

Program Brief: Implementing a Heritage Language Bilingual Education Program for the Primary Schools of Chittagong Hill Tracts, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

Language planning is a crucial task which involves multidimensional issues that ranges from policy approval at the governmental level to classroom instruction. The planning has to consider the existing socio-cultural, eco-political and cognitive factors, as well as available resources. Considering the facts mentioned above which will be discussed in detail later, I am planning an education program for the primary schools of Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh in light of the reality of existing phenomena. The topic of my interest is language maintenance and development with special emphasis on minority language. In line with these principles, I found that heritage language bilingual education program is appropriate for my objectives. So I will be exploring and presenting the different aspects of such a heritage language bilingual education program in this paper.

2. Context

The context that I will consider for my program and where I aim to implement the heritage language bilingual education program is Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of

Bangladesh, which is situated in the South-eastern part of the country.



Map of Bangladesh within the world map.

This region comprises three districts, which are the abode of thirteen ethnic minority peoples, who speak in ten distinct languages. The people of CHT are commonly known as Jummas or CHT People. They have their own distinct culture, heritage and values which are different from the mainstream majority Bengali population. That is why they have together gone through a two-decade long political movement for self determination to protect their distinctiveness of language, culture and identity, which ended in December 1997 through signing an agreement (Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 1997) between the government and the local political party. One of the provisions of the agreement is implementing educational instruction in ‘mother tongue’ in the primary schools of CHT (Clause 33b). Currently government has decided in the Primary Education Development Program-II (2003) that a separate education planning will be initiated for the CHT and other indigenous peoples. That is why I am ardently interested to devise a ‘heritage language bilingual education program for CHT peoples.

3. Rationale and significance

There is no doubt that ‘mother tongue’ is necessary and valuable for children to start their formal education, but mother tongue alone is not sufficient for formal education for a minority group. The objectives of formal education are multidimensional. It should include language, culture and heritage of the community for the cognitive, socio-cultural and political reasons. At the same time, any formal education should also aim at the future economic achievement of the children. For this reason, the national language must be placed in the education program.

In relation to this point, the Nobel laureate poet , Robindranath Tagore has also advocated that children should build the foundation of mother tongue before learning any other languages (widely used in Bangladesh, but I can not give the reference here). The same voice is also heard from The UNESCO 1953 document, which recommends, “In particular, pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue, because they understand it best and because beginning their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between home and school as small as possible” (cited in Romaine, 1995, p. 20) The importance of teaching children in their mother tongue is also upheld in other influential pieces of legislations, such as that by the Directive of the Council of the European Community (Brussels/77486/EEC) as it instructs member states of the European Community to ‘take appropriate measures to promote the teaching of the mother tongue and the culture of the country of origin of the children of migrant workers, and also as part of the compulsory free education to teach one or more official languages of the host state” (cited in Romaine, 1995, p. 20).

The knowledge of ‘mother tongue’ also helps children in learning other language. Miller (1982) has given a vivid explanation of the linguistic aspect of how ‘mother tongue’ helps the children in education. He explained that because of the knowledge of the structure of mother tongue, children become more aware of structure of other languages, and thus scaffolds the learning of other languages faster.

Thus the competence of first language and second language makes the children bilinguals and being bilingual has many positive implications- linguistically, socially, economically and politically. Peal and Lambert (1962) found that bilingual children are intellectually superior to monolinguals in terms of mental ability such as mental flexibility, concept formation, and diversified set of mental abilities. They have, of course, stated that they were not sure yet whether their superiority in intelligence is because of their bilingualism or they are bilingual because of their intelligence.

These clearly indicate that children should have education instruction through their mother tongue in early stages so that they can benefit from it. Unfortunately, the minority children are widely being deprived of this opportunity, which may affect them psychologically and socio-politically. So, there must be some response to this issue. Houlton and Willey (1982) pointed out that ‘positive responses to diversity’ and ‘encouraging bilingualism’ play great roles in racial harmony (p17), because it supports the ‘self esteem and positive self image’ of the minority children. This approach of education will, hence, help to achieve greater harmonies in the CHT region, which underwent twenty six years of ethnic and political conflicts for autonomy (a political system which will give them the power to preserve their own language, culture, heritage and identity) of the CHT people.

