

Mother tongue based multilingual education: how can we move ahead?

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Abstract

Save the Children UK has engaged in language and education for ten years, aiming to increase the space for mother-tongue based education. The focus of this work is often in conflict affected settings or remote minority areas. Key elements include:

- *Increasing use of local language in schools*
- *Building a foundation of child-centred learning approaches*
- *Enabling more local language speakers to become teachers*
- *Making materials available in local languages*
- *Influencing policy formation and implementation.*

The organisation produced a policy statement in 2007 which aims to promote mother tongue-based multilingual education for children who do not speak the language currently used in schools. A key focus of our strategy is working to gradually bring schools, communities and government closer to good practice over time.

While policy dialogue and pilot projects have grown in recent years, Save the Children's perception is that there is still significant resistance to adopting quality mother-tongue multilingual education approaches on a large scale within school systems. For example, reducing the use of national language to make room for more mother tongue in schools can be seen as a threat to national unity. There is often a lack of awareness about how children develop linguistically and cognitively, and achieving good practice can be viewed as unattainable or too costly.

Against this background, how can education actors create stronger arguments for mother tongue based multilingual education? Finding the right messages and evidence to influence policy debates and allay political concerns remains a challenge. This discussion paper assesses the way forward for in mainstreaming mother tongue based multilingual education, using a 'Drivers of Change' perspective. Based on Save the Children's experience, the paper analyses barriers to scaling up mother tongue-based multilingual education, and will suggest priority areas for action, with particular reference to the East Asia-Pacific region.

1. Why is instruction in mother tongue a key issue?

Recognising and responding to diversity is a key principle for quality education (UNESCO, 2008). Save the Children UK has a strong focus on improving quality and access of education for children disadvantaged by their ethnicity. Save the Children's experience is that language of instruction acts as a major barrier to education for children who do not have access to the school language. In Bangladesh's Chittagong Hill Tracts, for example, where indigenous children must learn in Bangla, the dropout rate is double the national average at 60%¹. The World Bank estimates that half the children out of

school globally do not have access to the language of school in their home lives, indicating the significance of language barriers in education (World Bank, 2005).

There is growing evidence from across Africa, Latin America and Asia that mother tongue based multilingual education (MT-based MLE) is the most appropriate solution for children who do not use national or international languages in their home life (Thomas and Collier, 1997; Benson, 2006). Good quality MT-based MLE starts education in children's first language and gradually introduces second or third languages as subjects, transferring if necessary to the second language of instruction after at least six years (Alidou et al, 2006). Children build up a strong conceptual picture of the world and academic concepts through a language they understand first, and later on transfer that to a second or third language. There is clear evidence that good quality MT-based MLE works, resulting in substantial efficiency savings to the education system and leading to better learning competencies and proficiency in both second languages and local language (Webley et al, 2006).

For the last ten years Save the Children has been working on language in education, aiming to increase the space for mother-tongue based education for children who do not speak the language used in schools. The focus of this work is often in conflict affected settings or remote minority areas, often in Asia. These programmes are showing us that there is significant enthusiasm for MT-based MLE at local level, among children, parents and local education officials. This is often because stakeholders can see the immediate benefits in their daily lives, such as children motivated to attend school, doing better at learning and improving in language skills.

