# What is the most effective approach to transition to the use of a second language as medium of instruction when classroom policy and practice has used the learner's home language/first language in the early primary years? Which school year is best for implementing this transition?

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## 1   Introduction

Practitioners use a bridge metaphor to illustrate the work involved in mother tongue–based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs. MTB-MLE presupposes an educational goal of bilingual, biliterate, bicultural   students.[1] The educational task includes constructing the necessary supports for non-dominant language learners who begin their formal basic education in their mother tongue and finish it in the dominant language of their home nation. The MTB-MLE bridge forms a two-way link between the learners' heritage language and culture and their participation as members of a larger multilingual and multicultural society. How and when to make the transition from MT to dominant language is an appropriate, necessary, and, yes, tough-to-answer question.

## 2   Why is this question being asked?

In almost all MTB-MLE programs, the main emphasis is placed on a successful transfer of academic, cognitive, and literacy ability from the learners' mother tongue to the national (dominant) language used in education. Attaining and sustaining learning and literacy in the mother tongue is, at best, a secondary goal. The MTB-MLE program's success is uniformly recognized only to the degree that its students acquire and can use the dominant language for learning and literacy purposes.

- Funding: The initial outlay of money for a strong MTB-MLE program is more than for a single language program. Concerns for cost often imply a desire to eliminate the additional funding required from the education budget as soon as possible.

- Too few bilingual teachers: The scarcity of bilingual teachers is often a product of the local language community's socioeconomic marginalization. Their children are often victims of inappropriate, irrelevant, and ineffective "submersion" [2] education programs. Those programs require the children to learn in the national language of education they do not understand. Therefore, language minority students frequently are unprepared to complete secondary school in the dominant language and thus do not qualify for admittance to teacher training institutions, as a result, there are few bilingual teachers.

- Little understanding of the educational rationale and research for MTB-MLE: School administrators, classroom teachers, and parents misunderstand the reasons for using the learners' MT to the end of

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[1]MTB-MLE programs involve the use of at least two languages as media of instruction, as subjects and for the acquisition and development of literacy skill and ability. Thus the phrase "bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate" in many MTB-MLE contexts is more precisely "multilingual, multicultural, and multi-literate."

[2]"Submersion" education refers to the common practice of enrolling minority language students into classrooms where all instruction is in the dominant language without any provisions for supporting the students who are learning a new language. The "submersion" is linked to the idea of "sink or swim"—an education practice with virtually no evidence-based support at all.

## 3   What is the context in which this question is likely to be found?

One likely context in which this question is found is in countries with one or two dominant languages and many non-dominant languages. Students from non-dominant languages are seriously disadvantaged by the language and education policy (cf. Jhingran 2005; Rahman 1996). In that context, acquiring the dominant language is seen as the true educational goal (as with Thai in Thailand, Mandarin in China, Khmer in Cambodia, Bangla in Bangladesh, Vietnamese in Vietnam).

Another typical context is minority language communities inhabiting countries where an elite educational language is dominant (as with Urdu and English in Pakistan, English in Papua New Guinea, French in Senegal, Portuguese in Guinea Bissau). The diversity of small languages is situated in reference to that prestige language, frequently tied to a colonial past.

## 4   Theoretical context

Research indicates that a successful transition from MT to dominant language for minority language students may take as many as 5–7 years, depending on the age and experience of the child and the learners' own motivation for learning the dominant language (Cummins 2000; Hakuta, Butler, and Witt 2000; Thomas and   Collier 2002).

Children are capable of learning languages for everyday purposes fairly well in a short period of time (1–2 years) given adequate exposure to the L2 in meaningful situations. However, their ability to use the L2 for learning new, more difficult concepts is a slower process.[3]

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky observed that the ability to talk about ideas is what helps learners think about them. If they are unable to talk about concepts in the second or third language, minority students' thinking is reduced to rote memorization (cf. Vygotsky 1986).

Development of oral language proficiency in the dominant language is a key component in minority students' achieving comprehension in dominant language reading (Droop and Verhoeven 2003; Verhoeven 1990).

Students' second language learning is influenced considerably by the extent of their mother tongue development. When the L1 has developed sufficiently to cope with decontextualized classroom learning, the  student can acquire the L2 effectively, provided there is adequate exposure to L2 and adequate motivation to learn the L2 (cf. Cummins 2000). Students' knowledge and skills in the mother tongue transfer readily to the dominant language (cf. Cummins 2000). Students do not have to re-learn a concept in L2. They only need to learn the L2 terminology to talk about it.

When the L1 is less well developed or is (quickly) replaced by the L2 in classroom instruction, the child's L2 development will be significantly impeded (cf. Cummins 2000; Thomas and Collier 2002).

## 5   Recommendations: Some ideas to try

Following are three recommendations to try:

1. *Use the MT and L2 throughout the scope of primary education.* Do not abruptly stop or curtail MT instruction and literacy. Construct the bridge from non-dominant language to dominant language by beginning initially with a solid foundation, using the mother tongue as medium of instruction. Students develop their use of the mother tongue in the academic context, while also learning to read and write in that language. They can also begin acquiring oral vocabulary in the dominant language as early as Grade 1, provided the L2 instruction is meaningful, unthreatening, and enjoyable. Dominant language oral proficiency supports achievement of dominant language literacy (Droop and Verhoeven 2003; Verhoeven 1990).

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[3]See the discussion of Cummins' basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive/ academic language proficiency (CALP) in Baker 2011:170–173.

2. *Use a team-teaching approach where there are few or no bilingual teachers.* Frequently an MTB-MLE program cannot be implemented without the use of trained bilingual teacher assistants (TAs) from the minority language community, along with the dominant language teacher. That collaboration has shown very good results in Vietnam and Thailand (cf. UNICEF 2011).

