

An Analysis upon Various Challenges and Opportunities of Mother Tongue Based Schooling for Improving Educational Quality

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Abstract – Education fully develops human potentials, especially the cognitive power and in any program taking the cognitive abilities of the human being into consideration language is a necessary instrument of thought. Language has a central position in all the situations involving human learning. But a significant proportion of children in many developing countries, enter school not speaking the language of the classroom. Whereas to effectively teach around 221 million children worldwide speaking a different language at home from the one used as medium of instruction in schools, there is a need to teach them first in their home language while gradually introducing the national or official language or foreign language. Education when imparted in foreign language or any language which is not spoken at the home of pupils or in their surrounding atmosphere causes difficulties in learning and understanding, leading to their failure in courses or drop out from the schools, which is a big loss to a country, nation and even to humanity at large. All the international forums like UNESCO, the World Bank, World Declaration on 'Education for All' (EFA), the UNO General Assembly's Convention on the Child's Rights etc has stressed to educate children at least at primary level using mother tongue as medium of instruction. Because researches have shown that mother tongue-based schooling significantly improves learning.

While there are many factors involved in delivering quality basic education, language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom. Many developing countries, are characterized societal multilingualism; yet continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate the education sector. However, the issues of mother tongues should be underlined as we look for quality of education in the grass root level. Therefore, this paper highlights important issues in mother tongue education such as arguments in the using of mother tongue for classroom instruction, various countries experiences in the benefits of mother tongue based education and the role of mother tongue education in maintaining quality of education. Eventually, it forwards recommendations which should be considered in further actions.

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INTRODUCTION

Education fully develops human potentials, especially the cognitive power and in any program taking the cognitive abilities of the human being into consideration language is a necessary instrument of thought. The essential parts of the education process are seeking, using and giving information, and usually are carried out through language.

Language is also the main tool of interaction in social settings, which is also a part of education. Human beings develop social and working relationships and communicate information by speaking and writing, though language and other things as well, such as the symbols and graphs of sciences. In fact in some modern-day definitions this form of language is taken into literacy consideration; and some writers have used terms like 'literate numeracy' and 'graphicacy' in domains to be covered by reading and literacy programs. For communication there is a wide range

of paralinguistic possibilities such as 'body language', 'sign language', 'frowns', 'smiles', etc. However it is verbal language that has enabled mankind to: create, think, record events, project itself into the future and seek to reinforce the capacity of individual for performing these functions.

It is the major object and subject of language in education. About mother tongue Orekan (2011) asserted that one learns and continues to perform the functions of "thinking, counting and dreaming" only in one's primary language (mother tongue). Language is very closely related to the mind because one thinks and conceptualizes, by means of language and without language normally no one can think. It emphasizes the psychological importance of language to humans particularly the mother tongue, the language, which the child first learns. Mother tongue also makes the orientation in the cultural environment.

This study is dedicated to highlight the importance and benefits of mother tongue in process of education and right of children to be educated in mother tongue.

While there are many factors involved in delivering quality basic education, language is clearly the key to communication and understanding in the classroom. Many developing countries are characterized by individual as well as societal multilingualism, yet continue to allow a single foreign language to dominate the education sector. Instruction through a language that learners do not speak has been called “submersion” (Skutnabb-Kangas 2000) because it is analogous to holding learners under water without teaching them how to swim. Compounded by chronic difficulties such as low levels of teacher education, poorly designed, inappropriate curricula and lack of adequate school facilities, submersion makes both learning and teaching extremely difficult, particularly when the language of instruction is also foreign to the teacher.

Mother tongue-based bilingual programs use the learner’s first language, known as the L1, to teach beginning reading and writing skills along with academic content. The second or foreign language, known as the L2, should be taught systematically so that learners can gradually transfer skills from the familiar language to the unfamiliar one. Bilingual models and practices vary as do their results, but what they have in common is their use of the mother tongue at least in the early years so that students can acquire and develop literacy skills in addition to understanding and participating in the classroom.

Though mother tongue based education has such roles, discussions of the role of the MT (mother tongues) are often controversial and polarized, full of misunderstandings and an unhealthy amount of guilt. The banning and the use of the MT have come and gone throughout history. However, Ball (2010) points out that most teaching methods since the 1880s have adopted the direct method avoidance of the L1 and recent methods do not so much forbid the L1 as ignore its existence altogether.

