

First Language–Based Multilingual Education Can Help Those Excluded by Language

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ABSTRACT

Although most Asian nations are multilingual, their education systems use mostly the national languages. Yet, many learners do not understand the languages of education. As a result, these learners are often excluded from many learning opportunities and are generally disadvantaged in educational participation and achievement. In most countries, the challenge is greatest in minority communities speaking non-dominant languages. The situation is particularly difficult among girls and women. Multilingual education (MLE) which is based on learners' first language can alleviate this challenge. Multilingual education means the use of several languages as the language of initial and recurrent literacy, the language of instruction and a means for lifelong learning. Research shows that learners benefit most from their education, if it starts in their first language. This paper will introduce the challenge of the language in education in Asia and discuss ways the language issue can be tackled with multilingual education.

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1 Introduction

Language and education are closely related. Since language is a main means of human communication, almost all educational activities use language some way. In multilingual settings, such as most of Asia, decisions about the relationship between language and education are not straightforward. Most Asian nations are multilingual, but their education systems use only the national languages. Yet, many learners do not understand the languages used. As a result, these learners are often excluded from many learning opportunities and are generally disadvantaged in educational participation and achievement.

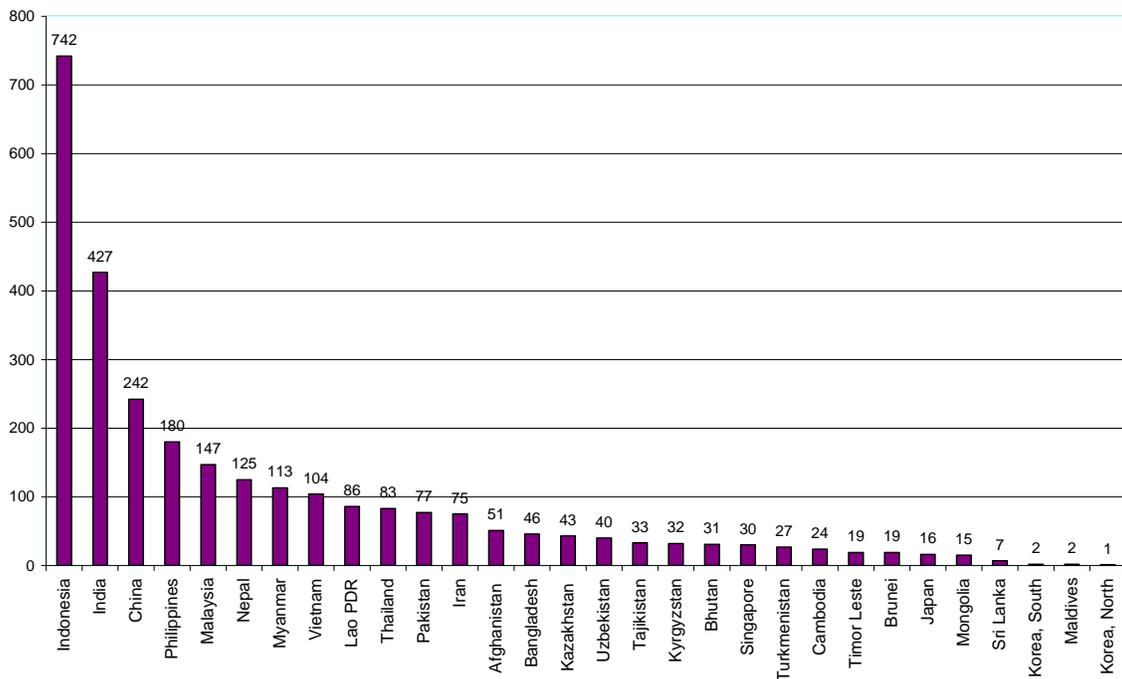
Learners having insufficient comprehension and command of the languages used as the languages of literacy¹ and languages of instruction² are likely to learn differently from those fully proficient in the languages used. This usually includes ethnolinguistic minorities³ in multilingual settings, whose first language is a non-dominant language⁴. In some cases, people speaking languages with millions of speakers also have to study through a language in which they may not be proficient.

This paper discusses the implications of multilingualism on education in Asia. The focus is on learners who are excluded from education due to their first language⁵ (or mother tongue or home language). Furthermore, the paper provides some rationale for using the learner's first language as the language of literacy and instruction in multilingual education⁶ (MLE). In first language-based multilingual education learning starts in the learners' first language (L1), and the second language⁷ (L2) as well as additional languages are gradually introduced later. The paper is based on my research project language-in-education policies and multilingual education in Southeast Asia (e.g. Benson & Kosonen, 2009; Kosonen, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2007, 2008; Kosonen, Young, & Malone, 2007).

