

# id21 insights

communicating international development research

## Mother tongue first

### Children's right to learn in their own languages

**E**ducation is power and language is the key to accessing that power. A child who thrives at school and develops self-esteem and pride will have better employment opportunities and is more likely to realise his or her potential.

Ethnicity, language and culture are deeply intertwined. They are also intertwined with inequity, discrimination and conflict. Since most countries in the world are multiethnic and multilingual, opinions about provision of education, curriculum content, and the language of teaching and learning are often fiercely held and hotly debated.

The languages of elite groups or former colonisers often dominate the languages of others, particularly in official settings like the school. Yet it is now well established that when a child begins learning in his or her first language (also known as a home language or mother tongue) that child is more likely to succeed academically and is better able to learn additional languages.

A child who begins learning in a second (or foreign) language will, at least initially, find learning anything that much harder. The barrier of school language is often enough for children not to enrol in school or, if they do, for them to experience difficulties, become discouraged, repeat years, or drop out of school.

#### What are the challenges?

With almost 7,000 languages worldwide,

**A Dinka (mother tongue) class for grade one students in Majak Akon, Southern Sudan, an area that has seen 21 years of civil war. Millions have died, been abducted, recruited into militias, abused or separated from families. Now south Sudan's population will swell with people returning home, but the education system is under-resourced, depending on programmes run by aid agencies and faith groups. These difficult circumstances call for renewed attention to language issues as a way of meeting basic educational needs.**

Credit: Anna Kari 2006



how realistic is it to expect every child to have the opportunity to begin school in his or her first language? How difficult (and expensive) is it for a ministry or department of education to develop writing systems and provide curricula, teachers and materials for every language in the country? If families of marginalised groups speaking non-dominant languages want their children to learn in a dominant language, should pedagogical arguments override their views?

**It is now well established that when a child begins learning in his or her first language that child is more likely to succeed academically and is better able to learn additional languages.**

Each article in this issue of *id21 insights education* demonstrates the value for children (particularly those from marginalised groups) of learning in their first language, while recognising the challenges of turning sound educational principles into practice.

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#### What are the benefits?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, states that all children have the right to education (Article 28), and the right to learn and use the language of their family (Article 30). **Tove Skutnabb-Kangas** argues that when education is in a language the child doesn't know, whether due to family choice or lack of an alternative, this is violating the child's rights. She also contends that if languages are not protected, they will disappear (estimated rates vary), along with the knowledge held by their speakers.

Bolivia's successful language model, Intercultural and Bilingual Education, described by **Xavier Albó**, shows that indigenous children are less likely to repeat years and more likely to perform well. Evidence from Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Mozambique, gathered by **Carol Benson**, shows that mother tongue-based primary schooling is particularly beneficial for girls and leads to increased parental involvement in their education, reduced exploitation by male teachers and improved educational access and performance.

#### Can it be done quickly?

The evidence suggests that it can't. **Kathleen Heugh** has reviewed research from 29 African countries and concluded that short-term models (children learn in their first language for one to three years) are beneficial but, because children must

- ▶ switch too quickly to the second language, the benefits fade by year five.

The full benefits of mother tongue-based education will only be achieved with a long-term commitment of six to eight years; dramatic benefits will only be seen after ten or more years, when the mother tongue foundation has promoted academic learning and achievement in other languages.

### Can it be put into practice?

**Susan Malone** outlines a framework to integrate minority languages into dominant language programmes, with five phases taking a child from spoken fluency and confidence in the first language to reading and writing in the first and then additional languages.

### Is it more expensive?

A recent review (see page seven) of cost-benefit analyses for the 2006 African Education Ministers' Meeting shows that education programmes starting with the mother tongue and gradually moving into other languages lead to cost savings compared to monolingual programmes. If they are more expensive at the beginning, costs decrease over time and savings (not paying for children to repeat years, for example) far exceed initial investment.

### Several languages in one classroom?

The government in Viet Nam recognises 54 minority languages. **Helen Pinnock, Dinh Phuong Thao** and **Nguyen Thi Bich** describe a project that trains local classroom assistants (one for each language group in the classroom) to promote multilingual education, increasing the use of each language and understanding of the national language. Within a politically constrained context such as Viet Nam, small steps are all that are possible, yet significant impact may not be seen for several years.

### Will good policy work?

**Sheila Aikman** shows the complexity and inter-relatedness of ethnic identity and language. With indigenous peoples' efforts to revitalise their languages entangled with larger struggles for social justice and self-determination, they wish to see educational programmes based on their culture that also allow their children to participate in and benefit from the multicultural and global world in which they are growing up.