MTB education is instruction in a child’s first language (L1), usually with a planned gradual transition to a second language (L2) or foreign language at a specified time in primary school. MTB instruction usually takes place exclusively in the language most familiar to children. In some cases, it may be provided as part of a bilingual or multilingual education program. In MTB programs, students have the opportunity to learn core concepts primarily in a familiar language, and, later, they learn the labels or vocabulary for those concepts in a new language. MTB education is especially beneficial in early childhood programs, preschool, and the early grades (up to grade 6), when children are learning to read and gaining new concepts (Benson, 2006).

Determining what language will be used to teach children is one of the most important decisions that ministries of education make. The language(s) used in the classroom dramatically affects children’s opportunity and ability to learn. Yet, this decision is often made without a careful consideration of implications for learning outcomes.

Furthermore, education improvement efforts rarely consider the impact that the language of instruction will have when designing education projects. Instead, the use of mother tongue or familiar languages is dismissed as a “political” or national issue; considered a problem too complicated to tackle within the scope of a project; or overlooked due to a lack of understanding of the central role that language plays in facilitating access to schooling and academic achievement.

This brief provides educators, governments, donors, and project implementers with key information on mother tongue-based (MTB) education to assist them with the design and implementation of education policies and programs. First, the brief provides background information on MTB education. Second, it offers research-based evidence regarding the benefits and effectiveness of educating children in a language they use and understand. Finally, the brief includes an overview of factors to consider when developing and implementing an MTB program.

Background Information The languages of India belong to four major families: Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austroasiatic and Sino-Tibetan, with the overwhelming majority of the population speaking languages belonging to the first two families. The four major families are as different in their form and construction as are, for example, the Indo-European and Semitic families. A variety of scripts are employed in writing the different languages.

Further more widely used Indian languages exist in a number of different forms or dialects, as influenced by complex geographic and social patterns.

The Indian Constitution recognizes a number of Hindi and English as official languages at the national level and other languages official at the state level. Articles 343 through 351 address the use of Hindi, English and regional languages for official purposes, with the aim of nationwide use of Hindi while guaranteeing the use of minority languages at the state and local levels. There are many impediments to the official use of Hindi, the main one being that not all Indian people speak the language.

The Constitution allows all legal documents and petitions to be submitted in people’s mother tongues because they are instruments of thought,

communication, appreciation and creativity. At present, there is a demand for many more mother tongues to be used for state schooling. However, there are not as yet standard writing systems for these languages, nor are there sufficient vocabularies, dictionaries for them to be included as recognized languages or introduced as mediums of instruction.

BENEFITS OF MTB EDUCATION

When curriculum content is presented in an unfamiliar language, an enormous amount of time must be spent first teaching children to understand, speak, read, and write L2 or a foreign language, something that is extremely difficult and wastes valuable years in the early grades that could be spent learning to read and learning academic concepts in L1. Moreover, children who cannot understand the language used in the classroom are unable to demonstrate what they know, ask questions, and participate.

In contrast, providing children with an opportunity to learn in a language they understand—starting on the first day of school—confers significant advantages for the education system, teachers, parents, and students. Key benefits of MTB education include the following:

- **Improves access to education.** Children who understand the language of instruction are more likely to enter school at age-appropriate times and attend school regularly; moreover, they are less likely to drop out than those who receive instruction in a foreign language. An analysis of data from 22 developing countries and 160 language groups revealed that children who had access to instruction in their mother tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school, while a lack of education in a first language was a significant reason for children dropping out (Smits et al., 2008). In another study in Mali, students in classrooms that used children's first languages as the language of instruction were five times less likely to repeat the year and more than three times less likely to drop out (Bender et al., 2005). The chances of keeping children in school, then, are significantly improved if they can understand and learn productively in the language in the classroom.
- **Improves reading and learning outcomes.** A recent review of research reports on language and literacy concludes that becoming literate and fluent in one's first language is important for overall language and cognitive development, as well as academic achievement (Ball, 2010).

Evidence from Cameroon, India, Mali, the Philippines, South Africa, Vietnam, and elsewhere attests to the benefits of learning in a familiar language. First, children learn to read faster if they speak the language of instruction, because they already have a repository of vocabulary, knowledge of the linguistic construction of the language, and the ability to pronounce the sounds of the language.

