

Language Matters

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M L E D E M Y S T I F I E D

Understanding Multilingual Education in the Indian Context

Prof. Ajit Mohanty (Retd.)

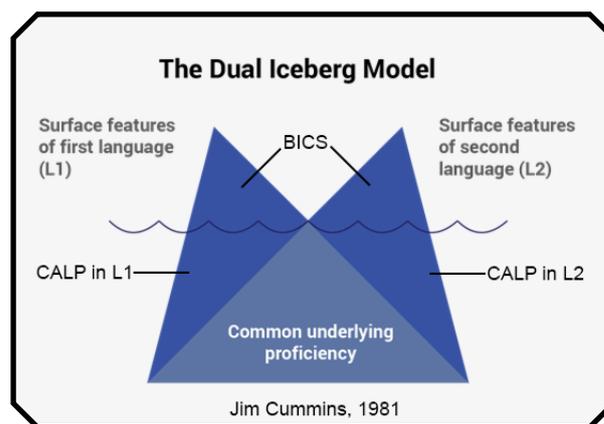
This article is an edited version of "Multilingual Education in India: How does it work?" first published at Swara Vol. 1, Issue 5, NMRC, January, 2011

Multilingual Education (MLE) begins with mother tongue. But MLE is not just education in the mother tongue. Essentially it is for development of proficiency in many languages through culturally embedded quality education. Development of mother tongue (MT) proficiency is considered a royal road to multilingual proficiency and multiliteracy. Unfortunately, many associate MLE to education in the MT only. Such association is appealing because MT almost always evokes emotion. However, MLE takes children beyond MT; it develops MT to create a foundation for effective early learning and conceptualization, for development of a better reflective orientation and, more importantly, for enabling the child to learn other languages better without sacrificing the advantages of MT. It is true that education in MT is necessary since MT is fairly well developed when a child goes to school and her early understandings of the world around are rooted in the MT making it easier for her to move on to higher levels of thinking and learning. But, in MLE, MT development is not an end in itself nor is it just a means to other ends. It is both an end as well a means; it cuts both ways. While MT makes quality learning possible, it also prepares the child to use language as an effective tool to engage in higher levels of reflection, creativity and flexibility for development of critical thinking, reasoning and multilingual proficiency.

It is often argued that children are already quite proficient in use of their MT and they are quick to learn many languages (in fact, many children already know and use multiple languages). So, why is it necessary to persist with the mother tongue? This necessity arises out of the fact that language, as a tool, needs further development. The tool needs to be sharpened so that it becomes effective. Children do use their MT (and sometimes their languages) quite effectively to communicate – to express themselves, to understand others. Children's MT (or their language skill) is a vehicle for adequate social and inter-personal communication, which is necessary for school learning. However, being able to socially communicate is not sufficient in itself. Schools require children to use language for reflection, for regulation of their thinking, for reasoning and problem solving and, significantly, to use language as an object of thought. It is not enough for children to express themselves and to appreciate what they hear; they need to focus on what they say or hear, to modify, if necessary, what they ex-

press and to regulate communication for greater effectiveness. When children move from their everyday experience and knowledge to new learning such as higher levels of mathematical reasoning, they need language to think, to plan and to monitor their thinking. In other words, children's language needs to move beyond their early interpersonal communication skills to deeper levels of proficiency as a cognitive tool for regulation and improvement of their thinking and reasoning. From using language for social communication or, what has been called, basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS), children must develop to use language for reflective engagement with academic learning and purposeful thinking or to the level of cognitive and academic language proficiency (CALP).

One must realize that BICS and CALP are not two distinct unrelated skills. BICS cannot grow without any reflection. Children engage in monitoring what they say and often self-correct quite early in their language development. Using language to express thought also involves thinking about language as an object of thought. Thus,



linguistic and metalinguistic developments do overlap. However, later in development, there is a conscious focus on metalinguistic reflections and on purposeful use of language as a tool for control, manipulation and regulation of thinking. Purposeful use of language to organize thinking and to solve problems develops later than simple social communication. In early use of language for social communication, children are supported by adults through simplification, pointing and gestures and by limiting language use to the immediate here-and-now contexts. Their language inputs are generally simple and

they do not need to exert their thinking to understand what they hear or receive.

But as they grow older, language use becomes more complex, abstract and the meanings communicated are not necessarily confined to the immediate context of such communication. Oral communication can also be quite complex, abstract and cognitively demanding. Indian oral traditions are full of such complex forms of expression of highly abstract and creative ideas. Thus, the distinction between BICS and CALP goes well beyond oral and textual use of language; orally communicated ideas and thoughts can be as complex and challenging as written texts. What distinguishes them is the rate at which each of them develops. Children easily acquire basic social communication skills through cultural interactions with adults and peers, developing them naturally by age five. However, using language for abstract thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving progresses more gradually, requiring focused development over time. It comes with the requirements of conscious reflection on language as an entity and engagement with complex cognition going beyond the immediate context. Schooling related activities happen to be more dependent on such requirements and they facilitate development of language for complex cognitive and academic actions although such development (of CALP) remains slower compared to the development of BICS.