2 Multilingual Asia

According to Ethnologue (2005) some 2200 languages are spoken in Asia. The total number of languages spoken in the world today is almost 7000. Figure 1 illustrates the number of languages in each of the listed 30 Asian nations. The chart confirms the evident linguistic diversity around the region. Almost all Asian nations are essentially multilingual. In more than half a dozen countries more than 100 languages are spoken, and Indonesia, India and China have several hundreds of languages. There are few monolingual nations, though North Korea may be an exception. Yet, certainly all countries – including North Korea - have deaf populations who use sign languages. Thus, when one considers this factor, even if a nation may seem monolingual, it is at least bilingual. Sign languages, however, are unfortunately not always listed as separate languages in all countries.

Figure 1. Number of languages spoken in Central, East, South, and South-East Asia.
(Source: Ethnologue 2005)



Although more than 2000 languages are spoken in Asia, the number of national⁸ and official languages⁹ in these 30 nations is only 50 (see Table 1), of which 22 in India alone. The concepts of official and national languages are quite similar, and sometimes they overlap. Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese, for example, play the roles of official and national languages in Indonesia, Thailand, China and Viet Nam, respectively. In many linguistically diverse countries, such as India, Pakistan and Singapore, determining the national language is more difficult, as no one language plays such a prominent role as in the four nations mentioned above. Yet, certain languages spoken in the country are adopted as the official languages. In some cases, such as India and Singapore, several languages have been given an official status.

Table 1. Official/national languages in Central, East, South, and South-East Asia.
(Source: Ethnologue 2005; Leclerc 2008)

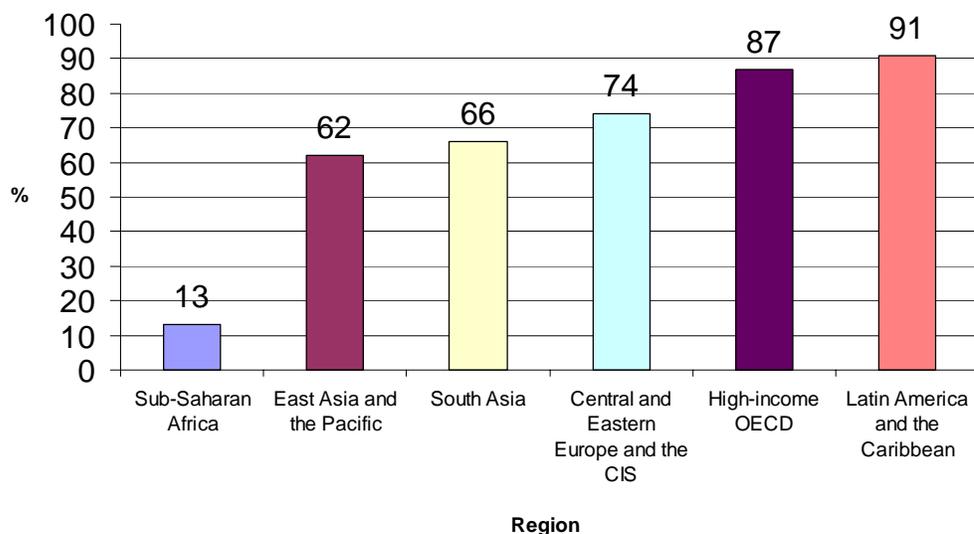
Assamese	Kazakh	<i>Portuguese</i>
Bengali (Bangla) 2	Khmer	<i>Russian</i> 2
Bodo	Kirghiz	Sanskrit
Dogri	Konkani	Santhali
Dzongkha	Korean 2	Sindhi 2
Eastern Farsi (Dari)	Lao	Sinhala
Eastern Punjabi	Maithili	Southern Pashto
<i>English</i> 4 (1)	Malay 3	Tajiki
Filipino	Malayalam	Tamil 2
Gujarati	Maldivian (Diwehi)	Telugu
Gurung	Mandarin Chinese 2	Tetun
Halh Mongolian	Marathi	Thai
Hindi	Meitei	Turkmen
Indonesian	Myanma	Urdu 2
Japanese	Nepali 2	Vietnamese
Kannada	Northern Uzbek	Western Farsi
Kashmiri	Oriya	

Table 1 only lists all official and national languages in Asia. Ethnologue (2005) and Leclerc (2008) provide more details about the status of these languages in different countries. The numbers after language names state the number of countries in which the language is official, and the italicized languages are of European origin. It is interesting to note that in Asia autochthonous Asian languages outnumber European languages as official, making the Asian situation quite different from Africa and Latin America, where European languages dominate as the official languages and the languages of education.

Despite the undeniable multilingualism in most of Asia, education systems in the region generally work as if the nations were monolingual. Consequently, in most cases, only the official languages are used as the languages of instruction and literacy in education. Thus, educational systems put the learners who are not proficient in these languages at a disadvantage. In some cases, monolingual education systems in multilingual national even exclude some citizens altogether from education due to restrictive language-in-education policies.

Figure 2 displays the global extent of the issue. It shows an estimated proportion of national populations in various continents having access to education in their first language. This means that the columns show the percentage of people whose first language is used as a language of instruction in education in a given geographical area. For example, if several languages of instruction are used in one country, the total population speaking those languages as their first language is counted. The most difficult situation is found in Sub-Saharan Africa where only 13% of the people can study through the medium of their first language. Although the Asian situation is somewhat better, hundreds of millions of people have no access to education in their first language, owing to large populations in many countries. Figure 2 also shows that no region, even the high-income OECD countries, is without challenges in terms of the language of instruction policies and practices.

