What strategies can be used to assist language-in-education policy makers to promote policies that support the use of non-dominant languages in education?

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1.1 Introduction

Most nations are linguistically diverse, yet language-in-education policies typically privilege a few dominant languages. Consequently, as much as 40 percent of the global population may not have access to education in the language(s) they know best (UNESCO 2016).

Over the past two decades, several countries in the Global South have increased the use of non-dominant languages (NDL) in education. Bringing NDLs into national education systems in multilingual countries is essential to improving the quality and equity of educational opportunities.

This chapter analyzes the role of various actors in developing inclusive language-in-education policies and practices. Sources include national case studies, United Nations documents, and a recently introduced theoretical framework (Kosonen and Benson 2021). We do not claim to have solutions guaranteed to work in all contexts. Rather, our aim is to provide suggestions for stakeholders interested in promoting the wider use of NDLs in education.

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1 Non-dominant language (NDL) refers to a language or language variety spoken in a given place that is not considered the most prominent in terms of number, prestige or official use by the government and/or the education system (Kosonen 2010). First language or L1 refers to the language that a speaker: (a) has learnt first; (b) identifies with; (c) knows best; or (d) uses most (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000; UNESCO 2003).
1.2 Envisioning language policy change

Susan Malone’s diagram of the components of effective multilingual education (MLE) programmes includes “Supportive MTB-MLE Policy” (see the figure below). But what are MLE advocates to do when a supportive environment does not exist, or when policies that look good on paper are not implemented, or when policies forbid the use of NDLs at school?

Figure: Essential components of successful MTB MLE programs (UNESCO 2018, used by permission).

Kosonen and Benson 2021 analyzed language policy developments in 20 countries. The resulting model provides a useful tool for visualizing policy evolution through the interaction of three stakeholder groups:

- **Actors from above**, principally high-level government entities and personnel
- **Actors from the side**, including academics, local education officials, international development organizations, etc.
- **Actors from below**, including local NGOs, religious groups, ethnolinguistic associations, etc.

Experiences in multiple countries demonstrate two main approaches through which the three groups have collaborated to impact national policies. Kosonen and Benson call these the **piloting approach** and the **advocacy approach**. The role of each actor and the steps taken over time are detailed in table 1 (Kosonen and Benson 2021, adapted with permission):
Table 1: Two possible approaches to language policy change

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Piloting - change from the side with below to above</th>
<th>Intermediate phases:</th>
<th>Possible future direction:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial phase:</strong></td>
<td>- Side actors continue piloting MLE for some time.</td>
<td>- Side actors continue as major implementers.</td>
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<td>- Side actors initiate small-scale pilot activities using NDLs.</td>
<td>- As activities expand, new NDL communities join.</td>
<td>- Actors from the side and below may become integrated.</td>
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<td>- Early on, they partner with NDL communities for linguistic and community support.</td>
<td>- Pressure from the side with supporting evidence, and demand from below lead actors from above to adopt supportive policies and allocate more resources.</td>
<td>- Actors from above may eventually accept more leading roles in bringing NDLs into education.</td>
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<td>- Written policies may or may not exist, but the use of NDLs is not prohibited.</td>
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<td>- Existing policies may be strengthened.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advocacy - change from the side to above, and then to below</th>
<th>Intermediate phases:</th>
<th>Possible future direction:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Initial phase:</strong></td>
<td>- Side actors continue piloting MLE for some time.</td>
<td>- Side actors continue as major implementers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Side actors advocate for MLE with policymakers based on access/quality arguments.</td>
<td>- Advocacy continues, focused on policymakers, gradually gaining support.</td>
<td>- Actors from the side and above may become integrated.</td>
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<td>- Written policies may support only dominant languages in education.</td>
<td>- Effectiveness convinces more grassroots actors to become engaged, and actors from above to become more supportive.</td>
<td>- New NDL communities may be included based on government framework/guidelines.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Side actors initiate small-scale pilot activities using NDLs.</td>
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<td>- Existing policies may be strengthened.</td>
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Cambodia, Mozambique, the Philippines, and Thailand exemplify the **piloting approach**. Side-level actors such as academics and NGOs initiated work with actors from below (NDL communities). At that point, actors from above (government agencies) were paying little attention to educational activities in NDL communities. The side actors worked with NDL communities to initiate small-scale literacy and early childhood education pilots. Orthographies and L1 learning materials were developed. Later, student learning achievement and parental testimonies attracted the attention of education officials. Local-level policies (e.g., MLE teacher recruitment, training, budget, etc.) were developed, and eventually new national policies were adopted. The language-in-education policy-making process was thus driven and informed by successful local projects, as well as influential side actors (Ball and Smith 2019, Kosonen and Person 2021).
Timor-Leste exemplifies the **advocacy approach**. Side-level actors including local and international NGOs and UN agencies advocated for MLE at a time when the government was focused on promoting Portuguese (Walter 2016). Piloting was seen as being politically sensitive and impractical (as few NDLs had orthographies). A prominent individual with strong connections to the government, the UN, and a local NGO emerged as a strong MLE champion. The side-actors, the champion, and the Ministry of Education then developed a policy that allowed pilot projects. This approach highlights the role of “key actors” whose contributions to successful policy change are indispensable.

