

Education for Multilingualism and Multi-literacy in Ethnic Minority Communities

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Introduction

Since 1990, the world-wide emphasis on "Education for All" has led to greater commitment on the part of most governments in Asia to provide quality education for their citizens, with special focus on girls and women, the disabled and people with HIV/AIDS. Until the last 3–4 years, however, there has been less awareness that the "all" in "Education for All" also includes the speakers of ethnic minority languages. In spite of lobbying by language groups and NGOs and clearly stated support from some multi-lateral agencies¹, few governments in Asia have yet demonstrated a commitment to providing linguistically and culturally appropriate education for their minority peoples².

Even so, the number of programs that promote multilingualism and multi-literacy among minority language speakers is slowly growing. This article argues that linguistically and culturally appropriate education in ethnic minority communities is both necessary and feasible. It presents an overview of the types of MLE programs that have been established and describes the program features that seem to be essential for achieving the programs' long term goals.

Current Situation of Education in Ethnic Minority Communities

Almost one-third of the world's 6,000 languages are spoken in Asia. A study of language and education policies and practices in the region, however, reveals that in most countries, a limited number of languages are associated with power and privilege while the rest are tolerated, ignored or suppressed. Nowhere are these differences more clear than in education. Although there are exceptions, most formal education systems tend to underutilize the knowledge and experience that ethnic minority children bring to school. Following are some of the situation which exist:

- Only Language of Wider Communication (LWC)³ allowed; (this extreme is rarely seen now).
- LWC used as Medium of Instruction (MOI), Minority Language (ML) allowed informally.
- LWC used as MOI, ML used to explain new concepts, as needed.
- ML used for special classes. Instruction is in the LWC except during "Culture Time" classes.
- ML used to introduce children to school.
- ML used as initial MOI with rapid transition to LWC.

The Need for Policy and Program Change

Three types of action are needed if linguistic and cultural diversity is to be preserved and if ethnic minority communities are truly to be included in "Education for All":

- 1) New language and education policies that affirm and protect language diversity and provide linguistically and culturally appropriate education for ethnic minority communities;
- 2) New models of development that meet the needs of all segments of society and that encourage integration, rather than forcing assimilation of ethnic minority groups into the majority society and
- 3) New education programs that enable ethnic minority learn-

ers to achieve their educational goals without forcing them to sacrifice their linguistic and cultural heritage. Such programs would

- Provide a strong educational foundation in the language the learners know best, enabling them to build on the knowledge and experience they bring to the classroom;
- Provide a good bridge to speaking and listening, reading and writing the new language using sound educational principles to build the learners' fluency and confidence; and
- Encourage and enable them to use both/all their languages to continue learning.

Research studies have demonstrated repeatedly that a strong foundation in the first language and a carefully planned process of bridging to the new language is an important factor in minority language learners' success in education.

Variety of MLE programs in Asia

At this point, most MLE programs in Asia are found within non-formal education systems and are the result of "grass-roots" movements—local communities usually supported by NGOs and occasionally by universities. However, a limited number of programs have also been initiated in primary schools with varying degrees of support from local, state or national governments. Programs are established for children and adults, in some cases to help ML speakers bridge into the LWC for education and/or employment, and in other cases to help learners bridge back into their heritage language, usually as part of a larger language revitalization movement.

Four categories of MLE programs can be identified (Malone, 1998):

(Type 1) Programs for ML children who must learn the LWC to succeed in formal education. MLE classes for ML children begin in the children's heritage language and later add the LWC. Some programs begin as pre-primary classes and continue as after-school and weekend classes once the children start school. Other programs are incorporated into the formal system.

Examples of Type 1 programs are the elementary classes that have been established in over 300 languages in Papua New Guinea⁴, the Kalinga language program⁵ in the Philippines and the Dong language program⁶ in China. The Dong program, now in its third year, was planned specifically to provide a strong foundation in the ML and good bridge to Chinese. It begins with two years of pre-primary classes in

¹ UNESCO's clearly stated position paper, "Education in a Multilingual World" (2002), emphasizing the right of all people to education in a language they speak and understand is on the internet at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001297/129728e.pdf>

² The paper is adapted from the author's plenary presentation at the Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Bangkok, Thailand, 6–8 November 2003. (Conference Proceedings to be published.)

³ The following terms (with abbreviations) are used in this paper to talk about the languages used in education: Language of Wider Communication or LWC: usually a dominant or majority language which is often also a national and/or official language; minority language or ML: the heritage language, or Mother tongue, of ethnic minority community members; Medium of Instruction or MOI: language used for school instruction.

⁴ Kale and Marimyas, presented at November 2003 Conference in Bangkok

⁵ Dekker and Dumatog, -ditto-

⁶ Geary, 2002, and Cobbey -ditto-

which focus is on the children's oral language development in Dong and on helping them acquire reading and writing skills in that language. The children are then introduced gradually to oral and written Chinese. Over the six years of primary school, the time devoted to Chinese will increase each year so that the children will achieve the government's expectations for Chinese language learning by the time they finish Grade 6. Dong language and culture will remain a vital part of the curriculum throughout primary school.