- **Facilitates learning a second or foreign language.** Mastering a first language and core learning concepts promotes general cognitive development that is needed to more easily and rapidly learn a second language. Because language and reading are closely related, learning to read in one's first language facilitates reading in a second, since many key skills related to reading are transferrable from one language to another. However, children will need explicit instruction and support in transferring skills and knowledge from their L1 to L2, as well as consistent and robust language instruction in the L2.
- **Improves internal educational efficiency.** With the increased efficiency resulting from fewer students repeating, dropping out, or failing to learn, MTB education is also more cost-effective than monolingual models of education. One World Bank study in Mali found that MTB programs cost about 27% less for a 6-year primary cycle than French-only programs (Bender et al., 2005). Another analysis shows that a 4–5% increase in a country's education budget would cover the immediate costs associated with mother tongue instruction and subsequently greatly reduce the education system's costs in the long run due to improved internal efficiency (Heugh, K. in Alidou et al., 2006).
- **Improves children's self-concept and identity.** By learning in the mother tongue, children's home culture and traditional knowledge are validated and reinforced. Children gain a better self-concept and have a strong sense of their own identity. Such children usually achieve better in school and life than children who are forced to learn in an unknown, strange language (Ball, 2010).
- **Supports local culture and parental involvement.** Finally, use of a familiar language for instruction validates local culture and knowledge, creating a bridge between the formal school system and children's home and community environment. This, in turn, facilitates parental involvement and strengthens community

support for education, since language is not a barrier to participating in children's schooling.

EFFECTIVE MTB EDUCATION PROGRAMS PLANNING

Implementing effective MTB education requires careful planning and commitment. Factors to consider and steps to take to ensure your program is effective include the following:

- **Language model.** One of the first factors to consider in identifying the appropriate MTB education model is the education system's goals. For example, maintenance MTB programs aim to develop and maintain students' L1, even as they develop their L2 to proficiency, to ensure that the mother tongue is not lost. A maintenance program provides students instruction in both L1 and L2 through secondary school. The outcome is bilingual and biliterate students.

In contrast, transitional MTB programs use the students' first language to facilitate the acquisition of an L2 or other language. The goal of transitional programs is to provide students with the oral and academic support they need to effectively move from instruction in L1 to instruction in L2. The amount of time L1 is used varies depending on the context, from 2 to 6 years of instruction in L1, to instruction in L1 for at least part of the day for 5–6 years.

- **Language distribution.** Key questions regarding the distribution of languages spoken in a community need to be answered in order to design an effective program. For example, do children from different language groups have to share the same classroom or are they clustered geographically in monolingual areas? If not all children in a classroom are from the same language group, is there a common language that is spoken fluently by all children that could be used for instruction? The proportion of children who speak different languages and their fluency in these languages will determine which are used in the classroom and will drive teacher recruitment and materials development. An assessment of the languages spoken by the majority of learners and teachers can help guide the roll out of mother tongue programs in a given country, while ensuring that minority groups are not excluded from learning in a familiar language.
- **Teacher recruitment and preparation.** Availability of teachers who are speakers of the target languages (L1, L2, and L3 in some contexts) is also a key consideration for

program development. Teachers will need to be proficient in both the L1 and L2 (or have classroom-based support from someone who is proficient in the other language); have knowledge of practices to teach the content areas in L1; have knowledge of practices to help students transfer skills from L1 to L2; and have knowledge of practices to teach and support children learning a second or foreign language. Quality pre- and continuous in-service training in the language(s) of instruction—as well as follow-up support, supervision, and monitoring and evaluation—will need to be provided to ensure they have the skills needed to provide effective mother tongue-based bi- or multilingual education.

- **Materials development and provision.** Materials for both teachers and students must be available in the language of instruction. To ensure quality materials are available, governments, donors, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) need to allow for adequate time to develop, pilot test, and evaluate mother tongue and second language materials. Collaboration across national borders and between publishers, education ministries, language experts, NGOs, and communities can facilitate this process.
- **Parental support.** Parents' support is essential to the success of a mother tongue education program. Therefore, parents need to be well informed about the benefits of MTB instruction and reassured that learning in the mother tongue will not hinder their children's opportunity to learn a foreign or national language, often a key goal of sending their children to school. Parents and communities should be included in decision making around program development and they also can contribute to materials development, provide support in classrooms, and conduct school oversight activities.
- **Education sector alignment.** To ensure the success of MTB education programs, governments must structure all aspects of the education system to be aligned in support of the chosen model. This includes ensuring that language is a key consideration in teacher recruitment, selection, pre-service training, and school assignments. Moreover, pupil assessment must also match the language model used so that children are able to fully demonstrate their learning.