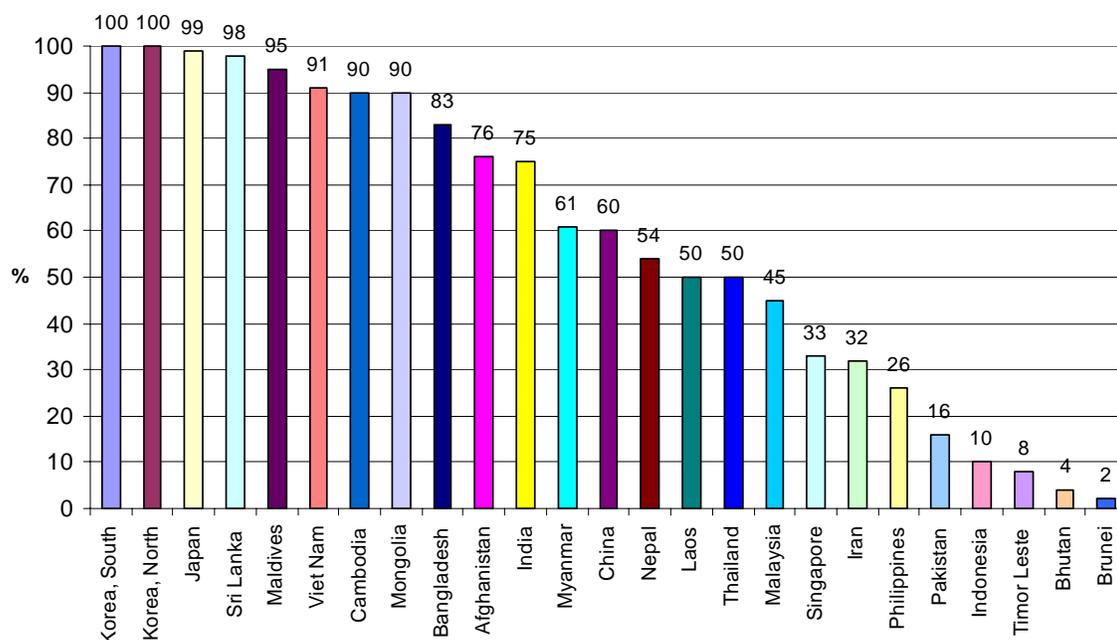
Figure 2. Estimated populations with access to education in their first language. (Source: UNDP 2004, 34)



The scenario is quite similar in Asia, though there is wider variety among the 25 nations observed. For example, in both Koreas and Japan almost all people can study through their first language, whereas in Indonesia, Timor Leste, Bhutan and Brunei less than 10% of the

population can do so. Figure 3 shows the estimated percentages of national populations in East, South and Southeast Asia having access to education in their first language (calculated on the basis of data from Ethnologue, 2005 and Leclerc, 2008). The basis for these estimates is similar to the one described above. As exact figures for the populations speaking various languages are not always available, all figures presented should be considered as estimates. It should be noted, however, that data are not available on the extent of bilingualism in all of these countries. Many bilingual people may in fact be fluent in the language of instruction but owing to the lack of data, Figure 3 does not take this into account. Nevertheless, the main point of the graph is that in many countries the issue of language in education is a major one.

Figure 3. Estimated populations with access to education in their first language in East, South and Southeast Asia. Figures estimated and interpreted by the author. (Source: Ethnologue, 2005; Leclerc, 2008.)