At the same time, as mentioned above, any education program must also emphasize the future economic achievement and further education. Baker (2006) in this regard argued that any education planning “needs to lead to economic and employment, social and cultural opportunities” (p.245). I would, therefore, advocate that the whole instruction in the primary schools should include the local languages, as well as the national language (Bangla). English should be taught as a subject, because the foundation of national language and international language should be seeded into the primary education for the following reasons:

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- (i) After primary education, children are going to secondary schools, where they will be exposed to the mainstream national curriculum, which comprises Bangla and English. So, they must be prepared for that in this stage.
- (ii) During the course of study, some of the students may be shifted to other districts than CHT because of the transfer of postings of the parents (those who are employed).
- (iii) Though the primary education in mother tongue is necessary for socio-cultural and psycho-political reasons, the broader future socio-economic implications are also similarly important, and these will require the use of Bangla and English.
- (iv) Only a bilingual education program may serve both of the objectives stated above.

Therefore, I contend that **a heritage language bilingual education program** for CHT primary schools would be the most suitable one, which addresses all the facts discussed above.

4. Aspects of Heritage Language Bilingual Education

To implement any education system, we should be fully aware of the broad spectrum of the program. Keeping this purpose in mind, I am presenting the different aspects of a heritage bilingual education program below:

4.1 Definition:

Baker (2006) defines heritage language bilingual education as a program where “language minority children use their native, ethnic, home or heritage language in school as a medium of instruction with the goal of full bilingualism” (p.238). This type of program is also called as **maintenance bilingual education** or **developmental maintenance bilingual education**. Examples of heritage language bilingual education

are found in the Navajo, Hawaiian and Spanish in USA; Wales in UK; Community and heritage language in Australia. Examples are also found in China, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Peru, Spain, Norway and elsewhere.

4.2 Objectives:

In addition to the linguistic, cognitive and political benefits of bilingualism discussed in the rationale, there are more objectives of heritage language bilingual education pointed out by Baker (2006) which are as follows,

- To protect, cultivate, develop and maintain the minority language.
- ‘Improving ethnic relationship’,
- Promoting the status of minority people,
- Cognitive and literacy development of the minority children,
- Achieving biliteracy and biculturalism.
- Producing proficient speakers, readers and writers in both of the languages.

In the case of CHT, the objectives of a heritage language bilingual education are related to academic, cognitive, socio-cultural and political achievement.

4.3 Curriculum instruction, content and time allocation:

In a heritage language bilingual education, the minority students’ home language is used almost half of the curriculum time. Baker (2006) argues that in a heritage language education, in most cases, half of the curriculum instruction is given in the heritage language or minority language. The proportion of majority language may range from 10% to 50%. In the case of my project, it may range 30% to 40%, because there should be an appropriate space for English too.

Curriculum content should be appropriate for the age of the students. Piaget’s (cited in Campbell, 1973), stages of cognitive development should be counted in this regard. It

should also comply with the objectives and principles of the program. The example of Rock Point Community School in Navajo, USA which is a famous and successful heritage language bilingual school focuses the content- reading, language arts, math, science, social studies and health, which are taught both in Navajo and English with differing blocks of time (Baker 2006). For CHT, I suggest that reading, language arts, social studies and health be taught in minority languages; math and science in Bengali, and English as a subject (not as medium of instruction). Both local and national cultures should be addressed in content. The allocation of time and content I propose for CHT is as follows,

Elementary level: 100% heritage language.