2. Progress towards Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education

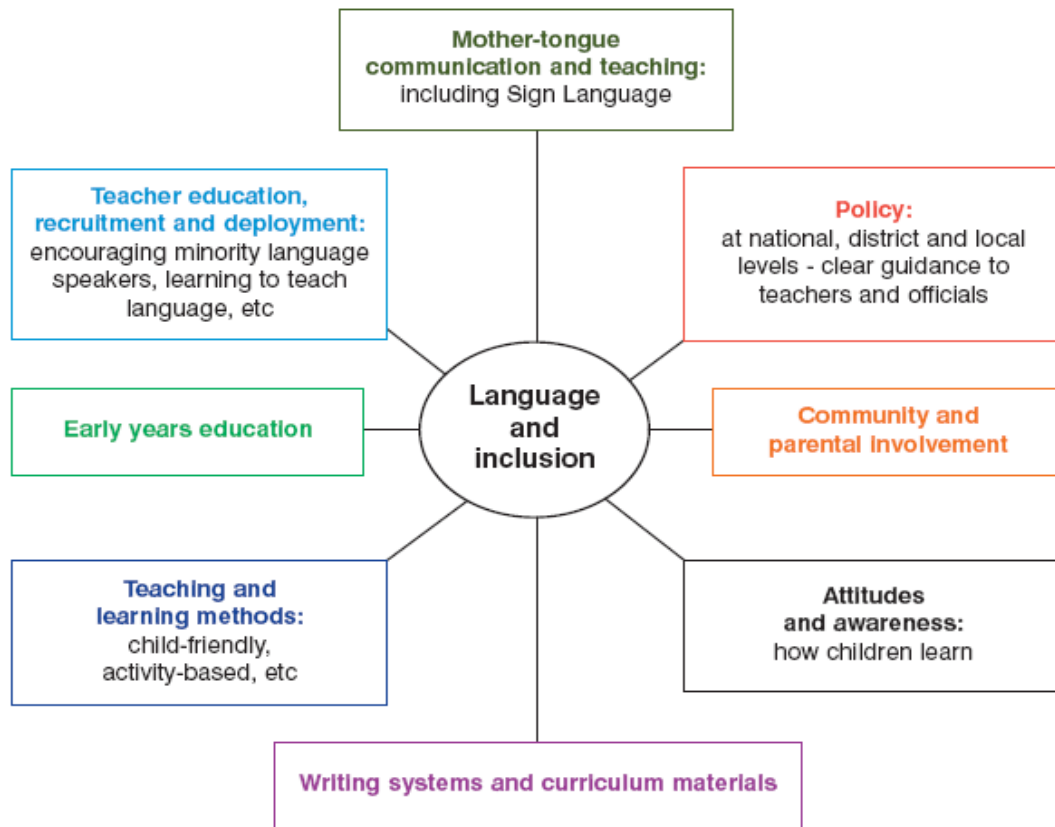
Progress has been made towards MT-based MLE in some multilingual settings, often in countries with very limited resources. One example is Eritrea, which brought in a mother tongue based multilingual education system after conflict with Ethiopia in 1993, making significant changes to teacher training schemes to enable people from a range of ethnolinguistic groups to become mother tongue teachers (Webley, 2000). Other examples, such as Bolivia's intercultural education approach and Papua New Guinea's mother tongue multilingual education system, covering 380 language groups, have been well documented (Webley et al, 2007).

Looking at learning from these instances, from Save the Children's experience and from the work of several other organisations² indicates that for MT-based MLE to be implemented effectively across an education system, a range of supports should be put in place.

These can be characterised as follows:

- Language (and the need for learning in mother tongue) is at the centre of education policy
- Clear guidance indicates local language is valued in schools
- Learner-centred teaching approaches are promoted
- Flexible modes of entry to teacher training are available for minority language speakers
- Early education in mother tongue promotes language development and preliteracy skills
- There is support for participatory production of writing systems and literacy materials in local languages; schools are encouraged to engage with parents and communities
- Teachers are encouraged to be aware of and promote language acquisition
- Moves to assess national examinations in local languages are under way.

Figure 1 is an example of a practice framework which would support mother tongue based multilingual education on a large scale (Enabling Education Network, 2008³):



Looking at the practical changes that might result from putting such supports in place, it can be argued that few require enormous change or upheaval, and in any case that most would need to be put in place to support a broad Education For All agenda. However, it also seems clear, from the range of supports needed, that commitment for MT-based MLE needs to stem from the leadership of the education system.

Practically every country in Asia has invested heavily in the MDG⁴ and EFA agendas, and is recognising that a focus on quality as well as access is vital to boost the education performance of the country. In several cases there is serious consideration of the rights of linguistic and ethnic minorities, and recognition that they are often not doing well in education. There is also informal recognition in discussions with regional education experts that majority ethnic populations are performing well below expectations in foreign language learning.

