# Best Practices in Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education

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## Executive Summary

Most of the world's education systems at the K-12 level currently do not value or take advantage of the various *heritage languages* or *mother tongues* spoken by the diverse students population of those nations. In recent years, the issue of mother tongue based language education in schools has come to the forefront of the education discussions worldwide, as nations aim to reach the Millennium Development Goal of Universal Primary Education, or Education for All (EFA). The best practice research presented in this report serves to:

■ Restate the importance of mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs in schools, especially in the context of the desired international goals of Universal Primary Education, as set by the United Nations

■ Review and analyze the mother tongue and multilingual education practices in various multilingual nations across the world

■ Determine and describe these practices' fundamental goals (functions) and specific program elements (features)

■ Assess the vulnerabilities of said educational practices

"It is hard to argue that we are teaching the whole child when school policy dictates that students leave their language and culture a the schoolhouse door" (Bismilla, 2005)

"The level of development of a children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development"

(Cummins, 2000)

"The job of an educator is to teach students to see vitatlity in themselves"

(Bismilla, 2005)

## Best Practices Research Design

### Research Goal

To identify best practices within Mother Tongue Base Multilingual Education.

### Research Objectives

1. Identify key issues surrounding multilingual nations and challenges to MTBMLW

2. Identify key successful MTB MLE programs

3. Identify key elements of such successful education programs in order to provide recommendations to nations that wish to design and implement MTBMLE programs

### Main Research Question

How can MTBMLE be successfully implemented in order to better reach the goals of Quality Education for All?

### Definitions

- **L1** A student's first language

- **L2** A student's second language. Often referring to the main medium of instruction in school, and/or the national language

- **Multilingual Education:** "a structured programme, of language learning and concept formation providing a sound foundation in the first language (mother tongue), adding second (e.g. state) and third languages (e.g. English, Hindi) thus enabling the appropriate use of both/all languages for life-long learning (Malone 2005).

- **MTBMLE** Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education "refers to the use of students' mother tongue and two or more additional languages as Languages of Instruction (LoI) in school" (Malone, 2007).  "The goal of mother tongue-based, bilingual and multilingual programs is to make children literate in their first language, as well as to help children acquire fluency in a second language" (MTB-MLE Network, 2014)

## Literature Review

In light of a recent international push to achieve the United Nation's second Millennium Development Goal: Universal Primary Education, often referred to as Quality Education for All, many educators and educational researchers have been asking the question of what dictates quality. What does the term "quality" look like in the classroom?

Donovan and Bransford (2005) have identified the following three necessary conditions for effective learning found through their research:

1. Prior knowledge and understanding

2. Integration of factual knowledge with conceptual frameworks

3. Encouragement of deeper understanding and giving students an active role in their learning process

So what then does prior knowledge include? This best practice review will focus on mother tongue language as prior knowledge. Knowledge is not restrained to the information a student has previously learned, but includes also the "totality of the experiences that have shaped the learner's identity and cognitive functioning" (Bismilla, 2005, p. 38). A student's experiences and identity are housed in their mother tongue, and thus mother tongue is an integral part of the prior knowledge necessary for students to move forward with their education.

Reports such as MacKenzie (2009) have shown in educational contexts that do not value mother tongues of the local culture and community, education has little or no perceived relevance for its students. Additionally, students encounter difficulty with more complex competencies taught in the dominant language, or L2. Due to these factors, such nations are then afflicted with high repetition and dropout rates among students.

Amongst experts in the field it is now widely accepted that a child's ability to develop in their L2 depends on their development of fluency in reading and writing in their mother tongue (MacKenzie, 2009). The founding principle, or primary function, of MTBMLE is therefore to draw from students' abilities in their mother tongue in order for students to better learn new subjects. This also allows teachers to better teach students the L2, often the dominant language of that nation. Educational reforms such as No Child Left Behind in the United States regard a student's mother tongue as a burden, or useless, and assume that a student's "cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities […] have little instructional relevance" (Bismilla, 2005).

Educational practitioners and researchers have encouraged further MTBMLE programs in which students develop communications kills in their first language, before slowly transitioning to the languages required for successful contribution to a multilingual society (MacKenzie, 2009). Many studies have demonstrated that use of students' first language in education has greater impacts not only on individual students but society as a whole, as it: (1) increases access and equity, (2) improves learning outcomes, (3) reduces repetition and drop out rates (4) fosters positive social cultural benefits and (5) lowers overall costs (Bender, 2005).

This best practice research report aims to identify some successful programs through case studies of existing MTBMLE methods operating in schools around the globe. The following case studies have been analyzed to pull out the best practices, identifying three key elements of each MTBMLE application: (1) Function: the defining logic, or the core, of the practice, and (2) features: the implementation strategy and specific programmatic elements, and (3) vulnerabilities (Bardach, 2012).

