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How can Mother Tongue-based MLE be carried out in classrooms where three or more local languages are represented as mother tongues?

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One challenge identified by education planners and policymakers is how first language-based multilingual education (L1-based MLE) would work in multi-language contexts where learners with different home languages come together in a single classroom or school. In this paper we explore why the question arises, summarize the MLE theories that would apply, suggest some strategies for dealing with the situation, and offer some directions for future research.

Why is this question being raised?

In countries with highly centralized education systems, particularly where one dominant language has been used to teach everyone, it may be seen as impossible to reach all learners with mother tongue-based multilingual education. Admittedly, most MLE programs are designed to function in rural, linguistically homogeneous communities where the need is greatest, and where large numbers of learners can be served with a single L1. When applying this model to more linguistically diverse contexts, adaptations would clearly need to be made.

Before we continue, it is important to establish whether claims of super-diversity are valid or are being used as an excuse not to implement programs in non-dominant languages. For example, in the capital cities of both Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau, Benson (e.g., 2000, 2003) and colleagues discovered linguistically homogeneous schools. While not all urban schools were the same, these schools drew students from neighborhoods where certain ethnolinguistic groups clustered. For this paper we acknowledge that multi-language contexts are a reality, and that they are increasing with urbanization, economic and/or social mobility, intermarriage, displacement due to conflict, and a number of other factors. UNDESA (2014) identifies increasing urbanization as a demographic characteristic of the twenty-first century and, although the Africa and Asia/Pacific regions still have predominantly rural populations, urban centers are predicted to grow rapidly in the next 30 years. Meanwhile, responses to conflict or natural disasters may push speakers of non-dominant languages further to the margins, yet joined in multi-language communities such as refugee camps (Dryden-Peterson 2015). The presence of multiple languages should not be grounds for ignoring effective pedagogy with regard to language(s) of instruction. Efforts to improve educational access, quality and equity must acknowledge the key role of learners' mother tongues for initial literacy and learning of academic content. The challenge in a multi-language context is how best to build on each learner's linguistic resources. Specific needs include:

- A pool of teachers with proficiency in multiple languages, and their deployment to schools according to learners' language needs;
- Training programs that provide teachers with strategies for identifying the languages spoken in their classrooms and addressing learning needs accordingly;
- Linguistically and culturally relevant teaching and learning materials that promote learner identity formation and build self-esteem;

Assessment methods and instruments that use multiple languages to capture learners' abilities and capabilities while diagnosing individual needs;
 School curricula that facilitate development of learners' L1 competencies to high levels, giving them strong foundations for literacy and learning.

In the next section we review the theoretical basis for addressing these needs, after which we discuss ways to meet these needs, at least to some degree, in multi-language contexts.

The theoretical basis for MLE in all contexts

Monolingual education in a dominant language cannot meet any of the above needs of learners from non-dominant linguistic and cultural groups. The focus should be on facilitating learning through at least one of the learner's strongest languages while building multilingualism and multiliteracy. The principles of L1 literacy learning, transfer to additional languages and bilingual content teaching have been established through large-scale research in North America (Cummins 2009; Thomas and Collier 1997, 2002) and substantiated in low-income settings, particularly in Eritrea and Ethiopia whose policies call for learners' L1s to be used for all eight years of primary schooling (Walter and Davis 2005; Heugh et al. 2012). In low-income countries, use of the L1 in education is associated with improved access, quality and equity for marginalized groups (Ouane and Glanz 2011; UNESCO 2010, 2012) along with greater parent involvement (Ball 2010) and participation of girls and women (Lewis and Lockheed 2012). Overall, use of the L1 at any level of education builds not only cognitive skills but also positive affect—self-confidence, self-esteem and strong identity—all of which contribute to successful learning (Cummins 2009).

What happens to the principles of MLE in a classroom with two, three or more L1s to consider? According to García (2009), the strategic and purposeful use of multiple languages, or translanguaging, not only supports the linguistic development of multilingual learners, but also normalizes multilingual communication as practiced outside the school. Some examples are programs that practice immersion of learners with varying language competencies in heritage or identity languages (for revitalization purposes) or in new languages through a Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) approach. CLIL integrates language with content instruction with no language prohibitions; learners are encouraged to use all of their linguistic resources (Genesee and Hamayan 2016).

