Panel session: Timor-Leste: facing MTB-MLE challenges

Timor-Leste, a post-conflict country with a population of approximately one million, emerged as one of the poorest and newest nations in Asia in 2002. Although goal 4 of the SDG 2015 agenda aims to achieve “inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” by 2030, this is a challenge. In 2015, a classroom language-mapping project listed 26 indigenous minority languages. The first language of at least 46 percent of the children in the country is different from the two official languages: Tetun (an indigenous language) and Portuguese (the former colonial language).

The Ministry of Education implemented a three-year mother tongue-based multilingual (MTB-MLE) pilot program (Edukasaun Multilingue Bazia Lian Inan, EMBLI) in three indigenous languages. It officially ended in December 2015 with very positive results from the independent testing and evaluation done, and has been extended two more years to see results in Portuguese. Yet some feel these children’s first languages keep them “backward”, a feeling people in other developing countries have faced. There is also an idea that the official languages are superior and some teachers have been told they are “stupid” because they do not use only the official languages in the classroom. This informative session, presenting several key areas, is significant to practitioners and researchers as it analyzes an undertaking to improve the access to quality education for marginalized non-dominant minorities.

This panel consists of four presentations:

- MTB-MLE in early childhood and primary education
- Teacher training
- Materials development
- Promotion and monitoring

This panel is coordinated by Karla J. Smith.
MTB-MLE (EMBLI) in early childhood and primary education

By Karla J. Smith and Steve Walter

Timor-Leste has a record of early grade repetition and dropout, while children in grades 1-3 can represent more than half of the students enrolled in school. Sometimes it can take 11 years to complete primary school. World Bank’s 2009 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) results showed that more than 70 percent at the end of grade 1 could not read a single word of a simple text and 40 percent were not able to read a single word at the end of grade 2.

The EMBLI end-line assessment in late 2015, including EGRA testing, shows very positive results including the fact that children who attend preschool do better in grades 1 and 2 than those who do not. Currently the country can only serve 15 percent of preschool-aged children in the nation. The Government depends on International and Non-Government Organizations to build and implement preschools. However, when the agency leaves or moves to another area after a three-year cycle the government cannot continue the preschools. A few key government leaders are focused on Portuguese (an official language, according to the 2010 census spoken by less than 2 percent of the population) to the detriment of the mother tongues or first languages.

Although there is on-going advocacy, politics plays a huge part in the acceptance or rejection of EMBLI. Lessons learned in Early Childhood Care and Development in the country can apply to other similar situations in other developing countries.
Teacher training in the EMBLI program

By Francisca de Jesus Soares

Due to Timor-Leste government policy, the government institution responsible for teacher training and accreditation has held their teacher trainings in Portuguese. The 2010 census shows that only a very small percentage of people in the country speak Portuguese, so the teachers understood very little of the training but were still certified as teachers.

The EMBLI pilot program uses a mixture of government-hired and EMBLI-hired teachers. Most of the teachers in grades 1–3 are government trained while many of the preschool teachers, recommended by the community, are EMBLI trained. EMBLI also hired teacher assistants for classes with over 40 children. Despite the extensive advocacy done in the communities, the teachers did not fully understand the importance of using the mother tongue in school and the commitment needed to use it consistently in their classes.

All teachers are given the same EMBLI training, which includes basic learning theories, curriculum content, practical class administration, and many hours of practice teaching. Training is conducted three times each year during the school holidays. The EMBLI-hired teachers are more receptive to the training than the teachers who previously received government training. Training records are kept and the training program works towards accredited certification for the teachers in EMBLI. Teachers are a vital key in education and other non-dominant language programs can learn from the good practices and challenges faced in this teacher training area of the program.
EMBLI currently goes from two years of preschool to grade 3, with grade 3 having started in January 2016. Teaching and learning materials for the current five years of schooling has been challenging, especially with a small staff, insufficient funding, low educational levels, and communities that are not yet fully literate. The principles of MTB-MLE have been used in developing curricula based on the government standards, along with a variety of reading materials.

EMBLI also developed the materials for three languages: the mother tongue and the two official languages. Oral Tetun (L2) begins in the second year of preschool and a transition literacy book in the third trimester of grade 2. Oral Portuguese (L3) also begins at the same time in grade 2, and expands in grade 3 using the Total Physical Response method. In grade 3 oral Tetun continues along with reading and writing in that language.

The current plans are to continue the mother tongue as a language of instruction in grade 4, but government policy dictates using L2 as the language of instruction in grade 5 and L3 as the language of instruction in grade 6. If this program is allowed to continue, the mother tongue will be one subject during these years. The small EMBLI team is stretched developing the materials needed for this program. Others in non-dominant languages can learn from the types of materials developed, experiences gained, and lessons learned in this educational presentation.
Promotion and monitoring of the EMBLI program

By Apolinario Serparosa

EMBLI has done extensive advocacy in the communities where the pilot schools are based and also in meetings with district education directors. Higher level government officials just want to see “results”, which generally means progress in speaking Portuguese (L3). Sustainability of the EMBLI program will only happen if it is adopted by the government as one of its programs to aid at least 46 percent of the children in the country whose strongest first language is not one of the official school languages.

Monitoring and evaluation is an integral part the EMBLI program. Teachers are monitored in the teaching and learning process. The curriculum and learning materials are evaluated in real life situations as they are developed. Pretests and posttests have been administered, along with the recent end-line assessment. The results from the 2014 posttests and the end-line assessment in late 2015 shows that children, even in the rural areas, are reading and writing as early as the second year of preschool. These processes help the EMBLI team to achieve better quality and gives results that can be used in advocacy.

Practitioners and scholars can learn from the methods and results from the monitoring and evaluation processes. This presentation will also examine the effects of advocacy in different sectors of the country including the positive reactions of parents, despite the negative reactions of a few, key, influential government leaders who are fixated on Portuguese with little regard for the mother tongues.