Panel session: Regional study on the use of language(s) in classrooms in ethnolinguistic communities

Classrooms are where learning takes place. The language used in classrooms by teachers sets the tone for learning. Recognizing the critical importance of languages used in classrooms, UNESCO Bangkok office launched a regional study to document the dynamics of language use in classrooms, what implications it has on classroom practices and pedagogy, and how it is translated into learning. The study included schools with and without mother tongue-based instruction in multilingual contexts, and it examined all aspects of school organization, such as enrollment policy, learning environment, teaching, management, assessment, etc. Four countries in the Asia—Pacific region were selected to capture pedagogical, psychological, and sociopolitical aspects of MTB-MLE on ethnolinguistic minority children.

The main purpose of this study was to investigate teaching and learning practices in school classrooms in multilanguage communities. As a part of the study, in-depth case studies of schools using learners’ mother tongues and/or local languages in classrooms by teachers and students – particularly in ethnolinguistic minority communities – were prepared. In addition, the study analyzed how language use (mother tongues/local languages or dominant/official languages) helps or hinders the attendance, participation, retention, and educational attainment of ethnolinguistic minority children. The best practices from each case were compiled as examples of promising practices of successful implementation of MTB-MLE.

This panel will highlight the preliminary findings from the regional study conducted by UNESCO Bangkok. In addition to the introduction of the research project by former UNESCO staff member Min Bista, the panel will have four presentations, each on one country. The key findings of each case study are:

- **Nepal**: Children in the mother-tongue medium schools were found to be learning in a joyful environment, participating actively in classroom activities, and engaging in interactions with teachers.
- **The Philippines**: A multisectoral participation and various levels of collaboration, continuous advocacy for MTB-MLE, and strong political commitment are keys to successful implementation of MTB-MLE.
- **Thailand**: MTB-MLE helps ethnolinguistic children to have a smooth transition from home to the school environment. Children are aware of their cultures and traditions as a result of MTB-MLE.
- **Viet Nam**: MTB-MLE has proved to be a feasible educational approach towards good quality education for ethnic minority students. Regular retraining of ethnic minority school managers, staff, and teachers in MTB-MLE principles has increased their self-esteem and confidence.
Introduction to the research project
By Min Bista

The use of language in classrooms in ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal
By Laxman Ghimire

The paper highlights the findings of the study carried out in primary classrooms in the ethnolinguistic communities in Nepal in 2015. Both MLE and non-MLE schools were included in the study in order to assess learning opportunities for ethnolinguistic students in different classroom contexts. Primary data were collected through a questionnaire, interviews, observations, and focused group discussions.

Language plays a key role in learning. Compared to the teacher-centered non-MLE classrooms, which restrict students’ participation, the study confirmed that the quality of learning is better in the learner-centered MLE classrooms. In addition to the meaningful communication, locally adapted curriculum has enriched academic development of the learners by enhancing comprehension and concept development. MLE classrooms are well-equipped with a significant number of teaching materials which make learning more effective. The students in MLE classrooms enjoy learning from the locally developed learning materials and appropriate teaching methods.

Teachers in MLE schools are more likely to develop innovative teaching strategies in the specific classroom context. They also spend more time on the tasks in comparison to the teachers in non-MLE classrooms. Besides pedagogical advantages, the MLE program has supported language revitalization initiatives and contributed to building positive attitudes toward minority languages. Consequently, it has helped to promote equality and inclusion in the society.
A macro and micro view of MTB-MLE implementation in the Philippines

By Maria Mercedes Arzadon

This study provides a macro and micro view of MTB-MLE implementation in the Philippines when its language policy orientation shifted from political towards pedagogical ends. It describes broad strokes made by the Department of Education and its implementing partners in teachers training, and orthography and materials development, including language and literacy assessment, information system management, monitoring, hiring of teachers, curriculum adaptation, and online archiving. It also considers supporting initiatives of stakeholders like NGOs, higher education institutions, writers, publishers, and local government units. The challenge is ensuring that momentum and support are continued to be provided by the new set of political leaders.

