Mother Tongue and Early Childhood Care and Education: Synergies and Challenges

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Asia-Pacific Regional Network on Early Childhood (ARNEC)
**Provocations**

- How many languages are spoken in Asia? How many in your country?
- What percentage of these languages are “in trouble” or “dying”? 
- What is the status of non-dominant languages in your country in regard to dominant languages? Why?
- How many of the non-dominant languages are used at all in education – as the medium of instruction or as a subject? If not, why not?
**Provocations**

Early childhood is generally defined as covering the ages of 0 (or -9 months) to 8 yrs.

Good quality Early Childhood Development (ECD) programs which use Mother Tongue (MT) enhance the wellbeing of children.

- So why do many governments spend so few resources on good quality ECD and MT programs?
- And why is it so difficult to create a seamless, developmentally, and linguistically appropriate curriculum and pedagogy for young children, e.g., aged 3-8 yrs?
We know that the most disadvantaged children (over 200 million under 5 yrs) benefit the most from ECD programmes:

• girls, children of migrants, and children affected by conflict, disaster, and abuse
• children living in extreme poverty and in rural and remote areas
• children in poor health, malnourished, and with disabilities and delays
• children of linguistic/ethnic minorities

So why do these children participate in ECD programs the least?
We know that learning first in one’s mother tongue leads to better outcomes in the future – for individuals, cultures, and nations. So why is the mother tongue used so little in many ECD programs and in the early grades of primary school? And why are so many children forced to learn:

• in a language they poorly understand?
• in an environment which neglects and even represses their cultural identify and the language which “carries” it?
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As an **outcome**, ECD defines a child’s status as being “physically healthy, mentally alert, emotionally sound, socially competent and **ready to learn**”. (UNICEF)

As a **process**, ECD covers important **periods of transition** from:

- pregnancy (and even before) to infancy,
- from home into ECD programs and then into primary school,
- and on to successful early learning (literacy and numeracy) and psychosocial development.

These often difficult transitions are made easier if they are made in mother tongue.
ECD: Why Do It?

- Early childhood is **the most important developmental phase** in a human's life.
- Preventive **early programs yield higher returns** than later remedial ones.
- ECD programs have **sustainable, long-term effects** on the development of human capital, social cohesion, and economic success.
- **The most disadvantaged children experience the most dramatic gains** from ECD programs – but are least likely to be enrolled – including the children of ethnic/linguistic minorities.
Stages of Brain Development in an Infant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Conception</th>
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<td>Vision Development</td>
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<td>Math/Logic</td>
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<td>Social Attachment and Skills</td>
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<td>Motor Development</td>
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<td>Peer Social Skills</td>
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<td>Language</td>
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Rates of Return to Human Development Investment Across all Ages

Return Per $ Invested

Pre-school Programs
School
Job Training

Pedro Carneiro, James Heckman, Human Capital Policy, 2003
ECD: Why Do It?

• **Neuroscience**: The most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first years of life; the impact of the quality of this development is long lasting.

• **Economics**: Returns on investment in ECD accumulate and help prevent later inequality.

• **Poverty reduction**: Quality ECD for young children, especially those most at risk, is a powerful strategy for breaking the inter-generational cycle of poverty.

• **Health**: ECD programs lower health costs for young children and their mothers and reduce the number of later high-risk adults.
ECD: Why Do It?

- **Education:** Good quality ECD results in:
  - cost-savings and increased efficiency in the education system
  - children ready for school with pre-literacy skills and socio-emotional competencies (e.g., resilience, tolerance, empathy)

- **Culture:** ECD programs, if embedded in local culture and delivered in the mother tongue, can have a strong impact on:
  - cultural identity and self-esteem
  - the inter-generational transmission of knowledge
  - participation in national development
(2) Mother Tongue-Based Education

• How many languages are spoken in Asia? 2296
• What percentage of these languages are in trouble or dying? 38%
• How many non-dominant languages are used in formal education? perhaps 10-15% (e.g., the majority of children in Indonesia and Pakistan -- maybe 200 million -- do not learn using their MT)
• And in community learning centres and early childhood development programs?
**Linguistic Diversity in Asia**

“**In trouble**” – parents speak the language but do not use it with their children

“**Dying**” – parents do not use the language

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Languages (In trouble or dying)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>136 (81%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>707 (46%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>447 (15%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>298 (53%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>183 (13%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>120 (52%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>117 (18%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>108 (39%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>72 (35%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>41 (22%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>27 (57%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**South Asia** – 659 (157 in trouble or dying) – 24%

**Southeast Asia** – 1247 (523 in trouble or dying) – 42%
Why Should We Care?

When a language dies, the world loses a piece of knowledge, of human thought, and of worldview – and these can never be replaced.

Languages in danger must be maintained, revitalised and further developed:

- they are needed to sustain cultural and linguistic diversity
- they express identity, “hold” history, and transmit culture
- they contribute to the sum of human and cultural knowledge
- they are essential for human and social development and for the fulfillment of human rights
MTB-MLE: Why Do It?

• A language can survive and thrive only if it has a strong presence in the education system.

• But most education systems don’t welcome, or are even hostile to, minority linguistic communities and their cultures.

• People only learn to “read” once. Learners must begin learning from where they “are” (the “known”) – in their home language -- and NOT in a language they do not know.