**Primary school pupils in Kaduna, Nigeria. Nigeria has approximately 400 languages and an education policy that allows for trilingual education in the mother tongue, a national language and English. In practice, only the national languages – Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo – have widespread use at the primary level along with English. Teaching materials are being developed in more languages, however, and at secondary level the national languages will soon be taught differently depending on whether students speak them at home or as a second language.** © Betty Press/Panos Pictures

But it is not just about establishing good educational language policies. India's national policy recommends schools use children's mother tongue in the classroom yet, as **Dhir Jhingran** and **Shireen Miller** outline, most children are still either completely 'submersed' into a second language or their mother tongue is used only unofficially in school. Language mapping, increased resources, research and training are also needed to turn policy into practice.

**Enabling access to education in the language in which the child feels most comfortable significantly increases that child's chances in life**

### Is language the key to Education for All?

Poverty and discrimination are still the root causes of inequitable access to education; family background (including levels of education, social class and so on) is still the main indicator of educational achievement. It is difficult to assess the impact of language alone, while controlling for all other factors such as quality of teaching and curricula and the availability of teachers and good teaching materials.

Yet mother tongue-based, bi- or multilingual education plays a significant role. Enabling access to education in the language in which the child feels most comfortable significantly increases that child's chances in life.

From a rights-based perspective, we know why it must happen. From a pedagogical perspective, we know what should be done. From a practical perspective, there are many success stories – from Papua New Guinea, Eritrea, Nigeria, Guatemala, Mali, Bolivia – demonstrating how it can work. More is needed, however:

- Teachers, educators and non-government organisations (NGOs) can increase awareness of and commitment



to the importance of language diversity and multilingualism in education.

- Donor agencies and NGOs can learn from the success stories and adapt them for countries without the same level of political support.
- Researchers need to find more effective ways to convince policymakers and budget holders.
- Researchers can also raise the issues at the annual international Education for All forum and monitor progress.
- National governments and donor agencies need to mobilise sufficient resources.

Approximately 1.38 billion people speak local languages – languages that are less well-known, without written forms and not used in formal education. This includes an estimated 221 million school-aged children. Mother tongue-based education can ensure a better quality education for these children – a significant contribution towards Education for All ■

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#### See also

*Promise and Perils of Mother Tongue Education*, Centre for Applied Linguistics, by N. Dutcher, 2003  
[www.sil.org/asia/ldc/plenary\\_papers/nadine\\_dutcher.pdf](http://www.sil.org/asia/ldc/plenary_papers/nadine_dutcher.pdf)

*A National Study of School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students' Long-Term Academic Achievement*, Centre for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, by W. Thomas and V. Collier, 2002  
[http://crede.berkeley.edu/research/llaa/1.1\\_final.html](http://crede.berkeley.edu/research/llaa/1.1_final.html)

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## Linguistic genocide?

### Children's right to education in their own languages

**We are killing languages faster than ever. By 2100, between 90 and 95 percent of today's approximately 7,000 spoken languages may be extinct or no longer learned by children.**

Most threatened languages are spoken by indigenous peoples; unless they are strengthened through education and other measures they will disappear.

Most countries are multiethnic and multilingual. If Education for All (EFA) becomes a reality, most children will soon attend school.

However, most indigenous and minority children (and children from majority groups like those from African countries with European official languages) are forced to accept instruction through a language that is not their own. They have no choice: there are no schools teaching in their first language.

Many parents and politicians 'choose' education through a dominant language, often English, unknowingly going against scientific evidence about learning and bilingualism, as well as against the human right of their own children to education in a language they understand.

#### Loss of educational opportunity

Some researchers claim that languages die 'naturally', that they cannot adapt to a post-modern technological world, and that their speakers leave them behind voluntarily to get the benefits that a more widely-spoken language gives. Parents think of the future education and jobs of their children and stop speaking their own languages at home. Nobody can be blamed and the children appear to profit.

But do they? Research with indigenous and minority children from all over the world shows negative results from using a dominant language as the main or only teaching language. Two examples: Canadian Inuit students taught in English reach only Grade 4 level after 9 years of schooling; English is the greatest barrier to successful classroom learning for Aboriginal children in Australia.

Research also shows that:

- Children learn better when they are taught through a language they know well.
- Children in mother tongue-based bilingual programmes in the USA learn English more rapidly and do better

**A Qomeni (San) child at school in Kagga Kamma, South Africa. San is not an 'official' language although it is supported by the constitution. South Africa's language policy in education advocates learning in the mother tongue, although many parents prefer their children to learn in English, despite strong evidence that a sound mother tongue foundation provides the best platform for learning a second language.**

© Paul Weinberg/Panos Pictures

academically than those in all-English programmes.

- In the largest-ever study of minority education students who reached the highest levels of bilingualism and school achievement were those whose mother tongue was the main language of instruction for the longest period of time.

