

Promise and perils of mother tongue education¹

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Abstract

Under the leadership of UNESCO and other international organizations, over 150 nations have pledged themselves to provide universal basic education. They have adopted as a specific goal,

...ensuring that by 2015 all children, particularly girls, children in difficult circumstances and those belonging to ethnic minorities, have access to and complete free and compulsory primary education of good quality (The Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting our Collective Commitments, adopted by the World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 26-28 April 2000, Paris, UNESCO, 2000, para 7.)

This paper discusses means for achieving this goal in linguistically diverse societies. It describes the promises and perils of education through the child's first language or mother tongue, drawing from the speaker's experiences with three national programs, each in different phases:

- *those that are in the preparatory phase, such as the mother tongue education program in Vanuatu*
- *relatively new programs, such as the mother tongue primary education program in Eritrea*
- *well-established programs, such as the intercultural and bilingual education program in Guatemala.*

The paper goes on to discuss internal support of mother tongue-first education programs—the decision to begin, language planning and development, materials preparation, teacher selection and training, research and evaluation—and external support such as the role of national and local government, community involvement, the difficulties of taking a pilot program to a national scale, and the role of outside agencies.

Introduction

We know that most children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, demonstrate increased self-confidence and continue to perform better than those who start school in a new language. The outlook for successful education is brighter when the school builds on the foundation of the mother tongue in teaching a second and third language. Such is the *promise* of mother tongue education. But there are *perils* as well. They include the possibility of ineffective teaching for a number of reasons and lack of support for mother tongue education on the part of teachers, parents and government.

In this article I describe both the promise and perils as they have played out in three countries with three different histories of mother tongue education: Vanuatu in the South Pacific, Eritrea on the horn of Africa, and Guatemala in Central America. All three are multilingual countries, as are virtually all countries of the world, but these three are each at different stages in the development of mother tongue education programs. Vanuatu has just begun a national program for mother tongue instruction. Eritrea's program is a little more than 10 years old. And Guatemala has a national bilingual education program that goes back more than 20 years. It is centralized, but coordinates with other bilingual programs at the state (called "department") level.

Vanuatu

Vanuatu is composed of a string of small islands in the South Pacific. The population of about 200,000 speaks more than 100 languages. With those numbers, it may be one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. Although some people speak English and French as second languages, the *lingua*

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franca for most is Bislama, an English-based pidgin or creole.

From 1906-1980, Vanuatu, then called “New Hebrides,” was ruled jointly by the British and French. Missionaries provided schooling in local languages during the early part of this period. When the two colonial powers took over education they set up two educational systems, with roughly half of the schools using English as the medium of instruction and the other half, French.

Vanuatu gained independence in 1980. The constitution specified Bislama as the national language and English and French as the international languages. In the last 10 years the country has worked hard to unify the English and French curricula. Now Vanuatu has turned its attention to the important issue of the language of instruction.

Rethinking the languages of instruction

I visited Vanuatu on two occasions for the World Bank—once in 1986 and again in 1998. On both occasions I found that language was a very controversial topic. However, in 1986 there was little interest on the part of school officials in changing the language of instruction. The emphasis was on improving the teaching of English or French, according to which language the school had used historically. (When new schools were added, they were assigned to one of the two languages to keep the balance equal.) By the 1998 visit, the situation had changed. Many in the school system wanted to find a way of teaching children in a language they understood.

In 1998 I worked with a team that was developing a master plan for education. School officials were enthusiastic about the use of local languages. Some of them had been educated in mission schools that had used the local language and they had gone on to successful learning of English or French. They knew that mother tongue education in the early years could lead to educational success. In addition, the World Bank had sponsored trips for key persons in the Ministry of Education to observe the education reform in Papua New Guinea.(PNG). That country, with its more than 800 languages, was in the process of extending the use of local languages as the media of instruction throughout the first three years of primary school. They were—and are—transforming village schools that had used the local language and been outside the formal education system into schools for pre-school through Grade 3, using the local language. Grade 4 and above continue to be taught in English. The Vanuatu officials had returned to their country enthusiastic about what was happening in PNG and interested in adopting this model for Vanuatu.

