

Study on Bilingual Proficiency of Bhutanese Children: Technology Intervention for Language Preservation

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Abstract

Due to dynamic development in Information and Communication Technology, Bhutan has seen a rapid increase in the use of social media, applications, and other ICT tools. This technology had made the life of all Bhutanese comfortable. However, the downside of the technology is limiting to use of Dzongkha. Therefore, most users are fluent in English as compared to Dzongkha even though the latter is an official language. The paper aims to study the status of the bilingual competence of Bhutanese children, perception of language technology development and indicate some avenues for a way forward. To conduct the study mixed method was adopted and also synthesized a variety of academic and grey literature. The article highlights the measures taken for language preservation through digital technology and a scope to incorporate in Bhutanese education system.

Keywords: Bilingual Competence of Bhutanese Children, Language Preservation and Shift

Introduction

Language is a vital component of human connection and it's an innate ability to express ideas, feelings, and thoughts to others. It has the potential to reveal a special feature of that community and the potential to weave a close-knit among community members for eons if it is used and preserved wisely. However, with time, language experience changes and it's a concern to preserve or maintain the language. According to Ethnologue -a catalog of the world's known living languages shares that 1519 currently living languages are at risk of death, with a further 915 said to be dying (as cited in Wired, 2015). Loss of language can be due to political, social, demographic, cultural, and linguistic factors.

Some of the linguistic factors that might lead to language loss are the use of a writing system that is expensive to reproduce and relatively difficult to learn and do not have sufficient digital language technology to use in daily lives. Conklin and Lourie (1983) as cited in Baker (2001, P.62) stated that the "use of alphabet which makes printing and literacy relatively easy" can be one aspect to encourage language maintenance. However, the internet is found to be one avenue that has led to language shift. Today, the internet is filled with information but dominantly in English language and most cases digital transaction mostly happens in English. Of 10 million popular websites, 55.2% are in English and the only other languages to make are French, German, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish ranging from four to 5.8% (Wired, 2015). Thus, linguistic diversity is much needed to allow individuals to use their language and maintain it. The digital resources in English have become accessible and available to every part of the country. Keeping the scenario mentioned earlier, this study aims to study the bilingual competence of Bhutanese children, investigate whether that will lead to language shift, and status of technological development, its implication on achieving balanced bilingualism.

Literature Review

Current Scenario

It is observed that English is used predominantly as compared to Dzongkha. Even a child who starts to develop language utters English language and most children become fluent in English before they join formal schools. It could be because of exposure to the English language through entertainment media, and parents encouraging them to use English with a belief that it would help in their education. Dorji (2016) wrote in a newspaper column that Bhutanese are bombarded with American, British and Hindi shows,

movies and games, language and many young people think they are cool and anything Bhutanese is not, thus, manifesting negative attitudes towards our language.

While Dorji (2014) argues that there is a tug-of-war between English and Dzongkha as a language of communication and correspondence. He said that the preference for English as a medium has little to do with learners' attitudes towards the language. Studies have proven that learners' attitudes towards the language and the culture of the target language play important role in learning a language. Although learners show a preference for learning English over Dzongkha, their attitude and interest in Dzongkha is not only positive but also considers Dzongkha as an important subject (Dzongkha Development Commission (DDC), 2011; Namgyel 2003). Dzongkha is found difficult language to learn due to lack of learning materials and excessive use of Chokey (DDC, 2011)- the language of Dharma and liturgy. Driem (1994) also agrees that young polyglot Bhutanese are generally quite competent in English, often more so than in Dzongkha. English has pride of place in many domains of language usage, and Dzongkha already cedes these domains of usage to English in the Bhutanese schools, where English is used as the primary medium of instruction. In most nations, the medium of school instruction is the national language. So, the threat to the national language in Bhutan stems first and foremost from the national school system. Waseda University (2017) in the article titled 'difficulties in reading and writing national language' stated that among 2500 languages listed on the endangered language list compiled by UNESCO in 2009, Dzongkha was selected under the vulnerable category.

