

# Language and development: Issues in mother-tongue based multilingual education

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This review will provide a brief, accessible overview of the academic debate about mother tongue education. The first section – Language and development – will discuss the relationship between language, the economy and sustainable development. Section two will focus on multilingual education, focusing on the benefits and challenges of implementing mother tongue-based language policies within education, highlighting case studies in particular country contexts. This document is designed to provide an introduction to key issues in this area for a broad audience. For further in-depth, comprehensive literature reviews and resources on mother tongue education see Dutcher (2004), Alidou et al (2006), Ball (2011), and UNESCO (2016, 2018).

## 1. Language and development

Decisions concerning what languages to use in education in multilingual contexts are a major issue in language planning and language policy. While there has been, since UNESCO's (1953) *Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*, an acknowledgement that use of mother tongues within education can have cognitive, pedagogical, and social benefits, '40% of the global population does not have access to education in a language they speak or understand' (UNESCO 2016, p1). Lack of inclusive language-in-education policies affects a large proportion of children in multilingual contexts. One third of the global population lacks access to education in the medium of their primary language (Walter 2004, p133). This disproportionately affects those in low-income countries with approximately 90% of those who do not receive education in their L1 live in economically least and less developed countries (Walter 2004, p113). The majority of countries which have not yet achieved free universal primary education are those which do not offer education in a language familiar to the majority of learners (Dutcher 2004). Due to this, children in low-income countries are unable to effectively engage with the education system which can have highly detrimental effects on socioeconomic development.

There is increasing evidence of the benefits of mother tongue and multilingual education (Cummins 2000, Ball 2011) and, at the same time, an increase in the use of English as a medium of instruction across various levels of education globally (Dearden 2014). Mother tongues, and local languages, are often viewed as having value as languages of cultural identity whereas international languages such as English are perceived as being valuable for social and economic mobility (Crystal 2003). Skills in different languages will thus be viewed as valuable for different reasons and the desire to develop skills in a particular language can influence the language policies adopted within education.

The international development community has often come under criticism for giving little attention to language and language policy (Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas 1995, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, Djite 2008, Romaine 2013, Marinotti 2016, Taylor-Leech and Benson 2017). However, there have been recent efforts to promote quality education worldwide, recognising that mother tongue education is one crucial aspect in achieving this (UN 2015, UNESCO 2015a, UNESCO 2015b). In multilingual countries, it has been suggested that sustainable development is a process which will require use of both local languages and international languages such as English (Ferguson 2013, see Coleman 2017 for an overview of the changing approaches to language planning and development aid).

Djite (1990, p96) highlights the important role which language planning and language policy creation has within multilingual countries, stating:

‘the formulation of a rational language policy in a multilingual nation is in itself an economic issue and should have as high a priority as other economic issues’

However, linguistic issues are consistently overlooked in development initiatives and international frameworks which seek to promote sustainable development and socioeconomic growth. Additionally, language planning efforts in multilingual contexts have been criticised as not sufficiently incorporating economic considerations (Bruthiaux 2000, Kamwangamalu 2016). Language, and language skills, can be viewed as economic entities (Wright 2002) each with social and economic capital with their own values, costs and benefits, which can make particular languages more or less attractive for individuals to use for their own economic mobility (Bourdieu 1991, Strauss 1996, Pomerantz 2002, Grin 2003, Heller 2009, Zhang and Grenier 2013). Taking this into

consideration and viewing languages as market orientated commodities which have economic value to speakers in particular contexts reflects dominant ideologies around language and could offer a new, more pragmatic perspective for language planning (Pennycook 2008, Phaahla 2015).

Language education and development economics are considered by Bruthiaux (2000) as natural bedfellows and Grin, Sfreddo and Vaillancourt (2010) argue that successful language-in-education policy must take into account the language skills which are necessary for participation, and which will bring value for individuals and communities, in the labour market (see Gazzola et al 2016 for a comprehensive literature review on language and economics). Knowledge of the linguistic labour market requirements would then allow language planners to cultivate language policies which could adequately equip individuals with the appropriate skills in particular languages for participation in particular sectors of the labour market. Highlighting the economic aspect of language and language policies could lead to linguistic issues being taken more seriously by international and national policy makers (Kamwangamalu 2016).