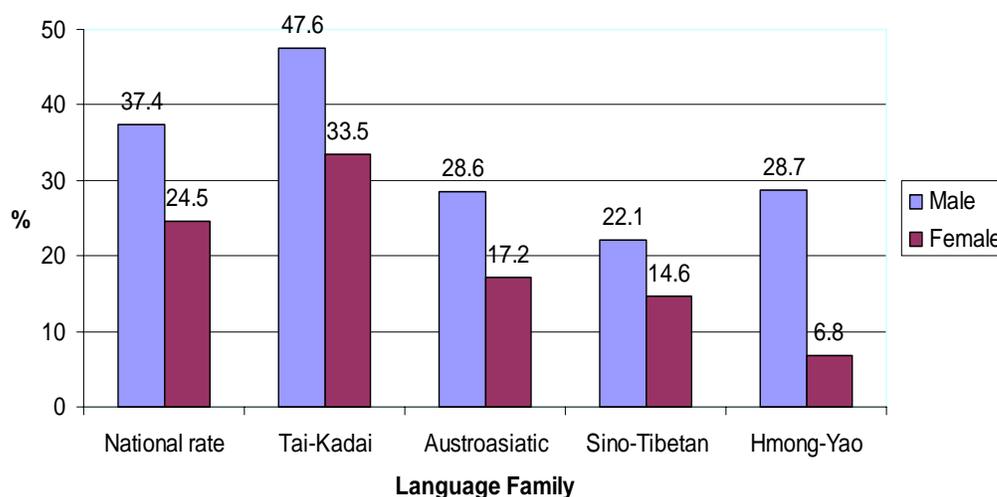
3 Language and literacy

Language in which literacy is learned plays a crucial role in literacy acquisition. This is particularly true for those who may not understand the language of literacy. For example, OECD's PISA (Programme for International Student Achievement) study showed that in Indonesia, 69% of 15-year-old secondary-school students performed at or below the lowest of five proficiency levels for reading literacy, and 94% performed at or below level two (OECD, 2004). In Thailand, the figures for the same categories were 37% and 74%, respectively. These low levels of tested reading literacy mean that many students are certainly not fluent readers and may find it difficult to use literacy as a tool in further learning or in daily life. There are many reasons for the low level of literacy in several countries that took part in the PISA study. However, it is likely that the languages of literacy, Bahasa Indonesia and Standard Thai, are a factor for these unsatisfactory results because not all students participating in the study have high proficiency in the languages used.

Another important issue is the disparity in literacy between speakers of different languages. As few countries have such comprehensive reports on the status of literacy as Lao PDR, the Lao case is used here to illustrate this point. Data from the Lao National Literacy Survey (Lao

PDR, 2004) demonstrate the existing disparity between different ethnolinguistic groups regarding literacy rates in Lao (see Figure 4). Data from other countries would likely show a similar pattern. The survey conducted tests in reading and writing using the Lao language, as well as in numeracy skills, with a maximum score of 30 in each test. To have ‘secured functional literacy skills,’ or what the study also called ‘self-learning level,’ a person had to have a minimum score of 22 in every test. The test results and the consequent literacy rates show that the adult literacy skills among ethnolinguistic minorities are clearly below the national average. The existing disparities are even more prominent when minority language speakers are compared to the speakers of Lao-related languages (Tai-Kadai). Unfortunately, no data are available for each ethnolinguistic minority group. Instead, these figures are based on the language families which may include tens of distinct languages.

Figure 4. Tested secured functional literacy rates (in Lao) by language family and gender in Lao PDR, ages 15–59. (Source: Lao PDR, 2004: 56)



4 Language in education

Like the language of literacy, the language of instruction is a similarly important issue in multilingual Asia. Smalley describes the educational situation of many minority children in Thailand. Although more than a decade old, his note is still applicable in Thailand and in other countries as well:

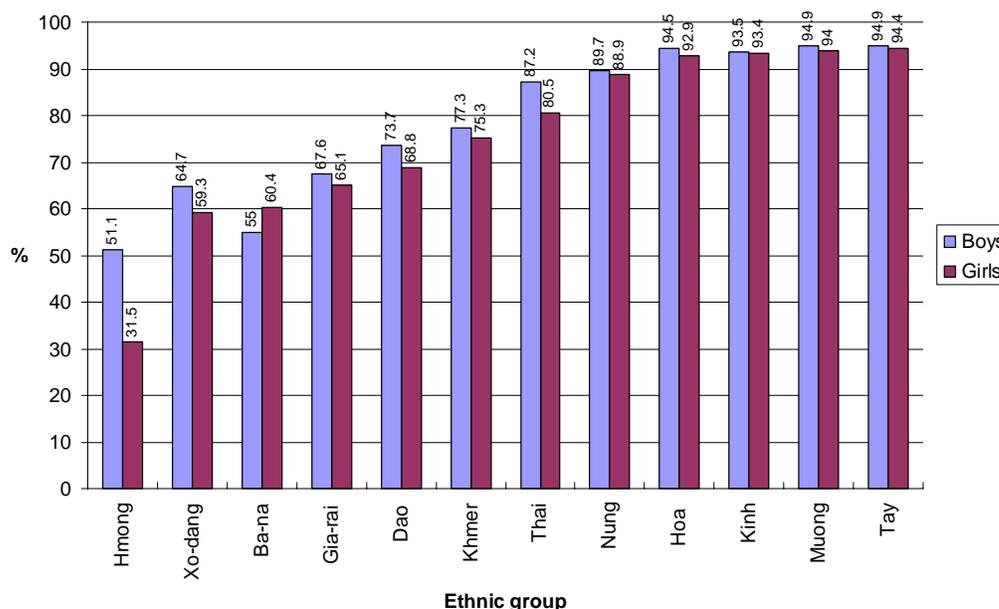
The [Thai educational system] is a sink-or-swim system, however, for those children who do not speak some dialect of Thaiklang [national language] when they start school. It is inefficient and frustrating because it assumes the life, culture and language of central Thailand, no matter where the children live or what they speak. It requires many children to lose two years in school before they follow well what is going on in class. (Smalley, 1994: 293)

Surveys conducted recently in Thailand (Prapasapong, 2008) show that minority children with poor Standard Thai skills had 50% lower learning results than Thai-speaking students in all main subjects. Further, about 13% of Grade 2 students could not read or write Standard Thai, and over 25% of students on all grades in 10 education areas (mostly border areas inhabited by ethnolinguistic minorities) had problems in reading and writing Standard Thai. The surveys concluded that a reason for poor learning achievements was that teachers and students spoke different languages.