Language Policy in Bhutan

According to the Constitution of Bhutan, Article 1 section 8 states "Dzongkha is the national language of Bhutan" thus, language policy is established in the country. With a single national language, Article 4 section 3 of the Constitution states that "The State shall conserve and encourage research on local arts, custom, knowledge and culture" which shall accommodate and preserve the country's linguistic diversity.

Another language that is predominantly used for official purposes is English. It is the medium of instruction in all levels of education and is taught as a language just like Dzongkha is taught in formal education. Just like other nations, Bhutan too stands up to be a multilingual country. As per Driem (1994) study, Bhutan has 19 native languages broadly categorized as central Bodish languages, East Bodish languages, other Bodic languages of Bhutan and Indo-Aryan Languages. In fact, they are considered to be vernacular languages and Dzongkha is a lingua franca in Bhutan.

Languages in Education

As mentioned earlier under the language policy, Dzongkha is the official language of Bhutan and English is the medium of instruction. It is observed that Bhutanese use the English language more fluently than Dzongkha or lacks balanced bilingualism. The study conducted by Rinchen (1999) found that students fare better in English than in Dzongkha. The spread of English and decline in Dzongkha use are attributed to a variety of factors, such as the advent of western-style education, strong western influences, lack of instructional resources in Dzongkha and easy access to English-language materials. Wangchuk (2019) argues that Dzongkha teaching requires a new pedagogical approach and the existing rote-memorization- and -reprimand method is not suitable for the liberal education system. He added that different learners have their ways to comprehend a new language and Dzongkha-teaching should also consider cognitive and linguistic realities.

Bilingual Competence

Bilingual is the ability to speak two or multiple languages equally well. However, Baker (2001) shares that bilingualism can be looked into multiple perspectives to understand an individual's bilingual competence. A distinction between bilingualism as an individual characteristic and bilingualism in a social group, community, region or country is necessary to understand this concept. It is observed that

people consider them as bilingual irrespective of their proficiency level in two or multiple languages. They may describe as bilingual but may mean only the ability to converse and communicate orally, while others may be proficient in reading or other language skills. Therefore, defining exactly who is bilingual is indefinable and 'native-like control of two or more languages' as suggested by Bloomfield (1933) as cited in Baker, 2001 offered little help. Since there was no reference to identify bilingual competence as native and what control meant.

Although it is complex to define bilingual, yet it is present in every country, social class, age group. It has taken a primordial role in understanding the sociolinguistic perspective of the world. Lewis (1978) stated that 'bilingualism has been and is nearer to a normal situation than most people are willing to believe (as cited in Liddicoat, 1991). As stated earlier this paper aims to study balance bilingualism. Similar to the definition of bilingualism, it also has a range of meanings for different literature. For Haugen (1973) as cited in Liddicoat (1991) a balanced bilingual is an individual who has native-like competence in both languages.

Technology as an aid to Language Maintenance

Initially, the internet created popular mythology that the internet is going to be a threat to the future of the language. Similarly in any sophisticated technology that an individual operates is mostly in English and there is a high chance of people being competent and comfortable using English. However, as Crystal (2012) explained that internet is enabling a dramatic expansion to take place in the range and variety of language and is providing unprecedented opportunities for personal creativity. It was proven to be true in a study conducted by Villa (2002) on the integration of technology into the preservation of minority language. She stated that it was necessary to preserve her heritage language by using authentic context in the classroom teaching-learning. Villa's pilot project was to create a website for her community who speaks minority heritage language. This was an initiative to preserve languages for future generations of Apaches. William (2018) shares a similar opinion on the internet being a tool to preserve the language. Once spoken for over 10 million Jews worldwide, the number of Yiddish speakers decreased dramatically due to the Holocaust and survivors who were forced to assimilate and use the native tongue to avoid persecution. The use of Yiddish had all but disappeared bar a small number of Hasidic communities. With the rapid popularity of online forums in the 2000s, the internet became a common place for Yiddish speakers to converse in their tongue and over time, the virtual world became the prime destination for Yiddish speakers. Probably one of the most notable languages that have had a revival in the 21st century is Yiddish. With online platforms becoming a destination for language preservation, language learning startups, including Duolingo, have diversified their product offering to contribute to the preservation process. Eisenlohr (2004) also agrees that language activists and linguists have begun using new technologies on projects aimed at revitalizing the practice of lesser-used languages.

