of quality in education for any country needs a sociological frame of reference. In determining our educational standard, we must first decide our priorities and these cannot be based on the criteria of developed nations.

Our needs are indeed quite different from that of most other developing countries. Ours is a country whose population was almost totally illiterate only 30 years ago. We are starting from scratch. It is unfair and misleading to compare Nepal with, for example, India, our closest neighbour, which has had a long and complex history of formal education. It would be very unrealistic to expect high quality in our educational system at this early stage. The mechanical application of foreign-designed theories and concepts will give rise to a welter of misconceptions and confusion in our schools.

We often tend to judge our educational quality by the products, i.e., by student performance. However, quality in education should be measured not only by products but should be appraised in terms of production processes as well as plans, policies and their implementation. We should count more on how our educational products can usefully contribute to our society than on

their scholarly attainments. Scholarship is an asset to which we may all aspire, but it is obvious that most of our students are not going to become teachers and scholars. We should not lose sight of the fact that the majority of our students come from diverse backgrounds and with varying needs.

### Medium of Instruction

NESP outlines its policy on the medium of instruction as follows: "The medium of instruction in the primary and secondary schools will be Nepali. Other arrangements can be made only with the approval of His Majesty's Government. However, while teaching language other than Nepali, the medium of instruction may be in the language concerned. The medium of instruction in higher educational institutions will remain as it is now, pending alternative arrangements by HMG. The teaching medium and text books will be in Nepali, even in those areas where Nepali has yet to gain a wider currency and where students can understand Nepali only with difficulty. Teachers may, however, use regional languages for explanation purposes" (NESP, p.29).

But the medium question is not as simple as the NESP policy would suggest. The choice of a language medium cannot be appropriate if it is done without consideration of the actual language situation and sociolinguistic context of the country.

The medium of education is not only the language used in lectures and examinations- it is also the language of text books. And it is the language of everyday, informal

communication between teachers and students. Language can bring about a meaningful rapport between teachers and students, and the lack of linguistic competence can disturb this rapport and gradually dislodge one's faith in education.

#### Facts about Higher Education in Nepal

Since the implementation of the NESP (1972/2029), the Institutes of Agriculture, Forestry, Engineering, Medicine, Law, Education, Sanskrit, Science, Business Administration & Commerce, and Humanities and Social Sciences offer different levels of higher education in 79 campuses. This number is not fixed and it may expand. New extension campuses of different institutes are being opened, based on needs and resources, in 13 different zones (excluding only the Mahakali zone).

Degree-level education is offered at the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, General Sciences, Business Administration and Commerce, Sanskrit, and Education. The Institutes of Law, Agriculture, Medicine, and Engineering offer courses up to diploma level only, and the Institute of Forestry offers only certificate level course. Institutes such as Agriculture, Law, Engineering, Medicine, and Sanskrit have campuses which do not offer courses run by other Institutes. But so-called 'multi-purpose' campuses have been set up, which run classes offering different courses for different Institutes.

One strong contribution of the NESP has been to establish such multipurpose campuses in remote areas<sup>1</sup> of different development regions. Each multipurpose campus is set up with a view to catering the needs of neighbouring districts. This has removed a great handicap for those students from remote areas of Nepal who cannot go to Kathmandu or India. It has also allowed students to receive higher education oriented to their interests and aptitudes.

Though they use uniform curricula and textbooks and have similar administrative structures, these campuses are unequal as regards both their intellectual and material resources -- e.g. qualified teachers, library and laboratory facilities, equipment, buildings, etc. Most of the campuses are poorly prepared. The single criterion for admission to higher education -- namely the S.L.C. degree -- does not mean that students of outlying campuses will be at the same level as those at the Kathmandu valley campuses. Such an attempt would be a mistake. Access to higher education opened up in outlying areas only a few years ago while the Kathmandu valley students have had a longer history of exposure to modern knowledge, various means of communication, and developmental issues. They have clearly enjoyed greater opportunities than of others in Nepal. Most of the outlying campuses came into existence only after 1972. It will involve considerable time, patience and sympathetic guidance before an average student from campuses outside the Kathmandu valley is on an equal footing with the average student from the Kathmandu campuses. For example, we should evaluate the science students at the Nepalgunj

campus with understanding and human insight rather than mechanically applying the academic scale which we might use to judge the science students at Amrit or Tri-Chandra Science campuses<sup>2</sup>.