The link between linguistic diversity and economic development has been debated. The 'active promotion of a single vehicular language' was often believed to accelerate a country's economic development (Coulmas 1992, p41). Multilingualism and linguistic diversity have been considered to be factors which are related to low economic development and which stall economic growth (Pool 1972, Coulmas 1992). The perceived link between multilingualism and low levels of economic growth resulted in the belief that socioeconomic development could be achieved through the adoption of monolingual language policies which would spur economic growth, particularly when the language used is English (Appledby et al 2002, Roberts 2007). However, Arcand and Grin (2013) find that multilingualism, the use of local languages, and embracing linguistic diversity, can spur economic growth. Rather than multilingualism itself being the root of poor socioeconomic development, it is instead poor and ill-fitting language policies which do not effectively harness the multilingual resources within low-income contexts (Djite 2008, Batibo 2014). The adoption of language policies in multilingual, low-resource contexts which do not accurately reflect the linguistic reality of the given context can inhibit individuals from being able to access key services and systems within their countries such as the health, education, political, and economic systems (Bamgbose 2000, Djite 2008, Williams 2011, Negash 2011). For an individual to be able to have the opportunity to develop both socially and economically, they must be able to freely engage in systems within the nations in which they live (Sen 1999). Bianco (2010, p149) argues that the ability to participate in public life

plays a key role in an individual's capacity to progress economically. An inability to implement policies which effectively accommodate linguistic diversity and allow participation in public life can then have detrimental effects on development. Multilingual policy approaches which would allow multilingual, low-income countries to make use of social and human capital could then be more socially just and inclusive, and allow all citizens to engage with and participate in the developmental processes of their countries (Heugh 2014).

## 2. Multilingual education

### 2.1. Benefits

The benefits of mother tongue-based education were brought to international attention by the publication of UNESCO's (1953) *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*. Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB MLE) is an approach which begins education in the language with which learners are most familiar and speak most fluently. Additional languages, such as national lingua francas and international languages, are introduced and gradually take over as the main medium of instruction (MOI) (UNESCO 2018, Wisbey 2016). MTB MLE is promoted as individuals learn best in a language which they understand and gaining literacy skills in a language with which they are already familiar provides a solid foundation for education and for the acquisition of literacy skills in languages such as English (Heugh 2002, Nekatibeb 2007, Ball 2011, Kirkpatrick 2013, Global Education Monitoring Report 2014, Taylor and Fintel 2016). Research suggests that learning should take place in a familiar language for as long as possible and for at least six to eight years in sufficiently resourced, effective learning environments (Heugh et al 2007). However, in many low-resource, multilingual contexts (such as Sub-Saharan Africa) early-exit transitions are common, with the MOI moving to fewer familiar languages such as English after lower primary (Simpson 2017). At this stage learners often do not have sufficient language and literacy skills to effectively learn in the new MOI (Ibid). MTB MLE is viewed as an essential step in achieving inclusive and quality education for all as outlined in SDG4<sup>1</sup>. As inclusive and quality education is viewed as a key foundation in achieving all 17 SDGS, MTB MLE is key to achieving sustainable development (UN 2012, Vuzo 2018).

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<sup>1</sup> SDG4 – 'Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'.

Teaching in a language with which learners are not familiar leads to the discrimination of already marginalised groups and high drop-out rates (Bamgbose 2011, Brock-Utne 2017, Manocha and Panda 2017) and including local and minority languages in education can provide students with a greater sense of cultural identity and can increase wellbeing (Hallet, Chandler and Lalonde 2007, De Houwer 2017, Morcom 2017). Grin (2003) and Zuckermann (2013) suggest that this is an important, non-market value which should be considered when developing language policy.

