

The Role of English in Culture Preservation in Bhutan

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Abstract

This study explores issues surrounding the preservation and promotion of culture in the context of the secondary school English curriculum in Bhutan. The languages of Bhutan carry a rich and diverse tradition of oral literatures, but these genres and the cultural values they embody may disappear if they are not promoted. In Bhutan, schools are an active culture preservation site. For this reason, and also since English is the language of curricula for most subjects taught in school, we assumed that one of the ways in which Bhutan's diverse cultures can be honoured and enlivened is through the study of folk literature in the English curriculum. We asked two questions: (1) "How do secondary English teachers perceive the long-term role of Bhutanese folk literature as a source of cultural knowledge in the English curriculum?" and (2) "What knowledge and attitude do secondary students show following three months of learning about Bhutanese folk literature in the secondary English curriculum?" To address the first question, 38% of all secondary English teachers (n=181) responded to a purpose-built questionnaire followed by in-depth interviews undertaken with six (expert) teachers. The second research question was addressed using action research conducted with twenty-four Class 11 science students over three months in a higher secondary school in south Bhutan. Three important perspectives on the role of English in

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culture maintenance were identified. First, the latter can create opportunities for students to learn English in culturally familiar contexts. Second, using folk literatures that exist in different languages but translated into English as pedagogical catalysts will not only promote the values of cultural diversity in school but will also ensure the intergenerational continuity of Bhutanese culture through the education of children. Third, since English is a global language and a language of growing popularity in Bhutan, English translations of oral literature will promote cultural diversity and continuity in the face of globalization.

Context of the research

This study explores issues surrounding the preservation and promotion of culture in the context of the secondary English curriculum in Bhutan. Accompanying the positive impact of globalization are forces that especially impinge on small and vulnerable cultures and languages in different parts of the world, including Bhutan (GNHC, 2009b, pp. 161-162). Bhutan is a multicultural and multilingual society and has 19 different languages (van Driem, 2004, pp. 294-295; Gyatso, 2004, p. 265) of which 16 are exclusively oral. These languages carry a rich and diverse tradition of oral literature such as folktales, poetry, epics, myths, legends, ballads, proverbs, beliefs and superstitions, spiritual songs, heroic tales (RGOB, 1999, p. 65). The key point is that the oral folk literatures in these languages are rich repositories of cultural knowledge and values (RGOB, 1999, p. 35). Moreover, their loss will mean the loss of the depth and diversity of Bhutanese culture as a whole. Thiong'o (1986, p. 205) says, language "carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world."

While "culture" is a highly contested term, in this study it is relevant to consider it in the context of policy. Cultures may be said to manifest in 'tangible' and 'intangible' forms. Tangible culture manifests in customs, crafts, rituals, symbols, traditional games and sports, arts and architecture, astrology, folklore, myths,

legends, poetry, drama, to mention a few (RGOB, 1999, p. 65). The intangible forms include values, norms, attitudes, worldviews, moral and ethical choices, sense of right and wrong, among others (RGOB, 1999, p. 65) and the more abstract “values” that include notions of identity, dignity, non-alienation, and diversity (see Ura, 2009, p. 53).

The cultural values embodied in folk literatures that exist mainly in oral languages and dialects will depend for their survival on how the cultural and literary resources they embody are kept alive through publication in a language that is rich, versatile and has both local and international audience. The Bhutanese government recognizes the danger of losing the country’s “many cultural traditions, particularly oral traditions” and the challenge of conserving the heritage through research and documentation (GNCH, 2009a, p. 161; see also PDP, 2008, p. 23). There is a commitment to “allocate adequate resources to document and promote the use and survival of all other languages and dialects” (DPT, 2008, p. 44) besides Dzongkha. Government policy considers the role of teachers and students vital in keeping the diversity of Bhutanese cultures alive, making the oral traditions available to children through the schools’ formal and informal curricula. One way of saving the oral literatures from disappearing can be by writing them down in a language that has both local and international influence, thus making published materials available to the Bhutanese people and to the world.

For these reasons, English is a pragmatic tool for the preservation of the Bhutanese cultural heritage. In fact, several genres of Bhutanese folk literature have been translated into English in recent years, some of which have also been included in the secondary English curriculum for schools in Bhutan (Thinley, 2010, p. 5).