MTBE IMPACTS ON QUALITY OF SCHOOLING

Well-documented empirical studies of mother tongue-based bilingual programs in developing countries began appearing in the 1970s and still form the basis of what is done in the field today.

- **Classroom Participation, Positive Affect and Increased Self-Esteem** - Observational data confirm differences between bilingual and non-bilingual classrooms worldwide. In contrast to students in submersion programs who sit listening or reciting, bilingual students participate more often in the classroom and demonstrate greater self-confidence and higher motivation. The L1 allows children to express their full range of knowledge and experience and demonstrate their competence, which pedagogical approaches like those of Piaget and Vygotsky would support as productive for learning (Richardson 2001).
- **Increased Parent Participation** - Another outcome of bilingual programs is increased parent participation in school affairs, a situation likely to be related to the fact that they are allowed to use the L1 to speak to the teacher. In Bolivia, d'Emilio found that given a "real opportunity to participate in decision-making about their children's schooling, parents no longer think speaking to teachers is a 'waste of time,' nor are they ashamed of using their native language in these meetings" (1995: 85). Parent participation is a widely-cited factor in successful bilingual programs (Cummins 2000).
- **Increased Participation of Girls** - While the mechanisms remain to be explored, a number of studies (Hovens, 2003) have found that bilingual schooling has positive effects on girls' schooling in terms of higher enrolment and passing rates and lower dropout rates. International research indicates that girls never get to school, or stop attending after only one to three years, due to various factors such as perceptions that they are less able than boys, or lack of trust in male teachers. Benson (2002) proposes that both internal and external impediments to girls' participation may be eliminated by use of the L1, because increased student-teacher communication allows girls to demonstrate their competence and teachers to see it, and increased parent-teacher communication increases trust in the teacher while exposing him to more social control.

MOTHER-TONGUE LEARNING AS A MEANS TO QUALITY AND ACCESS

It is estimated that 221 million primary-aged children from minority language and ethnic communities do not have access to education in a language they know. The unsurprising result is that literacy rates among ethnic and linguistic minorities are particularly low.

Low quality and achievement in many African schools can be partially related to language. As UNESCO notes: "*Africa is the only continent where the majority of children start school using a foreign language*". Education is almost universally offered in the old colonial languages – French, English or Portuguese – which most young people do not speak at home.

For instance, in Zambia, where English was the educational language (among non-English speakers), it was found that at the end of primary schooling children were unable to read fluently or write clearly. Many failed examinations because they could not read and understand the instructions. Reading skills were poor, even among secondary school children. Literacy skills in tertiary education were unsatisfactory: students failed to read and grasp information due to lack of reading skills and poor writing skills.

A recent survey in Jharkhand, India revealed that more than 96% of children at primary level fail to follow classes where the medium of instruction is Hindi. Only 4% of the rural population in Jharkhand speaks Hindi while 96% speak either a tribal or regional language.¹⁰ Much time was being spent in classrooms with children simply copying from textbooks or the blackboard, with little comprehension of the real meaning, or the ability to apply their learning to other circumstances. By the end of primary schooling, children may be able to decode grade two-level texts in the school language, but are unable to answer questions related to the content. Literacy is not simply being able to decode what is on a page: it is the intellectual process of gaining meaning from text; an achievement only possible in a language that is understood.

A number of studies show a zero level of understanding by children being taught in no mother-tongue languages. Those who manage to survive such schooling have stated that they understood very little until third, fourth or even eighth grade, depending on the amount of exposure to the language in and out of the school.

Given that issues related to the poor quality of education in many countries can be directly linked to a lack of mother-tongue learning, improving the quality of education and learning outcomes needs

more flexible approaches to incorporating mother-tongue into the classroom. It is essential that teachers' capacity is built to deal with this, appropriate teaching methods are created, and an interactive classroom environment is fostered – all of which will support the acquisition of literacy and learning in mother tongue.

Where instruction, curriculum and materials are not in the mother tongue and do not take account of the child's known world, the result is widespread non-attendance, increased repetition and low achievement levels. In a study of data from 160 language groups in 22 developing countries it was found that not using mother-tongue languages was a major cause of non-enrolment and dropout. Those with access to instruction in their mother-tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school.