MTB MLE can both increase appreciation and engagement with one's own culture and foster respect and understanding towards other cultures (UNESCO 2009, 2018) and language policies which recognise individual/community language rights can contribute to social cohesion (Marques and Bannon 2003, Ball 2011, Coleman 2015, Chandrahasan 2015, de Varennes 2015, Pinnock 2009, 2015, Perera 2015). Research also suggests that, as MTB MLE can enable learners to more effectively engage with education, it is a more cost-effective approach than using a monolingual, foreign language MOI (World Bank 2005, Djité 2008, Pflapson 2011, ACDP 2014). Within the African context, Heugh (2006) highlights that there are few studies of costs/benefits of different education programmes in Africa and no empirical evidence that using African languages is more costly than using former colonial languages. Heugh draws on simulated analysis of Mother Tongue (MT) education (Grin 2005) which argues that due to reduced drop-out rate, MT education is a better long-term investment. Similar estimates have been found in Guatemala (Carvajal & Morris 1989/1990).

A large number of studies into the benefits of mother tongue education involve comparison of experimental mother tongue instruction pilot programmes with control groups. These then compare results from standardised tests (either administered by research team or using national examinations). Studies which show benefits of mother tongue through these methods have been conducted in: Philippines (Orata cited in UNESCO 1953), Burkina Faso (Alidou et al 2008, DEP/MEBA 2009, Nikiema 2011), Guatemala (Morren 1988, Patrinos and Velez 1996, Lopez and Kuper 2000), Mali (Bühmann and Trudell 2008, Balima 2009, Nikiema 2011), Papua New Guinea (Wroge 2002, Klaus 2003), Peru (reported in Lopez and Kuper 2000), Paraguay (reported in Lopez and Kuper 2000), Bolivia, (reported in Lopez and Kuper 2000), Niger (Garba and Hanafiou 2009, Nikiema 2011), South Africa (Malherbe 1943, Heugh 2002, 2003, DoE 2005 reported in Heugh et al 2007), Nigeria (Bamgbose 1984, 2000, 2004, Fafunwa 1990, Elugbe 1996), Cameroon (Walter and Chuo 2012), Malawi (Williams 1996, Shin et al 2015).

Additionally, classroom observation research indicates that learner-centred pedagogy is more likely when a familiar language is used while an unfamiliar language will result in more teacher-centred and traditional teaching methods. Alidou and Brock-Utne (2006) report that this is the case in a number of African countries: Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Ghana, Malawi, Tanzania, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Togo, Botswana, Ethiopia.

UNESCO (2016) uses data from the Worldwide Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) based on international and regional assessments to highlight that differences between home language and school language have a negative impact on children's reading ability in: Burkina Faso, Benin, Cote d'Ivoire, Senegal, Togo, Islamic Republic of Iran, Honduras. The International Development Research Centre (1997) reviews case studies in Botswana, Kenya, Mali, Nigeria, South Africa, and Tanzania and concludes that MOI policies which utilise mother tongue in basic education are most effective in achieving learning outcomes.

In a large-scale study into medium of instruction, Heugh et al (2007) conducted a nationwide study on MOI in Ethiopia. This involved classroom observations/interviews to assess what the actual language policy being implemented in different regions was and then comparison of Grade 8 assessment results. Findings show that mother tongue instruction advantages student performance while English-only instruction disadvantages them. Mother tongue instruction also does not negatively affect English performance. ANOVA analysis by the National Organization for Examinations (2004) indicates statistical significance of MOI on student performance. In another large-scale study, based in the United States of America, Thomas and Collier (1997, 2002) conducted longitudinal study, based on over 200,000 student records, on education provisions for minority language students in U.S public schools and effect on academic achievement. They find that the strongest predictor of L2 student achievement is the amount of formal L1 schooling a student receives and that students who do not receive L1 language schooling do not reach grade-level performance in L2. Walter (2008) uses Thomas and Collier's (1997) findings to map educational outcomes with expected career paths. His findings suggest that students being educated in L2 will be disproportionately represented in low-wage, manual labour employment.

