8.1 Introduction

Most of the world is linguistically diverse, speaking several languages in everyday life. However, many children are still not enrolled in school and of those who are, UNESCO (2016) states that “40% of the global population does not access education in a language they understand.” This is a major factor that contributes to the more than 1 billion people above the age of 15 years who are still illiterate (World Bank 2020, Worldometer 2021).

Many countries in the world today have an education system inherited from a colonial past. They often use the colonial language as the language of instruction. There are other linguistically diverse countries that use one of their main languages as the language of instruction, and do not account for portions of the population that speak one of the other languages. In either case this is a great disadvantage to a huge number of children who are forced to start their education in a language that they do not know. Since real learning can only take place when there is understanding, many of these children become primary school dropouts, or if they continue, they are functionally illiterate.

Early childhood education (ECE) is generally thought of as a critical period from birth through eight years of age. Children’s brains are developing at a rapid rate with many connections being made both internally and with the world around them. Children in the early years of preschool\(^1\) and beyond need to

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\(^1\) Preschool in some settings is nursery ages 2–4 (also can be called playschool) and then kindergarten 5–6 years and in other settings the word kindergarten is considered part of formal school. There can be different names used in
be able to hear the language they know best to understand what they are learning, develop their critical thinking skills beyond just knowledge and understanding and be able to transfer these skills to other languages as needed. In these years children are developing their language skills, developing physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. Using a systematic, child-centered method in these formative years will give children a strong education foundation no matter their socio-economic situation or geographic location.

There are numerous studies that show the short- and long-term benefits of early childhood education. It is extremely important that education begins with the learners’ first language (L1) and then adds other needed languages. The benefits of children beginning in their first language include staying on longer in school and the likelihood of being employed in higher-skilled jobs (World Bank 2021). If linguistically diverse countries used multilingual education (MLE) principles in their ECE programmes, the results would be a significant decrease in the number of illiterates and an increase in the number of citizens making positive contributions to their countries.

8.2 Context

This paper is set in the context of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and a quality MLE programme will help learners build a strong foundation by beginning with and continuing the development of the first language (L1)² orally and teaching reading and writing in the L1 during their first six or eight years of school. This educationally sound pedagogy is based on the principle of moving from the known to the unknown, from prior knowledge to new knowledge. MLE builds a strong academic foundation in the first language (L1). Teaching the second language (L2) orally is done before teaching reading and writing in the L2. The preparation for and implementation of an MLE programme must be systematic, beginning with the L1 in the early preschool years and continuing, with time given for each phase over a six-to-eight-year period. This allows the children to use all their languages as they continue their education. This principle holds for the teaching of subsequent languages.

Over the past six decades there have been numerous pilots, small studies and educational programmes showing that a good MLE programme will have a positive impact on children’s education. However, political and education leaders in many countries are slow to acknowledge this fact. While this is often for political and cultural reasons, there are also many misconceptions about MLE. Meanwhile, children in early childhood education who are not allowed to develop their L1 in the school continue to struggle in the L2 or L3 and are consigned to memorizing with limited understanding. They are unable to express their thoughts fully and freely or engage in critical thinking which leads to more meaningful learning.

² Some children learn and speak more than one language while still in their first few years of life depending on their context.
One example is Timor-Leste with Portuguese and Tetun as the two official languages used in the schools. Although the country was under colonial rule for hundreds of years, less than 1 percent of the population speak Portuguese fluently, yet teachers are expected to teach the language. Tetun, a local creole language, is widely used in the capital and larger towns. In Statistics Timor-Leste the 2015 government census shows that approximately 70 percent of the children enter school speaking another language other than the official languages. A classroom language mapping project, carried out in all primary schools, grades 1-6 listed thirty different languages (Owen 2015), but some state there are more. This is a real challenge in an education system that continues to struggle with focusing on the national languages first when children who use another L1 need to start and learn in the language they know best before adding the national or required languages using good educational principles.

Someone in a rural multilingual area said about learning in the L1, “Logical. If I am learning something new, even like fixing a car or building something, I want it in a language I can understand well.” Another person made the comment that, “It is common sense. Why would I want to sit in a classroom just hearing words and not knowing what they mean?” Cummins (1979) distinguished between everyday language (Basic Interpersonal Communication: BICS) and the academic classroom language, (Cognitive Academic Learning Proficiency: CALP) which becomes more abstract and complex as one progresses in education. Research over the past four decades has shown this to be true across the world.

### 8.3 Strategies used in ECE

#### 8.3.1 Play

Play is imperative for children in ECE, especially in the years before primary or grade school. Play means learning, and it is just as important as nutritious food for their growth and development. Play includes describing, guessing, active and pretend games, all in their L1. Some play materials that enable children to learn various skills are blocks, crayons, finger paints, clay, puzzles, natural materials, sticks, vines, rubber bands, chalk, scissors, play money, balance beam, balls, swings, hoops, old tires and other outdoor materials. Materials can be found and used based on what is available in the area.

#### 8.3.2 Meaning-based learning

This learning is founded on the principle that the children should understand what they are learning, not just rote or memorization. Meaning-based learning can happen in these early years if they are using their L1. Children can learn many different skills while doing a variety of daily activities such as

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3 Personal communication 2016
4 See Smith (2021) for further explanations and a practical handbook for starting ECE classes.
• talking: It is important for children and their caregiver to talk together often to contribute to their on-going language development.
• telling, listening to and beginning to “read” stories
• singing and listening to songs develops language and auditory skills
• dancing, crafts and other cultural community activities
• activities, stories and songs that teach math, science and health
• activities that involve gross and fine motor skills
• learning to read and write

Second language learning begins with oral language development at this stage in preschool (Smith 2021). One of the popular methods for this is the Total Physical Response (TPR), initially developed by James Asher (1969),\(^5\) which will be discussed later in this paper.