A more expanded model is the Integrated Plurilingual Curriculum used in the Spanish Basque Country, in which Basque (the heritage language), Spanish (the national language) and two additional languages are given different roles in the curriculum depending on learners' cognitive development, their exposure to the languages outside school, and the linguistic proximity between languages (Elorza and Muñoa 2008; EHIK 2009). The theoretical basis for this approach is linguistic interdependence (Cummins 2009), which allows for the transfer of skills and metalinguistic knowledge acquired in one of the learner's languages into additional languages. Application of a plurilingual curriculum in low-income countries could be challenging due to limitations in teacher preparation, but the concepts of strategic communication in more than one language, of comparing and contrasting languages, and of using individuals' diverse linguistic resources are all things that adults do naturally in many multilingual contexts. At the very least, all languages that learners and teachers bring to the classroom should be seen, heard and utilized as resources.

Strategies for working effectively in multi-language contexts

There are a number of contextual factors to consider in developing multilingual strategies for heterogeneous classrooms. Depending on these factors, we can determine the nature of each multi-language context and what can be done pedagogically to maximize L1-based learning there. In this section we begin with strategies for gathering the information needed to make evidence-based decision-making, after which we offer ideas about organizing effective teaching and learning based on MLE principles. The first factor to consider is to what degree perceived linguistic heterogeneity is a reality for young learners. Which languages are spoken by children beginning school? What is the linguistic

proximity between their languages and any additional language(s) taught in the curriculum? Are learners exposed to an additional language or additional languages outside school? Related to these questions are societal aspirations for certain languages and how they are prioritized in the curriculum. Research data may be of value in adapting the curriculum to more realistic and age-appropriate aims. Research into teachers' language proficiencies, uses and attitudes will be of complementary value in planning, since language learning is highly dependent on competent speaker input (Krashen 1982).

Language mapping

A mapping strategy can be used to determine the languages spoken in a given area or even throughout a school system. Specific linguistic data can be collected at the community or school level through self-reports by families enrolling their children. Another option is for teachers to interview each family to determine who speaks which language(s) to the child, and in which language(s) family members may engage in literacy practices. An example of a larger, province-wide investigation is the Primary Classroom Language Mapping project implemented in Lao Cai, Vietnam by the Ministry of Education and Training, UNICEF and SIL (UNICEF Vietnam 2012). Information collected from students and teachers about language proficiency and academic performance was used to identify homogeneous Hmong-speaking schools where teachers had the language skills to teach bilingually. While the focus was on finding non-diverse schools, the same data could inform decentralized planning to accommodate all classroom languages. This was done in the Western Cape province, South Africa using a survey of students in grades 1 and 7 conducted in isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English (Plüddemann et al. 2004). The result was a database of languages used in school with a typology of their use in instruction, which could be used to raise awareness and facilitate language planning among stakeholders.

Planning grid

Benson (2009) proposes a simple grid for language-in-education decision-making that could be expanded to include linguistic survey and proximity data. In the vertical column are the actors: incoming learners, families/communities, teachers, school directors, teacher trainers and so on. Across the top are the languages in question, and within each, categories like understanding/speaking and reading/writing. The grid can be completed with an estimation of language proficiency as low, medium or high. At the bottom of the grid, realistic aims can be set for each language. For example, if teachers have "high" verbal but "low" written skills in a certain language, short-term training is likely to be able to address their literacy needs so that the language can be used in school. On the other hand, if teachers have "low" verbal skills in a certain language, it is unrealistic to expect that learners could achieve anything higher; long-term planning and training would need to take place if proficiency in that language is aspired to.

Once the presence of multiple languages in one school catchment area has been established, creative solutions can be reached depending on local conditions. The following strategies have been suggested, with examples if they have been put into practice.

Organizing classrooms by language:

Organizing classrooms by language rather than by age or grade level could offer learners a complete L1-based MLE program in two or more languages within one school (Kosonen 2006). Alternatively, learners could be grouped by language during the language arts period of the school day, after which they return to their grade-based classes. Either strategy requires teachers with proficiency in the appropriate languages to be trained in multi-grade teaching approaches, with a focus on languages and literacies.

Organizing a multiple immersion program

In traditional dual (two-way) immersion programs (Genesee and Hamayan 2016), classrooms combine speakers of a dominant language with speakers of a non-dominant language so that students learn from

each other as well as from the teacher, curriculum and materials, with the goal of developing oral and written proficiency in both languages. This idea could be adapted in contexts where there are, for example, speakers of one or more local languages combined with speakers of a regional or national language, especially where these languages share features like a writing system. Multiple immersion would call for teachers who are multilingual and multiliterate and have the creativity to develop multilingual teaching approaches, though it could be possible to organize multiple immersion using team teaching or classroom language assistants.

