



The Price of Proficiency: Assessing the Erosion of Nyishi Orality in an English-Dominant Educational Landscape

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Abstract

This research investigates the complex tension between the adoption of English-medium education and the sustained vitality of the Nyishi language, the largest indigenous community in Arunachal Pradesh, India. As English-dominant schooling becomes the primary vehicle for socio-economic mobility, it simultaneously functions as a powerful agent of linguistic shift, marginalizing Nyishi orality the traditional repository of the community's cosmology, customary laws, and ecological knowledge. Through a qualitative analysis, this study examines how institutionalized English pedagogy inadvertently devalues vernacular oral traditions, creating a generational "proficiency gap" where the mastery of academic English correlates with the erosion of indigenous linguistic competence. The findings reveal that while English proficiency is essential for modern integration, the current educational framework lacks structural mechanisms to integrate, preserve, or validate the oral-centric heritage of the Nyishi people. This paper argues for a decolonial pedagogical approach that moves beyond monolithic language policies, proposing a "bilingual bridge" model that fosters English proficiency without necessitating the abandonment of ancestral orality. By situating the Nyishi experience within the broader discourse of global linguistic homogenization, this research underscores the urgent need to redefine educational success in a way that reconciles professional advancement with the preservation of indigenous cultural identity.

Keywords: Nyishi language, orality, English-medium instruction, mother tongue education, Arunachal Pradesh, indigenous knowledge, language erosion, multilingual education

1. Introduction

Nyishi identity is deeply tied to vernacular speech and rich oral traditions embedded in ritual, festivals, and everyday life (Sneha & LI, 2021; Ramya, 2018). The Nyishi, one of the largest tribal groups of Arunachal Pradesh in Northeast India, possess a vibrant oral heritage that encompasses ritual speech, cosmological narratives, ecological knowledge, and festive performance. This orality functions as the primary medium through which cultural memory, values, and intergenerational knowledge are transmitted. Yet English and other dominant languages, promoted through schooling and globalization, increasingly shape aspirations and opportunities in Arunachal Pradesh (Sneha & LI, 2021).

Across Asia, English-medium instruction (EMI) has expanded rapidly, often marginalizing local languages and weakening linguistic diversity (Kirkpatrick, 2011; Fang & Hu, 2022). In the Indian context, tribal communities face particular vulnerabilities: the constitutional provisions for mother-tongue education remain largely unimplemented for minority languages, and English-medium schooling continues to be positioned as the gateway to socioeconomic mobility. For communities like the Nyishi, where formal literacy in the mother tongue remains nascent and where oral tradition constitutes the very spine of cultural life, such educational arrangements carry profound consequences.

This paper situates Nyishi concerns within this broader pattern and foregrounds the stakes for orality stories, ritual speech, indigenous knowledge, when English proficiency becomes the main educational goal (Sumartana et al., 2025; Adnyana et al., 2025). While no systematic empirical study directly measures the impact of EMI on Nyishi orality in classrooms, a rich body of analogous research from Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Manipur, Nigeria, and other Arunachali tribal communities enables a rigorous conceptual and comparative examination of the mechanisms, trajectories, and possible counter-strategies involved. By bringing together these comparative insights, this paper makes a case for why the Nyishi community and Arunachal's language policymakers, must take seriously the erosion risks posed by English-dominant schooling and invest in community-rooted alternatives that honour and sustain Nyishi orality.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine how English-dominant schooling can contribute to the marginalization of Nyishi language and orality, drawing on analogous EMI cases from South Asia and beyond.
- To relate Nyishi language loss debates to wider discussions on mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) for tribal communities in India.
- To identify community-based and policy-level strategies that could protect Nyishi orality while ensuring access to wider opportunities.

3. Research Questions

The study addresses the following research questions:

1. How does an English-dominant medium of instruction tend to reshape language hierarchies and identities in indigenous communities comparable to the Nyishi ?
2. What existing evidence suggests that the erosion of the mother tongue in schooling leads to weakening of oral traditions and intergenerational knowledge transfer ?
3. Which mother-tongue-based or community-driven models elsewhere in Arunachal and South Asia provide relevant lessons for sustaining Nyishi orality in an English-dominant landscape ?

4. Literature Review

4.1 Nyishi Vernacular, Identity and Policy

Nyishi language is described as facing serious pressure, with language loss felt as identity loss in Arunachal Pradesh (Sneha & LI, 2021). The community has taken some institutional steps to address this: efforts include making Nyishi compulsory in government and local schools at least at the primary level, and publishing newspapers and journals in Nyishi (Sneha & LI, 2021).

Festivals like Nyokum perform identity and transmit language and values through ritualized performance (Sneha & LI, 2021; Ramya, 2018). Broader ethnohistorical work stresses oral tradition as a key source for reconstructing Nyishi pasts, while warning against relying on a single disciplinary lens (Showren, 2019).