BEGIN LITERACY TEACHING IN MOTHER TONGUE

A curriculum, rooted in the child's known language, culture and environment, with appropriate and locally-developed reading and curriculum materials, is crucial for early learning success. Using the home language in the early stages of schooling in multilingual contexts supports child-centric policies. It starts with what is familiar and builds in new knowledge. It creates a smooth transition between home and school; it stimulates interest and ensures greater participation and engagement.

This prepares children for the acquisition of literacy and encourages fluency and confidence in both the mother tongue and, later, in other languages, where this is necessary.

Research provides convincing evidence that a second language is learned best when a first language is learned well. Learning the dominant language later - particularly by specialist language teachers – may ultimately be the more effective route.

Learning to read is a complex process and it is essential that it happens early. If children are not able to read well by third grade, they are likely to struggle to catch up and may never become fluent and confident readers. While other factors affect learning outcomes at school, early literacy experiences are particularly important in later school achievement.

The correlation between reading ability and academic achievement has been tested in a number of different situations.

There is substantial evidence to suggest that mother-tongue education programmes are capable of producing functionally literate readers in 2 to 3 years

rather than the 5 reported for many second language-medium programmes. In many cases, as outlined above, children never learn to read well in the second language. Thus not being taught in the mother tongue can put children at a distinct disadvantage for their potential future learning trajectory. While the development of a vibrant, literate environment, good teaching practices and a supportive home environment are all important for good literacy learning, mother tongue learning is a critical part of the literacy puzzle.

It is also worth noting that changing to an unknown language too early, or too abruptly, in a child's schooling can also be damaging. Research suggests that 'early-exit' mother-tongue education may not deliver strong academic benefits in the long term and children may not be successful in learning through either the mother tongue or in the dominant language.²⁵ Current evidence strongly recommends that mother tongue requires a minimum of six years (longer in under-resourced schools) if positive academic benefits are to be attained.²⁶ Learning in mother tongue over a long period of time in school, with the gradual introduction of other languages and a culturally relevant curriculum with appropriate and adequate materials that bridge to the wider world means a quality education is much more likely to be provided.

When there are multiple languages in a community, care needs to be taken which are chosen for schooling, particularly in sensitive areas. The community in such cases needs to be involved in the choices made, and dominant local languages should not exclude others on political or ethnic grounds. It is not impossible to ensure that all languages are included in the educational process.

CONCLUSION

Many children across the developing world are learning very little in school, a reality that can be linked to teaching that is in a language they do not fully understand. It is a practice that leads to limited – or non-existent – learning and acquisition of knowledge and skills, alienating experiences, and high drop-out and repetition rates. To improve the quality of education, language policies need to take account of mother-tongue learning. Models of education which ignore the mother tongue in the early years can be unproductive, ineffective and have a negative effect on children's learning.

Mother-tongue education - at least in early years - can enable teachers to teach, and learners to learn more effectively.

For too long, mother-tongue education has been largely ignored by policy makers. While there are encouraging signs that the policy pendulum is

beginning to swing towards a greater understanding of the importance of mother-tongue learning, there is still a long way to go. More governments are developing policies and programmes that include mother tongue in the early stages of learning, but there is still a need to formulate better policies, ensure better preparation for the introduction of second languages and ensure adequate resources are set aside.

Though there are still controversies of 'Why mother tongue based classroom education?', the rationales presented tend to incline to the advantages of using mother tongue especially at early grades. Even, some scholars clearly convince the importance of mother tongue to ensure the quality of education which is current the concern of Ethiopian education. Accordingly, stake holders should carefully notice how MT contributes for quality education and act accordingly to maximize its contributions.

In education, one of the most important roles of using local languages should be to teach languages of wider communication. As many scholars agree that mother tongue is a base for learning second language (language of wider communication). This can also be a base to improve quality of English language teaching within the education system in order to ensure quality education in the primary education system which in turn contributes for the quality of secondary and tertiary education.

Achieving quality in education should not be seen narrowly in terms of enrolment and access to primary education, or attainment, but in a broader context as preparation for life. The education system needs to capitalize on the range of opportunities that are open to students through education, rather than measuring success in terms of processing students through the education system, with the limited goal of accessing secondary and tertiary education.

Mother tongue language primary education is, in any case, an inefficient means of securing access to continuing in education, since secondary and tertiary education are based upon the use of languages of wider communication. In order to maximize the efficacy of language development, education in local languages should be seen within the wider frame of national development.

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