However, there is surprisingly little evidence of change towards MT-based MLE in many multilingual, multiethnic countries which would be expected to benefit from it, particularly in East Asia-Pacific, which have arguably better financial and human resources to make changes in education than many other parts of the world. Few powerful education actors in East Asia-Pacific seem willing to seriously consider putting these supports in place to deliver MT-based MLE. Concerns about limited numbers of teachers able to teach in minority languages, or about producing materials in multiple languages, often dominate discussions of the topic, although it is often evident that with sufficient political will the resources to remove these barriers would be available. Instead, several governments

have moved to increase the use of national and international languages in instruction from early grades of school, including the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia. In several countries MT-based MLE pilots are being permitted, but are not receiving support to scale up within national education systems.

For agencies and individuals convinced of the value of MT-based MLE, and of the likely failure of monolingual instruction in multilingual societies, a set of questions arises from this situation. Why are the problems which children and teachers experience with learning in an unfamiliar language not being addressed? Why does bringing in second language for instruction early seem so popular, when it goes against credible evidence on how children learn languages?

3. Applying a Drivers of Change approach to language in education

When policy and practice do not appear to be significantly influenced by the available evidence, it is logical to infer that other considerations are more powerful. It is helpful to investigate these considerations, in this case in order to understand how they affect the possibility of moving towards MT-based MLE in multilingual societies.

Assessing some of these major imperatives affecting decision makers, often termed 'drivers of change' can illuminate why decision makers choose policies which seem to be at odds with good educational practice. A Drivers of Change approach helps actors interested in promoting a particular change to assess the totality of the forces which result in change actually being realised. It highlights:

'...factors that affect political will and institutional capacity for reform, as well as factors that affect incentives and capacity for change ... A Drivers of Change investigation will consider change processes in terms of the interaction between structural features, institutions and agents. "Drivers" of change will normally be processes that involve each of these types of factors, with relationships of power, inequality and conflict at their heart.' (DFID, 2003)⁵

A Drivers of Change perspective is particularly helpful in analysing the lack of action towards implementing large scale MT-based MLE in Southeast & East Asia. This is because it does not appear that large financial or human resource gaps, or lack of governance and service delivery infrastructure are the issue. Therefore blocks to progress can be argued to be mainly rooted in the motivations and relationships affecting those with the capacity to make change.

In looking at blocks to implementing MT-based MLE, it is important to compare with settings where MT-based MLE has been implemented. Asking what key drivers appear in relation to language in education in countries that are socially and politically committed to multilingual education is useful.

Many of these countries have recently become independent (as with Papua New Guinea), or have emerged from conflict with a new sense of self determination and desire to differentiate national identity from the characteristics of groups previously in power. Guatemala, Bolivia and Eritrea fit this profile. In these countries it is also possible to see that strong commitment to mother tongue based multilingual education is linked to a strong desire to express and promote a new identity for their nation, based on indigenous culture. It is clear that language is closely bound up with the driver of expressing national identity and self determination.

Looking at these countries' experience also shows that MT-based MLE has produced positive results. For example, in bilingual schools in Guatemala, grade repetition is half that of traditional schools, with dropout rates 25% lower, despite children in bilingual schools being from more 'at-risk' groups (World Bank, 2005).

However, similar drivers of national identity affecting language and education can result in radically different policies. South Sudan's switch from Arabic as language of instruction to English appears to have reflected similar desires of self determination and differentiation, changing the language of education to one different to that of the previous colonising regime. However, in this case the desire for national differentiation and self determination appears linked to a desire to reach out to international opportunities, rather than placing indigenous identity at the core of the new nation state.

4. How Change Drivers for East Asia-Pacific relate to MT-based MLE

Examining East Asia-Pacific Asian countries, it becomes evident that MT-based MLE is not currently placed at the centre of major national priorities, and that it can be seen as conflicting with these priorities.