The fact that many students do not understand or speak the language of instruction, slow down their learning, and not all perform to their potential, through no fault of their own. This situation may lead to a decreasing interest in and motivation for education. As minority children underachieve due to language difficulties, and may thus drop out of school, both learners' and their parents' future hopes and plans may not be fulfilled, leading to disillusionment about the benefits of education.

Therefore, the existing inequalities between the dominant and non-dominant populations remain or may even increase. Likewise, the prevailing educational systems may in fact promote inequality on ethnolinguistic grounds despite their often very different spelled-out objectives. Many speakers of non-dominant languages experience inequalities in access, quality, attainment and achievement in education. For an elaboration on these issues in various contexts see, for example, Cummins (2000), May (1999, 2001), Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) and UNESCO (2007a).

Figure 5. Net primary enrolment by ethnic group and gender in Vietnam, figures for 1998. (Source: UNICEF Vietnam, 2004)



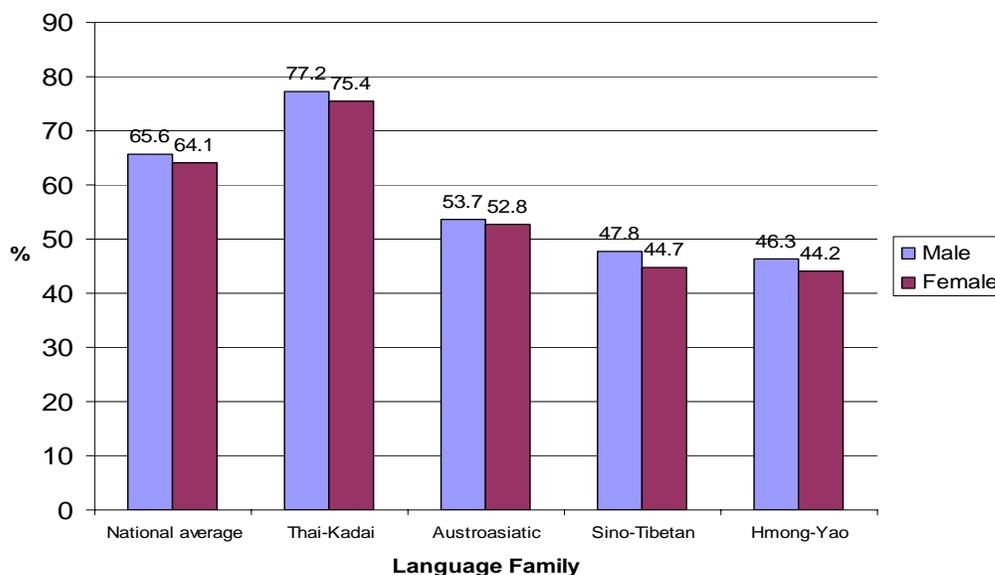
Few countries collect educational data disaggregated according to the students' ethnolinguistic background. Vietnam and Lao PDR do however and are therefore used as examples here. In Vietnam, ethnolinguistic minority children's enrolment in primary education is lower than the national average. The available figures show a drastic disparity based on students' ethnolinguistic background (see Figure 5). For example, the net enrolment rate (NER) in primary education, based on the 1999 Census figures, was only 41.5% among the Hmong (one of the larger minority groups), whereas the national rate is 91.4% (Baulch, Truong, Haughton & Haughton, 2002: 6). The disparities are even more drastic in secondary education (ibid.: 7). Likewise, in the mid-1990s the dropout rate of the Hmong ranged between 50% and 70% compared with the national rate of 7.16% and the repetition rate was between 30% and 40% compared with the national rate of 4.81% (Hoang, 2004). The highest repetition rates in primary schools are found in the early grades in ethnic minority regions (Aikman & Pridmore, 2001). The main reason for this disparity seems to be the language of

instruction. Figure 5 shows the net enrolment rates for some larger minority groups. Minority groups whose primary enrolment is quite similar to that of the Kinh, i.e. the Vietnamese — such as the Tay, Muong, Hoa and Nung — are also the ones having high rates of bilingualism in their first language and Vietnamese. Some have even lost their heritage languages. This inaccuracy is due to data disaggregation by group classification rather than by language(s) spoken. The successful performance of people from these groups in Vietnamese-medium education is used to argue against first language-based education.