Methodology

Participants

The participants of this study are around 25 teachers and parents. A separate questionnaire was prepared for these two categories. For teachers' questions were prepared to seek their perception on learner's level of performance in English and Dzongkha, challenges in teaching Dzongkha, and their perception in integrating ICT tools in teaching-learning Dzongkha, while questions on learner's behaviour towards two languages were asked to parents. Similar questions on children's performance in two languages were also asked this group and also gathered their perception on it.

Instruments

The study employed a questionnaire as a quantitative data collection tool. The questions used Likert-type scales to avoid unambiguous responses (attached as Appendix A). In addition to that, reflective questions

or open-ended questions were asked to understand their opinion on language and its level of competence. The questionnaire was prepared in the Google form and circulated online.

Data analysis

The analysis made by Google form was used extensively and for descriptive analysis, MS Excel was used for further analysis. In addition, the study examined the reflective report made by teachers and parents in exploring the study topic, academic articles and other grey literature.

Results

The study showed that almost 60% of teachers who participated in the survey have had the experience of teaching for more than 10 years, and the rest of them had variation from 1-9 years of teaching experience. From 25 teachers, 13 teachers were teaching English and Dzongkha subjects within the last three years. Upon asking them whether Bhutanese students are equally competent in English and Dzongkha. The pie-chart below illustrates that maximum of them felt that learners are not competent equally. While 32% of them were not sure, this could be the complexity of being balanced bilingual. Many times, children who are competent in Dzongkha are found to be weaker in the English language. A similar analysis is depicted in figure 2, where parents were asked whether they are equally competent in two languages.

Is your student equally competent in English and Dzongkha? (You may compare their overall ability in all language strand)
25 responses

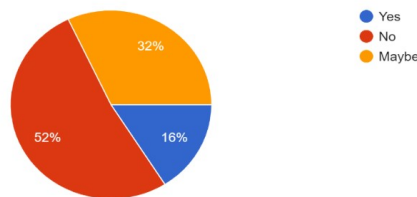


Figure 1

Is Bhutanese equally competent in English and Dzongkha?
23 responses

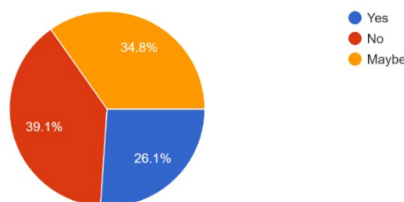


Figure 2

Further in figure 3 and figure 4, the analysis represents the perception of learners' proficiency in an individual language.

Rate your students competency in English. (from 1-5 5- Advance, 4- Upper Intermediate, 3-Intermediate, 2- Elementary, 1- Beginner). Just rate at the level of your learner.
25 responses

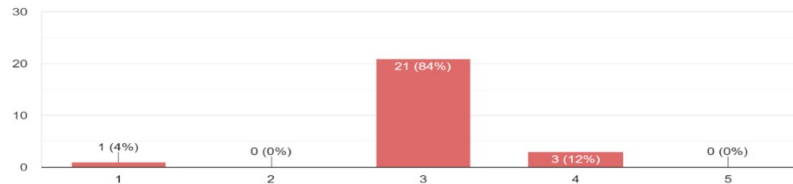


Figure 3

Rate your students competency in Dzongkha. (from 1-5 5- Advance, 4- Upper Intermediate, 3-Intermediate, 2- Elementary, 1- Beginner). Just rate at the level of your learner.
25 responses