While Dzongkha is the language of “national identity and unity of the country” (DDC, 2002, p. xv), its ability to keep the culturally diverse oral literatures alive may be limited by a number of factors. First, it faces the same onslaught of

globalization as any other language in Bhutan and will thus continue to be promoted as the most important language in the country. Yet, Dzongkha has not spread as quickly as English (see Gyatso, 2004, pp. 271-272; Namgyel, 2009a, pp. 1-2; 2009b, pp. 1-2). Second, in the effort to promote Dzongkha and to build Dzongkha literature, it is possible in the future that the rich, unique and diverse oral literatures that exist in the smaller languages may be documented, absorbed into and called "Dzongkha literature," which will be a loss of diversity. Third, young people find Dzongkha harder to learn than English, especially to write.

Perspectives on the role of English

There is a significant body of literature on English as used in South Asian countries, where there is, as Kachru (1996, p. xi) puts it, an "ongoing love-hate relationship with English" (see also Lie, 2002, p. 59; Thiong'o, 2007, p. 149, 202). There are others who depict English more positively. For example, Joseph (2001, p. 237) says, these theories may need to be "brought seriously into question" because the facts behind the negative portrayals are often not checked. We assume that English can play a positive role in the sustainability of oral cultures in Bhutan. We argue our position from four closely interrelated perspectives.

The discursive possibilities of English

Language is a powerful carrier of culture. Thiong'o (1986: 205) says, it "carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world." Writers of the Third World like Chinua Achebe of Nigeria, Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya, and R.K. Narayan of India used the English language as a powerful tool not only to explore the richness of the literary traditions of their lands, but also to present their own cultures to a global audience. The emergence of English translations of oral folk literatures in the 1990s in Bhutan illustrates the use of the rich resources of the English language and its global status to

expose the rich oral traditions to local and international audience. English translations are perhaps the most powerful means of articulating Bhutanese cultural values and identity to the outside world.

The discursive possibilities notwithstanding, it is important to consider the significant body of literature that portrays English as a cause of language and culture loss. Seen from this perspective, the English language promotes and perpetuates, particularly through the language curriculum, linguistic and cultural imperialism (Muhlhausler, 1994; Nandy, 1983; Pennycook, 1998; Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). For example, Pennycook (1998, p. 14) says:

When English becomes the first choice as a second language in which so much is written and in which so much of the visual media occur, it is constantly pushing other languages out of the way, curtailing their usage in both qualitative and quantitative terms.

Crystal (1997, p. 114) goes a little further: “It is inevitable that, in a post-colonial era, there should be a strong reaction against continuing to use the language of the former colonial power, and in favour of promoting the indigenous languages.” So, two distinct views emerge from the debates - a pro-English view and an anti-English view.

We take a pro-English stance because of its ability to articulate diverse Bhutanese cultures within and outside the country and its ability within the country to facilitate intercultural communication, understanding and empathy. Rushdie (as cited in Crystal, 2000, pp. 135-136) takes a more moderate stance:

What seems to me to be happening is that those people who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it. Assisted by the English language’s enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves

within its front ... The children of independent India seem not to think of English as being irredeemably tainted by its colonial provenance. They use it as an Indian language, as one of the tools they have at hand.

We therefore discuss its role and status from the perspective of its advantages for Bhutanese culture. Owing to the different, positive, historical and political circumstances in which English was adopted by the Bhutanese, its choice by the first Bhutanese writers in the 1990s, we assume, was not a matter of shame or guilt, but a pragmatic choice and decision to carve out a distinct territory for Bhutanese writing in English. No doubt there was also an eye at sales. English is a language of conversation with the international community, not a 'Trojan horse' or a language of class stratification.

Growing popularity of English

Crystal (1997, p. 50) calls English the "prestige lingua franca," the "language of opportunity," the language of success. Although there are no empirical studies that show the status and popularity of English in Bhutan, as a language of modern secular education, employment, commerce, and global opportunities, its popularity is growing very rapidly (Gyatso, 2004, p. 8; van Driem, 2004, p. 29). According to Lo Bianco (2008, p. 1), there is "immense international investment in English, whose dispersion and status worldwide is probably unassailable ... close to [two] billion people could be learning or know English by 2010." Hohenthal's (2003, pp. 24-42) survey of university students across nine states of India helps to illustrate this trend. For example, in the domain of use, 67% of the informants said English served as a "link language," 93% said English was the most dominant language in government, and 100% said job interviews were invariably held in English. In the affective domain, 53% viewed English as a medium of aesthetic expression. In the pragmatic domain, 93% viewed "speaking English" as an advantage, 93% viewed it as useful for gaining access to employment opportunities, and 76% thought

that lack of knowledge of English was an obstacle to finding a job. The study's other findings include that "English carries higher status than Hindi in India." These figures reflect reasons for English's growing popularity in Bhutan. The Bhutanese perspective parallels the Singaporean perspective (Ayyub, 1994). Ayyub (1994, pp. 211-212) says, "The increase in literacy in English has made the English language the lingua franca, and since it is acquired through the medium of education, it has more prestige than Malay." English is clearly important in Bhutan for all the reasons indicated above.