According to David Klaus, a former World Bank official with whom I worked on the master plan for education in Vanuatu, the World Bank and the government of Vanuatu prepared an education project that included two years in Kindergarten in the local language and then Grade 1 in English or French. (This plan did not match the PNG model of three years of mother tongue primary school.) In 2001, the World Bank and the government of Vanuatu approved the project. But when new elections brought a change of government, the new government officials did not take the actions necessary for the World Bank loan to take effect. After a year, the Bank closed the project.

Current status of mother tongue education in Vanuatu

In November 2003, when I spoke about Vanuatu at the Bangkok conference, I did not have the most recent information on mother tongue education in that country. Based on the cancellation of the World Bank project, I assumed that Vanuatu lacked the political will to go forward with vernacular language education. However, in January 2004, I received an e-mail from Janet Stahl, an SIL educator stationed in Vanuatu, with whom I had worked on my 1998 visit to the country. She wrote, “Much is happening in the country with regard to vernacular literacy and education... The government did not accept the World Bank project because of economic concerns but they have sought smaller aid packages from Australia, New Zealand, France, Britain, and the European Union.”

Vanuatu's master plan for education now stipulates that the vernacular be used as the medium of instruction for preschool and the first year of primary school. In addition, one subject will be taught in the vernacular throughout the primary grades. The government has decided to make the primary schools responsible for the vernacular classes, using trained teachers rather than individuals chosen by the community (as in the Papua New Guinea model).

In 1998, SIL Vanuatu supported training in Papua New Guinea for four Ni-Vanuatu so that they could learn about implementing vernacular programs. The Ni-Vanuatu completed their training by initiating practical projects in their own language communities. With assistance from SIL, the four trained Ni-Vanuatu developed three two-week workshops for class 1 teachers and zone curriculum advisors. Under government sponsorship, they have been conducting this first course throughout the country. In addition, they are inviting people from the communities to help write stories that will support the literacy programs.

The Bahai'i community, SIL and World Vision continue to implement non-formal literacy programs for adults in the vernacular languages. The Oral Traditions Project of the Vanuatu Cultural Center has published four booklets in 12 languages for teaching vernacular literacy for community kindergartens. They are also developing social science and history materials appropriate for Vanuatu children.

Promise and perils

The situation for effective education in Vanuatu is full of promise. As with any innovative program, there are perils associated with the Vanuatu educational plan. The vernacular pilot projects have met with mixed success. However, problems in the pilot project have been mainly the result of logistic and administrative difficulties rather than language or teaching problems. As Janet Stahl wrote, "The new government is very interested in vernacular education and improving education overall.... I feel certain that progress is being made for improving education in Vanuatu. It is an exciting place to work at this time."

Eritrea

Eritrea is a country of four million people, situated on the horn of Africa. For roughly the first half of the 20th century, it was an Italian colony. After World War II there was a short military occupation by the British, followed by federation with Ethiopia and then incorporation by Ethiopia. For over 30 years Eritreans struggled for independence. In 1991 they succeeded and in 1993 a nationwide vote ratified that independence.

Eritrea has nine indigenous languages, although most Eritreans speak either Tigrigna or Tigre, related Semitic languages, as their mother tongue. The official languages are Tigrigna, Arabic, and English. The medium of instruction for primary schools is the language of the community and English is used in Grade 6 and beyond.

During the Italian colonial period, the few schools that had been established used Italian as the language of instruction. During the Ethiopian occupation, education was in Amharic, which is not spoken as a mother tongue by any of the indigenous population. Before independence most Eritreans had decided, for both political and educational reasons, to use local languages for schooling. By 2002 the full national curriculum for elementary had been issued in eight of the nine Eritrean languages. Communities were encouraged to use their local language but were not obliged to do so.

How well is the new education system functioning? In essence it is doing well, considering the very short period—a little more than 10 years—that it has been in place. At least four evaluations have been carried out.

In 1996 I participated in the first evaluation of the mother tongue program. I was a consultant for SIL.

International, assigned to work with the language panels of the Ministry of Education. We found that about 60 percent of the schools had opted for the local language of the community as the medium of instruction. But there were very few textbooks available in the community languages and teachers relied on student recitation and copying. In short, there was much room for improvement. As evaluators, we recommended more textbooks and teacher training.

