Across the globe, the idea of using local languages of instruction in the primary grades is catching the interest of governments, donors, and NGOs alike. National-level programs in countries such as the Philippines, Uganda, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Nepal are aiming to develop and implement curriculum for teaching in the languages of the nation rather than international languages such as English, French, Spanish, and so on. Supported often by bilateral education donors, these programs have the scope and the backing to make a significant difference to education quality and access for speakers of the minority languages of the country.

This approach to early-grade instruction is well supported by research on language and learning. The cognitive benefits of using a familiar language of instruction include easy construction of schemata for learning and the availability of prior knowledge in learning new content (Bloch 2014; Benson 2000; Collier and Thomas 2004). The opposite effects are also well observed, in which the use of a medium of instruction not understood by the learner significantly inhibits learning (e.g., Diarra 2003; Harris 2011; Motala 2013; Trudell and Piper 2014). Fluency in the language of instruction stands out as a significant predictor of learner success in both reading competencies and curriculum content (Gove and Cvelich 2011:16; Alidou et al. 2006).

The student-centered pedagogical model, shaped by Northern scholars such as John Dewey and Carl Rogers and popularized in the 20th century by educators such as Maria Montessori, is also heavily dependent on the use of a language which the learner has mastered. Vavrus, Thomas, and Bartlett (2011:81) note:

Because this approach relies heavily on critical thinking and dialogue, students and teachers need not only adequate space for discussions but also the linguistic skills in the [medium of instruction] to express complex ideas and to ask critical questions. Thus, [learner-centered pedagogy] places significantly higher linguistic demands on teachers and students than teacher-centered approaches.

Classroom research on language and learning also indicates strong links between language of instruction and the participatory nature of the classroom (e.g., Batibo 2014; Trudell 2005). Fewer children drop out of mother-tongue classes (Laitin, Ramachandran and Walter 2015); understanding what is being taught, and what they are expected to do themselves, gives children more motivation to continue attending classes. Parental understanding of the curriculum and ability to help the child with his or her homework are considerably heightened as well.

Language choice for medium of instruction has also been linked to measures of economic and social inequality. A recent study of the countries of Africa by Coyne (2015) indicates that using the former colonial languages as the medium of instruction has a direct relationship to inequality, as measured by household income. Blommaert (2005:411) argues that the question of language use in education systems is part of a larger debate about the role of education in either reproducing social inequality or facilitating greater agency on the part of the population being served. The limitation of access of certain ethnic or linguistic groups to formal education by means of a foreign medium of instruction is a particularly important form of social and political inequality (Johnson and Stewart 2007:247; Trudell and Klaas 2010:126).

Thus the cognitive, pedagogical, and sociocultural rationales for local language–medium learning are strong, and in the last decade they have persuaded many policy makers and implementation agencies to enter the field of mother tongue–based bilingual and multilingual education. The conceptualization of strong multilingual education programs is not excessively complicated, having been described in helpful
detail by experts such as Baker, Cummins, Heugh, Malone, and many others. Most recently, Pflepsen (2015) has compiled a detailed guide to best practices in planning strong MLE programs. However, the successful implementation of strong MLE programs carries significant challenges. The factors affecting program success are many, and cannot always be controlled by the program implementer. These can include some or all of the below:

- the demographics of the language speakers;
- linguistic factors such as dialect variations and the status of the writing system;
- ethnic and political issues affecting the choice of languages to be used in formal education;
- policy and practice factors such as language policy, teacher preparation and allocation practices, and curriculum content;
- teachers’ level of expertise in their field, as well as their fluency in the languages involved;
- the availability of textbooks, by language and by subject;
- the language attitudes of parents, education authorities, national decision makers, and other stakeholders;
- infrastructural issues related to the existence and location of schools.

The interplay between these factors can create contexts that prove challenging even to the best resourced and informed implementer.

Nevertheless, many committed government, bilateral, and NGO agencies are moving forward in the implementation of mother tongue–based bilingual or multilingual education programs, demonstrating their determination to help provide access to quality education for linguistically marginalized communities and their children. As these agencies get more and more deeply engaged in such programming, some important questions are arising. These questions are generally very practical, and highly relevant to the success of the program.

Answering these implementation questions is not primarily a matter of scholarship. In many cases the relevant research that would provide a theoretical underpinning has not even been carried out. And in any case, the questions beg for practical responses that can be implemented on-site rather than an academic approach. These responses arise from experience in what has been done in actual programs around the world, and can be provided by consultants/practitioners who are well versed in the research context as well.

So this document on “Tough Questions” has been written for education practitioners who are experienced in their field, but who have come up against some tough obstacles to implementing MTB-MLE programs in their context; these are the people who provided the questions in the first place. The eight questions addressed here are:

- How can mother tongue–based MLE be carried out in classrooms where three or more local languages are represented as mother tongues? (Carol Benson, PhD)
- 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? (Dennis Malone, PhD)
- What can be done in contexts where teachers have inadequate oral fluency or literacy skills in one or more of the languages being used in the program? (Stephen L. Walter, PhD)
- How can pilot MTB-MLE programs be successfully scaled up? (Greg and Diane Dekker)
- How can instructional materials and supplementary reading materials be effectively developed for target populations speaking multiple dialects? (Diana Weber, PhD)
- When the orthography of the local language is not yet standardized or requires further review in order to adequately represent the linguistic features of the language, how should this challenge be handled in the program? (Leila Schroeder, MEd)
• How can informal and non-formal learning opportunities in the mother tongue best support or supplement school settings, particularly when the formal school system is unable to serve as a venue for mother tongue–based multilingual education? (Rudy Klaas)

• What approaches have been proven effective for managing the use of two or more languages in a bilingual/multilingual curriculum? (Kristine Trammell, PhD)

These eight questions have been addressed by experienced MLE consultants working around the world, in a range of program conditions. The answers aim to provide alternatives for meeting the challenges embodied in the questions in practical, credible ways. It is hoped that these responses will help make a challenging job just a bit easier.
References