In the Bhutanese context, while the status and popularity of English are growing rapidly, the implications of using English as a language of access to the oral literatures, and their cultural and aesthetic values in schools have not been studied. It was important to explore English teachers' and students' perceptions of the role of English in the context of their curricular and pedagogical experience with these materials, and in the light of government policy.

Intercultural communication

While there are defensive stances on English as impinging on cultures, the literature also reveals that English translations of indigenous literatures facilitate intercultural communication, understanding and empathy. Already the emerging body of English translations of Bhutanese folk literature highlights its diversity. For example, Kunzang Choden's *Folktales of Bhutan* (2002) and *Bhutanese Tales of the Yeti* (1997), and Sonam Kinga's *Speaking Statues, Flying Rocks* (2005) embody the cultural nuances of the central and eastern parts of Bhutan. Without English translations, much of the folk tradition that exists in the oral form would not have been known by many and perhaps even be lost by now.

Standard of English in the writings of non-native authors

Since some English translations of Bhutanese folk literature

have been included in the secondary English curriculum, it was necessary to understand perceptions about the kind of English used in these texts. According to Kachru (1983, pp. 50-51), since English is a universal language, native users of English must give up their attitudes of “reluctance, condescension, or indifference” towards non-native varieties of English as “deficient Englishes,” while the non-native users of English for their part must renounce their embarrassments with local varieties of English. Yet the linguistic cringe is still evidenced in South Asian countries. Thus, Rahman (1996, pp. 191-205) says, “Nineteenth-century literary English, however, is still held in high esteem by a large section of educated persons in Bangladesh” and that “People have negative attitudes toward non-native models.” So Lam (1999, as cited in Kramsch, 2000, p. 16) asserts:

Our responsibility as language teachers is to help students not only become acceptable and listened to users of English by adopting the culturally sanctioned genres, styles, and the rhetorical conventions of the English speaking world, but how to gain profit of distinction by using English in ways that are unique to their multilingual and multicultural sensibilities.

In relation to ‘standard’ of English, two perspectives are relevant. First, with the rapid globalization of English, an exonormative standard is not a realistic way of understanding the dynamic nature of the language. Instead, the focus should be on the principle of intercomprehensibility. Second, while English may assume different colours according to the unique cultural and literary contexts in which it is used, it cannot be indifferent to the long accepted conventions of language use. In the present study, we sought to explore teachers’ and students’ perceptions of what constitutes standard English and its role in the curriculum.

Cultural underpinnings of the English curriculum

Modern secular education began in Bhutan in the 1960s when the country opened itself up to the outside world,

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introduced social, political and judicial reforms, and launched its first economic development plan. Public schools based on Indian models of Western education were established and, importantly for the purposes of this paper, English was introduced as a medium of instruction. With the exception of a few subjects such as environmental studies and social studies which are taught in Dzongkha at the primary levels, English is the predominant language of the curriculum for all the other subjects at all levels.

Up to 2005, the English curricula for secondary schools (Classes 7 to 12) in Bhutan were either influenced or administered directly by the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examination (CISCE) in Delhi, India. The new English curricula for Classes 7 to 10 emphasize the development of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing (CAPSD, 2005c, p. v; CAPSD, 2005f, p. x), and the need for the students to cultivate values that reflect Bhutanese way of life, and to learn Bhutanese culture and “religious practices” (CAPSD, 2006a, p. xiv; CAPSD, 2006b, p. xiv; see also CAPSD, 2005f, p. xii). For example, the new Class 9 and 10 English curricula state that:

Through their reading, graduates have studied and reflected on the cultural values of Bhutan and other countries, particularly the different ways in which people discover meaning in their lives; different expressions of fundamental values of Truth, Goodness, and Beauty (CAPSD, 2005a, p. 3; CAPSD, 2005b, p. 3).

In the new curricula, the importance of learning English in a cultural context is emphasized in order to learn the “cultural values of Bhutan” as well as those of other countries. The real question of teaching and learning in multicultural settings is not attended to.