Finally, in a comprehensive literature review of multilingual education, Dutcher (2004) states that there is no evidence of any successful programmes globally which educate minority language children in a language of wider communication which is not spoken in the home.

## 2.2. Challenges

There are a number of challenges often associated with implementing effective MTB MLE. For MTB MLE to be successful, teachers have to be appropriately trained and supported to enable them to teach in all of the languages which will be used as MOI (UNESCO 2016, 2018). Sufficient resources must also be allocated for the creation of teaching and learning materials in appropriate languages (UNESCO 2018).

Arguments against MTB MLE and in favour of monolingual, language policies using international languages such as English are: it is more cost effective as all resources are available in these 'global' languages; technological terminology is more readily available in these languages; globalisation means that these languages are essential for mobility; it is necessary to avoid tribalism (Schmied 1991). MTB MLE is often not supported by parents and teachers as there is a strong desire for children to learn English and a belief that early exposure to English MOI is the most effective way to learn the language (Phillipson 1992, Steiger 2017). The appeal of English-only policies is largely due to the belief that this will lead to greater fluency in English. Desire for English language skills are based on the perceived high instrumental value of English due to its position as a global language and official language in many postcolonial contexts (Crystal 2003, Ricento 2010, Stavans & Hoffman 2015). It is believed to be of greater use than local languages for access to the labour market and socioeconomic mobility (Djite 2008, Coleman 2011, Ferguson 2013). Additionally, English language skills are believed to enable access to the international community (Ryan 2006, Austin and Sallabank 2011, Seilhmer 2013). Dearden (2014) investigates growth of English Medium Instruction (EMI) globally using 55 country case studies. She finds that there is increasing expansion of EMI provision and that while public opinion is not overwhelmingly in support of EMI it is not necessarily against it.

Mother tongue instruction is often viewed as unsuitable for use in education as European languages are perceived by some superior and more valuable than non-European, local languages (Heugh et al 2007, Tembe & Norton 2008, Becker 2013, Bamgbose 2014, Beyogle 2014, Walter 2014). Pressure is often placed on schools and teachers to use English even when this cannot be achieved effectively (Ogechi 2009, Arkorful 2014, Kiramba 2014). The position which English inhabits is not viewed

uncritically as Phillipson (1992, 2003) highlights through the concept of Linguistic Imperialism. Linguistic Imperialism reflects a situation in which a language, in this instance English, is assumed to be a superior language and then systematically aided to maintain a dominant position through unequal dispersal of resources and pressure from international agencies/Global North. Another important concept to consider when discussing inequalities regarding language use in education is 'elite closure' (Myers-Scotton 1993) in which the socioeconomic elite class, often possessing skills in European languages, pursue language policies which will isolate the majority and continue to privilege the linguistic repertoires of the elite groups. The difficulties of promoting mother tongue education within this context reflects the 'inequalities of multilingualism' (Tupas 2015) wherein promotion of mother tongue policies can conflict with regional/international socio-political structures which promote English.

When assessing mother tongue education, Piper et al (2016) highlight that there is little evidence on the practical effectiveness of large-scale mother tongue instruction in Africa. Evaluating MT programmes in Kenya they note that there are challenges due to educators not speaking necessary languages. MT policies are often not supported by sufficient teacher training (Iyamu and Ogiegbaen 2007, Kamwendo 2008, Obiero 2010, Jones and Barkhuizen 2011, Mackenzie and Walker 2013, Begi 2014) and there is a lack of sufficient teaching resources in multiple languages (Muthwii 2004, Gacheche 2010, Nyaga and Anthonissen 2012, Mackenzie and Walker 2013). UNESCO (2016) and Simpson (2017) note that in multilingual low- and middle-income countries, linguistic diversity can result in challenges to education in terms of teacher recruitment, curriculum development and the provision of teaching materials. Ngu (2004) assesses teacher training programs in Africa and finds that many dominant programs are run as they were prior to independence, so they have not been appropriately updated for training to teach in African languages.

