Expanding educational opportunity in linguistically diverse societies

By Nadine Dutcher


Reviewed by Joan Bomberger Yoder
SIL International

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**Introduction**

This report is an expanded version of a report originally written for the Ford Foundation. It bridges the disciplines of applied linguistics and developmental education. Drawing upon examples of innovative mother tongue primary education programs in thirteen countries, it takes an unequivocal stand for the necessity of mother tongue education. Its overall purpose is to “encourage those working in international education to confront directly what many consider ‘language problems’ by considering the effectiveness and feasibility of initial education in the mother tongue or local language” (11).

Dutcher introduces the central problem by citing the lack of attention global stakeholders in education have given to language. At the 1990 UN/World Bank conference on “Education for All,” and again in a review by the conference’s sponsoring agencies in 2001, a “shocking silence” existed about the role of the language of instruction. Dutcher states that at a 2001 World Bank seminar on “Language of Instruction”, SIL consultant Susan Malone “raised the obvious question: Does education for all include everyone?” (5).

**Structure of the report**

The report consists of an executive summary and introduction, five chapters, and three annexes. The executive summary and introduction describe the report’s background, purposes and structure, and the methodology used in the program overviews.

Chapter one focuses on international issues, while chapters two and three discuss the nuts and bolts of successful programs. Chapter four stresses the need for international leadership, and chapter five serves as a conclusion and summary.
Annex A gives useful summaries of programs from thirteen countries, annex B annotates the activities of multilateral, bilateral, and nongovernmental organizations, and annex C lists the references, including materials and people consulted.

Summary of contents

Throughout the report, descriptions of activities in successful programs in thirteen countries illustrate the value and viability of mother-tongue education. Conversely, in the course of preparing the report, successful examples of using the language of wider communication in initial education were sought. None were found.

Chapter one challenges the “Education for All” decrees that ignore language issues. The missing piece in calls to action is the role of the language of instruction, despite individual voices such as Susan Malone and Stanford University linguist Shirley Brice Heath, who attempted to raise the profile of language at the 1990 Education for All conference. The chapter states that although “educators have known the value of teaching in the mother tongue for years,” serious obstacles need overcoming, such as policymakers believing in the primacy of the national language for unity and parents who do not understand how difficult it is for children to commence their education in a second language. Dutcher notes that the hundreds of reports on successful mother-tongue programs, including the well-known research by James Cummins (2000) and Wayne Thomas and Virginia Collier (1997), address these obstacles.

A section about “Linguistic Human Rights” points out that an overt statement about “right of a child to education in a language which he or she understands” is missing from the international law passed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1990 on the “Rights of the Child.” “The child has the right to education and to enjoy his or her culture, but not necessarily at the same time” (22). Dutcher concludes chapter one by noting recent research which substantially links cultural and linguistic diversity to biodiversity.

But isn’t the reality of mother-tongue education an impossible goal? Chapters two and three dig into the nuts and bolts of how it can happen. These chapters contain nothing new for those working in minority languages, but are informative to those who need to understand the process. Chapter two discusses foundational steps such as policy formation, language development and planning, and various matters concerning materials, teachers, and evaluation.

Chapter three discusses the support needed from the government, Ministry of Education, and community. National legislation and policy must provide support for program development. Community and parental support are needed at the local level. Other key players are outside agencies that provide financial and technical assistance.

Chapter four returns to the report’s central paradox, the lack of sufficient policy and action despite the knowledge that “children learn best in a language that they know.” Dutcher quotes a Ford Foundation report that states, “only UNESCO and the Summer Institute of Linguistics have had as varied and continuous an involvement as the Ford Foundation with the language problems of countries in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America” (47). More international leadership is needed. UNESCO is a logical potential leader, as well as the World Bank, though
they have not seemed to be motivated for this thus far. But if such leadership arises, what would they do? Three actions are proposed: serious research, support for pilot programs, and high-level advocacy at international conferences.

Concerns about education typically focus on equity, quality of schooling, and access to education. Yet these all tie into the deeper question: What language is used for instruction? Dutcher concludes in chapter five, “so far the international community has failed to act,” although it recognizes that “it is failing the world’s children.” Thus the deadline for “Education for All” is extended without the cause of the original failure being addressed.

**Conclusion**

Overall, Dutcher summarizes the issues succinctly with clear prose and minimal jargon. She makes a realistic plea for feasible courses of action. The report articulates and documents what many who work in diverse contexts feel but cannot state as well. One positive development worth noting since this report has been published is UNESCO’s education position paper, “Education in a Multilingual World,” which strongly states the importance of mother-tongue education.

One may ask whether Dutcher is raising the right questions or enough questions. She decries the lack of international leadership, but successful mother-tongue programs need support at all levels: international, national, regional, and local. A positive international attitude is important, but only a beginning to the philosophical change that is needed.

In contexts where leadership already acknowledges the value of multilingual education, the practicalities of program implementation discussed in chapters two and three will be the most critical for success. Positive attitudes need to be supported by appropriate expertise created by effective training programs.

What audience will benefit most from this report? Mother-tongue specialists will read what they already know and believe. For them the document can serve as a valuable resource when communicating with program stakeholders. Although international policymakers are the main targeted audience, education administrators at any level who are uninformed about language issues will receive clear explanations and suggestions for direction. Overall, one can hope that Dutcher’s criticisms and cries for action will energize those who have the power to create mother-tongue programs which will successfully educate all.

**References**