Grade 1: Heritage language- 80%, Majority language- 10%, English- 10%

Grade 2: Heritage language - 70%, Majority language - 15%, English - 15%

Grade 3: Heritage language - 60%, Majority language - 25%, English - 15%

Grade 4: Heritage language - 55%, Majority language - 30%, English - 15%

Grade 5: Heritage language - 50%, Majority language - 35%, English - 15%

4.4 Justification for greater time and content to minority language:

Baker (2006) contends that minority language is easily lost and majority language is easily maintained. Children are usually exposed to the majority language through television, advertisements, shops, signs and videos in the community surroundings. The similar situation is also found in CHT. Moreover, children usually transfer ideas, concepts, knowledge and skills in majority language. So, initially children must be more exposed to minority language than majority language. As the students move to upper grades, they are gradually exposed to majority language in approximately equal time to achieve full bilingualism. In CHT children are allowed to have education in their 'mother tongue' only in the primary schools. From secondary school onwards they have to be converged to the mainstream curriculum, where the medium of instruction is Bengali with one or two subjects in English. In this point too the allocation of greater time and content allocation to 'mother tongue' in primary schools is justified.

4.5 School types:

This kind of program is mostly implemented in elementary schools, but it can be implemented in secondary education too, e.g. the cases of Wales in UK as well as Hawaiian and Navajo in USA where students have curriculum in both home language and majority language up to grade 12.

4.6 Student types:

The students of a heritage language education are mainly from minority language speaker homes. But it may include other students as well. This option might also be open to the majority students in my case.

5. Process of Implementation

Implementation of a large scale program such as the one I am proposing here involves multi-layer roles- roles of government, community and individuals.

5.1 Policy process and the role of government:

In case of policy approval, only government has the sole authority and responsibility. Government also has a great deal to do in terms of resource allocation. Much of the policy issue is founded in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord, 1997 by putting a clause (Clause 33b) in it to introduce 'mother tongue' in primary education in CHT, which is also addressed in the Primary Education Development Program II (PEDP-II) formulated by the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education of Bangladesh in October, 2003, where it was proposed that "provision of quality education to tribal communities, including a Tribal Development Plan" (p. 5) will be formulated. The proposed program of heritage language bilingual education program can be implemented within the 'Tribal

Development Plan' if it is clearly formulated and initiated. The CHT Regional Council and the Three Hill District Councils can play vital roles in this regard if empowered by the government.

5.2 Community Role:

In the case of CHT, the local NGOs, community organizations and local government bodies, e.g. Union Parishad and village committees can be involved in the process of implementation of a heritage language bilingual education program. In the domain of community use of language, commercial considerations such as media and entertainment play a vital role. The size of the community is also an important factor in the community role of language maintenance and development. However, Annamalai (2001) suggested that at least the use of sub-titles in regional television can play a role of the promotion of minority language. I advocate that Bangladesh government should allocate some certain times (e.g. one hour a day) to regionally or nationally broadcast radio or television programs in minority languages. Chittagong Radio Station and Rangamati Sub-station can play a vital community role in the maintenance and development of minority language by broadcasting programs related to the language program. The CHT communities can also publish child-centered magazines, books and cartoons as a support to bilingual education and language maintenance.

5.3 Individual Role:

Annamalai (2001) argued, "Language rights are the rights of individuals and it is their role to demand them, to exercise them and to create awareness about these rights among other individuals so that they are not carried away by extraneous forces like the market" (p.74). Individuals of CHT can play roles by doing research, by writing advocacy articles, by commencing creative writings etc. Some individuals can also form policy advocacy forums.

5.4 Beginning and progression of implementation:

In the process of implementation, a heritage language bilingual education should primarily be introduced to grade one students. Gradually and consistently, it can be implemented to grade two in the next year as the students get promoted to grade two. In the same way it can be implemented to the next grades in the following years as the same students move to the next grades. With this consistency, students will be provided and supported with a practical background repertoire and trajectory of knowledge, to carry on their accumulative lessons. Without considering this fact, if the program is suddenly introduced to all grades students will be thrown into an abrupt and sudden challenge and there is a potential threat of failure of this program.