### 1.3 Ideas for side actors

Side actors are crucial to policy change, as they serve as bridge-builders between NDL communities and government officials. They are also information brokers and advocates. This may include introducing globally-validated principles and practices and demonstrating how they could be locally implemented.

To gain the interest of actors from above and below, side actors should “scratch where it itches”: discover topics of concern to the government and the community and demonstrate how the use of NDLs in education could improve the situation. For the government, this could include low literacy rates, high drop-out rates, poor school performance in rural areas, social inequalities that might produce unrest, or the desire to improve the country’s Sustainable Development Goal progress. For communities, this could include fear of language loss, future job prospects, or concerns about children rejecting their heritage culture.

Therefore, advocacy messages must be adjusted to fit the audience. In Thailand, side actors (mostly academics) began with “one size fits all” messaging, emphasizing how MLE would help preserve endangered languages and cultures. Communities were somewhat interested in this idea, but education officials were unimpressed: why save a language that is dying? Side actors quickly found that the government was much more interested in improving children’s national language abilities. Thus, the message to officials became “MLE is an effective method to improve the Thai language learning of ethnic minority children, thus enhancing national development and social cohesion” while the message to communities was “MLE will help children maintain and value their language and culture while acquiring the tools they need to do well in school and get good jobs.”

Some side actors have appealed to United Nations rights documents as part of their advocacy efforts. The UNESCO *Convention against Discrimination in Education* (1960) and the UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (DRIP 2007) are among the dozen or so UN documents that mention linguistic and cultural rights (Person 2022). But is that an effective strategy? None of these documents are legally binding, meaning that the UN will not hold countries accountable for ignoring them. Additionally, government attitudes toward these documents vary. Some take issue with specific terms, claiming, for example, that their ethnic minority populations do not fit the UN’s definition of “Indigenous,” rendering DRIP meaningless. Many governments reject assertions that NDL speakers have special rights that are different from those of the majority population.
In some contexts, it may be more effective to appeal to UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4’s emphasis on “inclusive and equitable quality education.” Nations report on their SDG 4 progress via a series of indicators—some of which are compulsory for all countries while others are voluntary (the “thematic” indicators). Thematic indicators, 4.5.2 (percent of students in first language primary education), 4.5.3 (education resources for disadvantaged populations), 4.6.2 and 4.6.3 (literacy) are particularly important in multilingual contexts. Government agencies responsible for SDG tracking may not have a clear understanding of the indicators. MLE advocates could thus help interpret the indicators and provide insight into how data might be disaggregated by ethnicity and language (to demonstrate unequal progress among different social groups). The SDG 4 perspective informed UNESCO’s Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion (UNESCO 2020), which has thus far been translated into five languages, endorsed by sixteen countries, and will be promoted during the UN International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–32) (Person 2022).