While substantial research evidence suggests that MTB MLE is achievable and effective (Cummins 2000, Heugh 2002, Ferguson 2013) these attitudes persist. Support across a range of levels is needed for the inclusion of local languages and the use of multilingual education and effective implementation of MTB MLE. As such, to overcome these attitudinal challenges, stakeholders in education should be engaged and made aware of the benefits and feasibility of this approach (Steiger 2017, UNESCO 2018). How to effectively engage with stakeholders is thus a key issue in the promotion of inclusive and effective language-in-education policy, to ensure that the research evidence is effectively harnessed in practice.



### 2.3. Multilingual teaching practices

Increasingly calls are being made to recognise the benefits which multilingual teaching practices have within the classroom. This involves interchangeably using more than one language, drawing on a wide range of linguistic resources, within one lesson. This type of language use is widespread amongst multilinguals (Gardner-Chloros 2009, Lopez, Turkan and Guzman-Orth 2017) and in multilingual classrooms although often unofficial and stigmatised (Ferguson 2003, Heugh 2013, Mazak and Carroll 2016). Research shows that this has a wide range of pedagogical benefits such as: aiding student participation and performance (Clegg and Afitska 2011, Viriri and Viriri 2013); content clarification (Ferguson 2003, Uyes 2010, Chimbanga and Mokgwathi 2012); classroom management (Canagarajah 1995, Ferguson 2003); humanising the classroom environment and expressing a shared identity amongst staff and students (Ferguson 2003); increased understand of subject content (Baker 2001); and facilitating home-school links (Ibid); and reiterating important information (Adendorff 1993). While these practices are found to occur widely in multilingual contexts (Heugh 2013), they are often stigmatised and not recognised at an official policy level. Research into multilingual teaching practices has been noted to be mostly descriptive and uncritical as it has largely attempted to highlight that multilingual language use is a legitimate strategy in the classroom (see Lin 2013 for criticism). Research has often focused on high -resource contexts (Creese and Blackledge 2010, García and Li Wei 2014). Suggested that to effectively harness multilingual language practices then appropriate resources, curricula, pedagogies and teacher training are necessary (Adendorff 1993, Vorster 2008, Erling et al 2016, Erling et al 2017). There are increasing advocates for language policies which adopt a flexible multilingual approach (Lasagabaster and García 2014, Guzula, McKinney and Tyler 2016, Erling et al 2017). And further research is needed on how to effectively implement these policies and engage all stakeholders in supporting flexible multilingual policies (Weber 2014, Milligan et al 2016, Erling et al 2017).

### 3. Conclusion

There is substantial evidence highlighting the advantages of MTB-MLE. Despite this there remain social, practical, political, and financial challenges that hinder successful implementation. The

academic ideal of mother-tongue primary schooling has therefore been difficult to achieve in practice, given challenges such as 1) the availability of suitably qualified teachers and instruction materials (Muthwii 2004, Iyamu and Ogiegbaen 2007, Kamwendo 2008, Gacheche 2010, Obiero 2010, Jones and Barkhuizen 2011, Nyaga and Anthonissen 2012, Mackenzie and Walker 2013, Begi 2014), 2) a lack of financial resources (Breton 2013, Simpson, 2017) and 3) the (perceived) need to maintain a political equilibrium between different language groups (Coleman 2010, Mchombo 2017, Simpson 2017). Moreover, English is favoured by many students, parents and employers as global language of commerce and international mobility (Crystal 2003, Ryan 2006, Djite 2008, Ricento 2010, Austin and Sallabank 2011, Coleman 2011, Erling and Seargeant 2013, Ferguson 2013, Seilhmer 2013, Stavans & Hoffman 2015). Therefore, greater understanding of the reality of language policy implementation in low-resource multilingual contexts is needed (Erling et al 2017). Moreover, it is important to engage respectfully with the diverse perspective and stakeholders that shape language of instruction policy and practice, to identify the best approach possible given practical constraints. To achieve this, it is further important to invest in up to date evidence that is specific to each context as although the international body of literature is impressive it may not always be relevant or compelling.

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