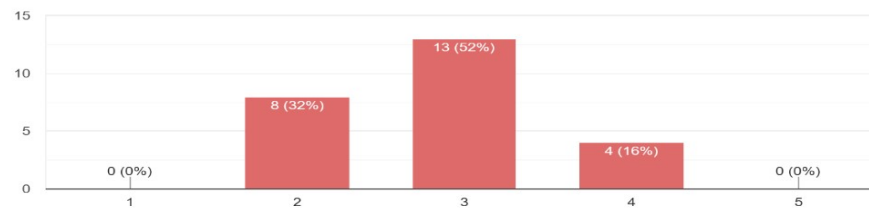


Figure 4

While comparing the bar graph, it indicates that learners are not equally competent in two languages - English and Dzongkha despite being the medium of instruction and official language in the country, respectively. Referring to each graph, 21 teachers felt that their learners fall into intermediate level in English and 3 teachers opted for upper intermediate level. Considering Dzongkha language competence, 13 teachers perceived that their learners fall at intermediate level and few have opted for elementary and intermediate level and none have opted at beginner level. The analysis represents that learners are not equally competent and they are most competent in the English language. While figure 5 indicates that a maximum of participants prefers to use English mostly for written communication this is because they are comfortable using English as most technology supports it, easier vocabulary as compared to Dzongkha, and comprehensible grammar rules. Boxed information below figure 5 shows few views shared by participants.

Which language would you prefer for written communication.
23 responses

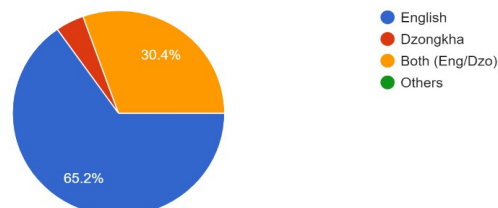


Figure 4

- *I would prefer both Dzongkha and English because I want my children to learn and be perfect in both languages. And writing part English is better because of the smart phones which we are using ...*
- *Easier and more user friendly with many users' applications*
- *English and Dzongkha are comfortable communicating oral and in English for writing since it is easier to type and get it auto-corrected.*

The question is on 'What are / would be the hurdles in teaching Dzongkha to students? Please state as many reasons as possible' had various perspectives where most state that Dzongkha letters are difficult to learn. As mentioned by Norbu and Namgyel (2019, Para.9) states that "a Dzongkha syllable can have 1-7 characters and most interesting, up to four characters can stack on one another...." Further, teachers also shared that complex grammar rules and spelling hinder learning and teachers do not change teaching strategies and learning resources in Dzongkha are limited as compared to other subjects. In a nutshell, the hurdle to teach Dzongkha starts from children's homes to the learning resources they are surrounded with.

- *"Students are mostly exposed to media where one can access English only. Can't access Dzongkha on web. I face difficult to let them read words and build vocabulary words although they can speak quite well."*
- *"Resources are not available in youtube, children get more access to English related items, parenting (parents encourages their child to converse in English rather than dzongkhag), they are more accessible to English resources thus making them least interested in acquiring dzongkhag language."*
- *"Speaking English and being good able to speak well in English has become trend among the youth."*
- *"Parents feel great when their child speaks English."*
- *Lack of student's interest.*
- *Lack of adequate resources beyond the prescribed texts*

The argument made by teachers is further supported by Bhutanese parents living in the country. Parents also felt that their children are comfortable learning English as compared to other subjects. Figure 6, depicts the parent's view on their children's performance on various subjects taught.

Which subject is found easier for your child(ren)? (For parents/guardians whose children are enrolled in Kindergarten and other academic institutions may respond here.)
17 responses

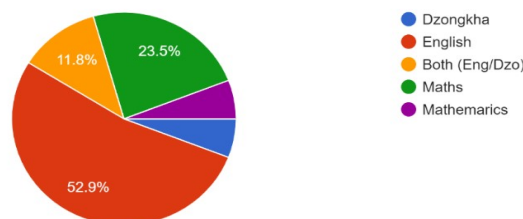


Figure 6

In line with that, parents were asked to give reasons what their children excel in the subject they have selected.

- *"It might be they are exposed to English media more than Dzongkha."*
- *"Dzongkha is found to be difficult in writing."*
- *"I think they are weak in Dzongkha as many other subjects in school is studied in English. Moreover, almost all the digital contents on any subjects are presented in English language."*
- *"My kids are weaker in Dzongkha because they watch youtube and explore in internet in English."*
- *"Children are found to be weak in Dzongkha as I think there is lack of material."*

Most of the respondents share the view that the Dzongkha language lacks digital resources which discourages children to use the Dzongkha language. Teachers are one of the stakeholders to preserve the language, culture and tradition of their country. Therefore, they shared some of their views on how Dzongkha can be preserved. Most of them agree that digital resources are needed to make them available for all kinds of learners. For instance, children at the age of 2/3 start uttering English words because of entertainment videos on Television or the internet. The following were some of the suggestions to maintain balanced bilingualism.

