“STRONG FOUNDATIONS” AND “GOOD BRIDGES” IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: LESSONS FROM AROUND THE WORLD

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Educational goals across languages

The hopes and dreams that most parents in minority language communities have for their children are much the same as those expressed by many parents in majority language societies. They want their children to...

- achieve a quality education;
- become confident and fluent in communicating in several languages with people from different places and cultures in a globalized world;
- become productive citizens who contribute to the well-being of their parents and home community and to the nation as a whole; and
- continue to love and maintain their heritage language and culture.

Situation for children who do not speak the official school language

The problem for children who do not know the official school language when they begin their education is that they are faced with three enormous challenges, all at the same time.

- They are expected to learn the new language (sometimes several of them).
- They are expected to learn to read and write in the new language.
- They are expected to learn academic concepts taught in the new language.

This problem has been recognized by parents, educators, researchers and policy makers around the world:

From parents:
When our children go to school, they go to an alien place. They leave their parents, they leave their gardens, and they leave everything that is their way of life. They sit in a classroom and they learn things that have nothing to do with their own place. Later, because they have learned only other things, they reject their own (Parent in Papua New Guinea, in Delpit and Kemmelfield. 1985, pages 19-20).

From teachers
My children are very good at copying from the blackboard. By the time they reach Grade 5, they can copy all the answers and memorize them. But only two of the Grade 5 students can actually speak Hindi (Grade 5

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1 This paper was first presented at the National Symposium on Language Issues and Quality Education for Ethnic Minority People, Ha Noi, Viet Nam, 3-4 December 2008
MLE teacher in India, in Jinghran, 2005, page 1).

From UNESCO

The choice of the language...is a recurrent challenge in the development of quality education. Speakers of mother tongues, which are not the same as the national...language, are often at a considerable disadvantage in the educational system... (UNESCO, 2003, page 14).

From the World Bank

Fifty percent of the world’s out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition. (World Bank, June, 2005, page 1).

How can children from minority language communities become successful in school and achieve their educational goals?

If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learners already know. Ascertain this and teach them accordingly (Ausubel, D. P. 1968. Page 235).

This basic education principle reminds us that there is no real learning without meaning. Students (and everyone else) learn best when they start with what they know and use that as the foundation for learning what is new.

“Schema theory”, as described by R.C. Anderson (1977), helps to explain why this is so. Schema theory describes the way that the mind organizes knowledge (that is, everything that we remember from our experiences and that we have learned from others, in school and elsewhere). Meaningful learning occurs when we are able to relate new concepts to what we already know. The more relationships or “networks” that we can establish between the new concepts and our prior knowledge, the more we will understand and be able to use the new concepts.

If we cannot relate a new concept to what we already know (our existing networks of knowledge), the only way that we can remember it is through rote memorization—saying or writing it over and over again. “Rote knowledge” remains isolated and essentially meaningless until we can link it to our existing networks of knowledge. This is the problem noted by the teacher in India (above) who complained that his minority language students could copy answers and memorize them but they could not speak the school language meaningfully.

These theories are basic to the Language Education component in MTB MLE programs because they remind us that a priority must be on helping students to...

Build a strong educational foundation by starting with the language they know best—and with the knowledge and experience they bring from their home and community.

Bridge to understanding, then speaking and then reading and writing the
school language (L2) in stages, focusing on what they know (content of the language learning lessons) as they are learning what is new (the L2),

Continue to use both languages throughout primary school and for life-long learning.

Rationale for starting with a strong foundation in the L1

A visit to two early primary classrooms—one in which the students are learning in their L1 and the other in which the teacher uses the L2, which the students do not speak or understand—reveals the reason why the L1 is essential for a strong educational foundation. In the one classroom students are animated and eager learners; in the other they are passive and quiet. Majority language teachers and researchers sometimes label minority language students as “slow” or “learning disabled” because they are so quiet and/or take so long to understand and apply new concepts. The problem, of course, is more basic: the teacher is trying to teach the new concepts in a language that the students do not understand.

Developing the students’ L1 and using it for teaching does more than help students to understand and respond to their teachers. Learning the L1 as a subject and using it as the language of learning also helps students to learn the L2. In fact, the more they develop their L1, the better they learn the L2:

Research shows that speed of learning an L2 is not necessarily related to the amount of exposure to the second language, especially if that exposure to L2 comes at the expense of the development of the first language. For the development of the L2, the development of L1 is more important than time spent in the learning of L2. This apparent paradox is explained by the "interdependence hypothesis"—that a common underlying [language] proficiency makes it possible to transfer academic skills learned in one language to the other language. When the L1 is well developed, all the learner’s academic knowledge, cognitive development, and life experience is available for use once the superficial features (vocabulary and grammar) of the L2 are acquired (Dutcher, 1995)

And...