(Type 2) Programs for ethnic minority children for whom the LWC has become the first language. The purpose of Type 2 programs is to help ethnic minority children who have lost most of their heritage language learn to speak, read and write that language. This type of MLE/ language revitalization program may be established outside the formal system as after-school or weekend classes or incorporated into the "Culture Time" component of the school curriculum.

An example of a Type 2 program in the formal system is the Chong language revitalization program⁷ in Thailand. In this program, ML classes begin in Grade 3 and focus on helping the children become comfortable using oral Chong, then help them bridge into reading and writing that language. Because the Chong orthography is based on Thai script with only a few adaptations, the children are able to transfer from Thai into Chong literacy relatively quickly.

(Type 3) Programs for young people and adults with no previous education who are monolingual in their heritage language (ML). Successful MLE classes for monolingual adults begin by introducing them to literacy in their heritage language. As they gain fluency in reading and writing that language, they are introduced to the oral LWC but bridge to LWC literacy only when they have developed confidence and oral fluency in the new language, a process that may take several years.

An example of a successful program of this type is the Central Subanen adult literacy program in the Philippines⁸. According to reports, the adult learners in this program have become bilingual and bi-literate (their own language and Filipino).

(Type 4) Programs for young people and adults who are bilingual in their heritage language and the LWC and have learned to read and write the LWC. The purpose for this type of MLE program is to help bilingual adults, who have some LWC literacy skills, bridge back into literacy in their heritage language. Members of the minority community may attend these classes for a variety of reasons: to read their sacred texts and/or traditional literature, to write letters to family members, to re-establish their ties to their heritage language and culture or to prepare for teaching in their community's MLE program. If the ML and LWC use the same script, the bridging process might require only self-study transfer guides and diglot reading materials (text in both ML and LWC). Unfortunately, there are few written reports of these types of programs, possibly because learning is often informal and through self-teaching.

Features of Strong MLE Programs

Sustainable MLE programs can be divided into four general stages although the length and specific activities of each stage are context-specific.

Stage 1—Beginning Literacy.

An early emphasis in Stage 1 of children's (but not adults') programs is on oral language development. Children's activities involve talking about familiar people, places and activities, singing songs, acting out stories and playing games. The learners (children and adults) are introduced to reading and writing in their L1, which is also used as medium of instruction (MOI). Curriculum and reading materials are based on topics that are familiar to the learners and relevant to their lives.

Stage 2—Fluency.

Emphasis now is on gaining fluency in reading and writing the L1, which is still used as the MOI. Also at this stage, teachers introduce the learners to oral L2 (no reading and writing yet).

Stage 3—Bridging.

As the learners have attained fluency in L1 literacy and are gaining confidence in using L2 orally, they begin bridging to L2 literacy. The duration of the bridging process is determined by several factors, among them the degree of difference (oral and written) between L1 and L2, the availability of reading materials in both languages, the teachers' educational level and quality of training and supervision, the availability of instructional materials that focus on the bridging process and the age and previous education of the learners. Unfortunately, this crucial stage is too often implemented without careful planning, good teacher training or relevant materials. Consequently, this is the point at which MLE programs most frequently fail. Careful attention to the bridging strategy, good instructional materials and good training and supervision of the teachers help to ensure that the learners will succeed at this stage.

Stage 4—On-going education.

At this stage, minority language learners should be able to continue learning in both their first and second languages, either in the formal or non-formal education systems or through informal learning.

Challenges to developing MLE programs in multilingual contexts

Most people agree that it makes little sense to force children or adults to learn in a language they neither speak nor understand. Why, then, has there not been more support for MLE? The following reasons are frequently given why MLE "can't be done":

"Supporting diversity will foster divisiveness and lead to ethnic conflict." Some LWC speakers claim that linguistic and

⁷ Choosri and Sisambot, presented at November 2003 Conference in Bangkok
⁸ Pina, -ditto-

cultural diversity leads to ethnic strife, arguing that a single language and culture are necessary for national unity.

A glance at recent and current history shows the opposite is more often true: it is when their language and ethnicity are suppressed that people are more likely to rebel. Consider the Bangladeshis who fought a war and gained independence over the issue of language, the Lithuanians, whose anger over the mandatory use of Russian in their schools was an early factor leading to their break with the Soviet Union or the Basques and Catalonians who are even now agitating against what they perceive as linguistic and cultural imperialism. Compare those situations with Papua New Guinea where the government has initiated early education in over 300 of the country's 820 languages. PNG celebrates its diversity rather than considering it a problem.

"Learning in one's first language will mean less success in learning a second language." The argument here is that ML learners need as much time as possible in the LWC, even if they do not speak and understand it in the beginning—that giving time to learning the ML will result in poor learning of the LWC.

In fact, the argument that it's better to "submerge"⁹ learners directly in the LWC, even though they neither speak nor understand it makes so little pedagogical sense that one must assume that educators making such an argument have other reasons for resisting MLE.

