

Improving Learning Outcomes through Mother Tongue-Based Education

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.

What is MTB Education?

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.



*Girl reading in her mother tongue in the Strategic Method for Reading Success (SMRS) Program, South Africa.
Photo: RTI project staff.*

What are the 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.



Female teacher working with group of Numanggang primary students in Papua New Guinea. © SIL International.
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- 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. This prior knowledge facilitates learning to read, as well as comprehending text. Being able to read and understand the language in turn facilitates academic learning. For example, a recent evaluation of a mother tongue education program in Cameroon reveals that children who were taught in their mother tongue, Kom, performed significantly better—125% on average—in multiple subjects (including math and English) than a control group of peers who attended schools where English was the medium of instruction (Chuo and Walter, 2011). In Vietnam, 68% of grade one students in a mother tongue program achieved the level of “excellent” compared to only 28% of students not learning in their mother tongue (UNICEF, 2011). Similar results were achieved in a program in the Philippines, where children learning in their mother tongue showed statistically significant improvements in all subjects compared to children who were learning only in Filipino (Walter and Dekker, 2011). Although additional research is needed regarding the efficacy of different MTB models in various contexts, there is abundant evidence that educating children in a language they understand facilitates both improved reading acquisition and subject-based knowledge.

- 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.

What Factors Must Be Considered in Planning Effective MTB Education Programs?

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.

Regardless of the model used, if children are expected to eventually learn in a foreign language, they need to be supported to become highly proficient in their mother tongue (or a language that is familiar to them). This can take 6–8 years of schooling (or more), so curricula, materials, and instruction must support student learning in their L1, even if a foreign language is introduced. Before children learn in an L2 or foreign language, appropriate scaffolding needs to take place to ensure that children have sufficient knowledge and academic vocabulary in the foreign language prior to the transition. Moreover, instruction of the foreign language needs to be systematic and explicit, using methods proven effective for teaching foreign languages. The transition from learning in the mother tongue language to learning (and being assessed) in the L2 or foreign language should take place gradually rather than happen abruptly from one grade to the next. Learning in the mother tongue can and should continue and indeed will help support the learning of the foreign language.

If a country's education goal is that children become proficient in a national or foreign language by the end of basic or secondary education, it is important to note that this language does not necessarily need to be the medium of instruction. Indeed, in many countries children become fluent in a foreign language not by learning *in* the language—but by becoming proficient in their first language, while at the same time receiving high-quality instruction in a foreign language that is taught as a subject. Moreover, by providing foreign-language instruction as a subject, not all teachers need to become proficient at teaching *in* the foreign language. This, in turn, creates less of a burden on teachers, who can focus on high-quality instruction of concepts in a familiar language.

- **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.



Education materials from the SMRS program, South Africa.
Photo: RTI project staff.

- **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.

Ultimately, spending time, energy, and money supporting effective MTB programs in multiple mother tongue languages is a better investment than continuing to fund an education system that is failing to educate children in any language. The cost of inattention to language is that millions of dollars will continue to be wasted on education programs that are ineffective—and millions of children will lack access to a quality education.

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