The World Bank (2007) highlights the following key drivers of change in the East Asia-Pacific region:

1. Competitiveness pressures from globalization of trade and investment, and the recognition that excellent human resources are an essential attribute for moving forward in the knowledge economy.
2. Demands of maintaining social cohesion and stability, preserving social identity, and building indigenous spiritual and cultural traditions.
3. Awareness of the need for protection of indigenous & minority cultures, languages and belief systems.

The third driver is relatively easy to link to a MT-based MLE agenda, and this has been underlined by the many conferences, meetings and publications instigated by indigenous minority groups and NGOs internationally. These make clear the need for flexible, diversity-friendly education systems as a means to meeting Education For All commitments and enabling the rights of minority groups.

However, the priority of investing in education to produce an internationally competitive human resource base is arguably greater, especially when combined with the pull to create a strong sense of national identity through education. In countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia, which have only recently entered a period of stable independence from colonial interests or internal conflicts, the need to make it clear to all citizens and outsiders that this is a unified country with a clear national identity is paramount. (This point was raised more than once in discussions by Thai participants at the recent Second International Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Ethnolinguistic Communities in Bangkok.)

A discourse promoting use of multiple languages in education can be seen as opposing such forces, placing the rights of minority language speakers to education and identity at variance with the project of strengthening a fragile national unity. Thus to a government and majority population focusing on economic growth and national unity, mother tongue multilingual education could be placed in a peripheral 'rights and diversity' corner, rather than at the centre of educational reform.

Taking these reflections as a starting point, observations from Save the Children's partnerships and interactions with key education actors at different levels in East Asian countries also point to several other ways in which monolingual instruction in national or foreign language appear attractive in relation to key social and political drivers.

What might be termed '**social drivers**' include the strong and often-expressed desire among parents of all ethnic groups for their children to have access to the languages of power and economic opportunity. Even where government schools use local languages,

this desire is often responded to by private schools offering foreign language medium classes, as has been seen in many parts of India.

Often members of majority groups feel a strong conviction that the national language has value in itself and should be promoted through the education system. Mixed in with those attitudes are assumptions that minority languages cannot cope with being used for education, as they are fixed to a world of traditional culture and do not have the vocabulary to express modern scientific or academic concepts.

Other powerful drivers concern **institutional functioning and relationships**, particularly among the individuals and agencies which form and govern the education system. In the often centralised education systems in East-Asia Pacific, Save the Children teams will frequently encounter strong anxiety on the part of local government officials not to adopt innovative practice or pilot MT-based MLE without express permission from central government. This is despite the fact that local officials, teachers and school principals are usually well aware of the problems of dropout and poor achievement linked to using unfamiliar language in schools. Often the more peripheral or fragile the district or region is in relation to the political centre of the country, the stronger the concern not to make changes without permission.

While this motivation may be in many ways related to political concerns about what is needed to secure national unity, there is also often, in Save the Children's experience, strong personal desire on the part of officials and education leaders in remote areas in East Asia not to attract attention for experimentation or risk taking. The counter to this is that officials at the centre, who may have higher political standing and therefore more safety to take risks, are less likely to be faced with the need for innovation which confronts those at the grassroots. It is therefore clear that in such circumstances efforts to promote large scale take up of MT-based MLE require strong approval and priority from both central and local education actors.

A related motivator for change among government officials is the pressure to achieve tangible and recognised success, particularly in relation to goals set by the centre. These goals themselves usually reflect a desire to demonstrate tangible action in relation to a priority area. This desire for tangible action, which can be claimed as a success by the instigator, requires action which can be straightforwardly communicated and co-ordinated from the centre, and against which progress can be clearly demonstrated by those implementing at the periphery.

