

EDUCATION IN ETHNIC MINORITY COMMUNITIES—QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER; PROBLEMS TO SOLVE

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Education in ethnic minority communities: The current situation

The choice of the language...is a recurrent challenge in the development of quality education... Speakers of mother tongues, which are not the same as the national...language, are often at a considerable disadvantage in the educational system... (UNESCO, 2002).

For many speakers of ethnic minority languages, school is an alien place, teaching alien concepts in an alien language. In spite of increasing awareness of linguistic rights at the international level, education programs available to many ethnic minority communities continue to require children to attend classes in which they understand neither the language of instruction nor the content of the lessons.

What are the outcomes of education programs in which language and content are unfamiliar to the learners?

For many learners from ethnic minority communities...

- **High repetition and drop-out rates**

Fifty percent of the world's out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition (World Bank, June, 2005).

- **Alienation from their heritage language and culture, from parents and home community**

When our children go to school, they go to an alien place. They leave their parents, they leave their gardens, they leave everything that is their way of life. They sit in a classroom and they learn things that have nothing to do with their own place. Later, because they have learned only other things, they reject their own (Parent of school child in Papua New Guinea).²

- **Lack of knowledge and skills for employment**

Existing policies and supports have failed to reduce discrimination towards indigenous communities in vital areas related to employment, religion, language, ownership, possession or use of lands and natural resources...and access to education, health services and different institutions. (Research and Development Collective, 2003, Page 17).

For the ethnic communities in general...

- **Loss of heritage language and culture; poverty and demoralization**

For many ethnolinguistic minority groups...promises of incentives such as economic and social mobility are doled out as poor compensation for cultural subordination and language shift. In the process, paradoxically, the linguistic minority groups are driven to further poverty –

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² In Delpit and Kimmelfield, 1985. Page 19-20.

culturally and economically – because their languages, as resource for educational achievement and, through it, for equal access to economic and other benefits in a competitive society, are rendered powerless (Mohanty, 1990, p. 54).

For many nations and for the world...

- **Underutilization of human resources**

We have a few hundred years of evidence that submersion in the L2 is "highly inefficient," if not downright wasteful and discriminatory, since such school systems are characterized by low intake, high repetition and dropout, and low completion rates. The costs to the individual, who sacrifices productive agricultural and family work time to go to school, only to experience failure and rejection, are high. The overall costs to the society, then, are clearly astronomical, and must be seen as at least partially to blame for the lack of inclusive, participatory governing in post-colonial countries (Benson, 2001, page 7).

- **Loss of linguistic and cultural diversity and of indigenous wisdom and knowledge**

Every language reflects a unique world view and culture mirroring the manner in which a speech community has resolved its problems in dealing with the world, and has formulated its thinking, its system of philosophy and understanding of the world around it. With the death of the language an irreplaceable unit of our knowledge and understanding of human thought and world view has been lost forever (Wurm, 1991).

- **Ethnic divisions; rebellion**

Our greatest national resource is the diversity of cultures in our country. Diversity means more viewpoints to clarify, more ways of solving problems, more creative ideas, a greater ability to deal with change... Where diversity is crushed...the nation becomes weak and divided (Waiko 1997).

What factors are related to exclusion on the basis of language in education?

The lack of quality education available to ethnic minority communities is often related to three categories of factors: 1) negative perceptions about non-dominant people groups in general and about multilingual education (MLE) in particular, on the part of members of the dominant society; 2) restrictive language and education policies; and 3) poor planning and preparation for those programs that are attempted.

Problem: Negative perceptions

MLE is considered unnecessary...

"It is a waste of time and resources. The best way for minority children to learn a new language is for them to use it as soon as possible and as much as possible!"³

"These children don't need a special MLE program. They can learn Thai in regular Thai schools!"

"It's too much trouble. Just let the languages die and get the minorities to become more like us!"

MLE is considered impossible...

"There are no / not enough minority language speakers trained as teachers!"

"It takes too much time and money to develop writing systems for all those languages!"