Similar information is available from Lao PDR. EFA Global Monitoring Report (UNESCO 2003a, 23) notes that ‘a much higher percentage of ethnic minority children have never enrolled in or attended school than children who have Lao as their first language’. Available educational statistics from Laos confirm the prevailing situation (see Figures 6 and 7). Komorowski complements this view with an appropriate first-hand account:

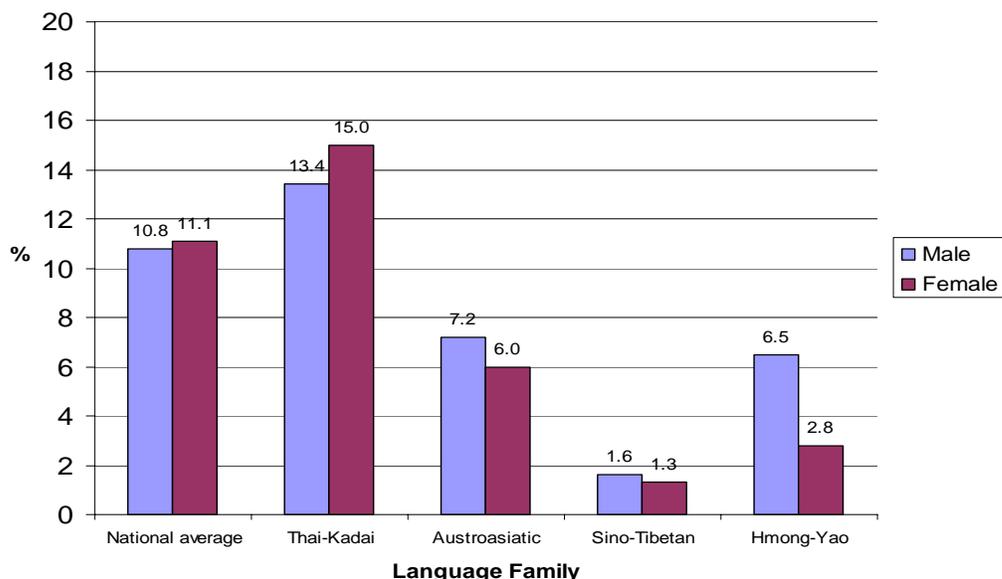
Minority students will be expected to acquire literacy in Lao, but ... an unproductive classroom scenario is set up. The existing situation is a vicious cycle: the most effective and reasonably resourced education is taking place in urban areas, so most teachers that are being trained are coming through this system. These teachers, if posted to rural areas, will likely not share a common language with their students. In turn these students will become demotivated by an inability to relate to their teacher and the language used, maintaining high levels of non-completion and low enrolment. (Komorowski 2001: 65)

Figure 6. Primary net enrolment by language family and gender in Lao PDR. (Source: Lao PDR, 2004: 35)



The available data show that students speaking languages belonging to the Thai–Kadai language family, which includes the national language Lao, have higher enrolment rates than those speaking languages not related to the language of instruction. In addition, the enrolment, retention, survival and achievement rates of minority children are lower than the national average (ADB, 2000; Kosonen, 2007; Lao PDR, 2004, 2007, 2008; Sisouphanthong and Taillard, 2000). A recent government document (Lao PDR, 2008) notes that the language of instruction may be a possible reason for the exclusion of ethnic minorities.

Figure 7. Upper secondary net enrolment by language family and gender in Lao PDR.
 (Source: Lao PDR, 2004: 36)



The low enrolment of students from minority backgrounds at the upper secondary level means that there are few candidates from those language groups to enter teacher training institutions. The evident disparities based on the students' linguistic background, as seen in Figure 7, show that it is likely that few, if any, people speaking various Sino-Tibetan languages will be trained as teachers. Thus the teachers of children speaking those languages will most probably be speakers of other languages, just like Komorowski points out above. Similar examples to the ones from Lao PDR and Vietnam can surely be found also in other countries.

The Lao case as presented in Figure 7 shows also the issue of gender disparity which exacerbates the language issue. A higher proportion of girls than boys from the Thai-Kadai group – including the dominant Lao – are enrolled in secondary education, whereas the situation among the minority groups is the opposite. Gender disparity based on ethnicity and language is also a global phenomenon. Lewis & Lockheed (2007) discovered that nearly 70% of 60 million out-of-school girls worldwide are "doubly disadvantaged", as they belong to the ethnic, religious, linguistic, racial and other minority groups. The study shows that language of education is a reason for their exclusion. Likewise, according to the World Bank (2005: 1) half of the world's out-of-school children do not necessarily speak the language used in the local school.