Ethnography of Nyishi cosmology documents extensive ritual speech, narratives, and oral ecological knowledge mediated by shamans and storytellers (Aisher, 2006). In Arunachal, Article 371H protections for economic and cultural interests, and tribal literary societies and SCERT/CIL initiatives, are cited as frameworks for supporting languages like Nyishi, though implementation challenges remain (Sneha & LI, 2021). However, these works do not yet link Nyishi orality directly to English-medium schooling, leaving a critical conceptual gap that this paper aims to fill through comparative analysis.

4.2 English-Medium Instruction and Indigenous Languages

Work from Nepal shows EMI policies misframe and stigmatize indigenous mother tongues, constructing deficit identities and limiting epistemic access for minority students (Phyak & Sah, 2022). Policymakers often profess multilingual ideals but enact medium-of-instruction (MOI) policies that sideline indigenous languages due to structural pressures and discourses around English (Poudel & Choi, 2020). Among Teochew-speaking students in China, EMI combined with dominant Putonghua marginalizes the L1 in academic domains and is seen as endangering minority languages (Fang & Hu, 2022).

A broader review of EMI in Asia argues that early and heavy English use is pedagogically unsound for most primary children and threatens local languages and children's sense of identity (Kirkpatrick, 2011). In Bangladesh, Bangla nationalism combined with neoliberal English policy distracts from harms to indigenous communities and languages, and a mother-tongue-based multilingual approach is recommended

to protect linguistic rights (Ahmed, 2024). Historical analysis from Sri Lanka shows that adopting English as MOI diminished the vitality and intergenerational transmission of indigenous languages and cultural knowledge (Manage, 2023). Early-education research from Nigeria similarly finds that English as MOI in nursery and primary schools, combined with parents not raising children in indigenous languages, leads to declining use and potential “death” of these languages, and argues that mother tongue should guide early education (Enu et al., 2026).

4.3 Mother Tongue, Orality and Educational Models

General work on globalization and mother tongues stresses that the dominance of English in curricula marginalizes indigenous languages, disrupts intergenerational communication, and erodes traditional practices and indigenous knowledge systems (Sumartana et al., 2025). A broad critical study of indigenous languages in education argues that when these languages are excluded from schools, losses are cultural and cognitive, not only linguistic (Adnyana et al., 2025). Where integrated, indigenous MOI improves engagement, comprehension, and cultural pride but faces obstacles such as lack of trained teachers and materials (Adnyana et al., 2025).

Mother tongue education is shown to support language preservation and community empowerment by affirming cultural legitimacy and enabling intergenerational transmission of oral histories and knowledge systems (Adnyana et al., 2025).

In Manipur’s hill districts, a strong disconnect between home languages and MOI (English or Manipuri) is found; schools lack local-language textbooks and trained teachers, yet communities support mother-tongue use in early education for better comprehension and identity formation (Mataina, 2025).

4.4 Arunachal Examples: Galo and Lisu (Yobin)

For the Galo tribe, oral narratives encapsulate indigenous knowledge of forest, history, myths, and stories, and are increasingly fragile; documentation and integration into mother-tongue textbooks as a third language aim to preserve this heritage among youth (Kamki, 2025). The Lisu (Yobin) case shows that many tribal members see education as crucial for preserving heritage, and support bilingual instruction, ritual documentation, and school-based cultural events so schooling does not sideline local languages or reduce customs to mere folklore (Gaddapati, 2025). These examples from Arunachal suggest that tribal communities can use schooling itself as a tool for safeguarding orality when mother tongue and ritual knowledge are institutionally supported.

4.5 Indigenous Learning Spaces and Ritual Institutions

The Yamphu community’s Mangsuk ritual institution functions as an indigenous learning system where Mundhum (oral tradition) and mother tongue are transmitted between generations, in contrast to formal education in Nepali and English where younger people no longer speak Yamphu regularly (Yamphu, 2025). Mangsuk is described as an unrecognized learning space that should be legitimized by the formal education system for its socio-linguistic role (Yamphu, 2025). Nyishi ritual and festival institutions documented elsewhere may play analogous roles, although this is not explicitly connected to schools in the available literature (Aisher, 2006; Ramya, 2018).

4.6 Policy and Rights Frameworks

At the Indian national level, only a small fraction of mother tongues are used as MOI or taught as subjects, which especially disadvantages tribal children and contributes to language and knowledge loss, despite constitutional provisions for mother-tongue education for minorities (, 2023). Scholars call for state-level mother-tongue-based multilingual education policies and collaboration with tribal organizations for revival and educational adoption of tribal languages (, 2023). In Arunachal, Article 371H and the initiatives of tribal literary societies and SCERT/CIL

represent existing frameworks that, if fully implemented, could provide meaningful support for Nyishi language in schools (Sneha & LI, 2021).

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 The ‘Price of Proficiency’: Patterns from Comparative EMI Contexts

Across multiple contexts, EMI and dominant-language MOI are consistently associated with the following consequences for indigenous communities:

- Marginalization of indigenous languages in school domains, even where communities remain multilingual at home.
- Deficit constructions and epistemic injustice, whereby indigenous linguistic knowledge is erased or stigmatized within formal educational settings .
- Threats to cultural identity and oral traditions, as schooling shifts the valued codes of knowledge transmission away from mother tongues and toward dominant languages.