## Lubuagan Multilingual Education in the Philippines (Walter, 2011)

This best practice comes from the municipality of Lubuagan in the northern Philippines. The Lubuagan Kalinga Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Program is unique and innovate program that operates within the district's 13 elementary schools.

### Functions

This MTBMLE program teaches the country's national languages, Filipino and English, through the use of mother tongue, in order to ensure comprehension of the curriculum content. The overall goal of the program is to result in greater educational outcomes.

### Features

Fluency in reading is first developed in the student's mother tongue. Then oral communication skills are developed in English and Filipino before students begin reading in those languages. Teachers in the program are first trained to read and write in their first language during writing workshops.  The Lubuagan multilingual program also incorporates cultural content, by introducing each lesson with a subject relating to the students' personal experiences. Reading materials are culturally relevant to the students' culture so that they may focus on developing reading skills rather than understanding the context of the story. Other additional elements of the program include "oral literature, local history, local arts, craft and music in the curriculum" (Walter, 2001, p. 673).

### Measured Success

Walter and Dekker (2011) conducted a study to analyze and compare the outcomes of students participating in the Lubuguan MLE program (experimental group) and those in the standard education programs conducted in English and Filipino (control group). The study aimed to measure whether or not the use of L1 stunted a student's development in their L2, and whether the use of the L1 compromised acquisition of curricular content. Students took tests in reading, math, Filipno, English, and social studies. An important element of the methodology was conducting the tests in the language of instruction specific to each group of students for each subject. The findings demonstrated a significantly higher score for students in the experiment group than the control group for all subjects, showing an advantage for students in the MLE program. Instead of compromising a students' aptitude for learning and comprehension, the use of L1 in fact enhanced their comprehension and outcomes.

### Vulnerabilities

This program and others like it encounter difficulty with many mother tongues that may not have standard written forms, or have only recently been standardized and thus spelling is often difficult.

## English language learners in Canada

**Function**

The aim of this method is to take advantage of student's cultural knowledge and language abilities in their mother tongue to affirm their identity and engage students in their learning of the English language.

**Features**

One approach, the Dual Language Identity Text, has been piloted in several schools in Canada's Greater Toronto Area: Thornwood Public School, Floradale Public School, Coppard Glen Public School. The program integrates the following elements and founding pedagogical principles:

- Team building

- Student autonomy

- Interdisciplinary pedagogy

- Cognitively challenging

- Students perform translations between their L1 and L2

- Integration of technology

- Imagination

- High school service learning in which students teach elementary school students who share the same L1

The aforementioned elements give "life" to students' homework assignments and engage them in their education.

**Vulnerability**

These projects are very time consuming, so it has been found to be most time efficient to have cross-curricular integration.

## Tribal Communities in India

The linguistic context in India is complex and challenging with its recorded 1,652 mother tongues as of 2002. Additional challenges to educating minority language communities include that they live mostly in remote regions of India. Though there are many challenges to MLE within this nation, the Indian Constitution states: "it shall be the endeavour of every state and every local authority within the state to provide adequate facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups" (MacKenzie, 2009, p. 375).

### Function

The multilingual education programs in India aim to improve the quality of education for marginalized groups. They serve to give students a strong foundation in their mother tongue in order to improve their L2 learning, by beginning with what is familiar to a child. The programs also aim to teach children what is important in the community; teach them culture and values that are hidden in their language. This will also provide them with a sense of stability, self-esteem, and cultural identity, in order to enhance learning (MacKenzie, 2009)

### Features

- Ten language schools were identified for a pilot program in Andhra Pradesh Education and Tribal Welfare Departments, working with 8 language groups

- Creation of mother-tongue textbooks with culturally relevant content

- Creation of bilingual and L2 textbooks to aid in the transition to the L2, Telugu

- Developed multilingual dictionaries with mother tongue, Telugu, Hindi, and English

- Orissa pilot program in 20 schools, with 10 language groups

- Train teachers to contextualize the curriculum

- Use child-centered methods

- Use activity-based learning

### Vulnerability

"Nearly 80% of Indian languages are endangered, most of them tribal" (MacKenzie, 2009, p. 370). In addition, most tribal languages do not have a script and their written forms are still being developed.

## Mother Tongue Medium Education in West Africa

For Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, French was adopted as the national language and the only medium of instruction in schools. These countries were among the first, however, to adopt an MLE

system. In 1970 an evaluation of the French-only *École d'Éducation Rurale* was found to produce low success and high drop-out rates, and the graduates were unable to communicate agricultural techniques and knowledge in the local languages to share with the community, as they had only learned the concepts in French.  Thus, the mother tongue medium education (MTME) program, *Formation des Jeunes Agriculteurs* (FJA) began in 1971 (Nikièma, 2011). While many overlaps exist between the multilingual education systems of all three aforementioned countries, this best practice will examine some shared features across the three nations as well as particular features of methods tested and implemented in each country.