- *Including Dzongkha as the main subject for ability rating for higher study. --Creating more ICT tools in Dzongkha----Inclusion of more Dzongkha medium subjects*
- *By developing more apps in Dzongkha like in English, so that our students get access to it and explore themselves like English.*
- *From my point of view, I think we need to practice teaching like Japan, where by we have two teacher to teach each subject. One will explain in English and other will explain in Dzongkha. Or else one teacher can teach the subject in both languages.*
- *The criteria of failing in Dzongkha makes them fail which is a good idea but if the educationist can come up with various strategies and train our Dzongkha teachers and also Dzongkha teacher should be the bilingual one*
- *Enough resources and materials related to Dzongkha should be available and create more interesting and competitive activities would help learners.*
- *Keep more resources for Dzongkha. Provide more avenues to practice Dzongkha more than just a spoken language.*
- *Bilingual can be one of the best strategies. Inclusion of additional Dzongkha related module, translating other modules in Dzongkha language, letting students use the language equally. Making such strategies as a part of curriculum.*
- *These days, the so-called educated parents encourage only English speaking at home. Our class PP students speak English to their Dzongkha teacher. We need to take a collective responsibility to uplift Dzongkha language with more emphasis on speaking and reading. Every Bhutanese must learn to speak Dzongkha well. We just have two Dzongkha tv channels which our young children hardly watch them. Teachers should take initiatives to make Dzongkha lessons more interesting and useful for future use.*
- *We can teach translation for the students to make them learn both the subjects and encourage them to watch Dzongkha movies and YouTube.*

- *Yes, very much needed. The digital tools to communicate are fully dominated by English language. Given the current trend, even an uneducated person tends to navigate the digital tools as they don't have any choice. However, considering the few apps like online Dzongkha dictionary, since it was not developed as user friendly thus few people land up using it.*
- *Yes, there is every risk of losing written Dzongkha however, speaking will happen for a long time.*
- *Obviously as a Bhutanese we need to look for more kind of technology which we can use our language most.*

Recommendations

From the results, it has been indispensable that classroom teaching-learning should be blended with digital resources. During the pandemic, it has been fundamental that teachers are fluent in using the digital tool and create an interactive classroom. In most research papers related to language preservation, the ICT tool or digital platform has been a handy tool in preserving the endangered language. Meighan (2021) did a study on how technology assisted in Indigenous language revitalization. She stated that her endangered mother tongue, Gàidhlig (Scottish Gaelic), which was spoken for more than 1500 years in Scotland was still not recognized as an official language. Therefore, her intervention of using web 1.0, web 2.0. and web 3.0 in creating indigenous content influenced decolonizing the digital landscape to better serve indigenous people, their languages, and their communities.

The study on teacher perception in using technology in bilingual classrooms by Daniel and Cowan (2012) was also found an effective strategy. They shared that the teachers involved in the study found a closer link to the Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach (CALLA) Chamot's (2009) reflective approach to lesson planning for teachers of the English language. CALLA divides it into five stages: preparation, presentation, practice, self-evaluation, and expansion. Teacher participants who made movies improve instruction in all five stages and some teachers agreed that movies activated their learner's prior knowledge, use new vocabulary, and explain and model. Reflecting on Meighan initiative to preserve her endangered language and Daniel and Cowan's finding on benefiting in a language classroom, the Bhutanese language classroom can also revamp. In data analysis, it was indicated that Dzongkha is mostly used for oral communication while English is for written as well oral communication. To avoid language shift, digital technology can save the Dzongkha language. To teach English (dominantly), Chinese, French and other languages, teachers are already using Technology-enhanced language learning such as Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL), Social Networking Sites (SNS), Corpus, and digital resources.

