

What and why Multilingual Education?

© Pushker Kadel¹, LDC - Nepal²

1 July 2011

Background:

The medium of instruction for basic education should be the child's mother tongue. This is especially true for pre-primary and primary education (Grades 1 to 5). Children have a right to basic education in their own mother tongue because of the benefit to their cognitive development and because it helps them to develop a strong foundation in educational concepts. Children understand subject matter much more easily and effectively in their mother tongue. They are able to use the literacy skills gained in their mother tongue to learn to read and write in additional languages. If we wish to provide quality education to our children, the mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in the early grades.

Additionally, this Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTBME) helps to transfer historical identity, knowledge, concepts, culture and skills to the next generation. According to Dr. Ellen Bialystok of York University in Toronto, "There are two major reasons people should pass their heritage language onto children. First, it connects children to their ancestors. The second is [that] bilingualism is good for you. It makes the brain stronger. It is brain exercise." Her research found several cognitive advantages to bilingualism, including that bilingualism can forestall the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease³.

Wikipedia defines education as "**the process by which society deliberately transmits its accumulated knowledge, skills and values from one generation to another.**" In line with these assumptions, the Ministry of Education of the Government of Nepal has developed a school sector reform plan in which they have decided to introduce mother tongue-based multilingual education in 7500 primary schools and distribute guidelines for the implementation of multilingual education.

The first requirement is that we bring human resources for the country up to international standards. For this to happen we need to standardise the public school education system. The current curricula used in the private schools are geared towards meeting western requirements alone. Therefore, we have to recognize the need and importance of public schools in our nation's development. To meet the requirement to bring human resources for the country up to high standards, we should start basic education in the child's mother tongue and gradually introduce instruction in the medium of other languages through the literacy skills that have been obtained in the mother tongue. This will help the children to become good learners throughout their whole lives.

Experience:

Our experience with primary schools has been that they are not as successful as we as we hoped them to be. This is true not only for MTBMLE programs, but also the entire education program. The concept of "**Local teacher for local school**" is not working. Teachers often do not treat teaching as their main profession; they give little time to their schools and spend more time setting up their own personal businesses.

However, all is not lost. It is still very possible to implement effective and sustainable MTBMLE programs to provide and achieve quality education through the mutual cooperation of government and non-governmental agencies.

Local schools are utilising their resources to improve classroom facilities and to construct additional infrastructure. This draws the attention of the local community. But due to the poor management and lack of coordination between the schoolteachers, school management committees, government officials and parents, these schools are not able to achieve educational goals commensurate to the investment.

¹ Pushker Kadel works as a Program Director in Language Development Centre (LDC) Nepal, Kathmandu. I am a practitioner and education activist. Email: pushker.kadel@gmail.com

² LDC-Nepal is supporting to introduce mother tongue as a medium of instruction in basic education at the beginning integrating micro community development activities. <https://www.ldcnepal.org>

³ Prof. Dr. Bialystok, The Bilingual Advantage, <http://www.NYT.com> 30 May 2011

Our progress:

LDC-Nepal provides technical support to four public primary schools for the implementation of the MTBMLE program - two of the schools are in the Duruwa and Halwar VDCs of Dang district, and two are in Phaktep VDC of Panchthar district. This is done in close coordination with local NGOs⁴ and the District Education Offices. We observed some positive changes, but due to unsecured funding for the program we were unable to provide as much support as we would have liked. The following progress was observed in the programs where we provide technical support:

1. The mother tongue languages are used as an additional language of instruction along with Nepali;
2. Local languages are used in teaching subjects, even when neighbouring schools are using English as a medium of instruction;
3. Parents are attentive to their children's education. We heard parents say, "**The achievements of our children are improving but still not satisfactory**";
4. Parents believe that the role of the teacher is important in providing quality education;
5. Children are interested in continuing their education and are able to mark their teachers' performance;
6. Teachers are aware of their role and responsibilities in helping students achieve well in their studies, but were not able to use their skills, knowledge and capacity because they do not have a good and full understanding of the language to explain concepts well to the children;
7. Teachers and parents are trying to understand the issues of language variation and issues with the language scripts as they apply to basic education

Benefits of MLE:

According to Dr. Lava Deo Awasthi, "In view of the present insurgency situation in the country, the role of MTM [Mother Tongue Medium] education appears to be even more pertinent. Its role is crucial for both peace building and poverty reduction purpose. The role of Nepal's indigenous and ethnic languages can be central in the capability approach to poverty. My study indicates that the development of indigenous people and ethnic minorities is linked with their freedoms of choices and freedoms of using 'alternative combinations' in order to address their linguistic and cultural needs in harmony with their material conditions and value system."⁵ This argument helps us to understand the importance of mother tongue in education.

The key benefits of Mother Tongue-Based Education are as follows:

- This type of education is practical and scientific. "**Strong forms of bilingual education can be an economically valuable policy. Repetition and dropout rates are decreased, and a more 'skillful, highly trained and employable work force' is produced.**"⁶
- Children will have effective life-long learning achievements especially since Nepali and English will also be used as languages of instruction using suitable teaching methodologies. Cognitive, language and literacy skills that are acquired and fully developed in the mother tongue will be used to easily and effectively learn in additional language mediums.
- The nation will achieve its national educational goals because ethnic and local community languages will obtain equal respect and status next to other languages.
- Children will have an opportunity to maintain links with their cultural backgrounds and maintain their identity.
- Children will develop a close relationship with their families and their communities.