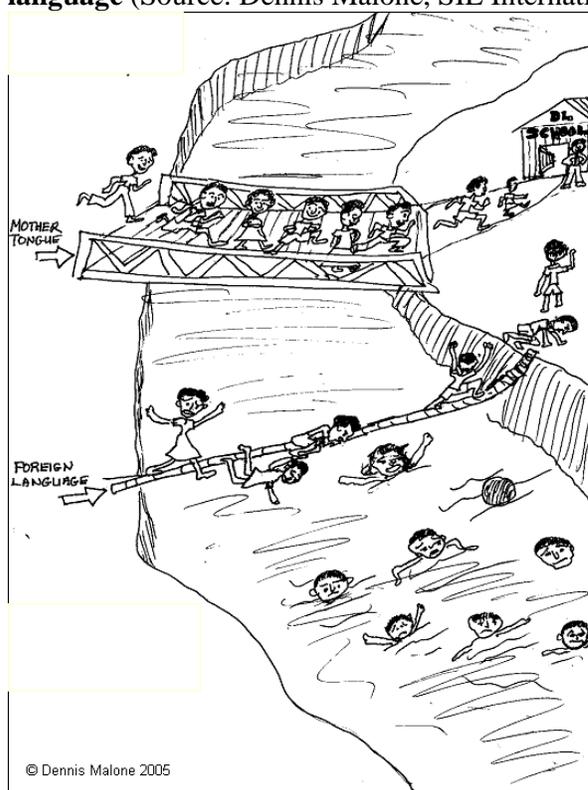
The language issue is not confined only to small communities of minority people. Table 2 lists, in terms of number of speakers, world's eight largest languages – all in Asia – that are not used as languages of instruction. The data show that hundreds of millions of speakers of these languages have no access to education in their first language. Javanese is the largest language community in Indonesia, for example. Western Punjabi is spoken in Pakistan, and is actually the first language of nearly a half of the population there. Many people in Pakistan, however, consider Punjabi as a dialect of Urdu, a national language, and not worthy of being used in education. Most of the listed languages are what many Chinese call "dialects," as they all share the Chinese writing system. Nevertheless, the oral forms of these languages are not mutually intelligible. In schools and education programmes, learners speaking these

languages may not understand or speak the languages of instruction used: Bahasa Indonesia in Indonesia, Urdu in Pakistan, and Mandarin Chinese in China. Therefore, speakers of these and other languages not used in education cannot perform to their potential at early stages of education.

Table 2. The population of worlds 8 largest languages not used as the language of instruction. (Source: Ethnologue, 2005)

Wu Chinese	90 million
Javanese	75 million
Yue Chinese	64 million
Western Punjabi	60 million
Min Nan Chinese	52 million
Jinyu Chinese	45 million
Xiang Chinese	42 million
Hakka Chinese	30 million

Figure 8. Comparison of students learning through their mother tongue and a foreign language (Source: Dennis Malone, SIL International in Kosonen et al, 2007: 7).



The situation of monolingual education in multilingual contexts is illustrated by Dennis Malone in Figure 8. The picture shows two groups of students. The group crossing the river across a bridge can study through their first language or mother tongue. Many of these students perform well in school as their first language is used as the language of instruction and literacy. The second group of students has to study in a foreign or a second language. Although a second language is used, some students can still cross the river, though some with great difficulties. Their learning achievements may not be as good as they could have had their first language been used. There are always a small proportion of students who succeed anyway despite unsupportive conditions. Such students are sometimes used as examples why first language-based education is not essential, but the fact that they are exceptions is often

forgotten by those making such arguments. Nonetheless, many students cannot cross the river between their home language and the school in which learning is in a foreign language. These students end up repeating grades, dropping out, and basically failing in their education due to restrictive language-in-education policies and misunderstanding of the role language plays in learning.

5 First language-based multilingual education as a solution

A solution to the problem discussed above could be first language-based multilingual education, in which the learners' first language is used as the initial language of instruction and language of literacy. The first language remains the language of instruction as long as possible, at least at the pre-primary and primary levels.

Table 3. Ideal model of mother tongue-based multilingual education for ethnolinguistic minorities

Primary Level	G6	L1 (LoI + subject)	L2 (LoI + subject)
	G5	L1 (LoI + subject)	L2 (LoI + subject)
	G4	L1 (LoI + subject)	L2 (LoI) + L2SL
	G3	L1 (LoI)	L2SL
	G2	L1 (LoI)	L2SL (oral + written)
	G1	L1 (LoI, literacy in L1)	L2SL (oral)
Pre-primary Level	KG2	L1 (LoI)	L2SL (oral)
	KG1	L1 (LoI)	

(Notes: Gx = Primary grade x; KGx = Kindergarten grade x; L1 = learners' first language; L2 = the commonly used language in education or the learners' second language; L2SL = teaching/learning L2 as a second language; LoI = language of instruction)

Table 3 displays an ideal model of strong L1-based MLE using two languages. The table shows that initially all instruction is in the learner's first language and other languages are learned as the second language using appropriate methodologies. Initial literacy is learned in the L1. At higher grades, both languages would be used as the languages of instruction and literacy, as well as studied as subjects. It is essential that the use of the first language continues throughout the education system. Likewise, equally important is that the second language is introduced gradually before it becomes a language of instruction. The following list sums up the key components of mother tongue-based bilingual and multilingual education:

- Learning starts in a language the learners already speak (L1), proceeding from what the learner already knows into the unknown,
- Initial literacy is learned in the first language,
- Other languages are learned as second languages (L2) with appropriate methods,
- Later both L1 and L2 are used as the languages instruction and languages of literacy,
- Both L1 and L2 are studied as subjects,
- New languages can be added later.