Many of our outlying campuses have been born out of the need of the people. Intractable socio-economic problems are coupled with our difficult geographical terrain. These problems, though similar everywhere, vary in magnitude from campus to campus. Our educational plans and policies should be down-earth, related to the concrete situations, and with only the necessary minimum of theoretical focus. Even theoreticians would not like to see the country divided into haves and have-nots. Our plans and policies should be democratic and egalitarian in an effort to lift the socially and academically weaker to the level of the stronger, and to encourage equal confidence in all.

#### Language Use at Campuses Visited

This section summarizes the situations of actual language use at the campuses visited. By language use we mean the medium used for class lectures and discussions, and written questions and answers during examinations



Table 1. Information on Multipurpose & Extension Campuses visited during field study.

S. No.	Name of Institution	Courses offered	Total No. of students (1)* Home Dist.	Language use for class lecture	Examinations For
1.	Mahendra Multi-purpose Campus, Nepalgunj	Cert.-Hum., Com., Law, Science, Dip. Hum.	1	Nep. & Eng.	Nep.-most Eng.-Rare Eng.-Science
2.	Thakur Ram Campus, Birgunj	Cert.-Hum, Edu., Com., Science dip.-Hum, edu., & Com.	386	Nep. & Eng.	Nep.-most Eng.-Few Eng. (Science)
3.	Mahendra Morang Adarsha Multi-purpose Campus, Biratnagar	Cert.-Hum., Com., Science, Dip.-Hum., Science, Com., Dig.- Com., Cert.- General	1324	Nep. & Eng.	Nep.-Most Eng.-Few Eng.- (Science)
4.	Hathishar Science Campus, Dharan	Science, Food & Technology.	87	Nep. & Eng.	English

Campus Registers of Shrawan 2035 Admission.

Table 2. Information on Central Campuses of the Institutes of Forestry, Agriculture, Engineering, Education, Medicine and Law.

S.No.	Name of Institution	Came under T.U. as Institutes	Courses offered	Language use	
				for class lectures	for Examination
1.	Institute of forestry Hetauda	1972	Senior & Junior Cert.	Nep. & Eng.	Nep. & Eng.
2.	Institute of Agriculture, Rampur	1972	Cert., Dip. & Extension programme, Applied Research	Nep. & Eng.	Nep. & Eng.
3.	Institute of Engineering, Pulchowk, Lalitpur.	1972	Cert. & Dip. in Civil Engineering, Trade Course, Refresher and Upgrading Course, Civil Aviation, Telecommunication.	Nep. & Eng.	Eng. Most. Nep. Few
4.	Institute of Medicine, Maharajganj, Kath.	1972	Cert. General Medicine & Ayurveda Dip. General Medicine.	Nep. & Eng.	Eng. (G. Medicine) Nep. (Ayurveda)
5.	Institute of Law, Bhrikuti Mandap, Kath.	1972	Cert. & Dip.	Nep. & Dip.	Nep. Most Eng. Few
6.	Institute of Education, Sanu Thimi.	1973	Cert. Dip. & Dig. Refresher course, Vocational and Upgrading Programme.	Nep. & Eng.	Nep. & Eng.

The tables given above show that: 1. English is never used exclusively as the medium for class lectures anywhere at any levels of courses offered.

2. English is never used exclusively during examinations. Students have option to use Nepali during examinations in the subjects of Law, Commerce, Social Sciences, Education, and even in Forestry, Agriculture and some branches of Engineering.

3. English is used during examinations by students in Science, Medicine (excepting Ayurvedic) and some branches of Engineering.

