

Working Session on Multilingual Education

Wednesday, 2 July 2008

Moderators: Susan Malone, Carol Benson

Session goals

Provide an opportunity for practitioners with multiple experiences and perspectives to share their ideas about what works and what is needed in promoting and supporting multilingual education programs in ethnolinguistic communities.

Program

Overview of MLE: Situation around the world

Overview of the Bridging process

Question / discussion time

Summary of questions and discussion points (everyone contributing to both the questions and responses)

Regarding the age at which learners' first language (L1) should be used for instruction:

At any age, people need to understand the language of instruction in order to be successful learners. Using the L1 helps new learners achieve success in small steps and so they build a sense of achievement and confidence.

Regarding the difference between "everyday" language and "academic" language and the importance of focusing on both: Participants were given the website for Jim Cummins' very helpful article on "BICS" (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and "CALP" (Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency):

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

Regarding the length of time (5-7 years) to achieve academic language proficiency through teaching the second language (L2) as a subject and using it for instruction:

The length of time to achieve CALP in L2 depends on several factors including the amount and quality of exposure to L2 within and outside the classroom: the more students hear and use the L2 for a variety of social and academic purposes, the better and more quickly they will learn it. Teachers help their students achieve CALP when they recognize that all math, science, and social studies, etc., lessons are also language learning lessons. Students need to understand the academic concepts and they need to learn the L2 vocabulary to continue learning about those concepts as they move into higher grades. A good way to do this, especially in earlier grades, is to introduce the new concept (e.g., multiplication) by hands-on activities and using the students L1. Students are encouraged to use their L1 to talk about what they are learning. The teacher then introduces new L2 vocabulary relating to the topic and then they use L2 to review the concept. The teacher then asks comprehension questions in L1 (and, when the students are ready), in L2. The amount of L2 gradually increases and the students gain confidence in using the L2 vocabulary. When

students have confidence in their ability to understand the new concepts, they also gain confidence in 'trying out' the new L2 to talk about what they learn.

Regarding the process of “bridging” or transferring between languages: Helping students “bridge” between languages starts with helping them build a strong foundation in the language they know best (usually their L1). Researchers have different opinions regarding the specific process by which transfer (bridging) should take place and regarding the amount of time students should spend in one language before they add additional languages. Practitioners and researchers in Africa, Asia and the Pacific have identified several principles which seem to hold true in all cases:

- 1) A strong foundation in the L1 (hearing, speaking, reading and writing) is essential for a good bridge (transferring oral and literacy skills to another language)
- 2) The bridging process involves building fluency and confidence in using oral (understanding and speaking) and written (reading and writing) L2 meaningfully and correctly.
- 3) The L2 can be introduced early as long as the L1 is not stopped.
- 4) There are no shortcuts to the transfer process. When people are saying “it is not working” it is because either the foundation or the bridge were too weak.

Regarding the transfer of “higher level thinking skills” between languages: Students who have learned to analyze, synthesize and think critically in their first language will do the same when they learn additional languages, as soon as they have the vocabulary needed for those processes.

Regarding the time frame for introducing new languages (ex: children learn their own language in Grade 1, in Grade 2 they use the state language with another script and in Grade 3 they use English with a third script. The program in this example is trying to do too much too quickly. There is some evidence by Charmian Kinder that children can be exposed to more than one language or script and make sense out of it – but it takes more time. When the scripts are used together it is more complicated, especially if initial literacy is followed too quickly by other literacies.

From China: Children who learn *first* in their L1 (Roman script) retain it when they move into learning Chinese characters. Children who learn in roman script and characters at the same time tend to lose the roman script and it takes longer for them to learn the Chinese characters. Having two scripts at the same time confuses the children.

From South Asia. Children are expected to learn multiple languages at the same time: the national language plus English plus the religious language (compulsory Arabic). In addition, parents in this person’s community want their children to learn their own Mother Tongue as well. This puts too heavy a burden on the children.

