
[Language of instruction](#)

BRIEF 2

[Language policy](#)

The issue

There are more than 7,000 known living languages and most children grow up in an environment where more than one is spoken (Wisbey, 2017). However, studies show that almost 40 per cent of children do not have access to an education in a language they understand and this is negatively affecting their learning (UNESCO, 2016). Many countries still prioritize national or official languages (second language) as the medium of instruction, which are often not the languages children speak at home (Kosonen, 2017). The importance of language of instruction for a quality and equitable education is recognized in the Sustainable Development Goals. Thematic indicator 4.5.2 reports on the percentage of students in primary education whose first or home language is the language of instruction (UIS, 2018).

What we know

Children learn best when the first language of instruction is their mother tongue (Benson, 2004; Bühmann and Trudell, 2007; Pinnock, 2009a, 2009b). Results of learning assessments show that when home and school languages differ there is a negative impact on test scores. (UNESCO, 2016). According to an analysis of SACMEQ III data in 2010, there is a positive correlation between speaking the language of instruction and pupil achievement, especially in reading (Trudell, 2016). Using the mother tongue in the classroom has been found to enhance classroom participation, decrease attrition, and increase the likelihood of family and community engagement in the child's learning (Trudell, 2016). In order to enhance their learning, students also need access to inclusive and culturally relevant curriculum and learning materials in a language with which they are familiar (Bühmann and Trudell, 2007; Mackenzie and Walker, n.d.; Pinnock, 2009b; UNESCO, 2016).

Most research now concludes that learning achievement is enhanced when children are taught in their mother tongue for at least the first six years of primary school before the second language, the main language of instruction, is introduced (Ball, 2011; Benson, 2004; Pinnock, 2009a, 2009b; UNESCO, 2016). Bilingual and/or multilingual education has been found to increase a student's self-confidence and self-esteem (UNESCO, 2016). In bilingual models, students continue to use both mother tongue and second language as languages of instruction for a range of academic subjects throughout primary and secondary schooling (Ball, 2011; Pinnock, 2009a). If the transition from mother tongue to second language is too rapid, the risk is that students will not attain full mastery of either language (Benson, 2004; Pinnock, 2009a). Mother tongue-based bilingual education – the use of the child's mother tongue alongside a second language – is now the recommended strategy (UNESCO, 2016).

Challenges

While many countries have a national language policy that supports the use of local languages, such policies are not always implemented in the classroom (Trudell, 2016). There may be a number of reasons for this misalignment:

Perceived status of the mother-tongue language: In communities where many languages are spoken, there may be a disagreement about which language should be taught as the 'majority language'. A minority language may have a lower status within the community, making acceptance of mother-tongue instruction more difficult as well as the reluctance of mother-tongue learners to use their language (Ball, 2011).

Cost: There are widespread concerns about the high costs of local-language medium of instruction, but these are not always backed up by evidence (Trudell, 2016). The rewards of schooling in local languages outweigh the costs, with gains in educational quality, lower attrition and drop out, and enhanced inclusion leading to savings from reduced school repetition and dropouts (Benson, 2004; Pinnock, 2009a, 2009b; Trudell, 2016, UNESCO, 2016).

Lack of trained teachers: Local languages have been marginalized in many education systems, often resulting in a shortage of qualified teachers able to understand, speak and teach in a child's mother tongue (Ball, 2011; Benson, 2004; Pinnock, 2009a).

Unwritten and non-standardized languages: The level of written development of the local languages may raise issues as to their pedagogical suitability (Trudell, 2016). Language planning may be necessary in order to create or modify a language's writing system, standardize spelling and usage, and, if necessary, expand the lexicon to include any missing vocabulary (Bühmann and Trudell, 2007; Ball, 2011).

Inclusion and equity issues

Students are unable to receive support from their parents if they also do not understand the language of instruction. If a child's parents lack familiarity with the language of instruction used in school this can further reinforce the gap between minority and majority language groups (UNESCO, 2016).

