“STRONG FOUNDATIONS” AND “GOOD BRIDGES” IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM CURRENT THEORIES AND PRACTICES?

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Educational goals across languages

The hopes and dreams that most parents in minority language communities have for their children are much the same as those expressed by most parents in majority language societies. They want their children to…

- Be successful in school and achieve a quality education;
- Become confident and fluent in communicating in several languages with people from different places and cultures in a globalized world;
- Become productive citizens who contribute to the well-being of their parents and home community and to the nation as a whole; and
- Continue to love and maintain their heritage language and culture.

Situation for children who do not speak the official school language

The problem for children who do not know the official school language when they begin their education is that they are faced with three enormous challenges, all at the same time:

- They are expected to learn the new language (sometimes several of them);
- They are expected to learn to read and write in the new language; and
- They are expected to learn academic concepts taught in the new language.

This problem has been recognized by parents, educators, researchers and policy makers around the world:

From parents

When our children go to school, they go to an alien place. They leave their parents, they leave their gardens, and they leave everything that is their way of life. They sit in a classroom and they learn things that have nothing to do with their own place. Later, because they have learned only other things, they reject their own (Parent in Papua New Guinea, in Delpit and Kemmelfield. 1985).
From teachers

My children are very good at copying from the blackboard. By the time they reach Grade 5, they can copy all the answers and memorize them. But only two of the Grade 5 students can actually speak Hindi (Grade 5 MLE teacher in India, in Jinghran, 2005, page 1).

From UNESCO

The choice of the language…is a recurrent challenge in the development of quality education. Speakers of mother tongues, which are not the same as the national…language, are often at a considerable disadvantage in the educational system… (UNESCO, 2003. Education in a Multilingual World.).

From the World Bank

Fifty percent of the world’s out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition. (World Bank, June, 2005. In their own language… Education for all).

How can children from minority language communities become successful in school and achieve their educational goals?

If I had to reduce all of educational psychology to just one principle, I would say this: The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learners already know. Ascertain this and teach them accordingly (Ausubel, D. P. 1968. Page 235.)

This basic education principle reminds us that there is no real learning without meaning. Students (and everyone else) learn best when they start with what they know and use that as the foundation for learning what is new.

“Schema theory” as elaborated by R.C. Anderson (1977) helps to explain why this is so. Schema theory describes the way that the mind organizes knowledge (that is, everything that we remember from our experiences and that we have learned from others, in school and elsewhere). Meaningful learning occurs when we are able to relate new concepts to what we already know. The more relationships or “networks” that we can establish between the new concepts and our prior knowledge, the more we will understand and be able to use the new concepts.

If we are unable to relate the new concept to what we already know (our existing networks of knowledge), the only way that we are able to remember it is through rote memorization—saying or writing it over and over again. “Rote knowledge” remains isolated and essentially meaningless until we can link it to our existing networks of knowledge. This is the problem noted by the teacher in India (above) who complained that his minority language students could copy answers and memorize them but they could not speak the school language meaningfully.
These theories are basic to the Language Education component in MLE programs because they remind us that a priority must be on helping students to…

*Build a strong educational foundation* by starting with their first language (L1)—the language they know best—and with the knowledge and experience they bring from their home and community,

*Bridge successfully into understanding, speaking, reading and writing the school language* (L2), and

*Continue to use both languages throughout primary school* and for life-long learning.

**Rationale for starting with a strong foundation in the L1**

A visit to two early primary classrooms—one in which the students are learning in their L1 and the other in which the teacher uses the L2 (which the students do not speak or understand) –reveals the reason why the L1 is essential for a strong educational foundation. In the one classroom students are animated and eager learners; in the other they are passive and quiet. Majority language teachers and researchers sometimes label minority language students as “slow” or “learning disabled” or even “stupid” because they are so quiet and/or take a long time to understand and apply new concepts. The problem, of course, is more basic: the teacher is trying to teach the new concepts in a language that the students do not understand.

