

## If you don't understand, how can you learn?

### Key Messages:

1. Children should be taught in a language they understand, yet as much as 40% of the global population does not have access to education in a language they speak or understand.
2. Speaking a language that is not spoken in the classroom frequently holds back a child's learning, especially for those living in poverty.
3. At least six years of mother tongue instruction is needed to reduce learning gaps for minority language speakers.
4. In multi-ethnic societies, imposing a dominant language through a school system has frequently been a source of grievance linked to wider issues of social and cultural inequality.
5. Education policies should recognize the importance of mother tongue learning.
6. Linguistic diversity creates challenges within the education system, notably in areas of teacher recruitment, curriculum development and the provision of teaching materials.

**Q**uality education should be delivered in the language spoken at home. However, this minimum standard is not met for hundreds of millions, limiting their ability to develop foundations for learning. By one estimate, as much as 40% of the global population does not have access to an education in a language they speak or understand (Walter and Benson, 2012).<sup>1</sup> The challenges are most prevalent in regions where linguistic diversity is greatest such as in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and the Pacific (UNDP, 2004).

Poverty and gender magnify educational disadvantages linked to ethnicity and language. With a new global education agenda that prioritizes equity and lifelong learning for all, the policy of respecting language rights is essential and deserves close attention.

This policy paper, released for International Mother Language Day, argues that being taught in a language other than their own can negatively impact children's learning. It shows the importance of teacher training and inclusive supporting materials to improve the learning experience of these children, and provide them with a resilient path of achievement in life.

1. According to an earlier study, around 221 million children are estimated to speak a different language at home from the language of instruction in school (Dutcher, 2004).



### To be taught in a language other than one's own has a negative effect on learning

In many countries, large numbers of children are taught and take tests in languages that they do not speak at home, hindering the early acquisition of critically important reading and writing skills. Their parents may lack literacy skills or familiarity with official languages used in school, which can then reinforce gaps in learning opportunities between minority and majority language groups.

International and regional learning assessments confirm that when home and school languages differ there is an adverse impact on test scores. The Global Education Monitoring Report's [World Inequality Database on Education \(WIDE\)](#) also shows the extent of learning inequalities within countries, depending on whether children speak the language of assessment at home or not.

In many western African school systems, French continues to be the main language of instruction, so the vast majority of children are taught from the early grades in a language with which they have limited familiarity. This

seriously hampers their chances of learning. In Côte d'Ivoire, 55% of grade 5 students who speak the test language at home learned the basics in reading in 2008, compared with only 25% of the 8 out of 10 students who speak another language (**Figure 1a**).

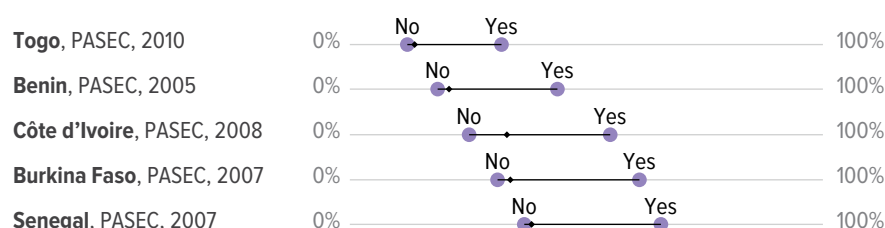
In the Islamic Republic of Iran, around 20% of grade 4 students taking the test in Farsi, the official language of instruction, reported speaking a different language at home. Of these, 80% reached the basics in reading, compared with over 95% of Farsi speakers (**Figure 1b**).

Similarly, in Honduras, in 2011, 94% of grade 6 students who spoke the language of assessment at home learned the basics in reading in primary school compared to only 62% of those who did not (**Figure 1c**).

Language and ethnicity can combine to produce complex patterns of compounded disadvantage. In Peru, the difference in test scores between indigenous and non-indigenous children in grade 2 is sizeable and increasing. In 2011, Spanish speakers were more than seven times as likely as indigenous language speakers to reach a satisfactory standard in reading (Guadalupe et al., 2013).

