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Integrating indigenous languages into textbooks for ethnic minority students in Bangladesh: Empirical research on challenges and potential solutions

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Abstract

In Bangladesh, ethnic minority students often face significant educational disadvantages, including linguistic barriers that hinder their access to quality education. Recognizing the importance of mother tongue in cognitive development and academic success, there has been growing advocacy for incorporating indigenous languages into the education system. This research paper examines the challenges and potential solutions for integrating mother tongue for indigenous languages in textbooks for ethnic minority students in Bangladesh. The paper presents empirical findings on the difficulties faced by teachers in using mother tongue as the medium of instruction, such as the lack of instructional materials in local languages, limited teacher training, and the influence of social media. Additionally, the paper discusses strategies employed by teachers to address these challenges, including translating literary works, vocabulary enrichment, and the use of differentiated instruction. Through a comprehensive analysis, this study aims to contribute to the discourse on educational equity and the preservation of linguistic diversity among ethnic minority communities in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Mother language, Bangladeshi ethnic minority students, text books, problems and solutions

Introduction

Bangladesh is a nation rich in linguistic diversity, home to numerous ethnic minority groups, each with its own unique indigenous language. Yet, the education system has long been dominated by Bangla, the national language, leaving little room for the integration of these mother tongues. This monolingual approach reflects a complex interplay of factors within Bangladesh's sociopolitical landscape. As Rahman (2010) ^[17] points out, "Language planning for indigenous minorities in Bangladesh is a complex issue mainly due to two conflicting issues: the 'sensitive and sentimental' (Baldauf *et al.*, 2008, p. 83) ^[2] attachment to the national language, Bangla, and the growing appeal of English for earning a better income." This prioritization of Bangla, spoken by a vast majority of the population (98%) (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009, p. 195; see also Sarker & Davey, 2009, p. 3) ^[4, 19], has resulted in the marginalization of approximately two million people representing 45 indigenous groups and over 30 languages (World Bank, 2008; Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, 2006b) ^[22, 3].

Despite the existence of diverse indigenous languages that contribute to Bangladesh's national heritage and culture, language policies and educational planning since 1971 have primarily focused on the development and promotion of Bangla, neglecting the country's multilingual side (Hossain & Tollefson, 2007; Mohsin, 2003) ^[8, 14]. While the National Education Policy 2009 proposed the provision of mother tongue-based instruction for indigenous minorities, the implementation of this policy faces significant unresolved issues. This research paper examines into the empirical evidence surrounding the integration of mother tongue instruction for indigenous languages in textbooks. Furthermore, it will explore potential solutions that could pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable education system in Bangladesh, one that values and supports the linguistic diversity of all its students.

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The Importance of Mother Tongue in a Child's Education

The role of a child's mother tongue in their educational development cannot be overstated. Research has consistently shown that a strong foundation in the home language is crucial for the development of literacy skills in the school language. When children are able to learn and express themselves in their mother tongue, they are better equipped to acquire knowledge and comprehend new concepts. (Sarkinada, 2018) [20].

One of the primary advantages of mother tongue-based education is that it allows children to learn more effectively. Children who are taught in a language they fully understand are able to engage more actively in classroom discussions and express their thoughts and ideas with greater ease (Alberto *et al.*, 2016) [1]. This enhanced participation leads to better retention of the material and improved overall academic performance. Additionally, the continued development of the first language can facilitate the acquisition of a second language, as the underlying proficiencies required for academic language skills often overlap across different languages. (Valentino & Reardon, 2015) [22].

Furthermore, the use of mother tongue in the classroom promotes a child's emotional and cognitive development. The home language serves as a tool for creative self-expression and emotional processing, which are crucial for a child's holistic growth. It also provides a solid foundation for the acquisition of knowledge, as it is impossible to acquire knowledge without language and knowledge and language are inextricably linked together.

Despite these clear benefits, the implementation of mother tongue-based education in many parts of the world faces significant challenges. The scarcity of instructional materials in local languages and the lack of proper training for teachers in this approach hinder the effective integration of mother tongue into the curriculum. Nevertheless, the prospects of mother tongue-based education remain promising, as it can provide children with a strong command of their native language, the ability to read for information and pleasure, and the skills to express themselves clearly and without misunderstanding (Kioko *et al.*, 2014) [10] (Alberto *et al.*, 2016) [1] (Valentino & Reardon, 2015) [22]

Challenges

Integrating mother tongue in text books for ethnic minority students in Bangladesh faces several challenges. The key obstacles include.