Developing the students’ L1 and using it for teaching does more than help students to understand and respond to their teachers. Learning the L1 as a subject and using it as the language of learning also helps students to learn the L2. In fact, the more they develop their L1, the better they learn the L2:

*Research shows that speed of learning an L2 is not necessarily related to the amount of exposure to the second language, especially if that exposure to L2 comes at the expense of the development of the first language. For the development of the L2, the development of L1 is more important than time spent in the learning of L2. This apparent paradox is explained by the "interdependence hypothesis"—that a common underlying [language] proficiency makes it possible to transfer academic skills learned in one language to the other language. Once the L1 is well developed, all the learner's academic knowledge, cognitive development, and life experience, is available for use once the superficial features (vocabulary and grammar) of the L2 are acquired (Dutcher, 1995). And…*

*… the learning of a second language before competency in the first language is fully developed may result in arrested development or loss of proficiency in the primary language. This negative effect on the primary language occurs most often if the native language is devalued. (Naomi B. Schiff-Myers. 1992). And…*

*The most powerful factor in predicting educational success for minority learners is the amount of formal schooling they received in their L1. … Only those language minority students who had 5-6 years of strong cognitive and academic development through their L1—as well as through [L2]—did well in Grade 11 assessments (Thomas and Collier, 1997, 2004)*


Building a strong foundation and good bridge—what does it involve?

Schools help language minority students build a strong foundation in their L1 when they teach the L1 as a subject\(^1\) and use it, first alone (until students have build a basic competence in the L2) and then with the L2, for instruction throughout primary school.

Students bridge confidently to using the L2 when they are encouraged to take “small steps”, always starting what they already know and linking the new ideas and information to their existing knowledge networks. The L1 to L2 bridging process that seems to be the most successful involves several stages…

Students are introduced to the L2 by listening to meaningful L2 commands, observing others responding to the commands and then responding in actions…

*The best [language learning] methods are … those that supply “comprehensible input” in low anxiety situations, containing messages that students really want to hear. These methods do not force early production in the L2 but allow students to produce when they are ‘ready’, recognizing that improvement comes from supplying communicative and comprehensible input, and not from forcing and correcting production (Krashan, 2001).*

Students next build fluency and confidence in using the new language to communicate orally with others.

*… oral proficiency in the target language [is] of critical importance for the development of … reading comprehension among third- and fourth-grade students… (Droop & Verhoeven, 2003, pp. 78-103).*

*Additional research finds that comprehensible output, as an adjunct to comprehensible input, helps students become aware of the structure of the language and helps them become more competent in its use (Cummins, 2001).*

Once students have developed a basic oral vocabulary, they are ready to begin reading and writing in the new language. Again, the process should enable them to go from the known to the unknown—using their knowledge of oral L2 and (ideally) their confidence in reading and writing the L1 to bridge into reading and writing the L2 because…

*Children’s knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue…to the school language (Jim Cummins, 2000).*

How long does it take students to learn a new language well?

Cummins’ distinction between two kinds of 2\(^{nd}\) language learning\(^2\) can help us think

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1 In newly written languages that do not yet have an extensive written literature, L1 classes in higher grades can focus on creative writing—on encouraging the students to put their traditional oral literature (songs, poetry, stories) into written form and equally important, to create their own songs, poetry, stories, reports, letters, etc.

strategically about ways to help students be successful in both:

**Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills** (BICS) refers to conversational language, usually about “everyday” topics. In good language learning situations (that is, the teacher speaks the L2 well and students can hear, speak, read and write L2 outside school hours, as well as in the classroom), it normally takes about 2 years to gain BICS. (Important to note: When only one or none of these conditions is present, it may take significantly longer.)

**Cognitive and Academic Language Proficiency** (CALP) refers to students’ ability to use the L2 to learn academic (abstract) concepts at the same level as majority language speakers in the same grade. Cummins and other researchers find that it, in a good program, with teachers that are fluent in the L2, it usually takes minority language speakers 5-7 years to gain CALP.

Cummins (internet) describes a problem with a lack of understanding the BICS/CALP distinction. He observes (as have most other researchers) that…

> Failure to take account of the BICS/CALP (conversational/academic) distinction has resulted in discriminatory psychological assessment of bilingual students and premature exit from language support programs…

The problem described by Cummins, and witnessed by countless researchers, is that teachers, evaluators and others do not take this distinction into account. They hear students using the L2 in everyday conversation and assume that the students are ready to “go mainstream”. However, if they stop using L1 in the classroom too soon, the students are lost when teachers introduce more abstract topics (usually in Grades 4 or 5) because they do not understand the L2 and the teacher no longer uses the L1 to help them. The common result is that the gains made by the students in the early grades are reversed and drop out rates rise rapidly.