#### Loss of information essential for survival

Non-degraded ecosystems such as rainforests in the Amazon, Borneo or Papua New Guinea are often inhabited only by indigenous and traditional peoples. When their languages disappear, their knowledge about how to maintain diverse ecosystems sustainably also disappears, including important knowledge about human survival (for instance, about medicinal plants) that is encoded in their languages. By killing languages, we are ruining the prerequisites for human life on the planet.

The disappearance of languages may be seen as a result of linguistic genocide. The formal education of indigenous and minority children through the medium of a foreign language corresponds to what two of the five definitions in The United Nations International Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (E793, 1948) define as genocide:

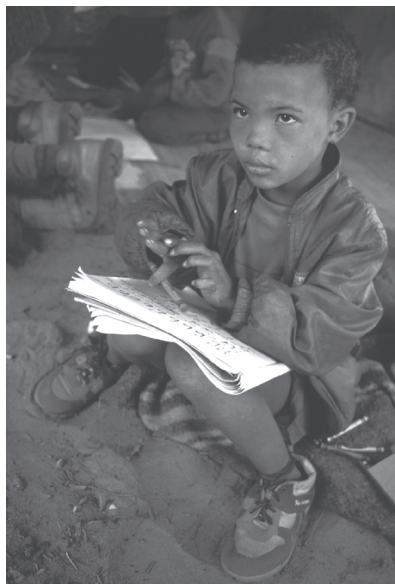
- Article II(e): 'forcibly transferring children of the group to another group'; and
- Article II(b): 'causing serious bodily or mental *harm* to members of the group' (emphasis added).

Indigenous and minority children should be educated in their own languages with good teaching of a country's official languages as second languages. Children need to learn dominant languages in addition to, not instead of, their own languages ■

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#### See also

*Linguistic Genocide in Education – or Worldwide Diversity and Human Rights?* Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, by Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000



## Gender, language and inclusion

**Schooling designed for dominant groups excludes other learners. Girls are particularly vulnerable because of their home responsibilities and the unsupportive attitudes of families and teachers.**

New evidence suggests that the inclusive strategies used in mother tongue-based bilingual education benefit girls even more than boys no matter what group they are from.

Studies in Guinea-Bissau, Niger and Mozambique have found that more girls enrol in bilingual schools, that they repeat classes less frequently and that they stay in school longer than girls learning in the dominant language.

More quantitative and qualitative research that separates data by sex is needed, but there are clear indications that girls benefit from learning in their first language due to factors such as:

#### Higher female enrolment

Families have more confidence in the educational outcome if their daughters can attend a school that communicates in a familiar language, especially when accompanying cultural values are respected. Traditional views may also be challenged, as happened in Bará, Guinea-Bissau: the bilingual programme convinced many caregivers that girls with a formal education could still be good wives, mothers and community members.

#### Increased parent participation

Improved communication encourages families to talk to teachers, support students' learning and become more involved in school decision-making. For example, parents of bilingual students in Xai-Xai, Mozambique, got involved in repairing the school premises and contributed to the curriculum.

#### Less exploitation of girls

Male teachers from the same linguistic and cultural communities as their students are more subject to social control and less likely to exploit girls sexually or otherwise. In Mozambique, bilingual male teachers were called by familial terms such as 'uncle', and had closer ties with students' families than teachers who only spoke Portuguese.

Mother tongue-based schooling also contributes to girls' psychological well-being. Girls learn better, gain self-esteem, build self-confidence and have higher aspirations for the future, making academic success more achievable.

Educational programmes that build on learners' strengths, and especially the languages in which they communicate best, benefit all students, but especially girls.

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#### See also

*Girls, Educational Equity and Mother Tongue-based Teaching*, by Carol Benson, UNESCO, Bangkok, 2005  
[www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/Girls\\_Edu\\_Equity](http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/Girls_Edu_Equity)

## Revitalising indigenous languages

Over the past 30 years there has been a blossoming of education approaches for and by indigenous peoples. Where there are bilingual and intercultural or multicultural programmes for indigenous peoples, indigenous students have achieved higher performance and attendance rates.

For indigenous peoples, efforts to revitalise their languages cannot be separated from struggles for democracy, justice and self-determination. Their actions have led to the 1993 Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which lays out the legal and political demands of indigenous peoples to establish and control education in their own languages (Article 15).

Schooling for indigenous and ethnic minority peoples needs to be relevant and recognise the learners' knowledge and languages. Multilingual and multicultural education programmes must be based on understanding people's language practices and ensuring that education supports the use of national or dominant languages in today's national and global societies.

Using bilingual education only as a bridge to ability in the dominant language undermines the development of the indigenous language and the intellectual, social and cultural resource it represents for the speaker.