There is usually a further desire to demonstrate tangible change within a short timeframe. Most governments set three to five year targets for economic growth and social change. This leads them to require education reform to demonstrate significant outcomes within that time. Therefore most governments will be keener to choose targets which seem easily achievable in a short space of time. A Ministry of Education directive to produce a new set of textbooks in English, for example, and to organise distribution to all schools within a year, meets all these criteria. Likewise a government target for children in minority areas to demonstrate knowledge of a certain number of words in the national language by the end of Grade 1, 2, etc. is easily issued and measured, although in practice it may be almost completely irrelevant to the ultimate aim of promoting better national language skills among the minority population.

For governments which are likely only to be in power for one or two terms, arguments about the long term efficiency savings which MT-based MLE can produce through reduced dropout and repetition may not be particularly relevant. Similarly, recent evidence that children need at least six years of good quality MT-based MLE before they can use second language for academic learning (Heugh, 2005) is not going to be palatable to government leaders faced with such short timescales for action. Even where all the factors work in support of MT-based MLE, this crucial factor of government's need

to demonstrate change and achievement in education in a short political term of office may lead to focus on early exit MT-based MLE, which transfers learners from mother tongue instruction to the second language within three or four years. This may be one of the factors in the early exit MT-based MLE programmes being pursued in countries like Ethiopia and Nigeria (Heugh, 2005).

This is not to say that these factors make it impossible to promote MT-based MLE. However, it seems valid to suggest that the more the national drive for growth appears to call for rapid transition to foreign languages, the more narratives of unity are bound up with a national language, and the more centralised the education system, the less likely it is that MT-based MLE will be seen as a priority strategy for those in charge of education delivery. An awareness of these factors can be vital for those lobbying for MT-based MLE to set realistic and effective strategies.

5. Using Drivers of Change in promoting MT-based MLE

Taking the above analysis into account, it seems that education practitioners, researchers and advocates would benefit from working to link the pedagogical arguments for MT-based MLE to key drivers of change.

In attempting this, a key strategy would be to demonstrate that monolingual education policies in linguistically diverse societies are unlikely to deliver against these drivers. Table 1 summarises some of these arguments in relation to drivers of change in East Asia-Pacific:

dominant priority	leads to	consequences of monolingual education
foreign language competency perceived as vital for national growth and competitiveness	policy of submersion in L2 allows tangible demonstration of rapid action (e.g. textbooks, training materials, new set of textbooks)	only elites who have access to the language of school at home do well, reducing potential for economic growth and strengthening social and economic divisions
narrative of national unity key to leading group's sense of stability and progress	concern that increased use of multiple local languages in education and other fields may create disparate identities in conflict with national identity	minority communities feel excluded and unwelcome, keeping concerns underground and fostering disunity and potentially conflict
sense that as national/colonial language is that of technology and growth, it should be that of education	behaviour of education and government officials reflecting beliefs that minority languages are not needed in education and children need to be demonstrating knowledge of second language as quickly as possible	children do not have a chance to build up understanding of concepts in their mother tongue to transfer to other languages minority languages are not developed for participation in modern national life through use and adaptation

Table 1: Illustration of how monolingual education approaches appear relevant against key change drivers but fail to deliver

Drawing decision makers' attention to analysis which links denial of education rights to dissatisfaction, disunity and instability in nation states is also valuable. Smith and Vaux (2003) identify how issues of equality in education 'carry the potential to inflame or ameliorate conflict between different groups within society.' Where different groups are

experiencing disparities in benefits from education, such as qualifications and access to economic opportunities, major resentment can be created. Where ‘assimilationist’ education policies are dominant, with single language institutions operating according to the dominant tradition, neglecting minority needs, education may become ‘a focal point for conflict and divisions within the wider society.’ Where access to and achievement in education is denied by children being turned away, dropping out or failing exams because they struggle to understand the language of education, this is a real threat.

Moving education provision towards an approach where institutions respond to the diversity in the population is more likely to ‘decrease the likelihood of education becoming a source of conflict’. (Smith and Vaux, 2003, pp 30-33.)