These patterns suggest that for Nyishi children, increasing English proficiency via EMI if not carefully balanced with robust mother-tongue support may come at the cost of reduced Nyishi usage in formal domains, weakened valuation of Nyishi oral knowledge, and shifts in identity away from vernacular anchoring. The “price of proficiency” is therefore not merely linguistic but encompasses cognitive, cultural, and epistemic dimensions of loss.

5.2 Nyishi Orality at Risk: Indirect Evidence

The Nyishi are already described as facing problems of vernacular language maintenance, with globalization and Westernization reducing attention to tribal-language media and practices (Sneha & LI, 2021). Language loss is explicitly cast as a form of identity loss, indicating that the community itself recognizes the deep stakes involved (Sneha & LI, 2021). Oral traditions, festivals, and ritual speeches constitute key vehicles of Nyishi culture and identity (Aisher, 2006; Ramya, 2018).

When young generations shift away from the vernacular in education, comparative cases from the Yamphu community, Enugu in Nigeria, and Manipur indicate that younger people may stop using the mother tongue regularly, concentrating it among elders and thereby weakening intergenerational oral transmission (Yamphu, 2025; Enu et al., 2026). While specific empirical evidence for Nyishi classrooms

is not yet available in the published literature, the convergence of these comparative patterns suggests a plausible “erosion scenario” for Nyishi orality unless it is institutionally strengthened within schooling contexts.

5.3 Mother Tongue, Orality and Educational Alternatives

Evidence from other tribal and indigenous contexts offers several protective mechanisms directly relevant to Nyishi:

- **Third-language and MTB-MLE models:** The Galo community’s recognition of Galo Ennam and the introduction of mother-tongue textbooks aim to preserve indigenous knowledge for youth (Kamki, 2025). Comparative policy work recommends similar mother-tongue-based multilingual policies for tribal learners across India (2023).
- **Schools as sites of cultural events and ritual reenactment:** The Lisu case advocates school-based cultural events, documentation, and ritual reenactments to keep practices alive within modern schooling contexts (Gaddapati, 2025).
- **Recognition of indigenous institutions:** The Mangsuk institution among the Yamphu is proposed as a learning space that should be acknowledged by the modern education system for its socio-linguistic and knowledge-transfer role (Yamphu, 2025).

For the Nyishi, similar integration of festivals, ritual speech, and oral narratives into curricular and school spaces combined with compulsory Nyishi teaching as already initiated could meaningfully mitigate the “price” of English proficiency by ensuring that orality remains central to the educational experience (Sneha & LI, 2021; Kamki, 2025). These strategies need not be mutually exclusive with English learning; rather, they represent complementary investments in linguistic and cultural sustainability.

5.4 Constraints and Tensions

Several recurring constraints complicate efforts to protect orality in the context of formal education:

- **Resource and capacity gaps:** The lack of trained teachers, teaching materials, and orthographic standardization limits effective mother-tongue education in tribal contexts .
- **Community anxieties about English:** Parents and communities may fear that a strong emphasis on mother tongue will limit English proficiency and, consequently, socioeconomic mobility .
- **Policy ‘distractions’ and misframing:** Nationalist and neoliberal discourses often obscure indigenous language harms, while official multilingual commitments coexist with practices that expand EMI and marginalize local languages.

These tensions likely also shape Nyishi educational realities, although direct empirical studies remain to be conducted. Addressing them will require not only policy innovation but sustained community engagement, teacher capacity building, and the development of Nyishi-language teaching and learning materials that honour oral traditions while preparing students for the demands of a multilingual world.

6. Conclusion

Across diverse global and regional contexts, English-dominant education is consistently linked to the marginalization of indigenous languages, the weakening of oral traditions, and threats to cultural identity and intergenerational knowledge. For the Nyishi of Arunachal Pradesh, existing scholarship already flags the pressures on vernacular language maintenance and connects language closely to identity and ritual life. The comparative evidence examined in this paper strongly suggests that the spread of English in schooling poses real risks to Nyishi orality if not counterbalanced by deliberate institutional, curricular, and policy interventions.

At the same time, models from the Galo, Lisu, and Yamphu communities, as well as from broader MTB-MLE research across South and Southeast Asia, demonstrate that it is possible to combine access to global languages with strong mother-tongue-based and community-rooted educational practices. Protecting Nyishi orality in an English-dominant landscape will require not only compulsory Nyishi teaching already an aspiration articulated by community institutions but also deeper curricular integration of oral narratives, festivals, and ritual institutions. This must be backed by dedicated language policies, the development of teaching materials, and sustained investment in teacher training, so that English proficiency is not purchased at the irreversible cost of Nyishi voices and stories.

Future research should pursue systematic empirical work inside Nyishi-medium and English-medium classrooms in Arunachal Pradesh, examining how language hierarchies operate in practice, how students negotiate their identities, and what community-driven interventions are most effective in sustaining orality. Such research will be essential to move from conceptual diagnosis to evidence-based action for the preservation of one of Northeast India's most distinctive cultural heritages.

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