4. Nepali is mostly used for class lectures in class lectures of subjects like Social Sciences, Education, Law Commerce.

5. Nepali is alternately used for class lectures in class lecture of Science, Medicine, Engineering, Forestry and Agriculture.

6. Nepali is mostly used by students during examinations in all subjects at all levels where an option is allowed.

The following discussion of the multipurpose campus at Nepalgunj illustrates the current situation of language use in outlying campuses.

Mahendra Multipurpose Campus of Nepalgunj is an important Campus in the Far-western-development region. Classes are held for 386 students from 47 districts up

to Diploma level in Humanities and Social Sciences, and up to Certificate level in Science, Commerce and Law. There are separate extension Campuses of the Institutes of Medicine and Education.

This multipurpose Campus of Nepalganj has offered opportunities to students coming from 5 zones, which represent 24 districts, to embark on higher studies in different courses suited to their aptitude and modest means. Such opportunities were non-existent before the introduction of the NESP. Previously, only a few wealthy parents sent their children to universities in India.

Nepalganj is situated in an area dominated by Awadhi speakers (Subba 1977). With the construction of the Surkhet road and Mahendra Rajmarga (connected to the Surkhet road a few kilometres north of the city), Nepalganj has experienced increased social contact with speakers of other languages, and the dominance of Awadhi and Hindi is now eroding. The use of English is limited to text-books and question and answer scripts in science courses. Even science lectures are given in Nepali with a few English sentences added here and there. All courses in Humanities and Social Science, Commerce, Law, Medicine and Education are conducted in Nepali. If this were not done teaching would become meaningless. The English language teacher we interviewed (we were able to meet only one of the two English teachers on the staff) admits that he teaches the English language through the medium of the Nepali language. All answer scripts in Humanities (except English), Commerce, Law, Medicine, and Education are written in Nepali. Questions are set

in English, but in many subjects a Nepali translation of the questions is included. New and enthusiastic teachers say they prefer to use English in class. But older and experienced teachers have other ideas. They claim that the effective delivery of "educational goods" can be done only in Nepali.

Students complain that their text books in English are "too difficult" for them. Even with the help of a dictionary, the texts pose a great handicap to the students' efficient learning. Hindi text books are only in limited use. Nepalganj once had a reputation for being a Hindi-speaking city, yet some 75% of the Nepalganj students come from hill districts where Hindi is as foreign language as English.

In Nepalganj, students are demanding text books in Nepali, though they are in no position to judge the standard of the available Nepali texts. Not a single student we interviewed from the Nepalganj Campus wants an English medium in the hope of getting a scholarship to study abroad. Their needs are more basic.

The policy of Tribhuvan University (T.U.) is to encourage science by offering science by offering science scholarships to top students. The number of students admitted as freshmen is high, but the dropouts increase after the first two semesters. Teachers and students both admit that this is principally due to the English language handicap. Most feel that if the compulsory use of English in examinations were abolished and text books were available in Nepali, science learning would get a fresh impetus.

### Medium Problem

It is probably correct to say that language problems have become more acute for students and teachers today than ever before in our educational history. Meetings with students, teachers and the survey of campuses have suggested a uniform pattern underlying these problems.

English is the recognized medium but Nepali is fast becoming the inevitable medium of instruction. This is the current situation which cannot be overlooked. And any superficial solution will eventually produce confusions about our educational quality and goals.

The text books, reference works and journals are in English. Not only students but teachers as well are lacking in basic English language skills. Our grounding in the language is even weaker at lower levels. Most teachers need effective competence in English to use it as the medium of their class lectures. Many lack competence in spoken English. Most of our students do not even have basic skills. It is unrealistic to expect them to study courses in English given this standard.

Nepali is being used in classes by teachers and students alike<sup>3</sup> but the greatest handicap for Nepali use is the lack of text-books. Very few text-books have been written in Nepali. Many T.U. teachers feel comfortable using Nepali in classes. Most of the students are happy with the Nepali medium.<sup>4</sup> But all experience the urgent need for new terminology in Nepali. So, the crux of the matter is this: we have chosen Nepali as the only alternative medium, but we must now tackle questions

like the development and modernisation of Nepali to make it adequate as a medium for higher education. We already have a basis of English with all its strong points, but it cannot function efficiently because we have not prepared students and staff in the necessary English language skills.

