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Book Review

Book Review: The Politics of English Language Education and Social Inequality

The Politics of English Language Education and Social Inequality: Global Pressures, National Priorities and Schooling in India

Maya Kalyanpur, Padmini Bhuyan Boruah, Sarina Chugani Molina, & Sunaina Shenoy, 2023

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Introduction

Kalyanpur et al. (2023) explore the intricate power dynamics of English surrounding language education in India. Drawing from their experiences with linguistic, transnationalism, and English-as-medium-of-education policies, the authors analyze and elucidate the intricate challenges surrounding language-in-education policies in India. They argue that global economic pressures and national development objectives drive Indian educational policies that hinder proficiency in indigenous languages and English.

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The book raises questions concerning the uncritical adoption of 'disability' labels, particularly in English medium schools catering to first-generation learners and predominantly non-English-speaking students from low-income backgrounds. The authors skillfully intertwine personal experiences with the data and theory to illuminate the repercussions of language policy, language pedagogy, and the language experiences of children. These dimensions span from questions of identity to national policy and even extend to linguistic dominance. Presented in eight chapters, the authors meticulously examine the multifaceted aspects of language education, such as linguistic disparities, the impact of dyslexia, and the overarching influence of colonial legacies through postcolonial perspectives.

The book begins with a prologue, where the authors bring their anecdotes from where the themes emerged, resonating with the broader dilemmas and challenges that manifest on a global scale. Each spoke different languages as their mother tongues and languages of communication, such as Kannada, Assamese, Hindi, Sindhi, etc, in addition to English. Each grew up when globalisation and neoliberal economic policies grappled, and the English language raised hope in their parents, educated at the intersection of vestiges of British India and her formative years of independence. All regret that their school curriculum excluded their home languages, and they fear the loss of their mother tongues. They develop their arguments on the foundation of these anecdotes.

Language Policies

Chapter I examines postcolonial perspectives on language education in the postcolonial Indian contexts. The Chapter concentrates on using English as an instructional language and integrating local languages in classrooms. The authors emphasize the importance of recognizing power dynamics in language education and their impact on students and educators. The Chapter explores the implications of postcolonial language education on students, the educational system, and society. The Chapter contributes to our understanding of how the postcolonial context shapes language education, particularly in the context where English threatens the existence of indigenous languages.

Colonizers controlled political, economic, and social systems in the colonial framework in colonized regions. In contrast, the postcolonial approach seeks to redress

the rights and autonomy of colonized people. Language, as the authors argue, restricts access to education and other services, oppresses minority language speakers, controls public discourse, denies rights, undermines cultural identity, and perpetuates power structures. The authors contend that colonizers imposed English on colonized communities to maintain political and economic control, resulting in linguistic imperialism and cultural domination. In the Indian context, postcolonial language education creates language-based inequalities and perpetuates colonial legacies in education. Power dynamics inherent in language education and their consequences for students, educators, and society have a lasting influence on language in shaping socio-political structures.

Chapter II concentrates on three issues—language, linguicide and equity. The authors argued that these issues emerge from different personal stories, a common ground of thread, and a sense of displacement and highlighted the importance of indigenous languages in education. They stood for the de/colonizing process and argued for intensive research to include global agendas prioritizing local languages, the languages of the learners and their experiences. India has accepted English with high respect, and today, India has more English speakers than any other country in the inner circle except the USA. Four authors, drawing from their diverse backgrounds, exemplify how bilingual students lose their chances of language acquisition in low-income learning environments with poor-quality of teachers and disadvantaged school environments.

Language Politics

Chapter III examines the intricacies of India's language education policies, primarily focusing on the Three-Language Formula (TLF). The TLF mandates teaching three languages in schools: the student's native language, Hindi, and English. The Chapter highlights how this policy has marginalized regional languages while bolstering the prominence of English. Examining socio-political factors, the authors argue that the TLF has created economic opportunities for mainstream society but further marginalized the speakers of minority language communities.

In this context, the Chapter argues that English gained dominance due to the TLF's influence. The neutral social status of English offered socioeconomic mobility. However, access to English education remains restricted to a privileged few,

perpetuating inequality and linguistic hegemony. The authors advocate for a nuanced approach that balances English and regional languages, preserving cultural identities and addressing pedagogical, resource allocation, and access issues. This Chapter contributes to our understanding of language dynamics in India, offering valuable insights for policymakers, educators, and researchers in the field of language education.

