

MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION POLICY

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Defining Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MT-Based MLE)

Discussions relating to MT-Based MLE in Asia tend to use the term in one of two ways. In some contexts, MT-based MLE refers to the use of students' mother tongue and two or more additional languages as Languages of Instruction (LoI) in school. In other contexts, the term is used to describe bilingual education across multiple language communities—each community using their own mother tongue plus the official school language for instruction.

In the non-dominant language communities of South Asia, multilingual education usually follows the first definition: learning and using multiple languages in school. In some South Asian countries, MT-based MLE includes four languages—the students' mother tongue or first language, a regional language, the national language and an international language.

Rationale for MT-Based MLE: The current situation

“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).

By the time children begin school, they have begun gaining confidence in their ability to communicate meaningfully in their mother tongue. They have built a foundation of knowledge and experience through observing and interacting with peers and adults in their community. The language, knowledge and experience that children bring to school form an important foundation for their learning in the classroom.

The educational problem faced by many children from ethnolinguistic communities is two-fold. In the first place, some have no access to education at all. Those who do have access to school but do not speak the official language when they enter the education system find that their knowledge, experience and language—rather than serving as a foundation for learning—are treated as a disadvantage. Their language skills do not serve them because their language has no place in the classroom. Instead, textbooks and teaching are in a language they neither speak nor understand. Their learning and problem-solving experiences and their knowledge of “how things work” in their own culture and social setting do not serve them because the culture of the classroom, the teachers, and the textbooks is that of the dominant society. The consequences for many students are predictable and have been described in numerous studies, as noted in the quotations that follow.

Loss of confidence in themselves as learners

...when students' language, culture and experiences are ignored or excluded in classroom interactions, students are immediately starting from a disadvantage. Everything they have learned about life and the world up to this point is being dismissed as irrelevant to school learning; there are few points of connection to

curriculum materials or instruction and so students are expected to learn in an experiential vacuum (Cummins, 2001).

Inability to learn the official school language well

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 teacher in India, in Jinghran, 2005, page 1).

High repetition and drop-out rates

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, 2005).

Alienation from heritage language and culture, from parents and community

The children who go to the primary schools are often teased by other students for using their MT in the classroom when they talk to their counterparts. Teachers advise them to use L2 instead of their MT. Parents are asked not to use MT at home in order to make the children fluent in the L2. All these things have led to a negative attitude towards their language in the minds of the parents and children... (Educator in minority language community in India. 2006. Personal communication).

In addition to the damage they do to students who do not speak the dominant language when they begin school, dominant language-only education policies and programs have negative consequences for the language communities, for nations, and indeed, for the world in general. These include...

Further disempowerment of girls

Gender considerations cross cut...situations of educational risk, for girls and women may be in a particularly disadvantaged position. In most traditional societies, it is the girls and women who tend to be monolingual, being less exposed either through schooling, salaried labour, or migration to the national language, than their sons, brothers or husbands (UNESCO, 2003).

Lack of access to social, political, economic and physical development processes

Existing policies and supports have failed to reduce discrimination towards indigenous communities in vital areas related to employment, religion, language, ownership, possession or use of lands and natural resources...and access to education, health services and different institutions (Research and Development Collective, 2003, Page 17, in Paulson, 2004).

For many ethnolinguistic minority groups...promises of...economic and social mobility are...poor compensation for cultural subordination and language shift. ...Linguistic minority groups are driven to further poverty—culturally and economically—because their languages, as a resource for educational achievement and...for equal access to economic and other benefits in a competitive society, are rendered powerless (Mohanty, 1990, p. 54).

Underutilization of human resources

Children whose first language is not used at school ... experience lower levels of learning and are much less likely to be able to contribute to a country's economic and intellectual development (World Bank, 2006, page 4).

Loss of languages, cultures and of knowledge systems.

More broadly, the loss of language is part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems, including philosophical systems, oral literary and music traditions, environmental knowledge systems, medical knowledge, and important cultural practices and artistic skills. The world stands to lose an important part of the sum of human knowledge whenever a language stops being used. Just as the human species is putting itself in danger through the destruction of species diversity, so might we be in danger from the destruction of the diversity of knowledge systems (Hinton, 2001, page 5.)