In 1998 and 1999 the Ministry undertook its own evaluation and found effective learning in some subjects in some grades. The weakest areas were mother tongue reading in Grade 1 and English reading in Grade 4.

In 2001 the Ministry took part in a UNESCO-UNICEF international educational assessment. Student performance scores were low overall, with the lowest in mathematics and the somewhat better scores in mother tongue reading in Grades 3 and 5.

In 2002 the Ministry undertook a detailed examination of reading instruction in primary schools with the help of consultants from SIL International. The team tested 2400 students in five schools in eight language areas and interviewed 120 teachers. They found that the two most critical areas for improvement were the teaching of reading in the mother tongue in Grade 1 and preparing children to study through English in Grade 6 and beyond. Reading weaknesses were due to inadequate pre-reading instruction, poorly designed and used primers, and no practice in reading connected text in Grade 1. The evaluation team also found that the least experienced teachers were assigned to Grade 1. Their teaching emphasized copying and memorization. With regard to preparation for study in English, the team judged the English curriculum to be weak because it contained few of the words and grammatical structures that children would need later when English became the language of instruction. In addition, not enough time was allotted for English instruction.

The team made two principal recommendations. The first was to revamp Grade 1 and to assign to Grade 1 the best prepared and best paid teachers; the second was to provide an extra year between Grades 5 and 6 to support the transition into English.

The Ministry accepted these recommendations, but questions remain as to whether they will be able to implement them. They are radical recommendations and even the most established school system might find them difficult to put into place. However, there is one new and encouraging development: a new teachers college to prepare teachers for mother tongue instruction.

Promise and perils

The promise of mother tongue education is there. Eritrea is a country with a strong political will to fully educate its citizens. The country is determined to provide initial education in a language children will understand and then to add a second language for wider communication. But there are perils as well. The use of the mother tongue is necessary but not sufficient for high quality education. To take advantage of schooling in the mother tongue the children must be engaged instructionally, not just talked at or required to copy from the board. As Susan Malone pointed out at this conference,² both the educational foundation established in the mother tongue and the bridge to learning through the second language must be strong and of high quality.

Guatemala

Guatemala is the oldest of the three countries, having gained its independence from Spain in 1821. It is also the largest, with a population of about 12 million, of which about 40 percent are of Mayan Indian descent. Guatemalans speak over 20 indigenous languages, most of which are Mayan languages.

² Susan Malone, plenary papers, this site.

Spanish is the official language. Local languages may be used in primary school, but Spanish is the medium of instruction in the higher grades.

Guatemala has the highest illiteracy rate in Latin America. One reason for this is the low level of spending on education, one of the lowest in Latin America. The country has had a history of internal violence—warfare between military and paramilitary forces and the rural people (most of whom are of Mayan ancestry). The violence came to a nominal end with the Peace Accords of 1996, which brought the needs of indigenous and underserved populations to the forefront of the national agenda.

Programs

Guatemala has several kinds of bilingual or mother tongue programs. In 1983 and again in 1987, as a staff member of the World Bank, I visited the oldest of these programs, now called the Directorate of Bilingual and Intercultural Education. In 1996, in connection with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), I visited another program for Mayan children. This one was geared specifically to multi-grade schools.

The Directorate of Bilingual and Intercultural Education is Guatemala's oldest and largest program for mother tongue education, operating in about 1200 rural schools throughout the country. Its origins go back 40 years to a kindergarten program for non-Spanish speaking children. This program aimed to improve learning by exposing the children to Spanish before they entered primary school conducted in Spanish.

In 1979 the government, with prodding and funds from USAID, began a pilot project in bilingual education. The pilot used the transition model, beginning instruction in the language of the children, with some instruction in Spanish and then transitioning gradually to Spanish-only in Grade 3 or 4. The pilot consisted of forty schools, ten schools in each of the areas inhabited by the four largest indigenous language groups. These forty schools were paired with a control group of forty schools in the same areas, in which the children received instruction only in Spanish.

The pilot project was a major undertaking. Textbooks were written in the four major languages. Mayan-language speaking teachers were trained to use their Mayan mother tongue in the classroom. They were encouraged to appreciate their Mayan heritage, both language and the culture. All this occurred at a time of extensive civil strife when it was dangerous to support any initiative related to the Mayan people.