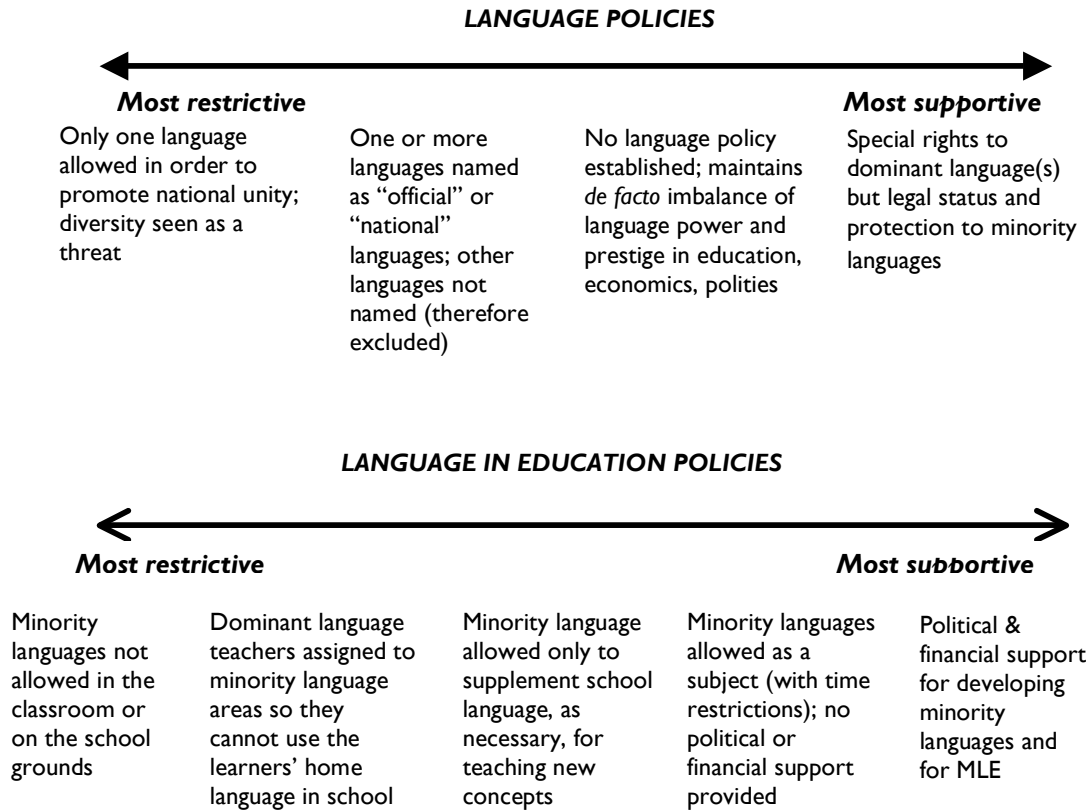
MLE is considered divisive and therefore dangerous...

"Using minority languages in school will cause ethnic divisions and lead to all kinds of trouble!"

³ All the comments listed here are frequently heard in discussions with speakers of dominant languages in Asia, Africa, the Pacific and the Americas.

Problem: Restrictive policies

Education for ethnic minority communities is affected by *language* and *language-in-education* policies (the first relating to the status of languages spoken within the national boundaries and the second to the use of languages in education.) Both types of policies can be described on a continuum from “most restrictive” to “most supportive”:



In most countries of Asia, language policies tend to be restrictive (intentionally excluding non-dominant languages) or to give official status only to dominant languages, with no mention of the smaller or less dominant ones. The consequences of both types of policies for ethnic minority communities are essentially the same: lack of the political, financial and infrastructural support that is necessary to develop their languages and implement strong MLE programs.

Problem: Poor planning and implementation

In those cases where a “First Language” program is attempted, it is too often 1) poorly planned and implemented, 2) with inadequately trained teachers, 3) low-quality classroom materials, and 4) too little time allowed for learners to build a strong educational foundation in their first language and a good bridge to the second (school) language.

