First language-based education for non-dominant language speakers: Issues and challenges


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First Language (L1)

Mother tongue, Home language, Community language

A language:
✓ that one has learnt first;
✓ one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others;
✓ one knows best; and/or
✓ one uses most.

(UNESCO 2003, Education in Multilingual World, p. 15)
Learners whose home language is the language of instruction and the language of literacy.

Minority language learners who do not speak the language used when they enter school or an education programme

Source: Kosonen, Malone, Young (2007)

Multilingual Education (MLE)

*Using more than one language as:*

- Language (or medium) of instruction (Lol)
- Language of literacy (initial and recurrent)
- Subject of study
Multilingual Education for building a strong foundation and good bridge

A strong foundation in the L1 and good bridge to the L2 build successful, life-long learners in both languages
First Language-based MLE

- **Learning starts** in a language the learner already speaks (L1) (known -> unknown)
- **Initial literacy** in the first language (L1)
- **Other languages** (e.g. L2, L3) learned as ‘second’ languages with appropriate methods
- Later both L1 and L2 used as the languages instruction and languages of literacy
- Both L1 and L2 are studied as school **subjects**
- **New languages** can be added later
- **L1 & L2** remain means for lifelong learning

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‘Ideal’ model of first language-based multilingual education
(Early Childhood and Primary Education levels)

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<tr>
<th>Primary Level</th>
<th>KG1</th>
<th>KG2</th>
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How Can Multilingual Education Benefit Learners?

The use of the first language (L1) helps learning

- Learning in L1 doesn’t hinder, but helps learning of L2 (e.g. official, national or foreign language) and L3, L4 etc.,
- Learning to read in L1 is easier and faster,
- What is learned in L1 transfers to L2 (and vice versa),
- L1 allows students to learn curriculum content from the first day in school,
- Strong L1 helps students perform better in L2 academic work,
The use of mother tongue (L1) helps learning

- L1 allows parents to participate more in their children’s education,
- Multilingual education (in L1, L2, L3 etc.) improves thinking skills, creativity and flexibility of the learners
- L1 helps teachers in identifying what students have learned,
- Long-term use of relevant learning strategies support students to become multilingual and multiliterate.

Bilingual Programs - Comparison of Achievement on Standardized Tests

Results of study of 42,000 learners over 11 years: the US
Strong Foundation in L1 and Good Bridge to L2 essential:

“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)

Rationale for Supporting Non-dominant Languages in Education:

• Educational efficiency and quality
• Human rights
• Social, political, and economic participation
• Social equality & equity
• Multilingualism, pluralism
• Language endangerment, maintenance, and revitalization
Benefits of MLE to the society

• MLE helps linguistically marginalized communities bridge to the broader society (better acquisition of the national language)
• MLE → education of better quality → well-educated citizens, including ethnolinguistic minorities, contribute to and benefit from the national development (also economy),
• Multilingual people are an important resource to the society
• Cultural pluralism and multilingualism can be resources and opportunities rather than problems for a nation

Benefits of MLE to the society

• People whose cultures and languages are respected and supported are likely more ‘loyal citizens’ than those denied this right,
• Government messages (e.g. rights and responsibilities) can reach linguistic minority communities best in a language they understand,
• Essential and life-saving information on HIV-AIDS, H1N1 flu and malaria, for example, reach linguistic minorities best in a language they understand
Keskeinen kysymys

• Voimmeko tosissamme edes puhua koulutuksen hyödystä oppijoille, jos he eivät ymmärrä opetuskieltä?

• Confused?
• Hundreds of millions of learners face this same challenge (an alien language of education or communication) every day

A Key Question

• Can education really benefit learners, if they don't understand the language of education?
Trends in L1-based education

• Major positive attitudinal changes since late 1990s in many countries
• International MLE Conferences
• National seminars – symposia (2003 →)
  – Laos, Vietnam, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Thailand, Malaysia, Timor Leste, the Philippines
• Language an agenda item in regional education meetings (UNESCO, UNICEF, SEAMEO, WB, INGOs)
• Support for MLE pilots and action-research (UNESCO, UNICEF, SIL International, Save the Children, Care International, Bilateral donors)
• Advocacy materials
• Policy changes: Malaysia, the Philippines

Challenges

Rationale (excuses) given for monolingual and elitist policies:

• Economic factors
  - Multilingual education is too costly
• National unity
  - Using many languages in education disintegrates the nation
• Power issues
  - Distribution of power, decentralization
  - Elites’ vested interests?
Rationale (excuses) given for monolingual and elitist policies:

• Misunderstanding of language & education issues and multilingualism
  - Using several media of instruction confuses students,
  - Using non-dominant languages will delay the learning of dominant (national) languages,
  - Parents want the national/international language only, as they don’t understand multilingual approaches

Rationale (excuses) given for monolingual and elitist policies:

• Technical and ‘logistical’ challenges
  - Non-dominant languages: no orthographies, ‘modern’ terminology & standard form
  - No literature and learning materials
  - No teachers speaking non-dominant languages
  - Multilingual classrooms / linguistic diversity in schools
  - Minority communities not interested (or this is what the decision-makers think)
  - MLE not seen as high priority by donors / program implementers
**Rationale (excuses) given for monolingual and elitist policies:**

- **Policies vs. implementation**
  - Supportive policies exist in documents, but policies not implemented

- **Colonial “legacy” and example**
  - Colonialists supported elitist and dominant language only-policies
  - Major issue in Africa and Latin America, less so in parts of Asia

**Thank you!**

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