Preliminary evaluations of the pilot project showed that Grade 1 and Grade 2 bilingually taught children were learning Spanish as well as their counterparts in the all-Spanish schools and that they dropped out less and were promoted more than their peers in all-Spanish classes.

Based on this success, the program was expanded to 400 schools, then 800. By 1999 the status of the program had been raised to that of a Directorate within the Ministry structure. The program was providing instruction in 14 languages for 230,000 rural children in 1200 schools.

The Directorate of Bilingual and Intercultural Education operates in the states (or departments) with large numbers of Mayan language speaking children. There are also a number of other bilingual education programs that operate on the department level. In El Quiche, a department in the mountainous highlands, USAID is supporting the Access to Intercultural Bilingual Education Project, which aims to improve the quality of pre-primary and primary intercultural bilingual education. This program operates along four lines: training teachers and others; developing and providing classroom posters, games, and other materials; increasing parents' participation in and understanding of intercultural bilingual education; and coordinating policy with other segments of the Ministry. Other donors, such as the European Union and German Technical Assistance Agency, support bilingual education projects in other parts of the country.

Promise

Much of the initial promise of bilingual education has been realized. The Directorate for Intercultural and Bilingual Education, which has provided relevant education to rural indigenous boys and girls, has become an integral part of the Ministry. There has been wide acceptance of bilingual education on the part of parent and community groups. For some people, acceptance has come because of the payoffs associated with speaking Spanish. For others, bilingual education has meant a way of valuing and preserving Mayan language and culture.

A major accomplishment has been the educational development of Mayan professionals supported by scholarships and work opportunities in the various programs. Twenty-five years ago, when the pilot project began, there were only a few Mayan professionals; now there are many. They belong to organizations such as the Academy for Mayan Languages, the National Council of Mayan Education and the Association of Mayan Researchers of Guatemala, organizations that work to preserve and strengthen the place of Mayan language and culture in the country.

The bilingually educated students do well in classrooms where the program is well implemented. An evaluation of students from 1986-1991 showed that bilingually taught children outperformed students in comparison schools on seven out of 10 measures of academic achievement; on the three other measures the average scores were about the same.

A later evaluation, covering 1991-1996, revealed that bilingual schools are more cost effective than Spanish-only schools, even with the additional operating costs. It costs less to produce a sixth grade graduate from the bilingual schools than from the all-Spanish schools because those in the all-Spanish schools often enter at an older age and repeat grades more often.

A 2002 study of sixth grade graduates from three phases of the bilingual program compared their achievement to counterparts in the all-Spanish schools graduating in the same years. This study found that bilingually educated students entered school at an earlier age, used more Mayan language with the investigators, and demonstrated mastery of Spanish at about the same level as their counterparts despite less time and focus on Spanish in the bilingual school.

In addition, this study of grade 6 graduates found that the importance of bilingual education and the teaching of Mayan culture have been widely accepted by graduates from both types of school, who said that, if possible, they would send their children to a bilingual school. The program has provided means for Mayans to preserve their identity and language during a period in Guatemalan history when both were threatened.

Perils

Naturally the situation in Guatemala with regard to bilingual education has not been entirely rosy. The Directorate is part of the regular Ministry. It pays the salaries of the teachers and supervisors. But without the additional funds that it received from U.S. funding in its earlier years, it is able to offer little in the way of providing materials or in-service training.

Gaining support for the bilingual programs has been a challenge. Ministry support and commitment have fluctuated. In the beginning it was strong; in later years, much less so. Also in the beginning, there was the problem of a lack of community acceptance, but the study of the grade 6 graduates found that this is much less of a problem now. Some programs, like the one in El Quiche, are successfully bringing parents into the activities of the school and helping them understand the advantages of the bilingual program. Support from monolingual teachers has never been solid. This is understandable, given their background and training, but it is a factor that the programs must confront because the lack of support undermines social approval of bilingual education in general.

Coverage still falls short. Of approximately 900,000 Mayan children age 6-12 years; only about 200,000 receive some type of bilingual intercultural education.