Despite MT-based MLE not currently being seen as linked to key drivers of change in East Asia-Pacific, there are plenty of grounds for demonstrating that it has strong relevance to major national priorities. Table 2 indicates how arguments for MT-based MLE are relevant to key drivers of change in East Asia-Pacific:

Powerful driver of change	Relevance of quality MT-based MLE
Foreign language competency vital for economic growth and competitiveness	A larger proportion of population will gain strong second language skills by the end of school, building better human resource base for economic growth
Government’s desire to demonstrate success	Improvements should be seen within 10 years, rather than wasting funds and effort in short cycles of failure
National unity key to stability	Better education for all reduces social and economic disparities Minority groups feel more valued, and better second language skills enable them to communicate and understand majority/minority priorities through peaceful dialogue

Table 2: example of arguments which show the relevance of MT-based MLE to key drivers of change

6. Implications for advocacy in support of MT-based MLE

As mentioned previously, many international and national organisations in East Asia-Pacific have been lobbying for MT-based MLE around EFA agendas, and around minority rights agendas, as well as promoting arguments about the value of mother tongue education in preventing language death and supporting diversity (UNESCO, 2007). In terms of practical work, particularly in Asia, action in support of MT-based MLE has involved developing local partnerships to run pilots, and demonstrating the positive results of these; communicating international research on MT-based MLE; advising Ministries of Education on policy change; and strengthening local awareness and capacity for MT-based MLE.

Bringing a stronger awareness of key drivers of change in the region onto this work would arguably result in more effective advocacy, leading to faster progress towards large scale

MT-based MLE. This would be likely to require additional research, and some shifts in evidence production and campaigning tactics.

6.1 Where could advocacy for MT-based MLE focus?

Given that the relatively long cycles involved in quality MT-based MLE are unlikely to be popular with governments focused on short term deliverables, it may be necessary to produce particularly compelling evidence that monolingual education is unlikely to achieve language competency aims. Bearing in mind that language of instruction is so strongly linked with key drivers of change in many settings, this implies a strong need to influence public attitudes, and to engage with private education providers. Such influencing needs to position mother tongue multilingual education as a vital strategy for achieving powerful societal and political aims, rather than as a barrier or a distraction.

It could therefore be very productive to invest in the following areas of research, campaigning and lobbying in the East Asia-Pacific region:

1. Produce country- and region-specific data on dropout, retention and exam performance/learning outcomes which is credibly linked to language of instruction and highlights failures of monolingual approaches: make this available to incoming governments and the public media before new education reforms are launched.
2. Produce country-specific projections of likely improvements within five years of adopting quality MT-based MLE in terms of education retention, repetition and exam performance, based on existing pilots and experience from other countries. Highlight cost savings to the education system as a result of these benefits.
3. Make individual stories of children affected by a range of language of instruction issues available in the media to influence parents' awareness.
4. Emphasise that setting ambitious targets for second or third language competency at later stages of education (e.g. at grades 6, 10, 12), rather than at early grades, would better promote effective language learning.
5. Produce/make available international case studies on language and education factors in ethnic conflict, fragility and secession.
6. Engage with private education sectors through conferences, lobbying and capacity building on best practice and evidence for MT-based MLE in producing stronger second language learning.
7. Work in partnership with state and private schools to set up more MT-based MLE pilot schools in a range of settings, to act as demonstration of successes accessible to media, officials and politicians.
8. In collaboration with Ministries of Education, produce, pilot and disseminate clear, practical local policy guidance on implementing MT-based MLE for education officials in remote areas.

Targeting evidence and influence in this way to the key motivations of decision makers, change agents and the public will lock into the political, attitudinal and institutional factors which will determine whether MT-based MLE is implemented at scale. In time, such strategies will hopefully lead to major benefits for hundreds of thousands of learners – both minority language speakers, and all other children who wish to understand their lessons as well as learning new languages.

Notes

- 1 Durrnian (2006)
- 2 UNESCO (2007), UNESCO (2005)
- 3 Lewis & Miles et al (2008)
- 4 Millennium Development Goals: specifically Goal 3, to ensure all children will be able to complete a full cycle of primary education by 2015
- 5 DFID (2003)

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