There has been some controversy about the place of English/Nepali as the medium of higher education in Nepal. The previous sections have attempted to present a picture of the situation regarding the language medium and the language problems of higher education in the country. The discussion highlighted the need for identifying the respective domains of English and Nepali use in the Nepalese education system. Hopefully this will help to correct the widespread misconception that these languages are rivals. English and Nepali are not in competition, but are complementary in their functions. It is high time that we identified these specific functions.

#### The Place of English in Nepalese higher Education

English was not brought to Nepal as the language of the conquerors, as it was in most countries of South Asia. English developed in Nepal at a much later date as the language of diplomacy and 'modern knowledge'. Alongside the national language, it now serves as an international language to fulfill important functions in education, international discourse, diplomacy and development (e.g. as a medium for transmission of science and technology, as a link with the foreign press and radio, and in trade, commerce, tourism and aviation).

English is the principal language of science and commerce in the West and serves as a contact language for much of South Asia. Nepal quite naturally adopted it for building up its educational infrastructure. English has given us access to modern knowledge. As V. M. Tarkunde has stated, "Books in English constitute the largest repository of modern knowledge". No language is going to dislodge English from the position it has come to occupy today as the most widely recognised international language of wider communication.

Along with Nepali, English is the second compulsory language in the Nepalese schools. But this position of English as the second language in education does not mean that it is the second language used by all students in Nepal for social communication outside the classroom. Normally, there is little or no opportunity to use English beyond the classroom. This is the main reason why English has become a great handicap for Nepalese students as the medium of higher education and as a compulsory subject.

In order to provide the proper functional role for English in Nepalese education, we must first identify the language needs of students. What is the principal purpose in learning English? Is it for learning or for living? What are our specific concrete needs? The present education structure and aims indicate that English is learned more as a school subject and less for non-school "living". But it should be developed as a tool for modernisation of Nepalese economy and society. It has been commonly felt that English has been introduced into our education into our education system without a realistic determination of the implicit aims of English Instruction.



English use in Nepal is not as pervasive as it is in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Even the elite of Nepal uses English only in specific situations. It is not the link language nor the language of wider communication within the country. It is used for learning, and has therefore taken on the function of a library language. Recently, since our emphasis has been on the development and modernization of the country, it has been used essentially for modernization and technical growth.

Our English language policy can be made more realistic. We should learn English due to the fact that it gives us access to modern knowledge, international contacts and more efficient development policies. Many now recognise that knowledge of English has become an essential prerequisite for better career. Few learn it for pleasure, or for its rich traditions of imaginative literature. It is, therefore, imperative that our educational policy identifies the type and level of English language skills it should provide to our students. Perhaps we need a high level of passive skills such as reading and listening comprehension, along with reasonable active skills in written and spoken expression. This would enable our students to have easy access to knowledge provided by libraries, reference books and journals. And, should they go abroad for further studies, English should not constitute a major handicap.

There was a different situation when we introduced the English medium into our education. Two decades back we suffered from many problems connected with education. We relied on Hindi and English as our media of instruction. The emphasis on the national language was not very strong.

We imported teachers from India. Gradually we have been able to remedy most of these problems. T. U. has trained many Nepalese language teachers. This may not be sufficient for improving the quality of education but it helps build up our self-confidence.

The situation in Nepal for English language learning is not very favourable. Three 'elements' must be present for an individual to learn a language: aptitude, motivation and opportunity (Richard Noss 1977). These three components are only partially present in our society as regards the learning of any foreign language, not just English. Our emphasis on English has been misplaced. We must 'cultivate English as a source of knowledge' (Pattanayak 1974) but not as the medium of education at any level.