Indigenous peoples live in changing, multilingual societies and the complex relationship between ethnic identity and language is a challenge for education programming. Where indigenous people commonly use more than two languages, the 'standard' L1/L2 model (indigenous language as L1 and dominant language as L2) could be seriously questioned.

One approach in Latin America is 'intercultural education'. Originally restricted to education and language learning for indigenous peoples, intercultural education now represents a new social paradigm which values diversity and puts it at the heart of education for all students. Community and family participation ensure that indigenous languages thrive and strengthen schooling and society.

Without participation, mutual understanding is undermined. In Peru, Amazon training colleges criticise the Ministry of Education's implementation of interculturalism because of its failure to address the complex and highly political relations between Peru's different cultural and linguistic traditions.

To respond to these challenges, diversity needs to be the starting point for language policy and planning. Good practice will focus on how people use all their languages in their everyday lives to understand each other, rather than imposing language policy based on a static, formal view of indigenous languages and cultures.

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### See also

'Indigenous Education: Addressing Current Issues and Developments' by Stephen Kay and Sheila Aikman in *Comparative Education*, Vol 39:2, 2003 (and other articles)

[www.journalonline.tandf.co.uk/link.asp?id=q7hgcwvptk0lk](http://www.journalonline.tandf.co.uk/link.asp?id=q7hgcwvptk0lk)

## Bolivia revolutionises bilingual education

**I**ntercultural and Bilingual Education supports the rights of indigenous school children to be taught in their own languages.

What can we learn from Bolivia, with one of the largest indigenous populations in Latin America, where children learn in their mother tongue?

Nearly two-thirds of Bolivians belong to one of 34 indigenous groups, the largest in population being Quechua and Aymara. Until 1982, children were punished at school for speaking their own languages rather than Spanish. As a result indigenous groups have lost many of their cultural and linguistic traditions.

### Better quality schooling

Intercultural and Bilingual Education (IBE) in Bolivia aims to teach in at least the three main indigenous languages, Quechua, Aymara and Guarani. It also aims to develop education and teaching processes in indigenous languages and Spanish.

IBE increases self-esteem and makes children happier, more communicative, participative, imaginative and creative. Since 1994, when the Education Reform Law expanded IBE to another 30 minority language groups, 14 more indigenous alphabets have been standardised and taught in schools.

A comparison of schools following the new IBE curriculum with traditional rural primary schools shows that students taught through IBE repeat an academic year less often (24 percent vs 48 percent). The level of satisfactory educational performance for indigenous children has increased from 19 to 35 percent.

### Keeping cultural identity

Placing indigenous languages at the centre of education provides indigenous children with the security and freedom to achieve better results, while maintaining their communities' cultural values and practices. Using the written form of indigenous languages also gives communities a sense of pride and prestige, with important implications for participating in national society.

### Evidence shows that

- Experience from neighbouring countries with the same indigenous peoples is important:

**Bolivia, Tapala, Chuquisaca department: two sons of indigenous farmers walk to school, an hour from their homes, as the school in their own village does not have a teacher.**

© Jan Banning/Panos Pictures

Bolivian educators trained in Puno, Peru have been key implementers of the reform, which has also received strong support from Peruvian experts.

- Teacher training is crucial: it is more effective to train new teachers than to reform those used to traditional methods. The lack of qualified intercultural and bilingual teachers and the resistance of Spanish-speaking teachers to adopt new practices and teaching materials have been major obstacles.
- UNICEF and other international agencies have been instrumental in helping turn IBE into official policy and in turning this policy into practice.

### Further success will require

- better links between the Ministry of Education and those responsible for meeting specific local and regional primary school needs
- more written materials in indigenous languages, including oral literature and translation from Spanish and other languages
- promoting intercultural and bilingual education of the dominant Spanish-speaking group, which is specified by law but not yet happening in practice
- more investment in teacher training to promote understanding and use of bilingual methods and strategies
- strategies to measure intercultural and bilingual equality and creativity as well as the attitudes and values of indigenous groups
- establishing IBE as official state policy through the constitution, so that successive administrations can not dismantle it ■

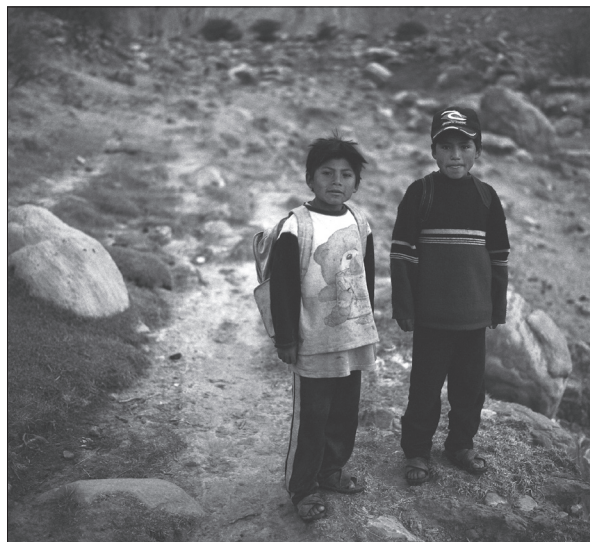
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### See also