Using L1 speakers as interim teachers or teaching assistants

In contexts where qualified teachers do not speak learners' L1s, they might be incentivized to learn, especially if they are proficient in related languages or are highly integrated into learners' communities. However, it may be more efficient to access L1 speakers from the community to be trained as teachers or teaching assistants. Status imbalances between qualified and unqualified school staff are often a challenge, but such interim measures can be phased out as soon as the first cohorts of multilingual learners graduate and go on to become teachers. This has been the case in Cambodia, where MLE learners taught by community teachers since 2002 have begun to graduate from formal teacher training institutions and gain employment in MLE schools (Benson and Wong forthcoming). In multi-language classrooms, multiple teaching assistants could be needed, making group work essential in organizing teaching and learning.

Using multilingual teachers

In multilingual low-income settings, teachers are likely to have proficiency in more than one local language, so their skills could be useful if appropriate methods could be developed and adequate training provided. Linguistic proximity is again a factor, as it may be possible for teachers to use one "standard" but make oral adaptations to include all learners. Information on teachers' language proficiencies can be collected at the school, district, regional or provincial levels, and it would ideally become part of their job profiles so that hiring and school placement can be done with languages in mind.

Providing multi-language materials

The provision of teaching materials in multiple languages enables teachers to adapt pedagogies and include children's languages in the curriculum, supporting a school-based approach accepting of all languages. Materials that reflect the cultural experiences and worldview of learners and their families are particularly important (Edwards and Ngwaru 2011, 2012). Initiatives such as the African Storybook Project seek to remedy the lack of local language literature by creating simple, interesting stories that can be adapted into different African languages. Hosted by the South African Institute for Distance Education (Saide), the project partners with organizations in South Africa, Uganda, Kenya, Zambia, Rwanda and Haiti to create stories in languages and contexts that will be familiar to African children; see the website <http://my.africanstorybook.org/> for stories and strategies for adapting them to other contexts.

If materials need to be developed, an online shell book source such as the Bloom library at www.bloomlibrary.org offers software to support the development of texts in one, two or three languages. A final low-cost alternative in the absence of such materials is to use post-it notes to adapt monolingual storybooks in dominant languages to the languages represented in the classroom.

Involving parents/community members in classroom support

The active participation of family members in school-related learning activities enables the use of more than one L1 in multi-language classrooms, and adult literacy learners can support the creation and use of multi-language learning materials. Project Literacy, a grassroots literacy and education project in South

Africa (see <http://www.projectliteracy.org.za>), offers home language literacy classes for parents, who learn alongside their children once a week at government-run primary schools as well as at community-run home learning centers. This approach has strengthened ties between parents and teachers, increased parent involvement in their children's education and raised parent awareness of the benefits of home language learning.

Further research

There is a need to document creative policies and practices in multi-language classrooms worldwide, particularly in low-income settings where teacher training may be limited but where multiple languages are likely to be prevalent, at least in the communities if not yet in the schools. As we have shown above, there are existing models like the Integrated Plurilingual Curriculum that are being implemented and from which we can learn. We have also suggested extrapolations from existing models, like “multiple immersion” based on dual immersion, which could be piloted. Curriculum development and materials production specialists should research and identify approaches that are adaptable at school and classroom levels to consider the needs of classes with three or more languages.

More instances of language mapping in schools and communities could be shared to identify simple tools that can be applied by community members to support localized approaches to appropriate education provision. Guidance materials might include simple planning tools like the language proficiency grid described above to help policymakers make well-informed decisions about the inclusion of multiple languages in school.

Conclusion

It seems clear that supporting classrooms where three or more languages are spoken means being able to make appropriate pedagogical decisions based on local realities. This calls for “enabling” language-in-education policies at the national level, or at least some decentralization of decision making so that flexible multilingual programs can be developed. At the central level, we would hope to raise the awareness of educational decision-makers, trainers, inspectors and supervisors regarding why and how to use the linguistic resources of teachers and learners. This may require continued advocacy by stakeholders in order that potential solutions are well understood and implementation processes are identified. The bottom line is to value learners' own languages to promote cognitive and affective development, while giving them access to additional languages and academic content. This should guide education policy, even—and, we would argue, *especially*—when there are multiple languages in the classroom.

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