- 1. Lack of Instructional Materials:** One of the most critical barriers to implementing a multilingual education policy in Bangladesh is the lack of resources, exacerbated by the country's classification as one of the least developed nations (Ministry of Education, 2010) [13]. This financial constraint significantly hampers efforts to develop educational materials in indigenous languages, adequately train teachers, and establish necessary infrastructure (Rahman, 2010) [17]. For example, developing textbooks, curriculum guides, and other learning materials in multiple indigenous languages requires substantial investment, often exceeding the capabilities of the national budget (Ministry of Education, 2010; Rahman, 2010) [13, 17]. Furthermore, there is a significant deficiency in textbooks and other educational resources available in

minority languages spoken by Bangladesh's 45 indigenous ethnic groups (Selim (2017) [21]; Reyes, 2021) [18]. While the government has made efforts to publish textbooks in five indigenous languages, such as Chakma, many other ethnic groups like Marma, Tripura, Garo, and Sadri lack adequate educational materials in their mother tongues (New Age, 2021). This disparity means that most children from these minority groups do not receive education in their native languages, further hindering the effectiveness of multilingual education initiatives (Selim (2017) [21]; Reyes, 2021; New Age, 2021) [18].

The limited budget allocated to education exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult to address the educational needs of diverse linguistic communities adequately (Ministry of Education, 2010; New Age, 2021) [13]. Without sufficient investment in developing educational resources in minority languages, the goal of providing equitable education for all remains elusive in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2010; Selim (2017) [17, 21].

- 2. Limited Teacher Training:** Many teachers from local indigenous communities are not adequately trained, impacting the quality of education these students receive (Selim, 2017) [21] (Dhar *et al.*, 2022) [6]. In Khagrachhari, despite initiatives to provide textbooks, the lack of trained teachers means that these books often go unused ((Dhar *et al.*, 2022)) [6]. This problem is exacerbated by the absence of organized training programs for teachers in the past few years (New Age, 2021).
- 3. Teacher Proficiency in Mother Tongues:** There is a shortage of teachers proficient in these mother tongues and trained in effective pedagogical strategies for multilingual instruction (Premsrirat & Person, 2018; MacKenzie, 2009; Dubria & Yambao, 2018; Reyes, 2021; Lwanga-Lumu, 2020) [16, 12, 7, 18, 1]. This is evident in districts like Bandarban, where teachers can only teach in a few languages, leaving many children without adequate language support (Dhar *et al.*, 2022) [6].
- 4. Diversity of Indigenous Languages:** The diversity of indigenous languages within the country complicates the development and implementation of curricula and teaching materials (Reyes, 2021) [18]. In Bandarban, for example, while textbooks are available in three indigenous languages (Chakma, Marma, and Tripura), there are over 11 indigenous groups in the region, leaving many children without appropriate language support (Dhar *et al.*, 2022) [6]. The government has implemented pre-primary education in only five out of the 50 languages officially recognized (New Age, 2021).
- 5. Socio-Cultural Challenges:** Indigenous students often feel shy and suffer from an inferiority complex because they cannot speak Bengali, the mainstream language, as fluently as their peers from the majority population (Selim (2017) [21]. This can lead to a reluctance to participate in class and a higher likelihood of academic disengagement.
- 6. Socio-Economic Factors:** Indigenous children often face long, tedious journeys between home and school, lack dormitory facilities, and their parents' seasonal occupations, such as Jhum cultivation, further disrupt their education (Selim (2017) [21].

- 7. Socio-Political Factors:** Political instability and a lack of political will are significant impediments to multilingual education. The political landscape in Bangladesh often sidelines the needs of linguistic minorities. Indigenous communities have limited representation and advocacy within the political system, making it difficult to push for policies that cater to their linguistic rights. Additionally, the prioritization of Bangla in national discourse often marginalizes the linguistic needs of indigenous populations (Cavallaro & Rahman, 2009) ^[4]. The socio-political environment is further complicated by historical tensions and conflicts, particularly in regions like the Chittagong Hill Tracts, where ethnic and linguistic diversity is most pronounced (Rahman, 2010) ^[17].
- 8. Policy Implementation Gap:** Though a first-language-based education strategy for indigenous minorities was proposed in the National Education strategy 2009, there is still a big gap between the creation of the policy and its actual implementation. Administrative inefficiencies, lack of clear guidelines, and bureaucratic inertia hinder the effective execution of multilingual education policies. This disconnect between policy and practice prevents the realization of the intended benefits for indigenous students (Ministry of Education, 2010) ^[13]. The implementation gap is further widened by the lack of accountability mechanisms to ensure that policies are effectively translated into practice at the local level (Rahman, 2010) ^[17].

These issues collectively create a challenging environment for implementing mother tongue instruction for indigenous students in Bangladesh. Addressing these problems requires comprehensive strategies, including the development of instructional materials, better teacher training programs, and supportive socio-economic policies to ensure these students receive quality education (Selim, 2017) ^[21]; (Dhar *et al.*, 2022) ^[6]; (New Age, 2021); (Reyes, 2021) ^[18]; (Premisrat & Person, 2018) ^[16]; (MacKenzie, 2009) ^[12]; (Dubria & Yambao, 2018); (Lwanga-Lumu, 2020) ^[11].

