Multilingual education
Why is it important?
How to implement it?
Why bilingual/multilingual education based on mother tongue?

UNESCO promotes mother tongue instruction in the context of bilingual education (BE)/multilingual education (MLE) from the earliest years of schooling because:

– It lays a solid foundation for learning
– It improves access to education, especially for girls
– When used at home and/or at school, it promotes literacy in the mother tongue (L1) and later in the second language (L2)
– It facilitates learning both of academic subjects as well as the second language (L2). At school, children can concentrate on the subject matter instead of struggling to understand the language of instruction as well.
– It improves learning outcomes as it promotes dialogue and interaction between learners and teachers by means of better communication and understanding
– It raises the quality of education by emphasising understanding and creativity rather than repetitive memorization.

Despite the known benefits of bilingual/multilingual education, the principle of education in the mother tongue is not always respected. More often than not, children are taught in a language that they do not master.

Who benefits from multilingual education?

Learners likely to be excluded from the educational system, whether due to poverty, faith, ethnicity, etc., or because they belong to minority language groups. Very often, such individuals do not master the national and/or official language.

Since girls and women often form the majority of out-of-school populations within these groups, a multilingual approach is particularly effective to promote gender parity.
How to implement MLE?

Creating a favourable environment

Prior to the actual implementation of a multilingual education project, upstream work is needed. This includes *inter alia* the following:

- Conducting an analysis of the sociolinguistic situation in consultation with concerned stakeholders such as learners, parents and school officials in order to ascertain which languages are used by whom and for what purposes
- Defining the educational objectives of MLE
- Ensuring that the concerned populations adhere to the project from the start
- Launching information and communication campaigns which are helpful notably when implemented through traditional and electronic media
- Formulating a language policy addressing all levels of education and integrating it in a national plan of education
- Ensuring sustainable technical and financial support, with government involvement regarding challenges related to human and financial resources.

Materials

- Teaching/learning materials should be developed in local languages so as to entirely reflect local cultures
- The use of available computer programmes and local publishing facilities should be envisaged for the production of appropriate teaching/learning materials at reasonable costs
- Universities, academic centres and Institutions should invest in language development (standardization of the writing system, lexical development and grammatical description) to support the development of materials in local languages.
Teacher/Educator Training

- Educators and teachers must be trained to teach in a multilingual/multicultural environment
- Educators and teachers should receive relevant training to enable them to teach in the learners’ mother tongue (L1) as well as in the second language (L2) should this not be their own language
- Educators and teachers should be provided with methodology and pedagogy adapted to teaching in the mother tongue
- Educators and teachers must fully master the learners’ languages and know their sociocultural backgrounds.

Learners

- School curricula should be based on local cultures and themes should deal with the daily life and activities familiar to the learners
- Learners’ knowledge base should be taken into account when implementing MLE
- BE/MLE can be set up provided that children have a good command of their mother tongue(s) and know their values and cultures well
- Learners should be encouraged to use L1 at home as the mother tongue is generally transmitted in the domestic environment
- L2 should become the language of instruction and L1 a subject only when the children have achieved literacy in L1
- Both L1 and L2 can be used at school: it is not a question of using one or the other language, but of using both languages.
Web sites

Linguistic diversity in education

Linguistic diversity and multilingualism on Internet

Local and Indigenous Knowledge

Endangered languages

For further information, please contact:

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Glossary

Bilingual education (BE)
Bilingual and multilingual education refer to the use of two or more languages as mediums of instruction. In much of the specialized literature, the two types are subsumed under the term bilingual education.

Multilingual education (MLE)
It refers to the use of two or more languages as medium of instruction. UNESCO established the term ‘multilingual education’ in 1999 (cf. General Conference Resolution 30 C/12) to refer to the use of at least three languages in education: the mother tongue, a regional or national language and an international language.

Language of instruction (LOI)
The language of instruction in or out of school refers to the language used for teaching the basic curriculum of the educational system. The choice of the language or indeed the languages of instruction (educational policy might recommend the use of several languages of instruction) is a recurrent challenge in the development of quality education.

Mother tongue or first language (L1)
The term ‘mother tongue’, though widely used, may refer to several different situations. Definitions often include the following elements: the language(s) that one has learnt first; the language(s) one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others; the language(s) one knows best and the language(s) one uses most. ‘Mother tongue’ may also be referred to as ‘primary’ or ‘first language’.

L2
Second language

L3
Third language

Notes
1 UNESCO Position paper “Education in a Multilingual World”, 2003; and from main findings of the email consultation on Early Childhood Care and Education and mother tongue instruction in a bilingual/multilingual education approach, 2012
2 From main findings of the UNESCO Online Consultation on ECCE and mother tongue instruction in a bilingual/multilingual education approach