Models similar to Table 3 are being used around the world (e.g. ADEA, 2006; Benson, 2002, 2004, 2005; Dutcher, 2004; Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009; King & Schielmann, 2004; Klaus, 2003; Kosonen et al, 2007; LD 2008¹⁰; NORRAG, 2004; SIL, 2004¹¹; UNESCO, 2004, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2008). However, not all programmes described in these studies and reports use the learners' first language as much and as long as the ideal model.

International research shows that at least some five years of instruction in the first language - but preferably throughout the education system - is required to provide a solid foundation for further studies (e.g. Baker, 2006; Baker & Hornberger, 2001; Benson, 2004, 2005; Cummins, 2000, 2001; Thomas & Collier, 2002; UNESCO, 2007a). A strong foundation in the learner's first language is also needed for second language acquisition and successful transfer of the literacy skills from the first to the second language. The following brief list of the benefits of using the learners' first language (L1) in education is adapted from Kosonen (2005b):

- Learning in L1 doesn't hinder, but helps learning of L2,
- Learning to read in L1 is easier and faster,
- What is learned in L1 transfers to L2 (and vice versa),
- L1 allows students to learn curriculum content from the first day of school,
- Strong L1 helps students perform better in L2 academic work, but only after they have acquired sufficient proficiency in L2,
- The use of L1 allows parents to participate more in their children's education,
- Multilingual education (in L1, L2, L3 etc.) improves thinking skills, creativity and flexibility of the learners
- The use of L1 helps teachers better to assess the real learning achievement instead of one based on low language proficiency.
- Long-term use of relevant learning strategies support students to become multilingual and multiliterate.

6 Conclusions

This paper has introduced some educational challenges in multilingual Asia. It has demonstrated that millions of Asian learners are excluded from quality education and cannot reach their full potential; since they must study in languages they may not speak or understand. Many learners who have to study in a second language never learn it well, particularly in poorly resourced rural schools. First language-based multilingual education is a solution that can include learners excluded from education due to language.

In addition to the apparent benefits to learning processes, L1-based MLE can benefit whole societies, but only if pluralism and multilingualism are seen as resources and opportunities rather than problems. MLE helps linguistically marginalized communities bridge to the broader society as they acquire the national language without losing their own identity. It is likely that people whose cultures and languages are respected and supported by the State are likely more 'loyal citizens' than those denied such rights. Government messages (e.g. rights and responsibilities) can reach minorities best in a language they understand. MLE can improve the quality of education for ethnolinguistic minorities, and well-educated citizens contribute to and benefit from the national development more than citizens with poor or no education. L1-based MLE may make people multilingual, an important resource to the society. Finally, essential and life-saving information on HIV-AIDS, avian flu and malaria, for example, reach linguistic minorities best in a language they understand.

However, the extent of the use of MLE is constrained by the prevailing, mostly restrictive, language-in-education policies. In most countries Asian the policies do not yet explicitly

support the use of non-dominant languages. Appropriate policies are related to the achievement of Education for All (EFA) goals. Even if bottlenecks in access to pre-primary and primary education could be resolved, learners not understanding the languages of education cannot learn much about life skills and certainly not receive quality education. Yet, both life skills and quality are EFA goals. Likewise, it is difficult to attract illiterate adults to literacy programmes if the language of literacy is not one they understand. Therefore, if the language of education issue is not addressed and if the use of first language-based multilingual education does not increase, the EFA goals and the closely related UN Millennium Development Goals will not be met in most Asian countries by 2015.

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Biodata:

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Notes:

- ¹ Language of literacy is a language through which the literacy learning takes place, including materials and instruction.
- ² Language (or medium) of instruction is a language through which the contents of the curriculum in a given educational system or a part of it are taught and learned.
- ³ Ethno-linguistic minority refers to a group of people who: (a) share a culture and/or ethnicity and/or language that distinguishes them from other groups of people; and (b) are either fewer in terms of number or less prestigious in terms of power than the predominant group(s) in the given state.
- ⁴ Non-dominant language is used to refer to the languages or language varieties spoken in a given state that are not considered the most prominent in terms of number, prestige or official use by the government and/or the education system.
- ⁵ First language (L1) or mother tongue can be defined as the language that a speaker: (a) has learnt first; (b) identifies with; (c) knows best; (d) uses most (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000; UNESCO, 2003b) or (e) a language that one speaks and understands competently enough to learn academic content at the appropriate age level (Benson & Kosonen, 2009). Multilingual people may consider several languages their first languages.
- ⁶ Multilingual education (MLE) refers to the use of more than one language as the language of instruction and literacy, and through which learning of concepts and curriculum contents takes place.
- ⁷ Second language (L2) is a language that is not the mother tongue of a person, but she/he speaks or has to study it.
- ⁸ National language is “a language that is considered to be the chief language of a nation state” (Crystal 1999, 227).
- ⁹ Official language is a language that is “used in such public domains as the law courts, government, and broadcasting. In many countries, there is no difference between the national and official language” (Crystal *ibid.*).
- ¹⁰ This online publication provides many case studies of multilingual education, mostly from Asian countries.
- ¹¹ See note 10.