⁴ Help Society Nepal, Tulsipur, Dang and Limbu Language Development Association, Phidim, Panchthar

⁵ PhD Thesis, Exploring Monolingual School Practices in Multilingual Nepal, 2004

⁶ Colin Baker, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, p288

- People will be able to create employment opportunities in the modern world and be competitive with other countries as well.
- The development of mother tongue-based curriculum will give students easier access to learning materials.
- Children will have an opportunity to improve their communication with different linguistic and cultural groups.
- Children will have better opportunities and will be able to share a wide range of intercultural experiences such as literature, entertainment, religion and their interests.
- The program will develop a congenial environment in the community and will help peace-building in the nation by creating an atmosphere of respect for differences in language, culture and beliefs.
- The schools will produce good and productive citizens. It will help to promote and establish democracy for the development of the country.
- MTBMLE will help to create positive thinking between the individual and society. According to Colin Baker, "**The ability to speak the mother tongue as well as the national language and international language creates a much wider range of life choices for individuals but can also achieve national unity.**"

Some key concerns:

We believe that MTBMLE at the beginning of basic education will be effective in providing quality education in a learner-friendly environment. However, there are many misconceptions about MTBMLE among the stakeholders. Parents are rightly concerned about the existing education system. It is necessary, therefore, to respond and clear these misconceptions and concerns so that we can implement an effective and sustainable MTBMLE program.

1. English medium education has become a social prestige issue. People think it is a powerful language and that speaking it well will allow access to better employment and business opportunities.
2. Teachers and parents believe that English medium education is necessary to achieve high levels of learning achievement.
3. Teachers do not believe that MTBMLE will help the children access quality education because they are not fully convinced of its importance for education.
4. There are often no MTBMLE curricula and textbooks to teach the children.
5. Teachers tell us that they cannot teach in the medium of a mother language because there is a lack of teacher training and a lack of knowledge about how to transfer to the medium of the national language (Nepali) and the main international language (English).
6. Some teachers are not qualified and capable to continue their services: **they lack the technical capabilities/capacities.**
7. Those teachers who are from minority language communities are mostly illiterate in their own mother tongue.
8. We need to convince parents and teachers that literacy skills in the mother tongue can make it easier to learn additional languages.
9. We need to convince people that MTBMLE in basic education will be an asset towards later employment opportunities.
10. MTBMLE must address cultural and religious issues. Does indigenous identity depend upon language, culture and religion? This issue was recently raised by the organisation Yamphu Kirat Samaj, who **argued against missionaries translating the Christian bible into the Yamphu language.** "As we know, they plan to translate the Bible to include Yamphu values, culture, and traditional

stories, and distribute it in Yamphu villages,” said the organisation's chairperson Bishal Yamphu. ⁷ We need to understand, why, these issues are raised by the language communities and who is responsible for addressing these issues?

11. MLE is accelerated as a political slogan rather than an academic and pedagogical slogan and thus there is often a lack of political commitments ⁸

Opportunities:

Despite these challenges and concerns, we are able to see many opportunities and advantages to pursuing such programs.

1. We can demonstrate a good MTBMLE module and thus help the state in designing their education program.
2. MTBMLE schools can become a resource centre to introduce MLE in other primary schools.
3. We can develop the MTBMLE curriculum by adapting the national curriculum and producing contextual teaching learning materials.
4. We can preserve the local language and culture through education and as a result we will help develop unity among these diverse communities.
5. We can help to develop the capacity of local organizations to support the implementation of MLE in their respective working areas and in coordination with government agencies.
6. We can share the experience of mother tongue-based multilingual education among our various stakeholders - parents, language communities, NGOs and GOs.

Conclusion:

We need to continue to advocate for MTBMLE in order to achieve positive and active participation among stakeholders in the implementation of the program. Our focus should be on improving the school facilities and developing the capacity of the local community, school management committee and teachers. We need to prepare the language progression plan and school-based community-assisted curriculum, choose and develop curriculum-based materials, and train the teachers how to use L1, L2 and International Language (English) as media of instruction. The government must develop effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to support the teachers so that their performance is improved. The Department of Education must invite NGOs at the onset, and use their services to implement MTBMLE in basic education. Lastly, we need to feel good about our work and be ready to accept constructive criticisms so that we can improve our working strategies for the sake of the children and the betterment of our nation.

References

- The bilingual Advantages, <https://www.NYT.com> 30 May 2011
Awasthi, Lava Deo Awasthi, PhD, Exploring School Practices in Multilingual Nepal, 2004
Baker, Colin Foundation of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 4th Edition
Nepal Samachar Patra (National News Paper), 1 June 2011
A Study on Integration of Local Contents in School curricula, 2010

⁷ Christianity in the name of language research, Nepal Samachar Patra, (one of the national newspaper) June 1, 2011

⁸ A study on integration of local contents in school curricula, 2010, pp15