Of course I am aware that there might be some argumentative questions such as “should the grade two+ students of the implementing year be deprived of it forever?” This will be a crucial question. In this regard, students of grade two+ may be introduced only with language arts lessons of the heritage language, not other subjects. They will, in this case, have at least some knowledge and experience of the heritage language education. This short of minimalist adjustment should be taken for granted in any transitional period of implementing a new program.

In the following few years, there should be a close monitoring, program evaluation and adjustments for the newly introduced education system. Other related issues such as teacher training, materials development should also be accomplished beforehand and during the implementation.

6. Challenges and Adaptations

Bilingual education or a heritage language bilingual education program will be a first ever education program in Bangladesh in general and in CHT in particular. So,

substantial potential challenges can be easily predicted in it. Much of the success of the program depends in dealing with the potential challenges. However, I can foresee the following challenges and offer the subsequent adaptations as follows,

6.1 Challenges:

- Teachers are not familiar with heritage language bilingual education and its principles, which is a massive weakness.
- There is no existing training institute for bilingual education in Bangladesh to train teachers, which is a significant drawback for achieving a satisfactory level of success.
- As mentioned in PEDP-II (2003) and Support to Basic Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Component Formulation Mission of UNDP (2006), the program is proposed as a project-based initiative for five years. The program will probably be not sustainable for the long term socio-political achievement.
- There is neither any constitutional provision for maintaining multilingualism, nor is there any Education Act for bilingual education or minority language education in Bangladesh. This implies that the future of a heritage language bilingual education or minority language education will completely depend on the good will of the ever changing political parties in power (the government).

6.2 Adaptation

Despite having some challenges in implementing a heritage language bilingual education and achieving success, I believe that the effective implementation of the following measures will help to eliminate the challenges. Consequently success and long-term sustenance of the program will be attained:

- As UNDP has a big budget for CHT education and PEDP-II has also proposed separate education plan for CHT, I will emphasize that teacher-training should be prioritized in the initial phase.
- A component of heritage language bilingual education should be incorporated in the existing Primary Teacher Training Institute (PTI) located in Rangamati Hill District and experts should be hired to run the training program.
- Govt. should be generous to recognize the multiculturalism and multilingualism of the country and should incorporate it in the constitution to open a long-term and sustainable education for the ethnic minority people similar to the Indian Constitution, which guarantees the rights and protection of the minority peoples' languages and cultures. Annamalai (2001) delineates from the Indian Constitution that "Article 29(a) provides the right for any section of the citizens to conserve its language, script or culture" (p.127). "Article 30 provides the rights for the linguistic minorities...to establish and administer educational institutions" (p.127), which is further strengthened through VIIIth amendment as Article 350A which says, "provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups" (p.128)
- Necessary education act such as Native American Languages Act (1992) of USA, Indian Education Act (1972), No Child is Left Behind (2001) of USA, and World Declaration of Education for All (1990) of UN should be passed for the CHT and other minority people of Bangladesh.

7. Conclusion

Heritage language has strong values in the socio-cultural arena, local business and politics in CHT and the national language (Bengali) and English are necessary for economic achievement and further study. So, a heritage language bilingual education would be the best suitable education model for the CHT minority people. Though the

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PEDP-II and the Support to Basic Education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts: Component Formulation Mission (2006) of UNDP are opening a door for such a program, it is viewed as a short-term policy. But any permanent phenomena such as ethnic diversity, linguistic and cultural pluralism of a country should be permanently addressed with a constitutional guarantee, which is even necessary for a modern, stable, peaceful, harmonious and prosperous nation. I would, therefore, advocate in the same vein as Pozzi-Escot (1981) for a “flexible and diversified education that would take into account the social and regional variety of the nation, without giving privilege to any particular member, but with a broad spirit of justice” (Cited in Hornberger, 1988, p. 23) that reflects the spirit of Peru’s Education Reform (1972).

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