In centralized education systems, beliefs at the top have a direct bearing on beliefs, perceptions and practices on the ground. We need to understand the cultural underpinnings of the curriculum as stated in the language of policy. The review of

documents therefore focussed on the interaction of Bhutanese culture and the English curriculum. The documents generally attribute three roles to English in Bhutan. First, in the wider political context, English is the language of Bhutan's path to modernization and participation in the global community. For example, the Class 7 and 8 curricula stated:

When the veil of self-imposed isolation was lifted, Bhutan looked beyond its borders and began to prepare itself to modernize and join the community of nations. Which language to use to interact with the international community was one of the many decisions that had to be made (CAPSD, 2006a, p. ix; CAPSD, 2006b, p. ix).

According to the new Class 7 and 8 English curricula, English enabled Bhutan to articulate "its identity" and "profile" in the international community (CAPSD, 2006a, p. ix; CAPSD, 2006b, p. ix), expressed mainly through "its rich spiritual and cultural heritage," thus contributing to the "intellectual resources of the world" (CAPSD, 2006a, p. ix; CAPSD, 2006b, p. ix). Second, English is regarded as an official language alongside Dzongkha (CAPSD, 2005f, p. xi). Third, English is a tool for "thinking," "learning" and "expressing" (CAPSD, 2002, p. i).

Bhutanese government policy recognizes children and teachers as the custodians of culture and the catalysts of cultural transmission respectively (RGOB, 1999, pp. 20 & 36). They are therefore the key to addressing the cultural consequences of globalization and ensuring intergenerational continuity and influence of the Bhutanese cultural heritage. Policy envisages that the "country's rich traditions, values, ideals and beliefs must ideally live on in the minds of Bhutanese [youth]" to enable them to make "ethical and moral choices" in their lives (GNHC, 2009a, p. 20).

These policy choices influence the new English curriculum. For example, the curriculum states that materials selected for "reading and literature" (including short stories, essays and

poetry), listening and speaking, and writing should be based on “Bhutanese culture,” (CAPSD, 2005e, pp. 101-102; CAPSD, 2005f, pp. 33-34). Also, in the new curricula, some materials from Bhutanese folk literature have been included alongside traditional British texts. Thus, the new English curriculum for Classes 7 to 12 emphasized the tangible and intangible forms of culture in the education of children, including the values of identity, diversity (GNHC, 2009a, p. 161), and recognition of and respect for “cultural differences” (RGOB, 1999, p. 66).

Key questions and methodology

The stance taken in this study is that one of the many ways in which Bhutan’s diverse cultures, especially those that exist orally, can be honoured and enlivened is through experience in the English curriculum. Oral and written folk literatures may be used as cultural and pedagogical resources to support the learning of English. Thus, in this paper, we address two research questions:

1)	How do secondary English teachers perceive the long-term role of Bhutanese literature as a source of cultural knowledge in the English curriculum? and
2)	What knowledge and attitude do secondary students show following three months of learning about Bhutanese folk literature in the secondary English curriculum?

In this constructivist study, part of a wider study by Thinley (2010), to address question 1, mail questionnaires were sent to all secondary English teachers in Bhutan. Questionnaires were mailed to the English teachers and 181 completed questionnaires were returned (38% of total questionnaires mailed). This response rate would be quite conservative since there would have been some questionnaires that went to schools and were not used. The purpose-developed questionnaire was trialled. Then in-depth interviews were undertaken with six (expert) teachers who had a particular interest in the use of folk literatures in their lessons. While the questionnaires were analyzed using simple content analysis techniques, the interviews were analyzed thematically. Research question 2 was addressed using action research (AR,

Maxwell, 2003) conducted with a group of 24 Class 11 science students by Thinley in a secondary school in south Bhutan over three months. Data in this AR project were gathered through (1) two rounds of questionnaires, one each at the beginning and end of the intervention project, and (2) three rounds of interviews, one each at the beginning, middle and end of the project. (3) Thinley and the teacher colleague also kept a diary. As with the teacher data, the responses to the questionnaires and interviews/diaries were analysed using content and thematic analysis techniques respectively. The study was limited to the secular forms of Bhutanese folk literature that exist orally and in English translations.

Main findings: Secondary English teachers' perspectives

Three broad views emerged: promotion of the values of diversity; the tension between the curriculum's cultural priority and the need to teach students 'standard' English; and the discursive possibilities of English as an international language for Bhutanese culture.