The micro view of MTB-MLE implementation is presented through eight case studies of schools that include indigenous cultural communities. The cases show that schools are in a state of flux and moving along at varying levels of implementation. Implementation level is affected mainly by teacher and principal leadership, but also by language attitudes and use, stakeholder support, training, contextualization, instructional materials, and the length of implementation.

At the classroom level, the study reveals that schools moving towards maximum implementation level have pupils who demonstrate enjoyment of reading and learning and engagement in meaningful and emotive discourse. Schools at minimum implementation level are hindered by weak acceptance of MTB-MLE among school heads, teachers, and parents. Challenges include making the mother tongue an effective bridge to second language acquisition and representing technical terms across subject areas. The study shows that the energy to realize MTB-MLE comes from both top and bottom structures. The challenge lies in finding avenues for complementation and synergy.
The use of language in classrooms and its impact in ethnolinguistic communities in Thailand: documentation of MTB-MLE innovative pedagogy and best practice

By Wanna Tienmee

Since 2007, Thailand has been implementing mother tongue-based bilingual education/multilingual education (MTB-BE/MLE) with formal government schools, which gives alternative options for ethnolinguistic minority children to study in their mother tongue. Since the classroom is where learning takes place, the study investigated and documented the dynamics of languages used in classrooms and its implication on classroom learning practices and pedagogy. It is found that the best practice MTB-BE/MLE schools have created inclusive learning environments for these ethnolinguistic children because it helps increase the attendance, participation, retention, and educational attainment. Some innovative pedagogies and practices have been introduced, such as using culturally relevant materials to encourage children right from the kindergarten level to express their thoughts orally, entailing cognitive skills development; plenty of reading materials being developed and used to promote children’s literacy in both the L1 and L2; the “sandwich model” of L1 and L2 teaching process, etc.

These practices of successful MTB-BE/MLE schools have made quite an impact on students, teachers, parents, and communities. For example, students spend less time adjusting from home to school. They enjoy coming to school and are confident to express themselves and communicate with the Thai teacher. They always read in their recess time. As for teachers, they are also happy to teach because there is mutual interaction between a teacher and students in class. Parents and communities have witnessed that their children in MTB-BE/MLE classes can read and write in Thai better than their older siblings (who have studied solely through the medium of Thai). However, these practices will be much more promising if a national teacher recruitment system serves the needs of the schools with MTB-BE/MLE.
The use of language in classroom in ethnolinguistic communities in Viet Nam

By Ngo Thi Thanh Thuy

A study on the use of languages in classrooms among ethnolinguistic minorities was carried out in Viet Nam in 2015. In the ethnolinguistic communities studied, there is a tendency to use the language of the regionally dominant group as language of wider communication (LWC). The Hmong language in the Lao Cai province is a case in point. Vietnamese is mainly used for communication in government offices, but local languages or the regional LWC are used for personal contacts, informal communication/meetings at home, at the market, or at community gatherings/festivals.

The study revealed that there were a number of differences between schools which use and do not use the MLE approach. At the MLE schools, learning took place in learners’ mother tongue in the early grades. A bilingual learning environment was created with posters, reference materials, and learning corners which were presented in both the national language, Vietnamese, as well as in the learner’s mother tongue.

Meanwhile, at non-MLE schools where Vietnamese is stipulated as the sole medium of instruction, minority students, especially in grade 1, had difficulty understanding what their teachers said. The learning environment was mainly decorated with Vietnamese language-only posters, pictures, and materials. The study also showed that the parents of MLE students recognized the importance of MLE for their children’s education and their families. However, awareness about the benefits of multilingual education outside the MLE schools was limited. Parents and minority communities on the whole showed their interest in teaching only Vietnamese to their children, so that they could integrate into society and get good jobs in the labor market.