Since CALP involves reflective and analytic skills in respect of language, development of a minimum level of CALP is necessary for the child to move effectively beyond her MT to other languages. CALP enables children to see the relationship between languages, to reflect on cross-linguistic similarities and differences and to use their developed linguistic skills (such as reading and writing) to learn (and to academically use) a second or subsequent language(s). Learning to read and write a new language becomes easier because children already know about language, reading and writing from similar and earlier experience with learning the MT. That is why, when MT proficiency, including reading, writing and cognitive-academic use of language, is well developed, classroom proficiency in other languages develops at a faster rate.

Extensive research globally, including a national analysis in Ethiopia (Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010), consistently shows that second language proficiency, particularly in English, and overall academic achievement depend heavily on the development of children's mother tongue (MT) in school. Ethiopian studies comparing students taught in MT for varying durations reveal that extended MT instruction significantly improves both English proficiency and general classroom performance. In India, children taught English as a subject from grades 4 or 5 achieve comparable English reading and writing

skills to English-medium students by grade 9. Notably, children with early MT development require 4–5 years to match English-medium peers' proficiency, which otherwise takes 9 years. MLE is most effective when MT is used as the medium of instruction for 6–8 years, allowing early exposure to other languages, like English, for social communication, while formal instruction in those languages can begin in higher grades.

Programs of MLE in India, such as in Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, begin education of tribal children in their MTs and introduce the state majority language, Telugu or Odia, in the second year for oral communication and third year for reading and writing. English is also introduced as a language subject early (third year in Odisha and earlier in Andhra Pradesh). MT continues as a language of teaching during the primary grades. In these MLE programs, other languages are taught sooner than necessary and there is also an early exit from the MT. Despite this problem, MLE programs in India have been found to be effective in promoting better educational achievement. They also lead to better classroom participation and positive community response. Several independent evaluations of the MLE programs in India confirm the advantages of MLE.



Children engaging with multilingual material, Jaganathpur, W. Singhbhoom, Jharkhand, 2024

Early development of MT does lead to effective school learning and positive transfer from MT to other languages. Children's early understanding of basic classroom concepts in their MT ensures better academic achievement and once they understand concepts in their MT they do not need to re-learn the same in other languages; proficiency in multiple languages are common across languages.

The benefits of MLE, however, go beyond the interdependence between languages and advantages of moving from MT to other languages.

Use of MT is also linked to positive identity and ensures continuity between children's cultural experiences and classroom learning with a sense of self-efficacy, confidence and pride. Classroom use of MT does entail greater parental and community involvement in schooling and literacy development. MLE programs, such as the MLE Plus programs in Orissa, focusing on linkages between children's everyday cultural experiences to school learning, community pride and engagement in literacy development and critical pedagogic practices in the classroom, do show better learning and community outcomes compared to the usual MLE programs. Emphasis on MT, promoting cultural pride, identity and community engagement in literacy development are necessary conditions not only for quality education but also for an egalitarian social order. MLE is a step towards dealing with extreme inequality across different languages and linguistic communities. Such inequality does matter because it has the capacity to subvert democracy.

ABOUT THE CONSORTIUM



The National Consortium for Multilingual Education - India (NCMLEI) is a collaborative platform uniting individuals and organizations dedicated to advancing multilingual education (MLE) across the country. Guided by a shared vision, the Consortium seeks to articulate, advocate, and implement strategies to strengthen MLE in India.

Key objectives include:

Share & Showcase: Promoting the exchange of innovative tools, best practices, and successful

models to inspire and refine multilingual education practices.

Identify & Solve Challenges: Facilitating collective problem-solving to address barriers in MLE implementation.

Advocate & Collaborate: Bringing together NGOs, educators, and policymakers to advocate for supportive policies and design sustainable initiatives.

Design, Implement & Scale: Creating effective multilingual education programs through pilot projects and partnerships with government agencies.

The Consortium's members include prominent organizations such as NCERT, Language and Learning Foundation (LLF), UNICEF, SIL, and the British Council. A Steering Committee oversees its activities, with LLF anchoring day-to-day operations. Major initiatives include developing a Common Understanding Document on MLE, hosting regular consultations, and organizing webinars featuring expert insights and field experiences. Future plans focus on expanding membership, publishing policy briefs, organizing a national conference, and fostering international collaborations. The Consortium is a vital step toward a more inclusive, linguistically diverse educational future for India.



PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVES

In this insightful audio, Sanat Kumar Baghel, a Block Academic Coordinator for the Language and Learning Foundation's MLE Programme in Bastar, Chhattisgarh shares their firsthand experience of how the use of students' home language in classroom management and instruction unfolds. He highlights how initial challenges of relying solely on the textbook language were overcome by the teachers after training on the importance of incorporating children's mother tongue. From giving instructions to engaging students in discussions, songs, and stories, he explains how the use of the home language enhances participation and comprehension and opines that this practical approach has not only made classroom activities smoother but has also fostered richer, more meaningful learning experiences for the students.

[Listen to the audio here](#)

In the same vein, Ms. Pareshwari, a teacher at a primary school in Bastar, engages with her students in Halbi through the use of poems in Halbi. Through this exercise, she elicits responses from the students in their home language and urges them to reflect on the poem.