Appreciation of cultural diversity

The notion of cultural diversity was included in the broad policy stance of the government and it was not part of the language of the extant English curriculum. Nor did the teachers acquire relevant knowledge and skills to deal with diversity in teacher training. We were not surprised by the teachers' silence in relation to cultural diversity in questionnaire responses. Consequently, the focus was on interview data where this issue could be explored.

Generally, three themes emerged. First, the informants recognized that cultural variations existed in the Bhutanese society which ought to be recognized and respected. Second, when cultural differences were recognized and respected, and people feel appreciated, mutual understanding grows among the people. Third, as one interviewee said, if students were given the opportunity to read English translations of Bhutanese folk

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literature, then they would be able to “understand the different ways or different life styles in different parts of the country.” The same interviewee also viewed translation of Bhutanese folk literature into English (e.g. Kurtoep to English, Sharchopkha to English or Nepali to English) as “fair” to those languages and the people who speak them. Another also argued that such translations would help to foster intercultural understanding among the people, “intimacy with ourselves, amongst ourselves,” and a sense of “belonging,” “integrity” and “respect.” While the teachers stated their understanding of cultural diversity in broad terms and in the context of student learning, they did not go into the complex interaction of culture, curriculum and teaching practice in the context of a multilingual and multicultural classroom.

Cultural learning and learning to use ‘standard English’

Although there has been no study to show classroom-based perspectives on it, an unspoken predicament in English education concerning what knowledge is of most worth for the students has always been there. The tension was visible in the teachers’ perceptions. The study of Bhutanese folk literature (BFL) in English translations personifies this tension. In Table 1, 98 (54%) of the 181 questionnaire respondents preferred inclusion of Bhutanese folk literature in the English curriculum, while 91 (50%) stated preference for the Dzongkha curriculum.

Table 1. The role of BFL in the curriculum (N, (%))

Bhutanese folk literature should be included in the English curriculum.	Bhutanese folk literature should be included in the Dzongkha curriculum.	Bhutanese folk literature is appropriate for class 7 to 12.	Because of its cultural relevance, Bhutanese texts motivate students better than non-Bhutanese texts.	Bhutanese folk literature should be included in the school curriculum as it will enable students to learn and appreciate Bhutanese culture.
98 (54%)	91 (50%)	144 (80%)	127 (70%)	63 (35%)

The evenly split difference in views was confirmed in the interviews. The informants stated dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction with the ‘standard of English’ used in Bhutanese folk literature. However, Bhutanese texts were well thought of. An interviewee remarked:

We teach [Bhutanese folk literature] just for its beauty and for students enjoy it. Also teachers feel very comfortable teaching it. But it is difficult to construct good test items from it based on Bloom’s taxonomy as the items drawn from it don’t fulfil the criteria for good questions. It is difficult to follow the table of specifications.

Some informants viewed Bhutanese folk literature in English as culturally useful and relevant material for the English curriculum. The “expression and vocabulary” as used in Bhutanese folk literature is “rich enough to make students appreciate how the situation is being expressed and how things are being discussed,” and that the “language used there is quite enough for our students” were two interviewees’ comments. Dyenka (1999, p. 5) saw this tension in the teaching of high school English in Bhutan and said that if the “cultural and curricular conflicts” in the English curriculum were recognized and addressed, then “we will be able to help students learn English better and enable teachers to teach English better.”

Discursive possibilities of Bhutanese folk literature in English

Since English was welcomed as a necessity and not forced upon the people by empire builders (see also Dyenka, 1999) or cultural missionaries, English is viewed positively in Bhutan and is perceived even as an effective agent of cultural assertion and identity in the global community. This positive stance was reflected in English teachers’ perceptions that English offered cultural possibilities. Teachers also generally viewed English as a popular language and so could “popularize” Bhutan. An

interviewee remarked that Bhutanese folk literature in English would provide people outside Bhutan a chance to “appreciate the unique beauty, the culture and tradition, and the imaginative and creative minds of our people.” Yet, another teacher said:

English ... has become a kind of language of the aristocracy, a language of people at the higher ends of society. It has become a language of big people. ... Its status is something like this in Bhutan because when somebody speaks English, he seems like an elite person.

This English teacher’s perspective helps us to understand the inherent tensions between culture, language and curriculum against the backdrop of globalization. Crystal (1997, p. 115) notes the dilemma and ambivalent attitude with which some writers of Britain’s former colonies view the English language: “(They) see themselves as facing a dilemma: if they write in English, their work will have the chance of reaching a worldwide audience; but to write in English may mean sacrificing their cultural identity.” However, Bhutanese English teachers generally perceived a dual advantage in promoting Bhutanese folk literature in English in particular, and the English language in general. First, it is perceived as a popular language and a high status language. Second, English can expose Bhutanese cultures to the outside world. So it provides discursive possibilities to the cultures which otherwise would stay in their oral forms and perhaps face the danger of disappearing.