Potential Solutions

Integrating mother tongue education for indigenous languages in Bangladesh's education system requires actions at multiple levels to address equity and diversity challenges identified in recent studies and reports (New Age, 2021; Islam (2017)) ^[9]. The current educational framework predominantly uses Bangla as the medium of instruction, which can marginalize ethnic minority students whose mother tongues differ (Tarannum, 2016).

To effectively implement solutions.

- 1. Developing Curriculum Materials in Mother Tongues:** It is crucial to create and adapt curriculum materials that include indigenous perspectives and culture (New Age, 2021; Islam, 2017) ^[9]. This adaptation should encompass not only subject matter but also cultural practices and norms to foster inclusivity and representation in classrooms.
- 2. Training Teachers:** Professional development programs should focus on equipping teachers with skills to teach in indigenous languages and understand diverse cultural norms (Islam (2017)) ^[9]. This training should promote interactive teaching methods that incorporate body language and oral communication to facilitate

better understanding among students (Heath & Mongiola, 1991).

- 3. Promoting Bilingual Education:** Implementing bilingual education models can enhance learning outcomes by utilizing both indigenous languages and Bangla as mediums of instruction (MacKenzie, 2009; Islam (2017)) ^[12, 9]. This approach supports cultural preservation and improves engagement among ethnic minority students.
- 4. Community Involvement and Support:** Engaging local communities in curriculum development and educational practices is crucial for validating the importance of mother tongue education (New Age, 2021; Islam (2017)) ^[9]. Community participation can also help mitigate bullying and discrimination in schools, creating a supportive learning environment for all students.
- 5. Access to Resources:** Ensuring equitable access to educational resources in indigenous languages requires addressing logistical challenges such as the availability of textbooks and teaching materials (New Age, 2021; Islam (2017)) ^[9]. District-level management plays a pivotal role in advocating for and supplying these resources to schools.
- 6. Monitoring and Evaluation:** Establishing mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of mother tongue education initiatives is essential to measure their impact on student learning outcomes (New Age, 2021; Islam (2017)) ^[9]. Regular assessments and feedback loops help refine strategies and ensure continuous improvement.
- 7. Advocacy and Policy Support:** Advocating for policies that support equity and diversity in education, particularly for indigenous children, is critical (Islam, 2017) ^[9]. Policy frameworks should incorporate provisions for indigenous language education and cultural sensitivity training for educators.
- 8. Research and Collaboration:** Encouraging research and collaboration among stakeholders can inform evidence-based practices for integrating mother tongue education into the national curriculum (New Age, 2021; Islam, 2017) ^[9]. Research findings should guide policy decisions aimed at enhancing educational equity and cultural inclusivity.

By implementing these strategies comprehensively and collaboratively across local, district, and national levels, Bangladesh can strengthen its education system to better serve the diverse needs of ethnic minority students, thereby promoting educational equity and preserving cultural heritage (Islam 2017) ^[9].

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study has revealed the critical challenges in incorporating mother tongue instruction for students in the textbooks for ethnic minority students in Bangladesh. One of the key barriers is the lack of available textbooks, grammar books, dictionaries, and other teaching and learning materials in the indigenous languages (Chiuye & Moyo, 2008) ^[5]. This deficiency has hindered the effective implementation of mother tongue-based education programs and perpetuated the dominance of the majority language, Bangla, and the colonial legacy of English.

To address these issues, policymakers and educators in Bangladesh should prioritize the development and widespread distribution of high-quality instructional resources in the mother tongues of ethnic minority communities. This would facilitate the meaningful integration of indigenous languages into the curriculum, empowering students to learn in a familiar linguistic and cultural context. (MacKenzie, 2009) ^[12].

Furthermore, the success of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MT-BME) programs, as evidenced in other countries like Malawi, India, and Thailand, highlights the potential benefits for Bangladeshi ethnic minority students (Premsrirat & Person, 2018) ^[16] (MacKenzie, 2009) ^[12] (Chiuve & Moyo, 2008) ^[5]. Adopting a similar approach, where instruction begins in the mother tongue and gradually transitions to the national language, can significantly improve educational outcomes, including proficiency in both the first and second languages. By embracing the linguistic diversity of Bangladesh and providing equitable access to education in indigenous languages, the government can promote social inclusion, preserve cultural heritage, and unlock the full potential of ethnic minority students. Ultimately, the integration of mother tongue instruction in textbooks represents a critical step towards ensuring the educational rights and academic success of Bangladesh's diverse indigenous populations. (Premsrirat & Person, 2018) ^[16] (Reyes, 2021) ^[18] (Chiuve & Moyo, 2008) ^[5] (MacKenzie, 2009) ^[12].

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