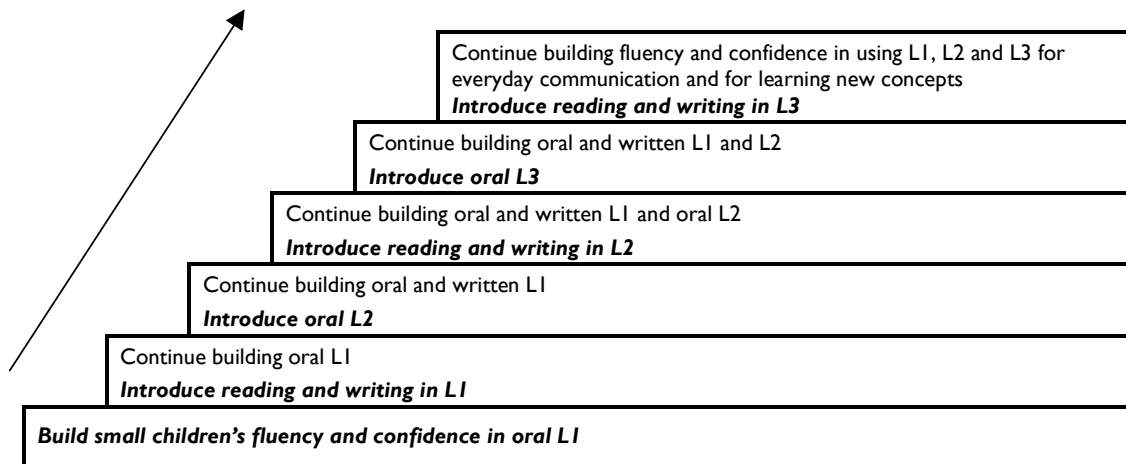
Programs are started and called “Bilingual” but there is no bridge between L1 and L2. Of course the children do poorly when they are abruptly “dumped” into the L2. Then people say, ‘See, bilingual education does not work.’ It does work, but you need a good bridge! (African educator (2000)⁴.

⁴ Personal communication. World Education Forum, Dakar, Senegal, 2000.

What is needed so that “Education for All” is indeed for everyone, including speakers of ethnic minority languages?

Multilingual education⁵ programs for ethnic minority communities should enable learners to build a strong educational foundation in their first language (L1), bridge successfully to additional languages (L2, L3, etc.) and continue learning in both / all languages, at least through primary school.

While each MLE program is specific to the context in which it is implemented, we can identify the general phases or steps of the process by which learners build a strong foundation in their first language and a good bridge to additional languages. The graphic below describes the phases of a 3-language program (the 3rd language being taught as a subject but not used as a language of instruction.)



In the process described above, ethnic minority learners' language, culture, knowledge and experiences form the foundation of their education. To that foundation they add the new language(s), new content, new ideas, and new ways of thinking. In strong MLE programs, building a “good bridge” between languages and cultures is thus an *additive* process rather than a *subtractive* one.

In addition to the social and cultural benefits of strong MLE programs, the educational benefits of enabling learners to build a strong foundation in their L1 with gradual bridging to the new language(s) have been demonstrated through research studies around the world.