A unique case of language-in-education policy development took place in Myanmar, as UNICEF’s Language and Social Cohesion (LESC) initiative brought hundreds of local government officials and NDL community leaders together in a series of “facilitated discussions” to develop broadly acceptable local language policies (Lo Bianco 2016). These became the basis for state and national-level policy recommendations. While a single high-level politician ultimately rejected LESC’s national policy conclusions, the LESC framework provides an excellent example of how MLE advocates can engage multiple stakeholders to develop local agreements that inform national policies.

It can be challenging for project personnel to collect longitudinal data on student performance. Nevertheless, such data are vital to improving student outcomes and providing the government with evidence to justify support for MLE (UNICEF 2018; UNESCO 2018; UNESCO 2020). Such evidence drove policy change in the four countries where the piloting approach was observed (Kosonen and Benson 2021).

In communicating with government officials, Joseph Lo Bianco (author of Australia’s 1987 National Policy on Languages) recommends brevity (Lo Bianco 2008). A two-page executive summary with one or two easy-to-understand graphs is more likely to be read and understood than a long research report (although more lengthy documents could be attached to the summary!) Similarly, PowerPoint presentations, videos, and other advocacy materials should be succinct and clear. MLE advocates should practice 20–30 second “lift talks” to communicate the benefits of multilingual education to a busy official.

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2 MLE advocates can also encourage their national UNICEF offices to disaggregate data on the basis of home language in the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) conducted every 3–4 years, and to include the optional MICS Foundational Learning Module (disaggregated by home language) to provide data on the literacy and numeracy skills of children aged 7–14. (UNICEF 2017)

3 The Salzburg Statement for a Multilingual World (2018) is an example of a policy brief, integrating data and recommendations (but lacking graphics). UNICEF Viet Nam’s Lao Cai Primary Classroom Language Profile (2012) clearly summarizes student ethnicity and academic outcome data.
1.4 Limitations

Some ideas discussed above will likely work in multiple contexts. However, it is worth acknowledging some caveats.

The most important factor to be considered is time. Sustainable changes in language policies have generally taken a long time, sometimes decades. This is not necessarily a bad thing; quick policy decisions imposed from above may lack crucial insight into the mechanics of operationalization and thus prove difficult to implement.

Another limitation is that, despite continuous advocacy, the policies in most countries support only a few years of NDL instruction in the early primary grades (the “early-exit” model). Ironically, this may be due to successful pilots; government officials see NDL students doing better than ever in the national/official language and wrongly conclude that the children no longer require L1 support!

Finally, as Kosonen and Benson say, “with new generations of national leaders, there may be negative turns due to lack of comprehension or experience with MLE, which means that actors from the other levels will be vital to keep implementing, documenting, supporting, and advocating for NDLs in education” (Kosonen and Benson 2021:45). In other words, advocacy never ends.

1.5 Conclusion

This chapter envisions language policy change as a process involving collaboration between actors from above, below and the sides. The text and the recommendations that flow from it are oriented toward side actors. We thus close with the following observations.

Piloting is the best approach where there is no written policy and no restrictions. As small-scale pilots are usually non-threatening, they can “mature” over time, and their good outcomes can inform and influence policy—first at the local level, and ultimately at the national level. Throughout the piloting process, networking with actors at all levels and recurrent advocacy on the benefits of multilingual education is needed.

Advocacy towards language policy change is the best approach where piloting is not possible. Influencing the thinking of policymakers is essential to gain latitude for foundational actions, such as orthography development or literacy training for community members. This may enable piloting later.

Communication and advocacy strategies carried out by side actors should fit the needs of the target audiences. This often means creating different messages for different audiences.

The good news is that language policy change is possible! In many countries, side actors have played a vital role in creating the conditions for policy reform. Nonetheless, these positive results have usually come as the result of many years of focused, evidenced-informed work at all levels.
References