Chapter IV examines the problematic effects of colonial legacies in India's multilingual context, exploring the relationship between language policy, English language instruction, and socioeconomic inequality. In the Indian context, educated individuals express their cultural and linguistic identities through multiple languages. In the struggle to acquire proficiency in English, students from linguistic minority communities lose access to their mother languages because of the linguistic hierarchy imposed by colonial legacies. The recent COVID-19 pandemic intensified the inaccessibility of English education because these students could not cope with the technological advancement used in emergency education. Government programs like the Three Languages Formula (TLF) fall short in their attempts to balance between English language and native language instructions. The Annual State of Education Report (ASE) indicates our poor understanding of the situation of underprivileged pupils, making it more difficult for efficient language acquisition for higher education.

Linguistic disparity sustains the uneven dominance of languages in India. The Right to Education (RTE) Act and TLF failed to recognize the knowledge and cultural capital of language instructors. Focusing on national integration, the Chapter examines historical shifts in English language instruction since Indian Independence. However, pedagogical strategies did not prioritize the achievement gap between advantaged and underprivileged kids. This gap causes increased educational inequalities based on language disparity. The RTE Act of 2009 hastens the hiring and training of language teachers, yet a neo-liberal framework and centralized organizations fall short in filling positions and providing high-quality teacher preparation programs. The 2020 National Education Plan (NEP) promotes multilingualism and native languages, attempting to minimize language disparity between home and school languages. However, the NEP overemphasizes Western ideals in textbooks and ignores indigenous knowledge systems and teaching strategies. The Chapter designates alternative pedagogy and curricular language education models, respecting Indian multilingualism and challenging hegemonic conceptions of Western ideology. Excluding teachers' involvement in

curriculum development and pedagogy poses challenges. The authors argue for a dialogue-based approach that nurtures students' linguistic identities and bridges understandings across language groups. In conclusion, the Chapter calls for language teacher educators, language teachers, and teacher education curricula to engage in dialogue to promote effective teacher education.

Chapter V locates its contexts in Karnataka, classifying schools based on the amount of the fees that students pay. Kannada is the dominant language of classroom discourse in low-cost schools, but high-cost schools have students with better English skills. The study shows that high-cost schools have better resources for teaching English. Low-cost schools suffer from challenges like large classes, classroom discourse switching between languages, and lack of practice in English proficiency development. On the other hand, high-cost schools focus on constant practice in English teaching. The study also looks at how well students perform in their first language, i.e., Kannada and English tests, depending on their school and teaching methods. The authors also explored the challenges school principals faced. For example, high-cost schools believe in starting English early and helping students with learning problems, while low-cost schools find it hard to get parents' involvement. Overall, this research shows how the economy, teacher skills, and English teaching pedagogy affect the English learning process in India.

This Chapter argues that teachers' English fluency and economic backgrounds impact students' English learning. Low-income school teachers come from lower-income groups and often switch to Kannada. On the other hand, middle-cost school teachers come from higher-income families and speak native-like language skills; high-cost schools feature English-dominant teachers. The authors found a connection between students' English skills and family incomes, underscoring unequal access to English education. Classroom conditions vary, with low-cost schools facing issues like overcrowded classes, while middle and high-cost schools offer better environments with modern resources. In terms of teaching methods, high-cost schools prefer structured lessons and student-centered activities, a rare practice in low-cost schools. The Chapter concludes that economic factors, teacher skills, and classroom quality impact students' achievements. The role of English and local languages in education is debated in the Indian context. The overwhelming acceptance of English in the postcolonial era created

challenges because the teachers' low level of fluency in English affected the disadvantaged children.

Chapter VI examines the intersection of dyslexia with English language learning in low-cost English-medium private schools, known for their popularity among families seeking quality education in India. The Chapter suggests that while these schools focus on English language immersion, students might face significant challenges in mastering the language, especially reading skills. In most cases, students from low-income families have minimum exposure to English at home because their parents are not English-educated. Their role models, the teachers, are not proficient in English. Students ignore their native languages in favour of learning English.

Located in the city of Bengaluru, this Chapter took two issues: a) how dyslexia affects learners of English who speak one language or learners who speak more than one, and b) how dyslexia affects students of low-cost, medium cost and high-cost private schools in Bangalore. This Chapter is based on the findings of Shenoy's earlier research.

