

Reasons for Mother Tongue First literacy in Nepal

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These notes have been written in response to a request to VSA (Te Tuao Tawahi Volunteer Service Abroad) and the Himalayan Trust for teachers to develop skills in English-medium teaching practice at primary level in Nepal.

A good international overview of language in education issues for donor organisations can be found in an analysis for Save the Children and CfBT. The report identifies Nepal as one of 20 countries at highest risk in a 2009 analysis of being “likely to face major delays to education and stable growth if they did not shift towards teaching in languages which more children understand” (p. 6).

See: Helen Pinnock, Pamela Mackenzie, Elizabeth Pearce, & Catherine Young. (2011). Closer to home: How to help schools in low- and middle-income countries respond to children’s language needs. Save the Children and CfBT Education Trust. <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/resources/online-library/closer-home>

International language educators now recommend a focus on the development of early literacy in mother tongues¹, before introducing the national language and then an international language. In Nepal this means early literacy in one of the approximately 120 languages spoken², before Nepali is introduced, and then English. Although “the earlier the better” may seem intuitive, a Mother Tongue First approach results in better English language outcomes by the end of primary level schooling.

I now outline the main reasons for this approach, before giving a description of a suggested model for languages in primary level multilingual education.

1 The reasons for a Mother Tongue First approach

Educational/cognitive

There is a growing international body of empirical evidence that initial literacy in children’s mother tongues has better outcomes in all subjects, including English. Learning occurs best in the language the children understand, and is transferred to other subjects. An important recent finding is that while an overall analysis appears to indicate that early introduction of English has better outcomes, the opposite effect is found when the data is analysed to account for levels of school resources and the socio-economic background of children.

See: Stephen Taylor & Marisa Coetzee. (2013). Estimating the impact of language of instruction in South African primary schools: A fixed effects approach. Stellenbosch Working Paper Series No. WP21/2013. <http://www.ekon.sun.ac.za/wpapers/2013>

¹ In these notes I use the terms “mother tongue” and “first language” interchangeably.

² Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com/profile/NP>) states that there are currently 121 living languages in Nepal, of which 11 are “institutional” (used and sustained beyond the home), 20 are “developing” (the language is used vigorously and has a developing literate form), 26 are “vigorous” (the language is unstandardised and there is not yet any literature), 56 are “in trouble” (intergenerational transmission is being broken), and 8 are “dying” (only fluently used by older generations).

Government policy

Based on international evidence, a phased Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education policy (MTB-MLE) was adopted by the Nepalese government in 2003. However, the programme has been hampered by a lack of resources, poor programme design and implementation. This indicates an urgent need for stronger interventions.

See: Prem Phyak. (2012). Language issues in educational policy and practices in Nepal: A critical review. Asian Development Bank. <http://aid.dfat.gov.au/Publications/Pages/mtr-back-rep-language-issues.aspx>

Lower costs

First language instruction results in reduced repetition and dropout rates. International studies show that this benefit outweighs increased costs such as materials development and teacher training.

See: Penelope Bender, Nadine Dutcher, David Klaus, Jane Shore, & Charlie. (2005). In their own language : Education for all. Education Notes. Washington, DC: World Bank.
<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/2005/06/7440673/own-language-education-all>

Katheleen Heugh. (2006). "Cost implications of the provision of mother tongue and strong bilingual models of education in Africa". In Hassana Alidou, Aliou Boly, Birgit Brock-Utne, Yaya Satina, Diallo, Kathleen Heugh, H. Ekkehard Wolff, Optimizing learning and education in Africa – the Language Factor: A stock-taking research on mother tongue and bilingual education in Sub-Saharan Africa . Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA). http://www.adeanet.org/adeaPortal/adea/downloadcenter/Ouga/B3_1_MTBLE_en.pdf

Human rights

Children have the right to education in a language they understand. The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (article 2), notes that everyone is entitled to rights and freedoms (such as education) 'without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status'.

See: <http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/>

Children's preference

Children prefer reading materials in their own language and from their own culture. Evaluations in Nepal prompted the international non-governmental organisation Room to Read to change their policies and develop a programme for publication in first languages.

See: Wood, John. (2013). Creating room to read: A story of hope in the battle for global literacy. Viking. Chapter 9, 'Searching for Dr Sues'.