**Figure 1: When home and school languages differ, there is an adverse impact on test scores**  
Percentage of children taking part in an assessment who achieved an international minimum learning standard in reading.

a. Speaks language at home, **Western Africa**



b. Speaks language at home, **Islamic Republic of Iran**



c. Speaks language at home, **Honduras**



Source: World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE).



The legacy of marginalization facing indigenous communities in high income countries, though clearly visible in student assessments, has received minimal attention in international education debates. According to an analysis of TIMSS data, in Australia, approximately two-thirds of indigenous students achieved the minimum benchmark in mathematics in grade 8 between 1994/1995 and 2011, as compared with almost 90% of their non-indigenous peers (Thomson et al., 2012).

Language, ethnicity and poverty can interact to produce an extremely high risk of being left far behind. Students from poor households who speak a minority language at home are among the lowest performers. In 2012, poor 15-year-olds in Turkey speaking a non-Turkish language, predominantly Kurdish, were among the lowest performers. Around 50% of poor non-Turkish speakers achieved minimum learning benchmarks in reading, against the national average of 80%.

In 2006, of poor students in Guatemala speaking a minority language (mostly indigenous) at home, only 38% learned the basics in mathematics while 77% of rich students who speak Spanish reached that level.

### Using the home language as language of instruction has a positive impact on learning across the board

*"Ensure that every institution is secure and has water, electricity, gender-segregated toilets that work and are accessible, adequate and safe classrooms, and appropriate learning materials and technology."*

—Natalee, teacher, Bay Islands, Honduras

To ensure that children acquire strong foundation skills in literacy and numeracy, schools need to teach the curriculum in a language children understand. Mother tongue based bilingual (or multilingual) education approaches, in which a child's mother tongue is taught alongside the introduction of a second language, can improve performance in the second language as well as in other subjects.



Credit: Nguyen Thanh Tuan/UNESCO

Nguyen, a teacher in Muong Khuong county, Viet Nam: 'There are 13 ethnic students in my class. All Hmong girls. Sometimes when you teach in Vietnamese they seem not to understand.'

In Guatemala, students in bilingual schools have higher attendance and promotion rates and lower repetition and dropout rates. Moreover, they have higher scores on all subject matters, including the mastery of Spanish. A shift to bilingual schooling would result in considerable cost-saving as a result of reduced repetition (Patrinos and Velez, 1996).

In Mali's Pédagogie Convergente programme, children starting school with mother tongue instruction ended up with better mastery of the official language, French. Between 1994 and 2000, children who began their schooling in the language they spoke at home scored 32% higher on French proficiency tests at the end of primary school than those in French-only programmes (Bühmann and Trudell, 2008). In Burkina Faso, results of tests in French carried out with children from bilingual schools in 2005 were comparable to or higher than those of children in traditional French-instruction schools (Nikiema, 2011).

The benefits of bilingual/multilingual programmes extend beyond cognitive skills to enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem. In Burkina Faso, mother tongue instruction facilitated the use of effective teaching practices in the classroom and encouraged learners to be active and become involved with the subject matter (Nikiema, 2011).

Earlier research and common practice in the past have supported earlier transitions from home to official language. However, recent evidence now claims that at least six years



of mother tongue instruction – increasing to eight years in less well-resourced conditions – is needed to sustain improved learning in later grades for minority language speakers and reduce learning gaps (Heugh et al., 2007; UNESCO, 2011). Yet many countries in sub-Saharan Africa that support bilingual education continue to favour early transition to the official language, usually by grade 4 (Alidou et al., 2006).

In Cameroon, between 2007 and 2012, 12 schools in the Boyo division of the Northwest region, used a curriculum in the local language, Kom, for grades 1 to 3, switching to English instruction in grade 4. Children taught in Kom showed a marked advantage in achievement in reading and comprehension compared with children taught only in English. Kom-educated children also scored twice as high on mathematics tests at the end of grade 3. Yet, these learning gains were not sustained when the students switched to English-only instruction in grade 4. The early exit from a mother tongue environment prevented them from sustaining this performance across the curriculum (Walter and Chuo, 2012).