*Niños alegres, libres, expresivos: la educación intercultural bilingüe en Bolivia (Happy, Free and Expressive Children)* by Xavier Albó and Amalia Anaya, UNICEF, 2003

[www.unicef.org/bolivia/resources\\_2245.htm](http://www.unicef.org/bolivia/resources_2245.htm)



## Policy and practice in Viet Nam

**The government of Viet Nam recognises 54 minority ethnic groups and languages. It expresses strong commitment to the development of its ethnic minority communities, about 13 percent of the population which, however, have missed out on Viet Nam's dramatic economic growth.**

The constitution says that all ethnic groups have the right to use their own languages.

Yet using ethnic minority languages in education is limited to a small number of schools. Guidelines restrict the language of instruction to Kinh (majority Vietnamese) and only eight minority languages are taught as school subjects. Only 28 languages have standardised writing systems; few books exist outside the main minority languages – Tày, Muong, Cham and Khmer; and there are few ethnic minority teachers, due to the difficulties they face progressing through the education system.

Some international agencies support teacher training initiatives for minority groups – a long term solution. Education agencies are also piloting mother tongue-based bilingual education in areas with one main minority language and a writing system.

### Improving practice in the highlands

Children in Vietnam's highlands come from multiple language groups, most without active writing systems. Several languages are often present in one classroom but lessons are all in Kinh.

At pre-school level, Save the Children UK works with 'key mothers' in highland communities, building their skills as teaching assistants so that each class has a resource person who speaks the children's language.

Key mothers work with teachers to ensure content is relevant, adapting curricula and textbooks to local context and using active play and learning techniques. They use local language to introduce new content and the teacher reinforces the message in spoken Kinh.

To help prepare children for primary school, Kinh is introduced verbally and children are familiarised with the Kinh alphabet. However, one or two years of this approach in pre-school are not enough for children to cope at primary level, let alone to develop essential learning and literacy skills in their own languages.

At present it is not possible to deliver truly bilingual education through the school system: without writing systems it is hard to teach in local languages, and schools lack ethnic minority teachers. What can be done in this challenging context?

Dao girls (right) in Tien Yen district, Quang Ninh province, northern Viet Nam, and a young H'mong girl (below) in Simacai district, Lao Cai province, eastern Viet Nam. Save the Children UK works with children, parents, teachers, officials and the wider community in these villages to improve pre- and primary education, health services and nutrition.

*Credit: Save the Children UK*



### Strengthening local languages

Save the Children UK is developing a new phase of multilingual education in pre-schools and primary schools. Working along a 'continuum of good practice', it will build capacity to strengthen local languages and teach bilingually. Home languages will be introduced as far as possible in pre-schools and primary schools.

#### Key mothers work with teachers to ensure content is relevant, adapting curricula and textbooks to local contexts

A network of bilingual community teaching assistants including key mothers will work in partnership with teachers to develop active learning and improve children's mother tongue and Kinh language skills. Teaching assistants will help improve communication between teachers and children. Teachers will improve their local language skills through language courses and supported communication with local people.

The government is now looking for practical solutions to address education needs in different language contexts, testing locally relevant approaches to fit Vietnam's situation. Save the Children UK wants to offer an approach for progressing towards multilingual education (MLE) in the most difficult contexts in Vietnam.

If MLE is to become both policy and reality, two challenges must be met:

- Robust methods for reporting early successes are needed, or the opportunity to influence policy may be lost. Rigorous mechanisms for monitoring longer-term progress are also needed.
- Agencies promoting multilingual education must reassure local education planners that using minority languages for learning strengthens rather than undermines students' skills in the national language ■

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### Forthcoming issues

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# Bridging languages in education

**I**nternational awareness of the importance of Education for All has grown. Yet, the only schooling available in many non-dominant language communities uses a language students do not understand or speak to teach concepts that have very little to do with their way of life.

While there are many factors involved in low educational achievement, it is clear that students who cannot understand what their teacher is saying quickly become discouraged. Members of non-dominant language communities have higher dropout and failure rates and lower literacy rates and have less success finding and keeping paid employment.

Using dominant languages in education has also led to the growing loss of the world's languages and cultures. Current estimates are that at least 50 percent of the world's almost 7,000 languages are endangered.

This article presents a framework for turning a monolingual system into a bilingual or trilingual one: mother tongue-based multilingual education (MLE).