**Thinking about the progression**

Planning for MLE in ethnic communities requires knowledge of the contexts in which the program will take place. With that awareness, and using what has been learned through past experience and through research around the world, we can identify six general phases of Language Education in strong MLE programs:

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3 When one studies educational statistics from some countries and sees that large numbers of students in specific (usually rural) locations are classified as “learning disabled” it is fair to assume that the statistics could be the result of “discriminatory psychological assessments”.
Note that in those cases when L1 literacy is not part of the program, it is essential that the students have a strong foundation in oral L2 before they are expected to read and write that language meaningfully. If L2 literacy is introduced before the students have a chance to build a strong foundation in oral L2, the students may be able to decode L2 words in a text and they may be able to copy L2 text from the chalkboard or write what the teacher tells them to write, but neither reading or writing will be meaningful activities until the students understand the language. If at all possible, therefore, L2 literacy should be postponed until students have achieved basic oral competency, and until they are familiar with the vocabulary they will encounter when they begin reading. Also, teachers will need to continue using oral L1, along with the L2, for a longer period of time, along with oral and written L2, to ensure that they students understand academic concepts.4

Conclusion

Can MLE be done? Evidence from minority language communities in Asia and around the world indicates that indeed, MLE can be and is being done.

Is it difficult? It is certainly challenging—especially in multi-lingual countries lacking extensive financial resources—to develop writing systems, establish the necessary training programs and support the production of instructional and graded reading materials in multiple languages, all of which are necessary for linguistically and culturally appropriate MLE programs.

Is it worth the effort? Perhaps this quote from the principal of a school in China with an MLE program helps to explain why it is worth the effort:

4 L1-L2-L1 or “sandwich” teaching is the process by which the teacher introduces a new concept (example, multiplication) using the L1 and having the students manipulate real objects. The teacher then introduces the L2 terms (ex: multiplication) and any other new L2 vocabulary that the students will encounter in the lesson. The teacher then re-teaches it, using lots of activity, in the L2. The teacher encourages the students to help each other to understand by translating (students, not teacher, doing the translating) from L2 to L1 and from L1 to L2. Finally, the teacher asks several questions in L1 to ensure that the students understand the concept and can talk about it (i.e., they have the language and can link it to their existing networks of knowledge). The point here is that during the years that the students are gaining BICS and CALP, all lessons for all subjects are also language learning opportunities.
Miaolan primary school has researched the children and parents involved in the [MLE] project. We have found that those children who first studied Dong and then studied Mandarin Chinese are superior in every respect to those who never studied Dong. This applies not only to reading and writing Chinese pinyin, to simple mathematics and to verbal expression, but also to music, physical education and art. In every respect, those children who have not studied Dong are not as good as those who have. Those who have studied Dong are more independent and have more initiative with respect to study and to life in general” (Principal of Miaolan Primary School, Miaolan, Rongjiang County, China, 20 March 2005, translated from Chinese by D. N. Geary. Personal communication.)

Education for All that is truly for all should ensure that all students, from all cultural and linguistic communities, are encouraged and supported in achieving their educational goals. It is safe to assume that the benefits of strong MLE programs will extend beyond the children and their communities to the nation as a whole.
ANNEX 2. RESOURCE FOR PLANNING COMMUNITY-CENTERED MT-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS

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**Research** that provides information about 1) language attitudes and uses in the community; 2) the community’s goals, needs and problems; and 3) resources for the program

**Mobilization** activities that generate interest and support (including resources) for the program within and outside the community (government, NGOs, universities, donors, businesses)

**Recruitment** methods that bring motivated, knowledgeable and respected individuals into the program (and keep them there)

**Training and supervision** that help all staff gain competence, creativity, commitment and credibility within and outside the community

**A political environment** that supports the use of minority languages in education; **Cooperation** among supporting agencies: government, NGOs, universities, etc.

**Components of MT-based multilingual education programs**

**A system for obtaining, distributing, accounting for and reporting on funding** for the program

**Evaluation and documentation** that regularly provides information for strengthening the program and for reporting to other stakeholders (e.g., government, donors)

**A management and coordination** system that provides support for program staff and ensures that necessary materials are on hand

**A system for writing, illustrating, editing, evaluating, producing, storing and distributing literature** in the minority language

A process of developing and testing an **orthography** that is acceptable to the majority of stakeholders and promotes on-going reading and writing in the language

A process for developing, testing and revising **curriculum and instructional methods** so they are relevant and appropriate in the ethnic minority community
References


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