Consistent implementation has also been a problem. Bilingually educated students do well in classrooms where the program is well implemented, but there are many gaps. One study found that in the bilingual schools, teachers used the Mayan language only 24% of the time, Spanish the rest of the time. Most of the use of the Mayan languages occurred in preschool, tapering to only 9 percent by grade 3. Many of the so-called bilingual education teachers are actually monolingual in Spanish. There have been difficulties matching teacher assignments to the local languages. And even when the language of the teacher and community are matched, the teacher who speaks the community language may not be at ease with reading or writing in the language. When using bilingual textbooks, teachers may be more comfortable with the Spanish version of the lesson, thus neglecting the Mayan language version.

There have also been problems with availability and use of textbooks. A recent study—the one of the grade 6 graduates mentioned earlier—found that both the graduates of the bilingual schools and those from the all-Spanish schools reported that they had seldom used textbooks in their classes. This was disappointing news, especially after the extensive time and money that had been devoted to production of texts. And when textbooks *were* used, their primary function was as a model for students to copy.

Adequate teacher training has been a constant problem. Programs in some of the Guatemalan teacher colleges have trained teachers to build students' cognition in both languages, but these teacher colleges are able to graduate only 150-170 students each year. With expansion of the program, on-the-job or in-service training has attempted to fill the gap. For example, in 2001, the Directorate for Bilingual Education trained 10,000 teachers for five days in reading and writing their own language. Programs from the smaller projects have trained teachers as well. The project in El Quiche emphasizes active methods of teaching in their teacher training programs.

Limited government finances are a major problem. When outside funds are available, programs flourish. When they are not, the programs wither.

Thus, the situation in Guatemala is far from perfect. The overall political situation is delicate and dangerous. Recognizing a variety of cultures and languages involves sharing power. Not all parts of Guatemalan society may be ready for the kind of power sharing that is one of the requirements, and fruits, of bilingual education.

Conclusions

What are the lessons from these three countries? There are at least two.

First is the importance of teacher training. Planning for bilingual education programs is only the beginning of effective education in a linguistically diverse society. Teachers need training in using their first language in the classroom; materials have to be appropriate, available, and used. If they are not being used (the case in Guatemala from the recent study of the Grade 6 graduates), it is important to learn why. Most teachers need training in methodology so that they can exploit the advantages of teaching in a language children understand. This means less emphasis on rote learning, repetition, and copying and more on peer-to-peer interaction and on encouraging students to think for themselves, read, and come to their own conclusions. Teachers also need good materials and methods for teaching the second language. All of this is true for Eritrea and Guatemala, and will be the case for Vanuatu, if and when they establish mother tongue education on a large scale. Such enormous undertakings require commitment and understanding.³

³ I was encouraged after I gave this talk at the Bangkok conference to learn from \ Vibeke Jensen of

The second lesson from the experiences of Vanuatu, Eritrea, and Guatemala is that political will is essential for mother tongue programs to begin and to thrive. Vanuatu has recently demonstrated the political will—at least to begin mother tongue programs. Eritrea did so as well when, during its armed struggle for independence, the country decided that all Eritrean mother tongues would be used in education if their speakers desired. The Eritrea slogan then and now is “Unity through Diversity.” In Guatemala the bilingual programs now receive support from many indigenous groups, which represent about 40 percent of population, but much less so from the more powerful non-indigenous community. At first many in the governing elites supported bilingual education but as the program has expanded, other innovative programs have been initiated and support for bilingual education from the ruling classes has diminished. What does that mean for the future? We can hope that those educators and others who have seen the benefits of bilingual education—the promises fulfilled—will be strong enough to demand from their government the best education possible for their children—education that validates the children’s home culture as well and also removes the barriers that inhibit them from participating fully in the wider world.

Sources

Information on Eritrea and Guatemala from Nadine Dutcher, 2004, *Expanding Educational Opportunity in Linguistically Diverse Societies*, revised edition, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington D.C. <ww.cal.org>.

Information on Vanuatu from personal communication with David Klaus, formerly with the World Bank, Washington D.C. and Janet Stahl, SIL Vanuatu.

UNESCO Bangkok that UNESCO Bangkok had developed a “Toolkit for Creating Inclusive, Learning-Friendly Environments” to be used by educators and others to improve the learning within and outside the classroom. If widely used, the strategies discussed in the Toolkit would go a long way toward addressing the teaching challenges that all teachers face, whether they are working in a monolingual or a multilingual environment.