MLE programmes acknowledge the right of all learners to education in a language they speak and understand. Learners begin school in their home language and then add the official language of instruction, building fluency and competency in both languages for communication and learning. MLE programmes have three general goals:

- **Language:** students will develop fluency and confidence using their first language (L1) and the official language (L2) for communication and for learning in school.
- **Academic:** students will achieve grade-level academic competency in each subject and will be prepared to move successfully into and through the mainstream education system, which may be all or mostly in the dominant language.
- **Socio-cultural:** students will maintain their love and respect for their heritage, language and culture and be prepared to contribute to the development of their own community and the nation.

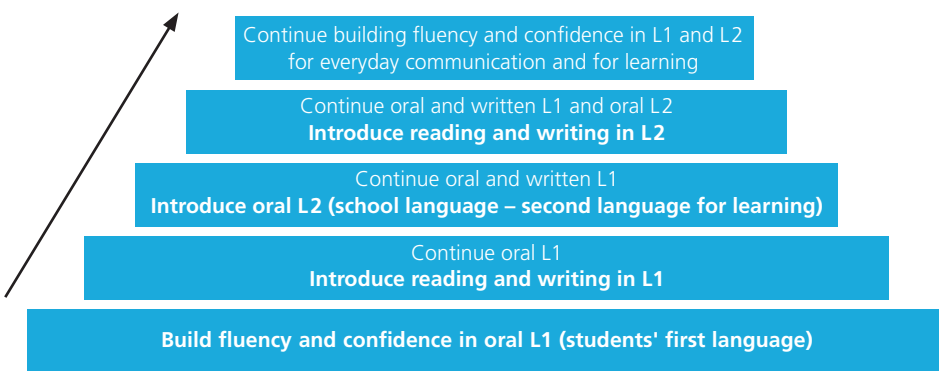
In MLE programmes learners begin school in the language they know best and use that language for initial literacy. Then the

new language is added – first listening and speaking, then reading and writing. As learners gain confidence in using the official language for everyday communication, they also learn the vocabulary and grammatical constructions for more abstract academic concepts.

We can identify five phases in bridging between languages in MLE. See Figure 1. In schools with L1 teachers who are not fluent in the official school language, the



**Sheglet Village, Gash Barka, Eritrea. The children come from Nara, Tigre, Kunama, and Tigrigna ethnic groups. There are nine national languages in Eritrea and texts and curricula have been developed for eight of these in addition to English.**  
Credit: Ezra Simon



**Figure 1: Five phases in bridging between languages in multilingual education**

language education component of primary level MLE might look like Figure 2 below.

Strong, sustained programmes require supportive language and education policies that:

- recognise all the nation's languages as resources
- protect the political, socio-cultural and linguistic rights of speakers of non-dominant languages, including the right to education in a language they understand and speak
- give explicit directions to implementing agencies regarding the use of non-dominant languages as one of the languages of instruction in formal and non-formal education
- provide implementers with strategies

for establishing and sustaining MLE programmes (including development of unwritten languages)

- ensure that MLE receives adequate long-term funding from governments ■

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**See also**  
*Manual for Developing Literacy and Adult Education Programmes in Minority Language Communities*, UNESCO: Bangkok, by Susan Malone, 2004  
<http://www2.unescobkk.org/elib/publications/minoritylanguage/index.htm>

Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Develop oral L1	Continue oral L1	Continue oral and written L1	Continue oral and written L1, oral L2	Continue oral and written L1 and L2	Continue oral and written L1, L2, L3	Continue oral and written L1, L2, L3
	Introduce written L1	Introduce oral L2	Introduce written L2	Introduce oral L3	Introduce written L3	
L1 as LOI	L1 as LOI	L1 as LOI	L1 and some L2 as LOI	L1 and L2 as LOI	L2 with L1 as LOI	L2 with L1 as LOI

**Figure 2: Possible model for primary level multilingual education**

## Mother tongue and bilingual education

**L**anguage education in Africa seldom provides a solid foundation for literacy and numeracy development. Instead of learning in a familiar language, pupils learn through an international language before they know it well enough.

A recent study of mother tongue and bilingual education for the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA) and UNESCO's Institute for Education (UIE) shows why current systems cannot deliver success.

Early literacy programmes focus on reading simple narratives, but from Grade 4 learners are expected to read far more complex texts.

African countries expect young children to learn through an international language from Grade 1 or within the first 3 to 4 years of primary. The transition from mother tongue (L1) education to learning in the international language often happens at the point that learners are expected to jump from reading stories to academic texts.

Learners, however, need six to eight years of very good second language (L2) teaching before they are ready to use it as a medium of instruction. During this time, strong mother tongue education needs to continue so that learners keep up with the curriculum. The stronger the development of the mother tongue, the stronger the proficiency in the second language.