The Six Year Primary Project in Ife, Nigeria, used Yoruba as the medium of instruction for the six years of primary education. Evaluations of the project found that students who switched to English after six years of mother tongue instruction performed better in English and in other subjects compared with those who did so after only three years (Bamgbose, 2000, 2004; Fafunwa et al., 1989).

Ethiopia has gone further than many countries, seeking to combine mother tongue instruction with Amharic and English in grades 1 to 8. Children's participation in bilingual programmes for eight years improved their learning in subjects across the curriculum and not just in the language of instruction. Primary school children learning in their mother tongue performed better in grade 8 in mathematics, biology, chemistry and physics than pupils in English-only schooling (Heugh et al., 2007).

## Language in education policies can be a source of wider grievances

Language both reflects the culture of one's community as well as an individual's ethnic identity. The language(s) one learns and speaks often create a sense of personal identity and group attachment. Yet, language can serve as a double-edged sword: while it strengthens an ethnic group's sense of belonging and social ties, it can also turn into a basis for their marginalization.

By one estimate conducted in 2009, over half of the countries affected by armed conflict are highly diverse linguistically, making decisions over the language of instruction a potentially divisive political issue (Pinnock, 2009). Whatever the underlying complexities and political dynamics, the following cases highlight the ways in which language policy in education has emerged as a focal point for violent conflict.

In multi-ethnic countries, for example, the imposition of a single dominant language as the language of instruction in schools, while sometimes a choice of necessity, has been a frequent source of grievance linked to wider issues of social and cultural inequality. The fault lines of violent conflict have often followed the contours of group-based inequality exacerbated by language policies in education. For example, disputes about using Kurdish in schools have been an integral part of the conflict in eastern Turkey (Graham-Brown, 1994; UNESCO, 2010). In Nepal, the imposition of Nepali as the language of instruction fed into the broader set of grievances among non-Nepali speaking castes and ethnic minorities that drove the civil war (Murshed and Gates, 2005). Guatemala's imposition of Spanish on schools was seen by indigenous people as part of a broader pattern of social discrimination. Armed groups representing indigenous people included the demand for bilingual and intercultural education in their conditions for a political settlement, and the country's peace agreement included a constitutional commitment to that end (Marques and Bannon, 2003).



Disputes over language often reflect long stories of domination, subordination and, in some cases, decolonization. In Algeria, the replacement of French by Arabic in primary and secondary schools after independence in 1962 was intended to build the new government's legitimacy but marginalized the non-Arabic-speaking Berber minority (Brown, 2010).

In Pakistan, the post-independence government adopted Urdu as the national language and the language of instruction in schools. This became a source of alienation in a country that was home to six major linguistic groups and fifty-eight smaller ones. The failure to recognize Bengali, spoken by the vast majority of the population in East Pakistan, was one of the major sources of conflict within the new country, leading to student riots in 1952. The riots gave birth to the Bengali Language Movement, a precursor to the movement that fought for the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of a new country, Bangladesh (Schendel, 2009).

Both countries have continued to face language-related political challenges. In Bangladesh, where Bengali is the national language, non-Bengali speaking tribal groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have cited a perceived injustice over language as a factor that justifies their secession demands (Mohsin, 2003). In Pakistan, the continued use of Urdu as the language of instruction in government schools, even though it is spoken at home by less than 8% of the population, has also contributed to political tensions (Ayres, 2003; Winthrop and Graff, 2010).

### **National education policies should recognise the importance of teaching children in their home language**

Education policies seldom reflect linguistic diversity. A review of 40 countries' education plans finds that only less than half of them recognize the importance of teaching children in their home language, particularly in early grades. Cambodia and the Lao People's Democratic Republic are positive examples, encouraging the recruitment of teachers with specific language skills. Namibia encourages

the production of learning materials in minority languages (Hunt, 2013).

In sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a general trend towards more widespread use of local languages. At the time of independence, only 20 out of 47 used local languages in primary education, whereas 38 now do so, largely influenced by advocacy from local actors (Albaugh, 2015).

Several Latin American countries – for example, Colombia, Guyana, Paraguay and Peru – go further than others in identifying reforms to improve the learning of disadvantaged groups, notably ethnolinguistic minorities and the poor. While such reforms mainly focus on extending access, they also include adapting curricula and pedagogical practices to the needs of particular groups. In Paraguay, this involves creating educational materials in various languages (Paraguay Ministry of Education, 2011).

### **Good teachers are critical for helping the most disadvantaged learners**

*"Without adequate knowledge in English, teachers are unable to interact with the students, and the result is a strict chalk-and-talk structure."*

—Inga, teacher, Kigali, Rwanda

For mother tongue based bilingual (or multilingual) education approaches to be effective, governments need to recruit teachers from minority language groups. Language of instruction policies may be difficult to implement though, particularly when there is more than one language group in the same classroom and teachers are not proficient in one or several of the local languages (Alidou and Brock-Utne, 2011).

Children who speak minority languages not taught in the classroom often enter school with low self-esteem and learning needs that teachers may feel unable to meet. Schools can play an important role in changing this situation. Hiring teachers from minority language communities can help widen children's horizons and raise their ambitions.



Yet, because ethnic and language minorities often obtain less formal education than majority groups, fewer members of the former are available and qualified for recruitment as teachers. In India, all states have a caste-based reservation of posts to ensure that teachers are available in more disadvantaged areas and schools, but teachers with lower levels of qualifications are hired to fill the reserved positions. There are not enough teachers who speak local languages, and very few bilingual teachers belong to minorities, which compounds the disadvantage children face when their home language is not the medium of instruction (Chudgar and Luschei, 2013). In Mexico, teachers whose mother tongue is an indigenous language often have less education and training than other teachers (Luschei et al., 2013).

### **Teachers need to be trained to teach in two languages and to understand the needs of second-language learners.**

Teachers are rarely prepared for the reality of bilingual or multilingual classrooms. In Senegal, where attempts are being made to use local languages in schools, training is given only in French, and a survey found that only 8% of trainees expressed any confidence about teaching reading in local languages. In Mali, this was the case for just 2% of teachers (Akyeampong et al., 2013). A small-scale study of mathematics teaching in Botswana indicated that bilingual teacher education was failing in its aim of preparing teachers for multilingual classrooms where pupils' home language may be different from both the national language and English, the medium of mathematics teaching (Kasule and Mapolelo, 2005).

In Peru, bilingual programmes aim to ensure that children can learn in their own language together with Spanish. Yet, children attending these programmes perform badly in both languages. By grade 4, only 1 in 10 Quechua speakers in bilingual programmes, and 1 in 20 speakers of other indigenous languages, reach a satisfactory level in their own language. Their achievement in Spanish is similarly weak. This highlights the importance not only of providing instruction in a child's own language, but also of ensuring that schools are of sufficient quality to ensure that learning takes place. A study found that half of teachers in bilingual education schools in southern Peru could not speak the

local indigenous language (Cueto et al., 2012; Guadalupe et al., 2013).

Teacher education programmes need to support teachers to be able to teach early reading skills in more than one language and to use local language materials effectively. Teachers should have a good understanding of the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of children, language development, and the interdependence of mother tongue and second-language development, and the use of appropriate teaching practices (Pinnock and Nicholls, 2012).

One reason Ecuador has been able to deliver strong bilingual teaching is that it has established five specialized teacher-training colleges. Similarly, the Plurinational State of Bolivia has created three indigenous language universities to support bilingual training (Lopez, 2010).