Ineffective and inefficient use of human resources

We have a few hundred years of evidence that submersion in the L2 is "highly inefficient," if not downright wasteful and discriminatory, since such school systems are characterized by low intake, high repetition and dropout, and low completion rates... The overall costs to the society... are clearly astronomical, and must be seen as at least partially to blame for the lack of inclusive, participatory governing in post-colonial countries (Benson, 2001, page 7).

These quotations—and there are many more like them—indicate the concerns that are being raised in Asia and Africa, about the negative consequences of exclusionary language and education policies. The next section of this paper focuses on strong Mother Tongue-Based MLE programs as the best means for ensuring quality education for the ethnolinguistic communities who speak non-dominant languages.

MT-Based MLE: Using students' mother tongue as the foundation for life-long learning

MT-Based MLE programs enable students from non-dominant language communities to build a *strong educational foundation* in the language they know best—their MT or first language (L1)—and a *good bridge* to the official language—the school L2—and other languages of learning (L3, L4, etc.) and then encourage them to use both / all their languages for life-long learning.

Strong and well-planned MT-Based MLE programs help students to build a *strong educational foundation* when they...

- 1) Enable and encourage students to develop oral fluency in their L1;¹
- 2) Introduce reading and writing in the L1; help students to become fluent and confident in L1 literacy²; and

¹ That is, children are encouraged to describe, explain, analyze, ask questions, exchange ideas—to talk rather than sit passively while the teacher talks at them. In strong programs, this “L1 time” is kept in the schedule throughout primary school.

² This, of course, requires a library of graded reading materials, which requires a core of L1 authors. At least in the first years of the program, L1 reading materials produced at local “writers’ workshops” are usually printed in black-and-white with stiff paper covers—inexpensive to produce and, because they relate to the students’ own lives, fun for the students, and their parents, to read.

- 3) Build their capacity to use the L1 for everyday communication and for learning in school.

MT-Based MLE programs help learners build a “good bridge” when they...

1. Introduce *oral* L2 through meaningful, non-threatening activities;
2. Introduce *reading and writing in the L2* by building on what the children have learned about the oral L2 and their foundation in L1 literacy;³
3. Build fluency and confidence in using oral and written L2 for everyday communication and for academic learning.

MT-Based MLE programs ensure that students achieve educational competencies or standards established by education officials for each grade when they...

1. Use the L1 only for teaching in the early grades, as students are learning basic communication skills in the L2;
2. Use the L1 *with* the L2 for teaching in later grades, as students gain fluency and confidence in using the school language for learning academic concepts.⁴

Planning a “strong foundation” and “good bridge”: From the theorists and researchers

Regarding the focus on building a strong educational foundation in the L1:

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 in their L1—as well as through [L2]—did well in Grade 11 assessments (Thomas and Collier, 2001).

Knowledge gained in one language transfers to other languages that we learn (Cummins: <http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/cummins.htm>)

Regarding the focus on introducing the L2 through listening and responding (no speaking at first):

The best [language learning] methods are...those that supply “comprehensible input” in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These messages 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 (Krashen, 1981, in Wilson, 2001).

Regarding the focus on building a basic level of oral fluency in L2 before introducing reading and writing in that language:

...oral proficiency in the target language [is] of critical importance for the development...of reading comprehension among third and fourth-grade students... (Droop and Verhoeven, 2003. Pages 101).

Children should be helped to build up oral skills in the second language before reading instruction in that language is started. Minority children’s knowledge of L2

³ Because reading is like riding a bicycle—we only need to learn once.

⁴ Most researchers and practitioners agree that it takes 2-3 years to build basic communication skills and 5-7 years to develop cognitive and academic proficiency in a new language (Cummins, 2000; Thomas and Collier, 2001)

vocabulary determines their comprehension of oral text much more than mother tongue L2 speakers. (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003, page 101).

Regarding the continued development of oral and written L1 and L2 (that is, both taught as subjects), at least through primary school:

When children continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They have more practice in processing language, especially when they develop literacy in both, and they are able to compare and contrast the ways in which their two languages organize reality (Jim Cummins, citing Baker and Skutnabb-Kangas.

