The Importance of Mother Tongue in Early Childhood Development

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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/minority languages in your country?
• How many of the non-dominant languages are used in early childhood development (ECD) programmes and more formal education?
• If not, why not?
We know that the most disadvantaged children (over 250 million under 5) 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 programmes the least?
We know that learning first in one’s mother tongue (MT) leads to better outcomes in the future – for individuals, cultures, and nations.

So why is mother tongue used so little in many ECD programmes 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?
**Early Childhood Development**

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 the age period of 9 to 8 years and important **periods of transition** from:

- pregnancy (and even before) to infancy,
- from home into ECD programmes and then into primary school,
- and on to successful early learning and psycho-social development.

**Readiness to learn** and difficult transitions are made easier if they are made in mother tongue.
**ECD: Why Do It?**

- **Neuroscience**: The most rapid period of brain development occurs in the first years of life.
- **Economics**: Returns on investment in ECD accumulate and help prevent later inequality.
- **Poverty reduction**: Quality ECD for children helps reduce inter-generational poverty.
- **Health**: ECD programmes lower health costs for young children and their mothers.
- **Education**: Good quality ECD results in:
  - cost-savings and increased efficiency in education systems
  - children ready for school with pre-literacy skills and socio-emotional competencies
ECD: Why Do It?

- Culture: ECD programmes, if embedded in local culture and delivered in mother tongue, can have a strong impact on:
  - a child’s cultural identity and self-esteem
  - the inter-generational transmission of knowledge
  - the participation of ethnic/linguistic groups in national development
  - loyalty to governments which value minority languages and cultures
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 only 10-15%*
- And in community learning centres and ECD programmes? *No one knows...*
**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</th>
<th>In trouble or dying</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>(81%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cambodia</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>(57%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>(53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>(52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>707</td>
<td>(46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>(39%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>(35%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>(22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>(18%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>447</td>
<td>(15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>(13%)</td>
</tr>
</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 world-view – 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
**MT in Education: Why Do It?**

- A language can survive and thrive only if it has a strong presence in the ECD programmes and 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.
- Mother tongues should be the basis of ECD programmes and for early primary school before the second language is mastered.
Why Do It: Using MT in ECD...

• enhances the relevance and effectiveness of ECD programmes and early grade education
• produces better learning and psycho-social outcomes and greater internal efficiency
• promotes participation of parents and other caregivers in a child’s education
• enables learners to gain fluency and confidence in mother tongue
• 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
What To Do?

At the national level:

• develop **national ECD policies** which promote the use of MT

• develop **national language policies** which promote and strengthen mother tongues in ECD programmes

• **promote high-level advocacy** and identify “champions” for ECD and MT

• **collect more evidence** through longitudinal research on the positive impacts of using MT in ECD programmes
What To Do?

At the local level:

- establish **accessible and affordable MT-based ECD programmes/pre-schools**
- 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
MTB MLE in ECD: 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.

If your ECD programme – or your nation’s ECD policy – does not support mother tongue, why not?

And what can be done to ensure this support is provided?