In Australia, where teachers often mistake a language problem for a learning difficulty, the Deadly Ways to Learn project is an attempt to change how teachers view Aboriginal languages. Set up in 14 government, private and Catholic schools across rural and urban Western Australia, the project included the preparation of books to introduce teachers to the culture, identity and history that inform Aboriginal language. Indigenous Education Officers provide support and guidance to teachers in the selected schools. The project highlights the importance of all students receiving an education that is sensitive to the history, culture and language of indigenous Australians, and that also takes into account the backgrounds of people from other minority groups (Biddle and Mackay, 2009).

### **The effectiveness of mother tongue based bilingual education depends on inclusive learning materials**

For early grade literacy and bilingual education to be successful, pupils need inclusive and relevant learning materials in a language they are familiar with. Textbooks, when available, are much less useful if learners have difficulty reading them, as was demonstrated in an experiment supplying textbooks written in





English to Kenyan classrooms. Test scores rose only among those who were already high achievers. Many pupils could not read the books, which were suited to academically strong pupils with educated parents. As a result, low achievers, mainly from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds, did not benefit from the greater access to textbooks (Glewwe et al., 2009).

Open licence educational resources and new technology can make learning materials more widely available, including in local languages. In South Africa, the Breadbin Interactive Project provides a cost-effective way of disseminating large quantities of open license digital content from a hard drive via digital dispensers. These can be connected directly to schools' computer systems or made available through electronic kiosks where materials are printed as required. Schools do not need internet connections to access the digital material. Further strategies are needed to support distribution to remote rural schools, however, as they rarely have even the most basic infrastructure for information technology. Outside the classroom, the Nal'ibali initiative supports volunteer-run reading clubs by producing colourful bilingual supplements with stories, ideas for literacy activities, and reading tips, available in English, and Xhosa or Zulu (Butcher, 2011; Nal'ibali, 2013; Project for the Study of Alternative Education in South Africa, 2013; Welch, 2012).

### **Teachers need to be supported with appropriate assessment strategies**

To improve learning for all children, teachers need the support of assessment strategies that can reduce disparities in school achievement and offer all children and young people the opportunity to acquire vital transferable skills.

**Diagnostic and formative assessments tools are crucial to improve the quality of education and make it more equitable.**

Diagnostic and formative assessments can provide reliable, timely and informative

information about student mastery and group progress on subject content. Such assessments are helpful in diagnosing learning difficulties, especially among low achievers. Teachers need easy-to-use and reliable assessment tools that are clearly linked to instruction, to better assess how instruction and classroom dynamics can be altered to meet the needs of all learners, even those with few or no writing skills. Teacher training in the use of diagnostic and formative assessments is crucial, so that teachers can identify weak learners and provide them with targeted support.

Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) are designed to be administered orally in local languages and are sensitive to the lower end of the achievement range, capable of detecting performance on emerging skills (Gove and Cvelich, 2011). In Liberia, the EGRA Plus Project, which trained teachers in the use of classroom-based assessment tools and provided reading resources and scripted lesson plans to guide instruction, made a substantial impact, raising previously low levels of reading achievement among grade 2 and 3 pupils. The project involved several types of continuous assessment. Teachers used a simple oral assessment outlined in scripted lessons plans to check pupils' understanding during reading instruction. This allowed teachers to quickly assess responses and identify pupils requiring further assistance. Teachers also applied regular curriculum-based measures to check individual pupils' progress and calculate class averages, reporting both pupil and class progress to parents a minimum of four times a year.

Colour-coded report cards allowed parents to visualize their child's progress easily throughout the year. In addition, periodic tests were built into the curriculum to check pupils' mastery of particular skills and determine instructional needs. One challenge was to ensure that teachers understood the importance of the data gathered from assessments and used the tools consistently to inform practice. To address this, trained mentors regularly visited schools to support teachers and ensure the quality of instruction and assessment (Davidson et al., 2011).



### Quality early childhood education and support for early transitions are vital

Improving the provision of good quality education through early childhood learning centres not only increases children's success in making the transition to primary school, but also improves later achievement – particularly for children facing disadvantage.