The six English teachers, who were interviewed after the questionnaire data were analysed, thought that students’ interest and motivation to learn English were higher when they were exposed to culturally familiar material and prior experience. There they felt emotionally safe. These experts said students were able to express themselves better in English and engage in discussion and higher-order thinking, and thus engage in active learning. A minority (35%) thought the Bhutanese folk literature in the English curriculum would provide opportunities to appreciate

Bhutanese culture. However, there were some surveyed teachers who disapproved of English translations of Bhutanese folk literature as appropriate curriculum material for learning standard English. The six expert teachers also said that English translations of Bhutanese folk literature would promote understanding of and respect for cultural differences in contrast to the views of the secondary English teachers at large.

In summary, culturally familiar materials enhance the quality of student learning experience through increased interest and motivation to learn. Second, teachers generally viewed the role of English in terms of its ability to assert Bhutan's unique cultural identity in a globalized world. Despite the burden to teach good English, the cultural role of English translations of the oral literatures was acknowledged, but less so as a resource for standard English. Third, the six expert teachers believed that English translations of Bhutanese folk literature could help to preserve and promote culture, including the enrichment of the diverse cultural traditions that exist in Bhutan. What follows represent students' reactions to these and other issues in the action research.

Findings: Secondary students' perspectives

A comprehensive overview of the action research can be found in Thinley and Maxwell (2013a, 2013b). Here the focus is upon the students' reactions to the role of English in the curriculum. Two relevant themes were developed.

Status of English translations of Bhutanese folk literature

The Class 11 students over time generally made evaluative statements about English translations of Bhutanese folk literature in terms of the richness of vocabulary, complexity of structures, notions of 'good English,' depth and sophistication of ideas and themes, depth of feeling, and depth and sophistication of the aesthetic and cultural elements of the stories and poems they have read and discussed in the action research lessons. The

concept itself was quite sophisticated for Class 11 students. The statements in these first interviews mostly showed the informants' general awareness of the surface features of Bhutanese folk literature in English, while in the second interview, they were able to talk about its aesthetic and cultural values. For example, referring to a Bhutanese writer writing in English, one of the informants said that he could write "beautifully with his poetic imagination." And progressively in the third interview, the informants were able to compare Bhutanese folk literature with English literature from other countries.

In terms of the standard of English used in Bhutanese folk literature, opinions varied over time and across people. For example, student Khandro's first interview generalizations about standard (e.g. "things that we can see") moved to phrases in the second interview such as "plain narrative," and it was more "poetical and more interesting." By the third interview, Khandro was able to evaluate the stylistic quality of Bhutanese folk literature against external criteria for 'standard' English; a clear distinction was made between "deep feelings" in respect of literature from other countries and "plain narratives" in respect of Bhutanese folk literature. Student Wangyal held a different perspective and said that Bhutanese writers too had the ability to write beautifully about their culture and landscape. In the first interview, Wangyal used knowledge words that were part of familiar discourse (e.g. "environment"; "society"; "culture"; "tradition") and by the third interview, Wangyal was able to further elaborate his learning by referring to the spiritual (e.g. "compassion") and personal qualities of the Bhutanese people (e.g. "responsibility"). He said that his appreciation of these values increased his interest in Bhutanese folk literature. These are illustrative of the many possible examples of how most Class 11 students connected to Bhutanese cultural elements through English translations of Bhutanese folk literature.

Class 11 students attached high status to Bhutanese folk literature mostly because of its cultural and historical values.

Moreover, 18 (75%) respondents stated preference for Bhutanese folk literature in English over others. Only 3 (13%) respondents stated preference for folk literature in Dzongkha. In the second administration, the number of respondents increased to 22 (92%), that is, almost the whole class. There was also a shift from a generally naïve and banal attitudinal stance towards English translations of Bhutanese folk literature in comparison with English literature from other countries, in the beginning, to more explicit forms of evaluative and comparative understanding of the former's aesthetic, cultural and spiritual values in the end. To illustrate the pattern, in the first interview, most of the informants judged the standard of English translations of Bhutanese folk literature as simply "not high," "low," "OK," and needing "improvement." In the second interview, the informants generally recognized and appreciated the aesthetic qualities of Bhutanese folk literature in English. By the third interview, most of the informants said that English translations of Bhutanese folk literature lacked sophistication and depth as compared with English literature from other countries. The students generally found the standard of English used in Bhutanese folk literature lower than traditional English literature. Yet, generally the informants also considered Bhutanese folk literature interesting and beautiful.