• MT should be the basis of ECD programs and should continue for several years of primary school before the second language is mastered.
Why Do It: Using MT in ECD…

- enhances the relevance and effectiveness of ECD programs and early grade education produces better learning and psychosocial outcomes and greater internal efficiency
- promotes participation of parents in their children’s education
- enables learners (especially girls) to gain fluency and confidence in mother tongue – and the national language and international languages
- produces materials in home languages
- inserts local knowledge into the classroom
- contributes to the maintenance of mother tongues and the strengthening of often endangered cultures
MTB-MLE: Why Do It?

For both cultural and educational reasons, and as a child’s right, early care and education and initial learning should be provided in a child’s mother tongue.
Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE): What Is It?

- Learning starts in a language the learner already speaks (L1), and initial literacy is gained in this Language of Instruction (LoI).
- Other languages (e.g. L2, L3) are learned as ‘second’ languages with appropriate methods.
- A successful “bridge” is built to transfer L1 literacy skills to L2.
- Later, both L1 and L2 are languages of instruction; new languages are added later.
- MTB-MLE is NOT teaching MT only as a subject or using it only orally to assist in learning the national language.
### ‘Ideal’ Approach to L1-based Multilingual Education (Kosonen 2006)

(Pre-school and primary levels, 2 languages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Language 1 (LoI)</th>
<th>Language 2 (LoI + subject)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G6</td>
<td>L1 (Subject)</td>
<td>L2 (LoI + subject)</td>
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<tr>
<td>G5</td>
<td>L1 (LoI + subject)</td>
<td>L2 (LoI + subject)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G4</td>
<td>L1 (LoI + subject)</td>
<td>L2 (LoI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G3</td>
<td>L1 (LoI)</td>
<td>L2</td>
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<tr>
<td>G2</td>
<td>L1 (LoI)</td>
<td>L2 (oral + written)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G1</td>
<td>L1 (LoI, literacy)</td>
<td>L2 (oral)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pre-school</td>
<td>L1 (LoI, literacy)</td>
<td>L2 (oral)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE1</td>
<td>L1 (LoI)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ECE2</td>
<td>L1 (LoI, literacy)</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
(4) What To Do?

At the national level:

• develop national ECD and education policies, strategies, action plans, and funding which promote the use of MT

• develop national language policies, strategies, action plans, and funding which promote and strengthen mother tongues in ECD programs
What To Do?

At the national level:

• promote high-level advocacy and identify “champions” for ECD and MT – to increase both demand and supply

• collect more evidence through longitudinal research:
  
  ➢ on the positive impacts of ECD on health, nutrition, cognitive development, protection, future income
  
  ➢ on the positive impacts of mother tongue on educational achievement and efficiency, cultural/linguistic preservation, and more inclusive national development
What To Do?

At the local level:

- Establish accessible and affordable ECD programmes/pre-schools of good quality using MT as the language of communication -- and with:
  - strong family and community engagement
  - culturally relevant materials and pedagogies
  - trained, certified pre-school educators with high status and pay and able to work in MT
What To Do?

At the local level:
• to retain one’s mother tongue, ensure that children:
  ➢ are exposed to positive parental attitudes toward maintaining the mother tongue
  ➢ continue interaction in MT with their family and community on increasingly complex topics
  ➢ have ongoing formal instruction in MT, even beyond school, to develop reading and writing skills
What To Do?

At the local level:

✴ establish programmes to ease the transition from pre-school into primary school via MT
✴ pre-school and early grade textbooks and other learning materials in MT
✴ smaller classes in the early grades with better teachers able to teach in MT
✴ a seamless, continuous curriculum and pedagogy, with MT as the LoI of ECD programmes/pre-schools through several grades of primary school and then as a subject in secondary school
4 Cornerstones of Good ECD and MT

1. Start at the beginning (0-3)
   • coordinate, improve, and universalise multi-sectoral, MT-based services
   • promote more positive caregiver-child interaction in MT

2. Provide new opportunities for discovery and learning (3-6)
   • ensure access to ECD programs/pre-schools in MT focusing on a sense of self, cultural identity, and language competence
   • provide information and support to caregivers, in MT, especially the most vulnerable and disadvantaged
3. Make schools ready for children (6-8)
   • ensure a child-friendly and inclusive school, including children of linguistic minorities
   • appoint teachers to lower primary grades who can ensure that their students gain literacy in their MT and begin the bridge to the national language

4. Develop comprehensive ECD and MT policies
   • develop, implement, and evaluate intersectoral ECD policies and programs with a focus on MT
   • provide adequate resources for ECD and MTB-MLE
(5) Why Is It So Difficult To Do?

• The lack of alphabets/scripts — but they can be written!

• The initial cost to produce mother tongue materials and to train teachers from, or in, non-dominant languages — but this will save money later!

• The claim that some languages are “undeveloped”, making them unable to express complicated ideas and concepts — but languages can grow and develop!
Why Is It So Difficult To Do?

- Indifference—and even opposition—from within minority communities themselves: Why do some communities care about their language and others do not?

- Indifference—and even opposition—from dominant political and economic groups based on the overriding goal of national unity. But they must be convinced that recognising, respecting, and valuing linguistic and cultural diversity reinforces—not reduces—the loyalty and sense of unity which minority groups feel toward the state.
The long and often difficult process of revitalizing, maintaining, and further developing the endangered languages of linguistic minorities must begin first in families and communities—but then must continue into ECD programs and the wider education system.

Without this, many languages and cultures will never thrive—and many of these will not survive.
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www.arnec.net

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