Indigenous culture

It is well-recognised in Aotearoa New Zealand that the indigenous language is a cultural taonga. It can be argued that non-government organisations from New Zealand should therefore accord the same recognition to the indigenous languages of other countries they work in.

See: Waitangi Tribunal. (1986). Wai 11: Te Reo Maori claim. <http://www.waitangi-tribunal.govt.nz>

Shiva Kumar Khaling. (2009). "Will you come back to the village?" (See Appendix below).

Gender equity

There is evidence that girls' participation levels in education is higher when local schools are taught in their mother tongues.

See: Carol Benson. (2005). Girls, educational equity and mother-tongue-based teaching. UNESCO Bangkok.
http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/unesco_Girls_Edu_mother_tongue.pdf

Parental/community involvement

Parents and community members such as elders are able to be involved in their children's schooling if they can speak the language which is being taught. They can directly support their children's learning by participating in materials development and classroom activities.

See: UNESCO. (2007). Advocacy Kit for Promoting Multilingual Education: "Including the Excluded."
<http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001521/152198e.pdf>

Minority group/post-colonial empowerment

English is used as the language of power in many post-colonial situations, and for this reason there can be resistance to a mother-tongue first approach, particularly from members of elites who have been successful in English language. First languages are sometimes used in resistance to these elites by minority groups such as women of ethnic minority groups in Nepal.

See: Robinson-Pant, Anna. (2000). Why eat green cucumbers at the time of dying? Women's literacy and development in Nepal. UNESCO Institute of Development. <http://www.unesco.org/education/uie/pdf/robinson.pdf>

Millennium Development Goals

Local languages are essential in achieving all eight of the MDGs. This is largely because communication is central to community development:

- Goal 1. [Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger](#)
- Goal 2. [Achieve universal primary education](#)
- Goal 3. [Promote gender equality and empower women](#)
- Goal 4. [Reduce child mortality](#)
- Goal 5. [Improve maternal health](#)
- Goal 6. [Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases](#)
- Goal 7. [Ensure environmental sustainability](#)
- Goal 8. [Develop a global partnership for development](#)

See: SIL International. (2008). Why languages matter: Meeting Millennium Development Goals through local languages. <http://www-01.sil.org/sil/global/mdg.htm>

2 A possible model for primary level multilingual education

Various models are suggested in the literature, and have been adapted according to the situation (including in Nepal), but all follow a similar pattern:

L1= first language

L2 = second language (e.g. national language)

L3 = third language (e.g. international language such as English)

LOI -= Language of Instruction

Adapted from: Insight, 2006, p. 6 http://www.multiculturas.com/textos/insightsEdn5_Mother_tongue_first_2006.pdf

Kindergarten	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4	Grade 5	Grade 6
Develop oral L1	Continue oral L1 Introduce written L1	Continue oral L1 Continue written L1				
		Introduce oral L2	Continue oral L2	Continue oral L2	Continue oral L2	Continue oral L2
			Introduce written L2	Continue written L2	Continue written L2	Continue written L2
				Introduce oral L3	Continue oral L3	Continue oral L3
					Introduce written L3	Continue written L3
L1 as LOI	L1 as LOI	L1 as LOI	L1 and some L2 as LOI	L1 and L2 as LOI	L2 with L1 as LOI	L2 with L1 as LOI

I would be happy to provide further information or explanation about any of these points.

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Appendix

Will you come back to the village?

By Shiva Kumar Khaling

You ...

saying you'll come by this evening

 you'll come by tomorrow

 you'll definitely come by this winter

 or by any means you'll arrive by the end of
 the year

you keep me waiting and waiting

I'm left to start at the path

Where have you gotten entangled?

Here ... if there were a sun it's on the verge of setting

 if there were a fire it's close to dying out

 if there were a river it's drying up

 if there were a flower it's begun to wilt

Here ... there is great difficulty

 in keeping our culture alive

 There are no Shilee dancers for the Tosi puja

 There are no Risiwa singers

 There is no one to recite veda and mundhum texts

And so ... will you come back to the village

before the Khaling language of Khaling is lost

before the mundhum vedas of Khaling are forgotten

before our culture becomes extinct

before our identity is erased?

(originally written in Khaling/Rai)

In: Manujushree Thapa. (Ed.) (2009). The country is yours: Contemporary Nepali literature. Khatmandu: The Printhouse, p. 111-112.