Bhutanese folk literature and the role of English

In the Action Research, not much emphasis was placed on the role of English in relation to Bhutanese culture. But the learning was undertaken in English in the context of the secondary English curriculum. The 'role of English' generally includes the advantages of English translation of folk literature for Bhutanese culture, and the status of English as a global language and its implications for Bhutanese culture.

There exists an unspoken tension between Dzongkha, the national language and language of culture, and English, the language of globalization. But since the tension is not part of popular discourse, it was understandable that the students

considered it unorthodox to compare English with Dzongkha. Hence, a typical initial response was “English has become a universal language and many people even in Bhutan can read and write in English, and they can understand it.” By the third interview, some of the students showed explicit interpretive knowledge of the cultural advantages of English translations of Bhutanese folk literature. Their reason for this, included amongst others, was that English was a richer language than Dzongkha. Bhutanese folk literature in English dealt with Bhutanese culture and history, which were easy to understand. Apparently they felt more comfortable reading Bhutanese literature in English than in Dzongkha. They perceived the advantages of English translations for cross-cultural knowledge and understanding, and cultural identity. Dzongkha was more complex, they said, and lacked interest in it. Data segments from student Jigdrel’s three interviews represent a typical response pattern. In the first interview, Jigdrel did not explicitly talk about the role of English in relation to Bhutanese folk literature. In the second interview, on the other hand, he stated his preference for English more explicitly. Progressively, in the third interview Jigdrel expressed a heightened sense of awareness: “After I have been through this action research, I am also equally interested to read it in English” and “English is very important in the modern world.”

Discussion

A vast majority of the teachers believed that culturally relevant texts in English motivated the students to learn English better than those that were not. They agreed that their students learnt English better and they enjoyed learning more when the curriculum materials had familiar settings, characters, cultural concepts and themes in them. This can be set against the experiences of many of the teachers who had been at school prior to the Bhutanization of the curriculum (Maxwell, 2008) and the contextual demands of traditional texts in English. Thus, these culture-rich translations can be used in the English curricula as cultural and pedagogical resources in a language that interests

young people. These perceptions support the approach taken in policy that cultural values in children can be instilled and cultural alienation prevented (e.g. see Ura, 2009, p. 53).

Interestingly, most of the informants acknowledged the value of cultural diversity and its place in the curriculum. Moreover, the teachers generally believed that through exposure to English translations of diverse Bhutanese folk literatures, students would develop deeper understanding of diversity and its value for Bhutanese culture as a whole. These views are consonant with the government's stance on cultural diversity (eg GNHC, 2009a, p. 161).

Although the teachers acknowledged the pedagogical and cultural advantages of having Bhutanese folk literature in the English curriculum, in the interviews, some of them also admitted that the quality of English used in Bhutanese folk literature was not good enough for the students to learn 'standard English.' So, in their view, Bhutanese folk literature is not a good bridge to standard English, yet the action research study certainly showed the students' positive reactions to Bhutanese folk literature in English. Additionally, the teachers' general perception about English as a language of prestige is significant because it reflects the status of English in Bhutan, as is the case in other developing countries as shown in Hohenthal's (2003, pp. 24-42) study, and by Abdullah's (2001, p. 350) and Ayyub's (1994, pp. 211-212) claims for English in Singapore and Malaysia respectively. Moreover, English in Bhutan does not have the post-colonial overtones that it has in some other countries.

A significant contrast was seen in relation to the concept of cultural identity. In the interviews, while the students generally talked about how Bhutanese folk literature in English translations would popularize Bhutanese cultural identity outside Bhutan, the teachers were generally silent about it. On the other hand, the teachers implicitly linked the notion of identity to Dzongkha suggesting that Dzongkha was the main agent of cultural identity. This view is much closer to official policy. The students'

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perspectives represent an understanding of the emerging role of English in a globalized world. Both the perspectives are legitimate and have implications for theory and practice. While the teachers spoke with care and reverence for Dzongkha, the students spoke in terms of their aspirations about the English language in a globalized world.

