HOW CHILDREN LEARN: THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND USE

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## Linguistic Diversity in Asia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P.New Guinea</td>
<td>850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>742</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>427</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
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<td>Vietnam</td>
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<td>Lao PDR</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
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<td>Pakistan</td>
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<td>Iran</td>
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<td>Bangladesh</td>
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<td>Kazakhstan</td>
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(30 countries)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Languages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uzbekistan</td>
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<td>Tajikistan</td>
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<td>Cambodia</td>
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<td>Brunei</td>
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<td>Japan</td>
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<td>Korea, South</td>
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<td>Maldives</td>
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<td>Korea, North</td>
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</table>

TOTAL: ~ 2200  
(Source: Ethnologue 2005)
- Of the world’s more than 6000 languages, 50% are “dying”, 40% are endangered, and only 10% are “safe”.

- 96% of these languages are spoken by only 4% of the world’s population.

- Most of the endangered languages are spoken by ethnic minorities.

- If nothing is done, these languages and their cultures will likely die.
What would be the loss?

• With the death of a language, an irreplaceable unit of our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world-view is lost.

• Endangered languages must be further developed or revitalised:
  ➢ because languages are interesting in themselves
  ➢ because we need to maintain cultural and linguistic diversity for a sustainable future
  ➢ because languages express identity and are repositories of history
  ➢ because languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge
  ➢ because languages help people learn
So what do we know? (1)

• A language can survive and thrive only if it has a strong presence in the education system.
• But most education systems are inappropriate for, or even hostile to, indigenous groups and their languages.
• As a result, large numbers of learners are faced with either a foreign medium of instruction or a language that is different from the language they speak at home.
• Thus, it is critical – for both cultural and linguistic development and academic achievement – that early education and initial literacy be provided in the learner’s first language or mother tongue.
What do we know? (2)

- People only learn to “read” once.
- It is therefore necessary to begin school from where the learners are – the language they speak at home.
- The starting point of learning how to read and write is the language spoken and understood by the learner – beginning with the known and moving to the unknown.
- It is impossible to teach most people to read and write in a language they do not understand.
- Skills in the first language of instruction should be consolidated (preferably during at least three years of study) before the second is mastered.
What do we know? (3)

- **A strategy of bilingualism produces better learning outcomes and higher rates of internal efficiency** – higher enrolment, less repetition, lower drop-out rates, higher achievement

- **Encouraging mother tongue as the medium of instruction also:**
  - builds trust, initiative, and participation in learning
  - stimulates the production of school and cultural materials in the language
  - broadens learned knowledge to include local, traditional knowledge
  - facilitates integration into social and cultural life
  - contributes at the political level to improving relations between political leaders and the multilingual population in the country
  - Contributes to the achievement of EFA goals and the Millennium Development Goals
Mother tongue-based multi-lingual education: What is it?

- education that promotes **initial instruction and literacy in mother-tongue** and improves educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of learners and teachers.

- education that allows often excluded **linguistic groups into mainstream life** without forcing them to leave behind their ethnic and linguistic identity.

- education that enables learners of neglected languages to **gain fluency and confidence in speaking, reading and writing the national language** (and then international languages) and to participate fully in, and contribute, to national economic and social development.
Learners whose mother tongue is the language of instruction and literacy in education.

Learners who do not speak the standard school language used when they enter school.
MLE for building a **strong foundation** and a **good bridge** in multilingual contexts

*Minority language learners...* …“bridging” to success in education

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Doubts and challenges (1)

• The lack of orthographies and alphabets and the problem of multiple scripts
  ➢ BUT new alphabets can be developed, at relatively low cost, often using the script of the national language
• Concern for the cost to develop mother tongue instructional materials and to recruit and train teachers from, or in, the minority languages
  ➢ BUT materials and texts can be produced locally and cheaply, especially for the early grades, using teachers and community members as resources
  ➢ AND teacher trainees from linguistic minorities can be found and trained
Doubts and challenges (2)

- The “underdevelopment” of some languages and their inability to express complicated ideas and concepts
  - BUT most can express the ideas and concepts needed for gaining initial literacy – and languages, too, can grow!
- Indifference -- and even opposition -- from within the minority communities themselves
  - BUT they can be helped to understand that simply speaking the language at home does not lead to literacy and that literacy in their own language can lead to greater literacy in the dominant language and greater success in school
Doubts and challenges (3)

- Indifference – and even opposition – from dominant political and economic groups based on fear of divisiveness and the overriding goal of national unity
  - BUT recognising and valuing linguistic and cultural diversity can reinforce the loyalty excluded groups feel toward the state
  - AND gaining initial literacy in mother tongue can lead to greater mastery of the national language and higher academic achievement
Education in a multilingual world

The Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity recognizes a relationship among biodiversity, cultural diversity, and linguistic diversity.

UNESCO’s action plan recommends:

• sustaining the world’s linguistic diversity and supporting the expression and dissemination of the greatest possible number of languages
• encouraging linguistic diversity at all levels of education and fostering the learning of several languages from the youngest age
• incorporating, where appropriate, traditional pedagogies into the education process
Education in a multilingual world

UNESCO also recommends:

1) Support for mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of learners and teachers

- Mother tongue education is essential for initial instruction and literacy and should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible.
- Literacy can only be maintained if there is an adequate supply of reading material.
- All educational plans should include the training of teachers familiar with the life of their people and able to teach in their mother tongue.
Education in a multilingual world

2) Support for bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies
   • Communication, expression and the capacity to listen and dialogue should be encouraged, first in the mother tongue, then in the official or national language.

3) Support for language as an essential component of inter-cultural education
   • The educational rights of persons belonging to minorities, as well as indigenous peoples, should be fully respected.
   • Education should raise awareness of the positive value of cultural and linguistic diversity.
Desired outcomes of the conference

To raise awareness regarding threats to the world’s linguistic and cultural diversity and to the social, cultural, political, economic, and educational injustices faced by the people who come from non-dominant ethnolinguistic communities.

To understand and appreciate that the diversity of a multi-ethnic society is a treasure, essential for sustainable development, and that preservation of such diversity is promoted and nourished by the spread of literacy in both the minority language and the national language.

To raise awareness regarding the purposes and benefits of MT-based MLE programmes that enable speakers of non-dominant languages to achieve educational success.
Desired outcomes of the conference

To understand that learning to read and write in the home language can be the most effective and efficient approach to learning to read and write in the national language and can lead to higher school achievement.

To raise awareness that literacy in the both indigenous minority language and the national language will have an integrative effect -- economically, socially, politically, culturally -- not a disintegrative effect.

To learn about good practices in planning, implementing, and sustaining strong language development, language revitalisation, and MT-based MLE programmes from the people who are engaged in such programmes.

To encourage participants – especially members of ethnolinguistic communities – to develop and expand their networks of individuals and organisations in these efforts.