"Some ethnic minority languages lack writing systems." Indeed, many smaller ethnic languages have not yet been put into written form. A misconception verbalized by some of those who use this argument is that developing a writing system requires designing a new script, an impossible task in countries with large numbers of languages.

However, as experiences throughout the world have demonstrated repeatedly, existing scripts can be adapted to a variety of languages (e.g., Roman script for writing Indonesian and Vietnamese and Devanagari script for writing Hindi and Nepali.) With the help of linguists, minority language communities throughout Asia and elsewhere have adapted scripts from related languages to develop their own writing systems.¹⁰

"There are too few mother tongue speakers qualified to teach in the schools." ML communities without access to quality education may lack people with the qualifications normally required for teaching in the formal education system. The best solution, of course, is to provide quality education in the minority communities so that ML speakers can become professional teachers. Until that happens, a common practice throughout Asia and in developing countries around the world is to equip non-professional ML speakers as teachers, providing them with careful pre-service training and on-going supervision and support.

In some cases the ML speakers serve as teaching assistants (e.g., in BRAC's pilot "Education for Indigenous Children" program in Bangladesh)¹¹ and in some cases as teachers for early primary grades (e.g., Papua New Guinea's ML elementary classes which make up the first three years of formal education)¹².

"There are no instructional materials that 'fit' all the minority language communities." Simply translating an LWC curriculum into minority languages is likely to result in content that is unfamiliar and inappropriate to ethnic minority learners. Developing curricula for many different ethnic groups may appear to be an impossible task but again, solutions have been found. One that is quite promising is to prepare curriculum frameworks for each grade level that ML teachers can adapt to their own contexts by selecting topics (e.g., for teaching math concepts) that are familiar and interesting to the learners in their community. An excellent example of a centrally produced curriculum framework comes from the Department of Education in Papua New Guinea (National Department of Education, 2003).

"The minority languages lack graded reading materials that can be used in their schools." Minority communities frequently lack graded reading materials that enable new learners to gain reading fluency and encourage them to continue reading. However, experiences in many countries have demonstrated clearly that with appropriate training, minority language speakers can produce excellent reading materials. Locally developed materials are especially enjoyable and stimulating to new readers because they are about people, places and activities that are familiar to them (Cf., D. Malone, in press; Choosri and Sisumbat, 2003).

"Minority communities lack funding to support their programs." Even when community members offer their homes and other local buildings for use as classrooms and volunteer as teachers and writers, the community will likely need financial support to print instructional and reading materials and purchase classroom supplies. However, these costs are minimal compared to the long-term costs of the inappropriate systems currently in place (Cf., Dutcher, 1995). Cooperative efforts in which a variety of outside agencies and organizations work together creatively with the minority communities is the best way to ensure that the necessary resources will be found.

Conclusion

"Can MLE be done?" As noted in this and other papers at a recent conference on ethnic minority languages and MLE in Bangkok¹³, evidence from minority language communities in Asia and around the world indicates that indeed, MLE *can* be and *is* being done.

"Is it difficult?" It is certainly challenging—especially in multilingual countries lacking extensive financial resources—to develop writing systems, establish the necessary training programs and support the production of instructional and graded reading materials in multiple languages, all of which

⁹ That is, forcing a learner to learn in a strange language is equivalent to forcing a child underwater before the child has learned swim.

¹⁰ Easton, presented at November 2003 Conference in Bangkok

¹¹ Sagar and Poulson, -ditto-

¹² Kale and Marimyas, -ditto-

¹³ Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Ethnic Minority Communities, Bangkok, Thailand, 6-8 November 2003

are necessary for linguistically and culturally appropriate ethnic minority education programs.

“Is it really necessary?” Perhaps a better question would be: Is it really acceptable to force minority learners into education programs that are inappropriate to their lives and destructive to their heritage language and culture? John Waiko, himself a member of a minority community in Papua New Guinea, provides his perspective on the second question:

The failure of formal education for indigenous minorities [is] well understood by indigenous peoples all over the world. The so-called drop-out rates and failures of indigenous people within non-indigenous education systems should be viewed for what they really are—rejection rates. (John Waiko, PNG Minister of Education. 2001).

“Is it worth the effort?” Perhaps the best people to answer that question are the members of the ethnic minority communities themselves.

For you, schooling simply serves to open the door to professional employment, but for me it is something else. It is the means of training for life... I would start with what I already possess [my language and culture] and add what is given to me, rather than abandoning what I possess to look for what

might be given (From a speech by Chief Djoumessi, translated and abridged from Momo 1997:10).

Education for All that is truly for “all” must not leave the minority feeling rejected by the majority or force minority learners to abandon what they already possess—their community-centered knowledge and experience and their linguistic and cultural heritage.

Better that the majority—government agencies, NGOs and academic institutions—support ethnic minority communities in developing education programs that celebrate who they are and what they have been given and, in so doing, provide them with “training for life”.

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(For reference of back cover)

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- The Cultural Space of the Brotherhood of the Holy Spirit of the Congos of Villa Mella—Dominican Republic
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