Conclusion

It is said that 'language is land and land is language.' As compared to other regions, Bhutanese have a sense of respect toward their official language and hold strong for their culture and identity. However, with the advent of digital technology and digital resources mostly in English, there is a risk of language shift. This is already been indicated in most news reports and other literature. The survey finds that only 10 percent of the 43 government offices use Dzongkha in official correspondence (Wangchuk, 2018). Even young learners are found fluent in English while they lack equal competency in Dzongkha. To be more precise, children lack competency in written discourse. Therefore, this study suggests concerned stakeholders explore an avenue where Dzongkha language can be integrated with sophisticated technology so that teachers can use these digital resources, as well as children, are available with ample edutainment.

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ANNEXURE 1

Questionnaire (for random population)

A. Profile:

1. Which age group do you belong to? Select the most appropriate.
 - 18-22
 - 23-27
 - 28-32
 - 32-above
2. Where do you live? Select the most appropriate region.
 - West
 - East
 - South
 - North
 - Central

B. Language Use:

3. Are you a parent?

- Yes
- No

4. What is your Occupation?

5. Those who are parents/guardians may respond to this. Do you speak English to your children?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes
- Often

6. To those who aspire to have children in future. Will you speak English to your children?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

7. What language do you use at home? (For those whose mother tongue is dzongkha, may opt for Dzongkha). [You may click as many options you like if you are using other languages dominantly.]

- English
- Dzongkha
- Mother tongue
- Other

8. Which subject is found easier for your child(ren)? (For parents/guardians whose children are enrolled in ECCD and other academic institutions may respond here.)

- Dzongkha
- English
- Both
- Other

9. Please state the reason why he/she/they are found to be weaker in that subject?

C. Linguistic Environment:

10. How often do you watch Dzongkha entertainment shows? (Voice of Bhutan, Elden Drukpa, Dzongkha movies etc). Rate yourself from 1-5 (1 refers to No, 2-Occasional, 3-Often, 4- Sometimes, 5- Everyday)

- 1-5

11. Do you think we should have more rhymes, animation movies, kids show in Dzongkha?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

12. Which entertainment does your child (ren) mostly watch such as follows: (click as much as you can)?

- YouTube
- Netflix
- BBS 2
- Others.... Please mention.

D. Language in Future:

13. Is Bhutanese equally competent in English and Dzongkha?

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

14. Given the opportunity which language would you prefer for daily(oral) conversation?

- English

- Dzongkha
 - Both
 - Others
15. Which language are you comfortable within written communication?
- English
 - Dzongkha
 - Both
 - Others
16. Please state the reason for the option you have selected for Q.15 and 16.
17. Do you think there is a need for language technology development to preserve the Dzongkha language? (For instance: when we chat in social media, we chat in our mother tongue or dzongkhag using English letters, use voice dictation to send text messages, etc. Thus, there is a risk of language extinction digitally.) Please provide your say on it.

Questionnaire for Teachers:

1. How long have you been in teaching?
 - 1-5
 - 5-10
 - 10 and above
2. Which subject do you teach? (Can be from last three years)
3. Is your student equally competent in English and Dzongkha?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Not sure
4. Rate your student's competency in English (from 1-5 -5- Advance, 4- Upper Intermediate, 3-Intermediate, 2- Elementary, 1- Beginner).
5. Rate your student's competency in Dzongkha (from 1-5 -5- Advance, 4- Upper Intermediate, 3-Intermediate, 2- Elementary, 1- Beginner).
6. Please state your reason for Q. 3 and 4.
7. Do you agree that we lack materials for the Dzongkha syllabus as compared to English? (For example, we get a lesson from YouTube on phonics, rhymes, and writing samples on the internet in the English language)
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neutral
 - Disagree
 - Strongly Disagree
8. Do you use technology in your lesson (for example PowerPoint, Kahoots, padlet, spider scribe, etc)
 - Yes
 - No
 - Sometimes
9. What are the hurdles in teaching Dzongkha to students? Please state as many reasons as possible.
10. With emerging technology, use of social media, and ICT tools; English is available to all. However, there is a risk of extinction of the Dzongkha language. As an educational institute, how can you achieve bilingual competency for your learners?

BIO-NOTE

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