Dyslexia is a learning disability. The reader struggles to read coherently, especially to relate letters with words. It affects students with average or above-average cognitive abilities. It can occur in any learning environment and affects their understanding of classroom discourses. Dyslexic students have problems with attention, focus on maths problems, spelling and phonological processing.

The Chapter concludes by raising questions about assessing English language proficiency in India, highlighting the current emphasis on writing skills in tests and calling for a more comprehensive evaluation of listening, speaking, and reading abilities. It lays the foundation for a nuanced exploration of these themes, raising questions about the effectiveness of current educational practices and the need for more comprehensive support for students with learning difficulties.

Decolonizing Language Education

Chapter VII begins with a citation from Gandhi's speech at Chatham House in London on October 20, 1931. In his speech, Gandhi declared the dangers of colonial rule and the modern evaluation methods, resulting in collateral damage inflicted on the indigenous of the land. This Chapter highlights that despite efforts in English language

education to neutralize the English language, coloniality continues infiltrating language education policies and practices. The second half of the Chapter brings to life what it would mean to engage critically with challenging historical, social, and political dimensions of the teaching of English. It draws on the teaching approach over some 30 years that Sarina Chugani Molina has developed using critically reflexive practices and pedagogical approaches to expose the presence of colonial harm in English language education.

This Chapter offers alternative solutions to frustrating problems in language education policy to resist colonial hegemony through self-reflexivity. Translanguising, asset pedagogies, teaching materials with localized contexts, sufficient emphasis on the learners' lived experiences and indigenous wisdom, and culturally sustaining pedagogical practices are these alternative practices. These practices decenter the English language education and decolonize education as a whole.

Chapter VIII discusses the difficulties of implementing inclusive language education policies and the power dynamics involved. The Chapter examines language education policies in India and proposes ways to resist colonialism and promote critical teaching methods. The authors argue that language affects more than communication; it also influences identity, social and economic mobility, and resource access. They highlight that English has colonial roots, and English-educated people use their knowledge of English to maintain power. They call for the resistance of decolonizing the prevalent epistemic hegemony in the Indian educational system. The Chapter recognizes the challenges in choosing and enforcing a national or colonial language as the language of instruction and the conflicts in linguistic power structures.

The authors offer hopeful prospects for critical pedagogy and decolonial resistance despite these challenges. They advocate for critical discourse and culturally relevant teaching, including indigenous languages and multilingualism. They recommend using an indigenous variety of English, like Indian English, as a medium of instruction. These alternatives aim to build strategies for inclusive language education and subvert Eurocentric hegemony. Reflective practices, the authors argue, enable teachers and students to resist Western hegemony in giving justice to the multilingual contexts of India.

Conclusion

The book significantly contributes to the existing discourse on language education in India. The authors dissect the multifaceted issues of language disparity, language pedagogy, language policy, and the challenges posed by the colonial legacy of Indian education. The critical examination of these issues from postcolonial perspectives, linguistic inequalities, and the impact of dyslexia fills a crucial gap in the literature. Furthermore, the book deconstructs the colonial legacies prevalent in Indian language education policies and practices. The authors call for understanding linguistic power dynamics that shape post-independent Indian language education. Overall, the book enriches the discourse on language education in India.

CRedit Author Statement

Poudel, T.: Conceptualization, Introduction, Supervision

Poudel, A.: Conclusion, Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter VI: L2 English language acquisition: Dyslexia and learning inequalities in private schools), Writing - Review & Editing

Thapa, B., Gaire, B. R.: Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter I: Introducing a postcolonial perspective on language education)

Adhikary, B., Chaudhary, B. P.: Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter II: Language, linguistic and equity: Navigating the tension between heritage, national and colonial agendas)

Saud, D. S.: Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter III: Language contestations and the illusions around English in India's Three Language Formula)

Kafle, D.: Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter IV: English language teachers and teacher education: Challenging normative linguistic positionings)

Paudel, G. R., Basnet, G.: Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter V: English medium private schools: Teaching bilingual and multilingual students in the context of inequality)

Thapa, K., Kafle, G.: Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter VII: English language education and the case against neutrality)

Bohara, K. B., Chapai, K. P.: Writing - Original Draft (Review of Chapter VIII: Challenging disadvantage through language education policy and practice: New postcolonial directions)

Reference

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