The ADEA-UIE study shows that learners do well in early L1 programmes. However, within a year or two of the transition to the international language, achievement slows

down and declines to an average of about 30 percent by the end of secondary.

Learners left behind by Grade 6 rarely catch up. The system only prepares them for an unsuccessful early exit from school. Figure 3 below shows the difference between the achievement of learners who study through their second language (32 percent) and learners who study in their mother tongue (69 percent) in South Africa.

### Research findings:

- L1 literacy development for Grades 1 to 3 is valuable but not sufficient.
- Strong L2 subject teaching for 6 to 8 years is required before L2 can be used as medium.
- Premature interruption of L1 education interrupts cognitive and academic development.
- Low achievement in literacy, mathematics and science is linked to premature use of L2 medium.

### Policy recommendations:

- New programme and materials design should eliminate the gap between early literacy (Grades 1 to 3) and academic literacy (Grades 4 onwards).
- L1 education needs to be extended through to Grade 6.
- All teachers need training in literacy and language development ■

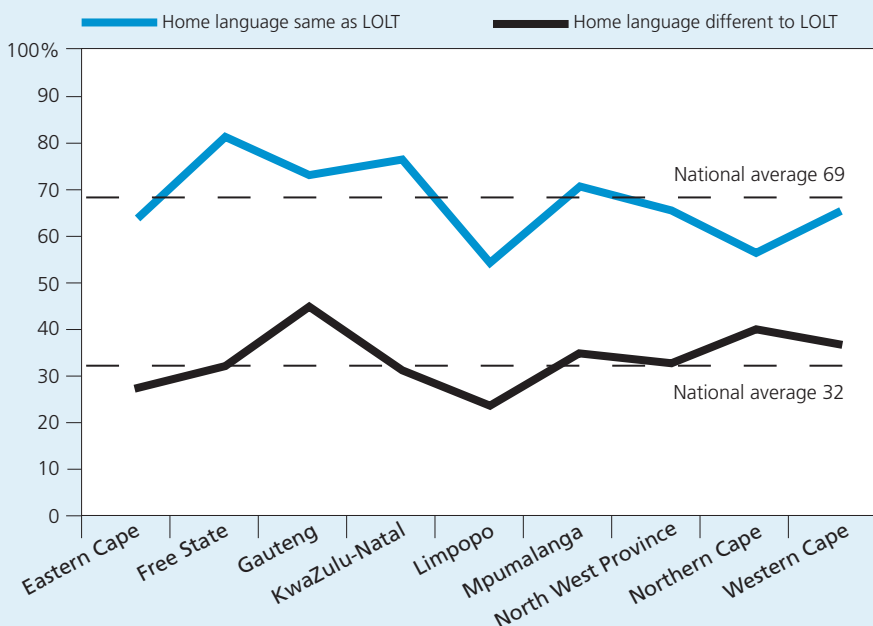
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### See also

*Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor; A Stock-taking Research on Mother Tongue and Bilingual Education in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Association for the Development of Education in Africa: Paris by Hassana Alidou et al, 2006  
[www.adeanet.org/biennial-2006/doc/document/B3\\_1\\_MTBLE\\_en.pdf](http://www.adeanet.org/biennial-2006/doc/document/B3_1_MTBLE_en.pdf)

**Figure 3: South Africa – Grade 6 Language achievement by province: where the home language is the same as the language of learning and teaching (LOLT); and where the home language is different from the LOLT**



Source: Grade 6 Systemic Evaluation National Report, Pretoria: Department of Education, 2005

## Mother tongue education is cost-effective

**Policymakers are often reluctant to support mother tongue as a medium of instruction in schools, arguing it is too expensive. Yet the savings can be significant.**

Mother tongue education (MTE) results in lower dropout and repetition rates than traditional approaches where children don't learn in their own languages.

A cost-benefit analysis of MTE programmes shows that they cost more to set up but the costs of moving to MTE are not as high as might be expected. Additional costs of developing MTE programmes include:

- scripting and developing local languages for academic use
- writing, developing, and publishing textbooks and materials
- developing programmes to train teachers in MTE approaches
- better teaching of the dominant language as a second language

Moving to an MTE system is estimated to cost up to four or five percent of a country's education budget. However, extra teacher education costs for MTE decrease over time. Once a new teacher education programme has been designed and trialed it is absorbed into the overall system.

Similarly, the costs of textbooks and materials are absorbed into overall running costs with time. Once developed, they only need updating and reprinting, as with any textbooks.

MTE leads to reductions in repetition and dropout rates, resulting in significant cost savings. When fewer children have their education interrupted by repetition and dropout, it takes less time (and costs less) to get the same number of children through basic education. Additional benefits accumulate to a country from adopting MTE as students' future earning power is likely to increase if they stay in education for longer.