The recurrent theme was that documenting the rich and diverse oral literatures from different languages in Bhutan in the form of English translations would not only help to preserve these oral traditions and their cultures, but would also enrich the existing diversity in Bhutanese culture as a whole. A generally accepted argument was that since English is a global language and its popularity in Bhutan is growing rapidly, documenting the diverse oral literatures in English not only can keep these cultures alive, but will also expose the Bhutanese culture to the outside world. However, both the teachers and students were generally silent about the more delicate issue of what would happen to the lesser known languages and cultures as a result of globalization, and the dominance of Dzongkha and English, and the cultures they represent.

Teachers and students also held complementary views regarding the status of English translations of Bhutanese folk literature. Translations were held in high esteem for their aesthetic and cultural values. However, they considered the standard of English in folk literature rather low and not appropriate as a good model of English for students to learn. These views raise a number of important issues regarding the quality of English translations, the process of selecting materials for the curriculum, and the need for more intensive study of the literary, aesthetic and cultural elements of Bhutanese folk literature so that teachers and students are able to make judgments about quality on the basis of close knowledge of the genres. There are pedagogical issues to be addressed also.

Policy documents generally attributed three commonly accepted roles to English in Bhutan - as a language of

modernization, as an official language alongside Dzongkha, and as a language of curriculum and instruction, hence as a tool for “thinking.” Teachers and students, on the other hand, showed alternative views. Although there are drawbacks in doing so, they said translating the oral literatures into English can help to popularize the oral traditions and cultural values in lesser known languages, promote intercultural empathy, and lastly, promote diversity. The deeper implications of English translations for the Bhutanese culture were not visible in the teachers’ and students’ perceptions especially in relation to minority languages themselves. Lo Bianco (2008, p. 1) says, “Languages are deeply intellectual and intensely practical. When you learn a language well, you engage in the deepest manifestations of a cultural system.”

In fact, there is likely to be cultural losses through English translations. The whole process could well hasten the decline of minority languages in Bhutan. On the other hand, translating the disparate forms of folk literature from the lesser known languages into English might help prevent these literatures from disappearing with the languages themselves. More particularly, transmission of the cultural essence of these folk literatures would be enabled. English translations would also make the diverse range of oral traditions available to the Bhutanese people as well as to the world. Of course, that is what English teachers would say. What about Dzongkha teachers? They would perhaps think differently. We suggest a similar piece of research with Dzongkha teachers. Clearly there is an academic debate to be had in this regard.

Conclusions

Three important perspectives on the role of English for oral and written forms of Bhutanese folk literature were identified. First, they can create opportunities for students to learn English in culturally familiar contexts. Second, using folk literatures that exist in different languages, but translated into English as pedagogical catalysts, will not only promote the values of cultural

diversity in school, but will also ensure the intergenerational continuity of Bhutanese culture through the education of children. Third, since English is a global language and a language of growing popularity in Bhutan, translating oral literatures into English will help to promote cultural diversity and continuity in the face of globalization.

The role of English translations of the oral traditions, and the role of English generally, and its implications for language and culture in Bhutan should be reviewed but not before empirical studies are undertaken on its spread, influence, status and impact on people's lives and their language and culture. In the age of globalization, this seems essential. While there is at present a paucity of studies on the role of English in Bhutan in relation to culture, the few statements made in English curriculum documents suggest the discursive possibilities of English, as beautifully sketched here:

The flexibility, versatility, and richness of English allow it to be used in a variety of circumstances and to be used by the Bhutanese people to meet their own goals ... The cultural and intellectual resources of the English-speaking world and the formulations of philosophy, jurisprudence and economics, to mention a few, have been opened to the Bhutanese people directly. In return, Bhutan has been able to share with the international community its rich cultural and spiritual heritage and, in the ensuing dialogues, enrich the intellectual resource of the world (CAPSD, 2006a, p. ix; CAPSD, 2006c, p. x; CAPSD, 2005d, p. xi; CAPSD, 2005f, p. vii).

While the English language presents possibilities for the survival of the oral traditions, the study has brought to light a number of issues that have not been attended to, including the quality and cultural authenticity of English translations of Bhutanese folk literature, and the role of English in Bhutan's multicultural and multilingual landscape. The present study helps

to understand that while the oral and written forms of Bhutanese folk literature can be used as pedagogical resources, success will depend on the epistemological approach of the English curriculum and the teachers' understanding of folk literature and its cultural value. Not so well known is how to teach about culture in a multicultural environment (see Thinley & Maxwell, 2013b). Finally, this study has shown possibilities and starting points for more sustained work in folk literature education, including educational policy, curricula, pedagogy, professional support in schools, teacher training, and folk literature studies in Bhutan.

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