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).⁶

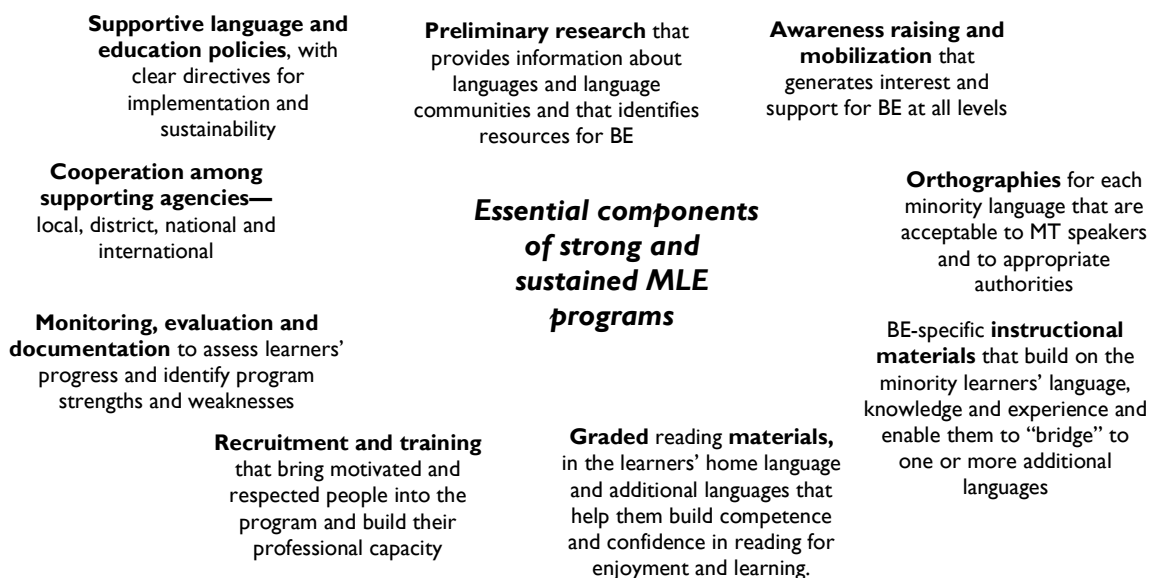
Strong MLE programs enable learners to gain competence and confidence in using the new language(s) for communication and for learning new and increasingly more abstract concepts. Rather than being forced to memorize what the teacher says, learners grow in their the ability to understand, apply, analyze, evaluate and, most exciting and rewarding of all, create new knowledge.

⁵ MLE: Use of 3 or more languages in school OR use of 2 languages (home language and official school language) in multi-language contexts.

⁶ See also Droop and Verhoeven (2003), Hakuta, Butler and Witt (2000), Krashen (2001), Association for the Development of Education in Africa (2005), (India) National Council of Education, Research and Training (2005).

Planning for strong MLE programs

Multilingual education (MLE) programs require a supportive political context, thoughtful planning, careful preparation, and cooperation among multiple agencies, organizations and individuals. Especially important is the formative participation of ethnic minority speakers in planning, and implementing programs for their own communities. The graphic below presents an overview of the components of strong and sustained MLE programs. Note that each component requires support from multiple agencies at all levels of implementation:



Conclusion

Can MLE be done? Experiences in minority language communities in Asia and around the world indicate that indeed, MLE *can* be and *is* being done. Through the cooperative efforts of international agencies, governments, NGOs, universities, research institutes, and especially the ethnic minority communities themselves, strong and sustainable MLE programs are becoming a reality. Much is yet to be accomplished but a beginning has been made.

Is it difficult? It is certainly challenging—especially in multi-lingual countries lacking extensive financial resources—to develop writing systems, establish the necessary training programs and support the production of instructional and graded reading materials in multiple languages.

Is it really necessary? A better question might be: Is it really morally acceptable to force minority learners into education programs that are inappropriate to their lives and destructive to their heritage languages and cultures?

Is it worth the effort? Perhaps the best people to respond to that question are the members of the ethnic minority communities themselves:

Now my child is in [local language] school. He is not leaving his place. He is learning in school about his customs, his way of life. Now he can write anything he wants to in his language. Not just the things he can see, but things he thinks about, too. And he writes about his place. He writes about helping his mother carry water, ...about going to the garden. When he writes these things they become important to him. He is not only reading and writing about things outside, but learning through reading and writing to be proud of our way of life. When he is big, he will not reject us. It is important to teach our children to read and write, but it is more important to teach them to be proud of themselves, and of us. (Papua New Guinea parent, in Delpit and Kimmelfied, 1985).

Education for All that is truly for *all* must not leave the minority feeling rejected by the majority or force minority learners to abandon what they already possess—their knowledge and experience and their linguistic and cultural heritage—in order to pursue their educational goals. If education is truly to provide learners with “training for life”, then surely education programs must be based on the principles of fairness and justice and the practice of celebrating, rather than repressing, diversity.

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