Abstract

This work is the result of a research project undertaken by the researcher towards facilitating a Mother tongue based Multilingual Education Programme (MTB-MLE) for the children of the Singpho community in Assam. A major part of this research was carried out through the practical involvement of the present researcher with the community in the phases of mobilisation, planning and implementation of the Singpho MTB-MLE programme in Ketetong in Margherita under Tinsukia district of Upper Assam. This work is based on the experience of the researcher through his involvement with the community at the grassroots level in terms of the facilitating the MTB-MLE programme. This work sets out the insights gained by the researcher in the course of his involvement in the programme regarding the practical applicability of the MTB-MLE programme in the local context.

Rationale

With the growing awareness regard in the linguistic and cultural exploitation of minority language communities all over the world, there has been a concerted international effort for safeguarding their linguistic and cultural rights of these relatively vulnerable communities. In this connection, the world-wide emphasis since 1990 on the slogan 'Education for All', has led to a greater commitment and effort on different quarters such as international statutory bodies, NGOs, Educational institutes and research scholars towards providing quality education to the linguistically disadvantaged minority communities across the globe. The relevance of Mother Tongue based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) Programme has been firmly established, and it has been strongly put across to all countries by UNESCO to plan and implement MTB-MLE in their respective education systems. This is because MTB-MLE can bring a significant change in the overall education scenario of the linguistic minority groups. This has already been proved through a number of programmes being run in different places of the world.

India, and especially the northeast of India, being one of the most linguistically diverse areas, is home to a large number of linguistic minority groups. Hence, the existing submersion education system in the state presents the same kind of linguistic disadvantage for the children of these minority groups and highlights the relevance of MTB-MLE programme for these communities.
Another reason for undertaking this study is to look at the applicability, usability and success of these programmes in the context of Northeast India. There have been examples of successful MTB-MLE programme in some of the places like Papua New Guinea, Philippines etc but it needs to be seen whether the same kind of programme can make a difference here. A further aim of this study is to see how far this programme can be adapted to the nature and requirement of the community for whose benefit it is being implemented.

Thus, in the background set out above, this study attempts to give an overview of MTB-MLE in the context of the Singpho community of Assam. The constant monitoring of the programme right from the mobilisation to the implementation stage by the researcher has served to identify a number of relevant issues and challenges which have been focussed upon and discussed in this study.

An outline of the chapters

The present work is broadly divided into two parts. Part I, which consists of three chapters (Chapters 1-3), presents a detailed description of MTB-MLE and its different aspects in general terms. This segment of the work aims at a general understanding of the essence, necessity, function and benefit of MTB-MLE. Thus, the concerned chapters seek to present a general theoretical perspective of the various aspects of MTB-MLE.

Part II deals with MTB-MLE in specific reference to the Singpho community. This part consists of six chapters (Chapters 4-9) which deal with the different relevant aspects of the Singpho MTB-MLE programme.

In accordance with the broad plan outlined above, CHAPTER 1 introduces MTB-MLE as an approach to education. This chapter is broadly divided into two sections. The first section presents an introduction to the topic and a description of current linguistic situation of the world. It also presents a summarised description of global efforts to promote MT literacy for the minority language communities. The chapter also contains a brief introduction to the Singpho community that provides the context for the MTB MLE study.

CHAPTER 2 presents a detailed discussion of MTB-MLE at a general level. It takes the reader through the philosophy behind MTB-MLE and gives an account of different types of MLE programmes and on other important aspects such as the role of
stakeholders etc. The different components of an MLE programme are discussed in a major section of this chapter.

Drawing on the background information presented in the previous chapter, CHAPTER 3 deals with certain theoretical issues relating to MT education. It focuses on various theories of cognitive development, including bilingualism.

As the opening chapter of Part II, CHAPTER 4 starts with a brief discussion of the factors and circumstances leading to the Singpho community's decision to start an MTB-MLE programme. This is followed by a discussion of two initial but important steps in MLE – baseline survey and mobilization.

CHAPTER 5 takes a detailed look at various issues relating to the Singpho orthography system. It also gives an account of the practical strategies adopted by the community under the present researcher's guidance in making decisive efforts to introduce some much-needed modifications in the existing system of orthography.

CHAPTER 6 deals with issues involved in bringing out different types of reading materials for the MLE programme in Singpho, and the methods adopted in this regard. In this process, the chapter gives a detailed account of the challenges and issues encountered by the community as well as the researcher during the stage of material production.

Teachers' training is another important component of an MTB-MLE programme. CHAPTER 7 gives an account of the different issues involved in teachers' training for the Singpho community. It presents a description of the training that the Singpho teachers underwent in the programme.

CHAPTER 8 is divided into two sections. The first dwells on the different aspects of curriculum development for the Singpho community. The objectives of designing a well-balanced curriculum for the Singpho MTB-MLE programme, and the issues and challenges faced in this regard are dealt with. The second section highlights the need for documentation and assessment with special reference to the Singpho MTB-MLE programme.

CHAPTER 9 directs attention to one of the central themes the study – the involvement of the community. It discusses the issues and challenges in regard to the community's involvement in the programme. It also examines the issue of government stake-holding in such programmes.