3. *Ensure that MTB-MLE curriculum is based clearly on the mainstream curriculum.* That reduces suspicions among detractors that MTB-MLE will lead to unwanted outcomes. Education supervisors can then recognize that the goal of the program is integration—not separation or assimilation (S. Malone 2012; D. Malone 2003).

## 6   Why will they help answer the question?

Where the MTB-MLE program has been implemented with the MT included until upper primary, the results have been uniformly good, even dramatic. The Thomas and Collier (2002) study in the U.S. provided solid research support for a multilingual program with a strong MT component through to upper primary and middle school. Results from that research also indicated that an effective transition process is much longer than a single-year transition from MT-supported learning to dominant language-only learning.

The use of the MT is, in part, to make the minority students' entry into formal education smooth and painless. However, beginning in the MT and then two or three years later abruptly changing to the dominant language may only delay the pain, not alleviate it (Bougie, Wright, and Taylor 2003).

Even where the long-term results of MT education have not been assessed (e.g., the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam), MTB-MLE used in lower grades for instruction and initial literacy has shown very good results (cf. UNICEF 2011; Malone and Paraide 2011; Walter and Dekker 2011).

One of the main reasons stakeholders (including parents) are opposed to MTB-MLE is that they do not understand its educational purposes and processes. L2 speakers think it promotes separatism or they think MTB-MLE is not worth the additional expenditure of money. Parents of non-dominant language children are anxious for their children to learn the dominant language, a prerequisite in the larger society for getting wage-earning jobs. If people can see how well MTB-MLE helps the MT children learn the L2 better and learn the other subjects more effectively, much of the opposition will fade away (Tupas 2014).

## 7   Where the proposed solutions have worked

Few "strong" MTB-MLE programs have been permitted to run the full course of their instructional design in ethnic minority communities. Finding empirical evidence that the recommendations above work is virtually impossible. Plenty of empirical evidence demonstrates that weak or aborted MLE programs fail to deliver the long-term benefits possible in strong MTB-MLE programs. There is even more evidence that submersion programs in the dominant language of education do not provide effective education for minority language students (cf. Thomas and Collier 2002).

Thomas and Collier's study (2002) also shows the results of not doing a strong program. It is worth mentioning because the records studied were of students immersed in the L2 society with L2 oral and written language present everywhere in the school and community. Still, the students experienced little success. In most remote areas of non-industrialized countries, where MTB-MLE is most needed, the MT students rarely hear L2 or see written L2 outside of the classroom. If early-exit transition programs are not effective in the USA, they will be even less effective in places where the L2 is not spoken in the student's community and where there is little print literature in the dominant language.

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[4]The southernmost provinces of Thailand, where the MTB-MLE program is being implemented, is a conflict zone. The choice of Thai script for the written form of Patani Malay in the education setting has met with strong resistance in the language community where a Perso-Arabic script, which was used in the past, is preferred by religious leaders. Also, due to the conflict and other variables, there is an unusually large turnover of teachers and administrators that makes sustaining a new, innovative instructional program very difficult.

In Thailand, the Patani Malay-Thai Bilingual Education Pilot Project was planned as a strong MTB-MLE program with the use of the MT through to Grade 6. For a multitude of reasons, a strong program by design turned into a weak, early-exit one in practice. Instead of the learners' MT being used for support and for literacy through Grades 4–6, the MT was effectively eliminated after Grade 3. Grade 3 assessments clearly demonstrated a strong positive effect of L1 literacy on the students' acquisition of L2 literacy. By the end of Grade 5, however, that benefit had virtually evaporated (Suphalak Sintana 2015). Similar experiences have been shown in Papua New Guinea (Malone and Paraide 2011).

# 8 Conditions and limitations of each recommendation given

## 8.1 Recommendation 1: Conditions and limitations

The ingrained nature of the dominant language as the "true" language of education creates pressure to spend every moment of classroom time promoting it. Often, the desire for assimilation of minority children by the  educational planners and frequently by the parents themselves, make planning for the learners' bilingual, bicultural, and biliterate achievement difficult to implement.

## 8.2 Recommendation 2: Conditions and limitations

Any team teaching instructional approach requires a healthy climate of mutual respect and clear roles for the teacher and TA. Bilingual TAs from the minority culture are not automatically respected, especially where the local language is seen as substandard. Program implementers need to monitor classrooms carefully to foster mutual respect between classroom teacher and TA. Where this is done well, the classroom teachers usually gain a genuine respect for the TA's ability to communicate key ideas and concepts to the children. However, this  respect may diminish as the minority students advance into the upper primary grades. Most TAs have not had enough effective secondary education to be able to communicate complex ideas in math, science, and social studies. Where the TAs have tertiary degrees, their performance in the MT can exceed the classroom teacher's ability in the dominant language (Suwilai Premsrirat, pers. comm., 2010).

## 8.3 Recommendation 3: Conditions and limitations

Curriculum development in MTB-MLE programs is often the skill for which the MTB-MLE practitioner is least  likely prepared. It is difficult and time-consuming work, with technical expertise needed that is difficult to train local partners to do. Yet, without the linkage of MTB-MLE to the mainstream education outcomes and competencies, the program is vulnerable to resistance at the local, the district, and the provincial levels. With that linkage, the bridge of instruction in the MT to instruction in the dominant language is supported and reinforced.

# 9 Conclusion

The MTB-MLE program specifically aims for learners who are bilingual, biliterate and bicultural. The bridge from the learners' non-dominant language to the nation's dominant language is therefore an essential, not an optional, component of the program. Bridges take time to build, and two-way bridges take even longer. Practitioners should avoid the "quick fix," which is almost certain to result in a collapsed bridge at some point in the future.

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