### 8.3.3 Four language skills

Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four language skills. As babies, we listen and learn to speak the language(s) that are spoken to us. It is very important to continue this language development in the early years, as it is through this language that children learn to communicate their desires and thoughts, to think critically, and learn more about the world around them.

**Oral language development**

These four language skills should be developed in the L1, starting with oral language development which enables the learner to develop the vocabulary and structure of the language. This can involve a variety of interactive and learner centered activities: talking, singing, telling stories, answering open ended questions, playing games, showing and talking about something, reading stories, dramatic play, and puppets. It includes the first time listening to a story where the teller or reader asks prediction questions, and questions that require more than a yes or no answer.

While children are learning new concepts in their first language(s), L1, they can be engaged in language learning in the official or national languages in a measured, structured way. Once these new concepts are learned they can then be expressed in other known languages. It is possible to have the children learning the L2 orally, focusing on listening first and then speaking as they learn the language. There are multiple language learning approaches. The foundational principles of one, Total Physical Response (TPR), developed by James Asher (1969) is a strategy that has proved to be successful and enjoyed by children. They listen to oral commands, understand, and respond by doing the action to the command given without having the pressure of having to speak or pronounce words correctly. There are

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\(^5\) James Asher developed TPR based on his observations of how children learn language. It is an example of the comprehension approach to language learning that is used worldwide.
various levels in this strategy and many activities such as listening, singing, games, pantomimes, role-plays, and storytelling.

**Reading and writing**

The skill of reading is best understood in the language one knows best, the L1, and this skill will transfer to other languages. In learning to read during the preschool and kindergarten years, games can be played as the student is learning the sounds, syllables and characters in the script of the language. Reading in a Roman script\(^6\) should involve both the phonics (letters and sounds to words and then phrases, sentences to stories) and whole language (stories, sentences and phrases, and then words to sounds and letters) approaches. Writing should be taught along with reading as this is another distinctive skill. Writing requires language, recalling the orthography, hand-eye coordination and concentration.

8.3.4 **Multi-Strategy Method (MSM)**

The Multi-Strategy Method or Two Track Method\(^7\) is one of the best ways to develop the four language skills. The Meaning Track is the story track (Whole Language – from whole to part) and the Accuracy Track is the workbook or primer track (from part to whole).

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\(^6\) Letters of the classic Latin alphabet like in this paper.

\(^7\) Malone adapted the MSM originally by Mary Stringer 2001.
### Phase 1: Meaning Track

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PHASES IN MEANING TRACK</th>
<th>PHASES IN ACCURACY TRACK</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students listen and respond</td>
<td>Distinguish and learn sounds, syllables, words, sentences, and texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak and share ideas with each other</td>
<td>Use vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar correctly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read, understand, and use new information</td>
<td>Recognize and read parts of words, phrases, and sentences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write to communicate their ideas</td>
<td>Form letters, spell and use grammar correctly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### 8.4 Stages – concrete, pictorial, abstract

Manipulatives are an extremely important part of ECE. Again, children operate in the language(s) they know best, their L1, and this continues through all the stages of learning new concepts in ECE. Young children use all their senses to engage with **concrete** objects that can be touched, smelled, tasted, seen or heard. In ECE, new concepts need to be taught clearly using **concrete** objects or manipulatives as needed with explanations given. A variety of objects such as sticks, small stones, large seeds and shells are needed. These manipulatives are used when counting a certain number of objects or when putting the objects together as in adding or when taking them away as in subtraction. In the case of alphabet letters, when teaching a new letter sound, the children can see and touch the objects that begin with that letter while saying the name and the beginning sound. It is important to repeat the word and the **sound** of the beginning letter. For example, if the object is a ball, they would say the sound of the letter “b”.

Next is the **Pictorial**, or visual stage, and refers to pictures of a variety of objects. This can be pictures of the same concrete objects and/or other objects. Then comes the **Abstract** stage that refers to a symbol such as a shape, number, or letter. The teacher explains that this is how the number or alphabet name is written and demonstrates how to write it. In the case of the number, the teacher shows the children the corresponding quantity of objects and the picture that matches the numeral/number symbol. The children count out objects to match the quantity shown and choose the picture that correctly matches the number symbol. For the alphabet letter, it is shown while the sound is pronounced. The teacher explains that this is how the sound is written and models how to write the letter. The teacher and children give examples of objects that start with that letter sound. The children practice writing both letters and numbers with their fingers in the air, in their hand, on the table, floor, sand or dirt with a stick, or with chalk or pencil. Much practice is needed. (Smith 2018)
8.5 Conclusion

Crucial to any discussion on L1 instructional strategies is for countries to acknowledge that children in ECE need to be taught in the language they know best, even when it is not an official language(s) of the country. The leaders need to accept this is most efficient when learning any new concept and leads to a better acquisition of literacy and numeracy. It is a first step and foundation for the children that continues with their learning in other languages and should continue in a structured way through the primary school years.

Teacher training in the principles of ECE and how to engage the children in learning through play and discovery is essential and central to any hope of a high-quality programme. This includes both pre-service and on-going in-service training and work. The L1 curriculum\(^8\) must link to the learning outcomes of the mainstream curriculum. Any educational bridge between languages takes time. There are no “quick solutions” to better education. The use of L1 strategies must be and can be effectively implemented.

References


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\(^8\) There is a stage 1 readiness and stage 2 curriculum available, written by the authors of this paper. They are available as E-copies and can be requested from karlajsmith20@gmail.com.