### Function

The goals of the L1-first multilingual education in these countries aimed to eliminate the inefficiencies and problems associated with the previous French only education system. These inefficiencies include: high student failure and dropout rates, high grade repetition rates, low retention, and high rates of regression to illiteracy, among others (Nikièma, 2011).

### Shared Features

- Emphasis on keeping the mother tongue throughout primary schooling even as a separate language subject, in addition to the integration of the L2, French.

- These programs include training of their teachers; previously training was only during a short period, however recently MTME modules have been integrated into the teacher training center programs.

- New methods of teaching have been piloted in MTME programs in these countries, inspired mostly by educational tools used in adult literacy and non-formal education.

- MTME in these contexts effectively uses the learner-centered approach to teaching.

### Shared Vulnerabilities

The short-period teacher training, though almost entirely replaced by MTME modules in teacher programs, was insufficient and costly. In addition, these countries have encountered minor challenges in creating cooperation between the local language and French programs.

## Burkina Faso

### Features

- 422 bilingual schools

- Mother tongue medium experimentation by NGOs and local organizations

The current strategy has been to ensure the spread of mother tongue based instruction throughout all grade levels of a school, prior to expanding these methods to other schools. Additionally, bilingual

programs in Burkina Faso have experimented with five-, as opposed to the standard six-, year cycles in primary school (Nikièma, 2011).

Burkina Faso piloted the program, *Apprenstissage de la Langue Française à partir des Acquis de l'Alphabetisation* (ALFAA) to demonstrate that literacy in a mother tongue could be instrumental in learning an L2, even for adults with no prior schooling. The program consisted of two 36-day intensive sessions for adults who had just gained literacy in their mother tongue. By the end of the program, they had reached a primary grade 5 or 6 level of fluency in French (UNESCO, 2008, p. 116).

**Measured Success**

Students were given tests in French and mathematics, and an analysis was conducted to compare scores from bilingual schools and traditional schools. The bilingual school students' results in French were comparable to those of the traditional schools, and they outperformed their peers in traditional schools in mathematics (Nikièma, 2011, p. 607). A study conducted in 2009 found additionally that repetition and drop out rates in experimental bilingual schools were consistently between 6 and 9% lower than those of classical schools between 1998 and 2001 (Nikièma, 2011, p. 610).

## Niger

**Features**

- 573 bilingual schools

- Second-generation bilingual schools.

- As of 2007, Niger's new curriculum development system, *Cadre d'Orientation du Curriculum* (COC), combines MTME in the approach to achieving competency in French and other subjects.

**Measured Success**

The German Society for international cooperation conducted a comparative study of students in the MTME programs and those in more traditional schools. The students completed an assessment in various subjects, including French and math. The results demonstrated that the students performed their best, even in the tradition schools, when the test was conducted in the local language. Furthermore, when the test was conducted in French, there were no significant differences in scores between students in the MTME and traditional programs, thus disproving that the use of L1 hinders a student's performance in French (Nikièma, 2011).

## Mali

**Features**

- 2,550 bilingual schools.

- New pedagogical approach in bilingual schools: *Pédagogie convergente* (PC)

In Mali, there has been a mixture of pedagogy: the MTBME and the skills-based approach (SBA). SBA is founded on the importance of learning-centered pedagogy and an active role for the learner, and with the integration of MTME ensures efficiency as the teachers and students use the same language in the classroom (Nikièma, 2005).

**Measured Success**

Primary pass rates between 1994 and 2000 were 32% higher for those children that were educated in their mother tongue first as compared to those in the French-only education programs (Bender, 2005, p. 2). Additionally, students in the *Pédagogie convergente* program have had higher measured success on assessment than the national average (Nikièma, 2011).

## Heritage Language Learning in the United States

The context of heritage language learning is complicated by the policies and politics surrounding the No Child Left Behind Act's requirements for yearly progress measurement through standardized testing. Students' progress is generally only assessed in English, creating further challenges for bilingual programs (Cummins, 2005).

**Function**

The aim of these bilingual strategies is to communicate to students the value of their home language and culture in school. Such programs aim to decrease the loss of home languages and engage students in their education through the integration of their identity in their education.

**Features**

- Bilingual identity texts, as discussed in a previous section.

**Vulnerabilities**

- Conflicts with national and state language policies, such as No Child Left Behind, where curriculum and assessments are offered only in English.

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