*In Guatemala and Senegal it costs more to publish textbooks in local languages but not as much as some claim. In Guatemala 0.13 percent of the recurrent education budget is spent on textbooks. Guatemala's savings have been estimated at over US\$5.6 million a year due to reduced repetition and dropout rates resulting from MTE, allowing for higher costs of delivering schooling.*

### Policy implications

- MTE needs to be introduced against a background of broader investment by donors and national governments in education. All education systems need to invest in flexible and well targeted teacher recruitment, training and development to reach Education for All goals.
- Governments must give long-term support to MTE, as most benefits will only be seen after a few years. MTE is therefore more likely to succeed in a relatively stable political context.

By Helen Pinnock, Save the Children UK, summarising review by Kathleen Heugh  
[www.adeanet.org/biennial-2006/doc/document/B3\\_1\\_MTBLE\\_en.pdf](http://www.adeanet.org/biennial-2006/doc/document/B3_1_MTBLE_en.pdf) (Chapter 8)

## Linguistic diversity and policy in India

**India is a mosaic of linguistic diversity. None of its 1,600 languages, grouped somewhat arbitrarily into 114 groups, has a clear majority. Yet children often start school in a language that is not their mother tongue.**

Children from non-dominant groups are particularly disadvantaged, including India's Scheduled Tribes, those living in remote areas, migrants from states with different official languages (a child from Maharashtra living in Gujarat, for example) and those living on the edges of large cities.

The question of which languages are most suitable for instruction has long been a central issue. It is now even more important in the context of Education for All and improving educational access and quality.

Most states decide their own medium or mediums of instruction (MOI) for primary schools. While national policy recommends using the mother tongue as the MOI in primary schools, state policy varies for lack of implementation guidelines. States often designate the official state language (such as Tamil in Tamil Nadu) as MOI or even, increasingly, English.

### What does this mean in practice?

Two broad patterns emerge:

- In the first, teachers use only the standard language, prohibiting local languages in the classroom.
- In the second pattern, the mother tongue is used informally – where the MOI is one language (English in Jammu and Kashmir, for example, with textbooks in English) and teachers teach and explain in the local language.

## Useful web links

African Academy of Languages  
[www.acalan.org](http://www.acalan.org)

Association for the Development of Education in Africa  
[www.adeanet.org](http://www.adeanet.org)

Centre for Applied Linguistics  
[www.cal.org](http://www.cal.org)

Consortium for Language Policy and Practice  
<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/plc/clpp>

Centre for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence  
<http://crede.berkeley.edu>

Education Resources Information Centre  
[www.eric.ed.gov](http://www.eric.ed.gov)

Ethnologue Languages of the World  
[www.ethnologue.com](http://www.ethnologue.com)

MOST Clearing House Linguistic Rights  
[www.unesco.org/most](http://www.unesco.org/most)

SIL International  
[www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org)

Terralingua  
[www.terralingua.org](http://www.terralingua.org)

UNESCO Bangkok  
[www.unescobkk.org/index.php?id=222](http://www.unescobkk.org/index.php?id=222)

UNESCO Cultural and Linguistic Diversity  
[http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=12871&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=12871&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html)

For further references see web version:  
[www.id21.org/insights/insights-ed05/index.html](http://www.id21.org/insights/insights-ed05/index.html)

In both situations children struggle to understand a new language rather than learn the concepts being taught in a language they understand. Attempts to introduce higher-quality teaching practices are therefore wasted due to lack of communication.

### Recommendations

Alternative approaches to submersion need exploring. Carefully planned bilingual models should be developed through strategies that:

- identify linguistic groups and the language abilities of children aged five to six through sociolinguistic mapping
- ensure that linguistic diversity is reflected in the local and district education plans required for annual allocation of resources
- develop language profiles of students, involving teachers and children
- incorporate local education strategies in response to identified needs, including effective bilingual models and programmes
- develop innovative responses, through action research, to demands in areas where children have two or more first languages
- recruit and support local bilingual teachers to get full teaching qualifications
- sensitise education officials, planners and trainers to the crucial importance of the first language for cognitive development and acquisition of additional languages
- train and support strong first and second language teaching methodologies
- promote policies and norms across states that support learning in linguistic minority groups within schools.

Some of the above approaches are being piloted in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. The challenge lies in scaling up these interventions in an integrated manner for long term sustainability of language-in-education practices ■

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#### See also

*Language Disadvantage: the Learning Challenge in Primary Education*, APH Publishing Corporation: New Delhi, by Dhir Jhingran, 2005

*Language and Education: Meeting the Needs of Linguistic Minorities in Delhi*, unpublished dissertation, Institute of Education, University of London, by Shireen Miller, 2005



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