Children studying in an unfamiliar language face a double burden. Not only must they learn new academic concepts and skills, they must do so using words they do not understand (Bühmann and Trudell, 2007; Pinnock, 2009b). There is strong evidence that use of the mother tongue in the initial years of schooling helps reach socially and educationally marginalised populations, improving their enrolment, attendance, and achievement (Pinnock, 2009b). Marginalization of indigenous communities in high-income countries is also visible in student assessments (UNESCO, 2016).

Several studies show that offering instruction in the mother tongue has a positive impact on girls' enrolment and transition rates, primarily because girls are less exposed than boys to languages outside the home and so face a tougher barrier when the mother tongue is not used in school (Benson, 2004, 2005).

Migration and displacement can affect education, requiring systems to accommodate those with migrant backgrounds who do not speak the language of instruction at home. A lack of knowledge of the language of instruction or the classroom language hinders the ability of refugee students to

engage, learn, and communicate, and is a barrier to being included in national education systems, especially for older children and youth (UNESCO, 2018).

Policy and planning

Determining language policy: Comprehensive language planning requires an in-depth situational analysis of the sociolinguistic and educational context of the community. The analysis may include that a mapping exercise is needed to gather reliable and up-to-date information about which languages are spoken, read, and written; in which areas; at what proficiency level; and attitudes towards the language (USAID, 2015; Benson, 2016). Discussions would need to be held with a wide range of stakeholders, including education officials at all levels of the system, teachers, language specialists, nongovernmental organizations that support education, community representatives, parents, and school management associations (USAID, 2015; Bühmann and Trudell, 2007; Pinnock, 2009a).

Any language in education policy which is developed and implemented needs to be linked to the goals of the education system and support a country to reach its education goals in terms of learning outcomes, access and equity, and language proficiency (USAID, 2015; Ball, 2011). Monitoring and evaluation of the policy in terms of gains in learning outcomes is essential (USAID, 2015).

Teaching and learning materials: Availability of instructional materials in local languages also needs to be considered as part of the long-term planning process (USAID, 2015; Ball, 2011). Decentralised educational planning and budgeting can help countries develop their own local-language materials (Benson, 2004). Local communities can collaborate with government agencies and linguists to create mother-tongue materials (Ball, 2011; Benson, 2004; Pinnock, 2009b). Basing materials on standardised templates produced in the national or official language can be rapid and cost-effective, since it uses centralised technical expertise in curriculum development, illustrations, formatting, and other elements (Mackenzie and Walker, n.d.). Open educational materials and technology can help make instructional materials more widely available (UNESCO, 2016).

Teacher preparation: Teacher training and recruitment should be aligned with the languages and instructional approach (USAID, 2015). This may include recruiting teachers who are fluent in the language of instruction (Ball, 2011), training teachers to teach specific subjects in a target language (USAID, 2015), and deploying teachers to schools where their language proficiency aligns with those of the pupils (Ball, 2011). Ideally, teachers should be trained to teach in two languages and use local language materials effectively. Some countries, such as Ecuador and Mali, have introduced specialized teacher-training programmes to deliver bilingual education (Maurer, 2010; UNESCO, 2016).

The role of the community: Community members, who are fluent in the children's mother tongue, may be recruited and trained as paraprofessional teachers in the short term if no trained teachers are available (Ball, 2011; Bühmann and Trudell, 2007; Mackenzie and Walker, n.d.; Pinnock, 2009a, 2009b; UNESCO, 2016). Hiring teachers from minority language communities can also help widen children's horizons and raise their ambitions.

Pre-school/out-of-school language preparation: It is often particularly difficult for children who are members of linguistic and ethnic minorities to gain access to high quality early childhood education that prepares them for primary school. Culturally appropriate school-readiness programmes provided to children as they make the transition into primary school can improve learning outcomes. Accelerated learning programmes in the local language delivered in non-formal settings can also help

disadvantaged children catch up (UNESCO, 2016).

Tools

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Policies

- South Africa [[PDF](#)]
- Vanuatu [[PDF](#)]

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