<http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/>

Finally, in strong MT-Based MLE programs, both languages are used for teaching throughout primary school. Following is an example of a progression plan for teaching and using languages in a 3-language MT-Based MLE program:

K1	K2	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Build fluency in oral L1	Continue oral L1 Begin written L1 Begin oral L2 (late in the year)	Continue oral & written L1, oral L2 Begin written L2 (late in the year)	Continue oral & written L1, L2	Continue oral & written L1, L2 Begin oral L3	Continue oral & written L1, L2, oral L3 Begin written L3	Continue oral & written L1, L2, L3	Continue oral & written L1, L2, L3
L1 for teaching	L1 for teaching	L1 for teaching	L1 for teaching	L1-L2-L1 for teaching	L1-L2-L1 for teaching	L1-L2-L1 for teaching	L2-L1 for teaching

Language and education policies for strong and sustained MT-Based MLE

Successful MT-Based MLE programs (that is, that are sustained and enable students from non-dominant language communities to achieve their educational goals) can be described as “top-down and bottom-up”. They are part of an established education system and so enable children to achieve learning competencies developed at the “top” and they incorporate the knowledge, skills, stories, songs, and culture from the communities into the curriculum. Success and sustainability depend on cooperation among a variety of stakeholders, with local communities working in partnership with the MOE or other implementing agency. They also require good policies.

A study of language and/or language-and-education policies in Asia reveals a continuum of policies, from those that support and affirm linguistic and cultural diversity as a national resource to those that promote assimilation and “national unity” based on the language and culture of the most dominant group(s).

Continuum of language policies—most supportive to most restrictive

← Most supportive		Most restrictive →	
Multilingual policies	Non interference policies (or no policy at all)	One (or more) official language policies	Assimilation policies
Special rights to dominant languages but protect and ensure legal rights to minority languages	Maintains status quo; effectively assures that dominant languages (and their speakers) maintain their power	Provides official status to one or more languages; gives them dominance over other languages in education, government. etc.	Promotes “national unity” through a single language; linguistic diversity considered a threat

Continuum of language and education policies—most supportive to most restrictive⁵

← Most supportive		Most restrictive →		
Political and financial support for language development and MLE	<i>Unofficial language can be included as subject in the formal education system but no official/financial support given</i>	Unofficial languages can be used only temporarily, as a “crutch” to help minority children understand what is being taught	Unofficial languages not used for teaching (minority teachers purposely assigned outside their own language areas)	Unofficial languages not allowed in the classroom or on the school grounds

“Education for All” that includes students from non-dominant language communities require language and education policies that provide...

- Clear statements of the specific purposes, goals and intended outcomes relating to the program based on a clear understanding of the language situation in the country and the educational goals and needs of the non-dominant language communities;
- Clear directives regarding the languages that are to be included in the program;
- Clear directives regarding the extended teaching of students’ LI as subject and using it as one of the languages of instruction throughout primary school
- Clear directives regarding agencies and organizations that will be involved, with emphasis on cooperation among government and non-government organizations
- Clear directives regarding implementation, including clear assignment of responsibilities
- Clear directives regarding financial support (who will be responsible; how funding will be provided)

⁵ UNESCO’s booklet on “Language and Education Policy and Practice in Asia and the Pacific”, part of the recently published *Advocacy Kit for Promoting Multilingual Education* (UNESCO, 2007) includes a brief overview of policies in South Asia (pages 4-6).

- Clear directives for incorporating the program into the existing education system and for providing funding for all components and personnel

Conclusion

Planning, implementing and sustaining MT-Based MLE programs in multiple language communities is certainly challenging, especially in multi-lingual countries lacking extensive financial resources. But is it worth the effort? Perhaps the best people to answer that question are the members of the ethnic minority communities themselves.

When our children go to school, they go to an alien place. They leave their parents, they leave their gardens, 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.

They don't want to dig sweet potatoes, they say it's dirty; they don't want to help their mother fetch water. They look down on those things. There are big changes in the children now. They don't obey their parents; they become rascals. And this is because they have gone to school and left the things that are ours.

Now my child is in Tok Ples school. He is not leaving his place. He is learning in school about his customs, his way of life. Now he can write anything he wants to in tok ples. Not just the things he can see, but things he thinks about, too. And he writes about his place. He writes about helping his mother carry water, about digging kaukau, about going to the garden.

When he writes these things they become important to him. He is not only reading and writing about things outside, but learning through reading and writing to be proud of our way of life. When he is big, he will not reject us. It is important to teach our children to read and write, but it is more important to teach them to be proud of themselves, and of us.

(Parent, Laitrao Village Tok Ples School, Buin, North Solomons Province, in Delpit and Kemelfield, 1985, p. 29-30)

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