Regarding the best response when people ask how to implement a good bilingual or multilingual education program: It helps to emphasize several points from the beginning:
1) *the importance of awareness raising and mobilization before the program begins.* Parents and

community leaders) need to understand the benefits of a good MLE program and be committed to supporting it. School principals and district, state and national education officials need to understand and support the program, if it is to be sustained. 2) *The importance of developing the teaching and learning materials.* Successful MLE programs require a team of fluent speakers who write, illustrate and edit and produce an adequate quantity of graded reading and other learning materials *before classes begin* (because once classes start, it's hard to stop and work on the materials); 3) *The importance of curriculum and lesson plans that help ensure that students will achieve government competencies.* The best programs are "top down" and "bottom up"--that is, learning outcomes for each grade are based on the government system but classroom activities and materials draw on the cultural context of the learners; 4) *The importance of a core teachers who speak the students' L1 fluently and receive the training and support they need to do their jobs well.*

From India: In the MLE program in Orissa (India), Grade I classes have an alphabet book and chart to teach the local language alphabet and also Big Books and small reading books in the languages developed by MT speakers from the communities.

Regarding introducing oral L2. Teachers need a clear plan for introducing Oral L2 that ensures that all students are achieving roughly the same levels of L2.

Regarding the issue of multiple languages in a classroom. One option is to do multi-grade teaching: teaching several grades/ages in one classroom in one language and train teachers so they can facilitate children's learning in that setting. In multi-language settings, use of the students' L1 will probably be transitional, if it can be used at all. In some cases, a local or regional lingua franca is used. It is important to know what language competencies children have when they enter the program. There are some easy ways to do that kind of assessment.

Regarding successful L2-based education; are their good studies available?

From Africa: At this point, there are still very few credible long-term studies of MLE programs in countries of the South. Some studies have been initiated but have been going only for a few years. This is a major need but will require good coordination and funding.

Regarding what we can do to raise awareness about bilingual and multilingual education.

From Africa: There have been African language issues for over 40 years without much progress. The most important thing is that those in power need to be convinced. In Namibia, 0.8 percent of the population speaks English, the official language. If local languages are to be used in schools, they must be given status by national leaders.

From Southeast Asia: One of the things we can do is suggest to those in power that teachers should be assigned to their own ethnolinguistic communities. The problem is that it is difficult to get changes made in government policy. In her country, people are

beginning to realize that it is important for people to teach in MT at the elementary level.

From Asia: There are still not enough people that know how to adapt government curriculum to local contexts. The government knows that MLE programs are being established but is not ready to give official support. How do we encourage teachers to apply MLE principles while working within the government framework?

From Asia: They have started two pilot programs and are planning to hold advocacy workshops at a provincial level with officials to share research findings from different parts of the world. They plan to develop and implement a 4-6 week teacher training program. The idea is that the current programs will lead to more national level resource programs, hopefully for 5-6 states. Initially 15 people from 4-5 provinces will be involved. They also want to set up a resource center/clearing house so people can come and find out how to plan for program. That is scheduled to take off for later this year.

Regarding advocacy and awareness raising

From Asia: High level advocacy is often done on urban level. We're speaking to the urban context with a lot of language shift. We need to be clear about what the language situation is on the ground. That will help us as we talk to officials. Also we need to speak to parents clearly about LI and which languages we are talking about.

From Africa: Influencing those in power and those in the community. This meeting is a combination of language experts and education people. It is important for more people to be attending such meetings and interacting with officials and leaders.

It is important to make short, cogent presentations to officials – they are mostly interested in economic growth and don't have time to listen to long explanations. There needs to be evidence that teaching in MT based MLE enables a country to have better literacy and numeracy rates. Then the bank and others can relate the results to economic growth.

We can't say that mother-tongue MLE will always result in economic growth. How do you keep it going and becoming a good program, that it is a good bridge and not lose benefits by having a program that ultimately falls apart.

Regarding intensive regional MLE training for MLE.

From China: We need to gear programs like this to people who don't speak English. We should make sure there is an opportunity for people to use their own language, have translations, etc.

Regarding getting resources to people who need them.

There are a lot of people working on MLE – theoreticians and practitioners. Resources aren't currently accessible to most people. Is there any agency that will take up the job of setting up a resource or network/website for such a resource for language/training/ MLE materials, etc.?

Suggestions and recommendations:

- Form working groups based on different themes and issues. None of us has all the answers. We have a lot of experience in this room. The working groups could be communicating with each other.
- Identify model programs in each region.
- Start pilot projects and use those as opportunities to learn--to make mistakes and then make corrections.
- Conduct forums such as this in which people can talk together about these issues--ask questions, think through strategies together.
- Conduct training sessions as close to the local communities as possible.
- Collect good “stories”-- case studies that will help people understand what this is all about.