Nobody can deny the fact that for a country like Nepal, which began to develop formal 'modern' education only two or three decades back, we must use our native language to disseminate knowledge among the majority of the population. This will provide an opportunity to all students from remote areas and outlying campuses to strengthen their educational backgrounds.

In a developing country like Nepal, it is extremely difficult to provide modern techniques to improve the learning of English. Therefore, it is wise to aim at giving a solid basic competence in the language without relying on costly western techniques of language learning, such as language laboratories and extensive audio-visual aids.

Nepali as the language medium in Nepalese Education

Nepali as the only medium of primary and secondary level and the inevitable medium of instruction at the tertiary level of Nepalese education requires a thoughtful planning for language development. Language development briefly suggests language modernization and language planning. This refers to conscious or organized efforts to solve language problems which, according to Haugen (1966), can be norm selection (select or modify old norm or create new standard), codification (choice of script, orthography, pronunciation, grammatical forms, lexical items), elaboration of functions (i.e., innovation or adaptation of vocabulary into the realms of scientific, imaginative and emotive experience). Ferguson (1971) mentions 'language development refers to a code graphization (reduction to writing of the speech of a community) and standardization - the development of a norm which overrides regional and social dialects, and, for want of a better term, modernization- the development of inter-dialectalibility with other languages in a range of topics and forms of discourse characteristic of industrialised, secularised, structurally differentiated modern societies.' Fishman (1965) mentions that processes of language development are not single events but involve repeated elaboration and codification.

The demanding functions of Nepali today reveal that we should give our attention to the areas of standardization and modernization of the language if it is to function efficiently in the domain of education.

In order to function efficiently Nepali needs appropriate codification (reforms in its orthography,

grammar and pronunciation) and modernization by expansion of the language with new words and expressions and by the development of new styles and forms of discourse. Lexical expansion is urgent in order to treat new topics.

The fact that Nepali is the language of text books and the medium of instruction does not mean that solid Nepali language skills are transmitted to our students during their high school stage. The language and cultural backgrounds of our students and the language and content of text books and language teaching skills of teachers seem to be incompatible with existing situations.

The relevance of functional Nepali for the development of NSP (Nepali for Specific Purposes) course was discussed for the first time in the T.U. Nepali Language Seminar in a paper by Dahal (1977). Basic skills of Nepali should be built up at school stage and at higher education Nepali language curriculum should concentrate on functional Nepali to build up subjectwise language skills, registers and expressions.

### Conclusion

In light of the present situation, some compromise must be made to decide language priorities in our education policy.

The medium question is not a simple one. It actively involves students, teachers and administrators, raises questions of communication skills, books, curricula and educational quality. Nepali and English are both indispensable to Nepalese higher education.

The experiences of small, developed nations like Israel, Denmark, Holland, W. Germany and Japan and also small developing nations like Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Malayasia, and the Philippines, show us that national and international languages need unemotional and unpolitical treatment. However, situations vary from country to country. Our situation demands a rational and functional approach to language use in our education. We must provide intensive NSP and ESP courses to our students in order to give them language proficiency and confidence.

Nepali, as the language of education and the ~~vehicle~~ of communication, is confronted with problems and challenges. As the medium of instruction and text books, it requires extensive vocabulary expansion and structural modification for expression of new thoughts. We hope that the Curriculum Development Centre, T.U., realizes its responsibility in this direction. It might in fact be the only recognized agency in T. U. which could make sound language planning regarding the development of Nepali to be the alternate language in our higher education.

Notes

1. "Remote areas" here suggest places which are distant from the Tribhuvan University which is located in Kathmandu, and hence should not be confused with the HMG's classification of remote areas.
2. Tri-Chandra College was opened in 1918, while Amrit Science College, previously known as the Public Science College, was in 2013 (1956).
3. During our talks majority of teachers and students complained about the design of courses and selection of text books. They claimed text books and courses were unrelated to their existing situations, backgrounds.
4. Nepali is used for some lectures in geography, history, culture, political science, and education in degree courses at the Kirtipur Multiple Campus. Students can use Nepali during degree examinations in these areas if they so desire.

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