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.

One such successful programme was implemented in Viet Nam under the Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children project. While Vietnamese, the language of the Kinh majority, is the medium of instruction in primary schools, it is not the mother tongue of the other 53 ethnic groups that constitute about 15% of the population. Children in remote, single ethnic minority communities who are taught by a Kinh teacher can have difficulties coping with the classroom environment, understanding the curriculum and retaining interest in school (Harris, 2009).

The Teaching Assistants and School Readiness programme began in 2006 and has reached over 100,000 children. Over 7,000 locally recruited bilingual teaching assistants in 32 provinces were deployed to support ethnic minority children from isolated communities as they made the transition into primary school. The assistants helped children prepare for school through early childhood education activities for two months prior to grade 1 entry and provided additional instruction once they were in school, including help with learning Vietnamese.

In a two-year study completed in 2009, grade 1 pupils that participated in school-readiness activities scored between 20% and 30% higher in reading and writing, as well as shape and number identification, than children in schools not participating in the programme.

In addition, parents were happier to send their children to school, knowing they would have someone who understood their language and culture. As a result, head teachers reported increased enrolment and attendance (Harris, 2009; Primary Education for Disadvantaged Children, 2010).

### Second-chance accelerated learning programmes in local languages enable the disadvantaged to catch up

Where schools fail to deliver good quality education, children are more likely to drop out early. Second-chance programmes, if well-designed, can teach foundation skills through an accelerated learning cycle. Such programmes can effectively raise the achievements of disadvantaged groups and linguistic minorities.

Accelerated learning programmes are typically delivered in non-formal settings and target disadvantaged out-of-school children. The programmes often produce their own curriculum resources. The in-class timetable reflects children's and communities' realities, and trained teachers provide an inclusive atmosphere. In such programmes, teachers are generally recruited from surrounding communities, ensuring a common cultural and linguistic background and enhancing accountability to community members (Longden, 2013).

Accelerated learning programmes typically cover two or more grades of formal schooling in one year with the aim of raising participants' academic proficiency to a level that allows them to re-enter the formal system in the appropriate grade. The majority of such programmes focus on basic numeracy and literacy skills, taught in the local language, coupled with practical learning oriented to learners' lives (Longden, 2013).

The Complementary Basic Education programme in Malawi recruited young men and women under 35 with a secondary qualification who lived in or near the villages hosting the learning centres. Community leaders were





closely involved in the selection process (Jere, 2012). In South Sudan, secondary school graduates are recruited from surrounding communities and provided with intensive initial teacher education and regular in-service

training. Their use of the local language to clarify instruction is seen by learners as an important positive aspect of the accelerated learning programme (Østergaard, 2013).

### Recommendations

- 1 Teach children in a language they understand.** At least six years of mother tongue education should be provided in ethnically diverse communities to ensure those speaking a different language from the medium of instruction do not fall behind. Bilingual or multilingual education programmes should be offered to ease the transition to the teaching of the official languages.
- 2 Train teachers to teach in more than one language.** To fully support the implementation of mother tongue based bilingual/multilingual education programmes, teachers should receive pre-service and ongoing teacher education to teach in more than one language.
- 3 Recruit diverse teachers.** Policy-makers need to focus their attention on hiring and training teachers from linguistic and ethnic minorities, to serve in the schools of their own communities.
- 4 Provide inclusive teaching materials.** Curricula need to address issues of inclusion to enhance the chances of students from marginalized backgrounds to learn effectively. Textbooks should be provided in a language children understand. Classroom-based assessment tools can help teachers identify, monitor and support learners at risk of low achievement.
- 5 Provide culturally appropriate school-readiness programmes.** Locally recruited bilingual teaching assistants can support ethnic minority children from isolated communities as they make the transition into primary school, including by providing additional instruction to them after they have enrolled.

#### NOTES

1. References to this policy paper can be found online at the following link: [https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/language\\_paper\\_references.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/sites/gem-report/files/language_paper_references.pdf)

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