...the learning of a second language before competency in the first language is fully developed may result in arrested development or loss of proficiency in the primary language. This negative effect on the primary language occurs most often if the native language is devalued. (Schiff-Myers. 1992).

And...

The most powerful factor in predicting educational success for minority learners is the amount of formal schooling they received in their L1. ... Only those language minority students who had 5-6 years of strong cognitive and academic development through their L1— as well as through [L2]— did well in Grade 11 assessments (Thomas and Collier, 1997, 2004)
Building a strong foundation and good bridge—what does it involve?

Teachers help students build a strong foundation in their L1 when they teach it as a subject and use it as the only language of instruction until students have achieved basic competence in the L2. Then they use L1 with the L2 to the end of primary school.

Students begin learning the L2 best through “hear-see-do” activities: They hear the teacher give meaningful L2 commands for action and then observe her doing the actions herself. They hear the commands again and observe volunteers doing the actions. Then they listen to the commands third time and they respond through actions:

*The best [language learning] methods are ... those that supply “comprehensible input’ in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the L2 but allow students to produce when they are ‘ready’, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production (Krashan, 2001).*

Students then build fluency and confidence in speaking—using the new language to communicate meaningfully with others.

*... oral proficiency in the target language [is] of critical importance for the development of ... reading comprehension among third- and fourth-grade students... (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003, pp. 78-103).*

*Additional research finds that comprehensible output, as an adjunct to comprehensible input, helps students become aware of the structure of the language and helps them become more competent in its use (Cummins, 2001).*

Once students have developed a basic oral vocabulary, they are ready to begin reading and writing in the new language. Again, the process should enable them to go from the known to the unknown—using their knowledge of oral L2 and (ideally) their confidence in reading and writing the L1 to bridge into reading and writing the L2 because...

*Children's knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue... to the school language (Jim Cummins, 2000 [http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/bicscalp.html]).*

How long does it take students to learn a new language well?

Cummins’ distinction between two kinds of 2nd language learning can help us think strategically about ways to help students achieve success in both:

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**Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS)** refers to “everyday” language, usually about familiar topics. In good language learning situations (that is, the teacher speaks the L2 well and students can hear, speak, read and write L2 with peers outside school hours, as well as in the classroom), it normally takes about two years to gain fluency in everyday L2. It is important to remember that if students do not hear “everyday” L2 spoken fluently by teachers or peers outside the classroom, it is likely to take a lot longer for them to gain that basic level of fluency.

**Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)** refers to students’ ability to use the L2 to learn academic (abstract) concepts. Researchers find that in a good program, with teachers that are fluent in the L2, it usually takes minority language speakers 5-7 years to gain fluency in using academic L2. Without a strong 2LA program, it will be much more difficult and will take much longer for them to understand and use academic L2 for learning in higher primary grades.

Problems begin when teachers, evaluators and others do not take this distinction between everyday and academic language into account. They hear students use the L2 for everyday communication and assume that the students have achieved the level of proficiency in L2 they need to continue learning. However, if they stop using L1 in the classroom too soon, the students are lost when teachers introduce abstract concepts. The all too common result is that the gains students made in early grades are reversed, their understanding of their subjects goes down and the number of students dropping out of school goes up.

**Thinking about the progression**

Effective planning for MTB MLE is possible only when the planners have an insiders’ knowledge of the communities in which the program will take place. Even so, by using what has been learned through past experience and through research around the world, we can identify the general phases (in bold) of Language Education in successful MTB MLE programs. (This example is for 3 languages.)

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Continue L1 & L2 & L3
Bridge to reading and writing in L3

Continue oral and written L1 & L2
Introduce Oral L3

Continue oral and written L1, oral L2
Bridge to reading and writing in L2

Continue oral L1
Introduce Oral L2
Introduce reading and writing in L1

Build fluency in Oral L1
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Conclusion

Can MLE be done? Evidence from ethnolinguistic communities around the world indicate that indeed, strong and effective mother tongue-based multilingual education programs can be developed and sustained when governments, NGOs and communities work together and base their programs on sound educational principles.

Is it difficult? It is certainly challenging—especially in multi-lingual countries that lack extensive financial resources—to develop writing systems, establish the necessary training programs and support the production of instructional and graded reading materials in multiple languages, all of which are necessary for linguistically and culturally appropriate MTB MLE programs.

Is it worth the effort? Education for All that is truly for all should ensure that all students, from all cultural and linguistic communities, are encouraged and supported in achieving their educational goals. It is safe to assume that the benefits of strong MLE programs will extend beyond the children and their communities to the nation as a whole. So yes, it will be worth the effort.

REFERENCES


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