[Watch the video here](#)



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE MLE SPACE?

Research in Focus

Jhingran, D. (2024). *Multilingual Education in Practice: A Reality Check*. *Language and Language Teaching*, 13(1), pp.131–143. [Available here](#).

This paper explores the implementation of multilingual education (MLE) in early schooling to address the significant challenges faced by children whose home languages differ from the medium of instruction (MoI). Drawing on the experiences from field implementation, the study highlights the necessity of integrating children's primary languages in education to enhance foundational literacy, numeracy, and overall learning outcomes. It identifies four classroom language scenarios in India, ranging from environments where students share a common language close to the MoI to those where multiple home languages create complex linguistic dynamics.

The proposed approach, grounded in a balanced literacy model, employs children's familiar languages alongside the state language and English to develop oral and written literacy. The study also presents data from language mapping initiatives in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan, revealing widespread home-school language gaps and the resultant learning disadvantages. Findings emphasize the efficacy of structured multilingual instructional strategies, including translanguaging, oral language development, and contextual inclusion of students' cultural knowledge. The paper concludes by underscoring the need for teacher preparation, administrative support, and community engagement to sustain MLE at scale. Addressing systemic challenges, the research calls for a more inclusive vision of multilingual education to support equitable learning opportunities.



Nationally

Bisai, S. and Singh, S. (2024). *Translanguaging: Centralizing the Learner in Multilingual Classroom Transactions*. *MEXTESOL Journal*, [online] 48(3). [Available here](#).

In multilingual classrooms, the linguistic resources of minority students are often underutilised, leading to marginalisation and higher dropout rates. Translanguaging offers a pedagogical alternative, enabling minority students to engage more freely and creatively. A study in West Bengal demonstrates its effectiveness, showing increased student participation and fostering creativity within the classroom environment.



Borbora, U. and Mohapatra, D. (2024). *Inclusive Integrativeness: A New Approach to ESL Learning in Multilingual Contexts*. *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, 16(2). [Available here](#).

This paper introduces "Inclusive Integrativeness," a pedagogical framework addressing ESL challenges by embracing multilingual identities. Unlike traditional assimilation-based models, it emphasises learners' reflexive engagement with their linguistic repertoire. A survey of 105 Assamese students supports the approach, showing its efficacy in promoting multilingual identity and enhancing English proficiency through translanguaging and culturally relevant materials.



Internationally

Abraham, S. (2024). *Relocating the linguistic repertoire: from in us to among us*. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, pp.1–17. [Available here](#).

This inquiry explores the concept and location of the linguistic repertoire, inspired by a pedagogical encounter during a bilingual poetry workshop. Challenging the notion of the linguistic repertoire as a singular cognitive container, the study advocates for a relational, collective understanding. This approach redefines pedagogical practices, emphasising open-ended learning and multilingual creativity.



Gede, P. and Rohmah, Z. (2024). *Contemporary translingual English language policy and practice in Indonesia*. *Cogent Education*, 11(1). [Available here](#).

This study reviews the application of translanguaging pedagogy in enhancing English language learning in Indonesia using the PRISMA framework to analyse 17 relevant studies. It identifies trends, strategies, and future prospects in Indonesian translanguaging pedagogy. Despite challenges from linguistic diversity, findings support transitioning from monolingual to translanguaging approaches for improved EFL outcomes.



OUR STORY IN ACTION

UNESCO Asia Pacific MLE WG Meeting

During the 60th meeting of the UNESCO Asia Pacific MLE Working Group, Dr. Dhir Jhingran presented on the vision and the objectives of the National Consortium for Multilingual Education - India (NCMLEI). In this talk, the consortium was introduced to the larger group and its various activities of were discussed. [The slides to the presentation can be found here.](#)

Spinning the Top: Translanguaging Pedagogy for Emergent Multilingual Students in Multiple Language Classrooms

The webinar featured Dr. Sangsok Son, consultant for Literacy and Education at SIL International, specialising in translanguaging pedagogy as the key speaker. Dr. Son provided a compelling presentation on translanguaging pedagogy. He had also shared insights and practical strategies for implementing translanguaging pedagogy in multilingual classrooms. [Click here for the recording to the webinar.](#)



Implementing the Vision of Multilingual Education in India: Teacher Training and Capacity Building

In light of the National Curriculum Framework 2022 and National Education Policy 2020, the conversation examined teacher training in Multilingual Education. Key issues included resource availability, teachers' needs, and India's linguistic diversity. The discussion assessed NCERT, LLF, and IPEL's training programs, exploring how they tackle these challenges while considering the socio-linguistic diversity of students. [The recording to the webinar can be found here.](#)



Interaction with Prof. Ianthi Tsimpli

An interaction session of the consortium members with Prof. Ianthi Maria Tsimpli from the University of Cambridge's Faculty of Modern & Medieval Languages & Linguistics. This session will delve into her pioneering project, *MultiEd: Teaching, Learning and Assessment*, aimed at enhancing multilingual education in India. The project provides research-backed strategies for using multilingual resources to improve primary school children's language comprehension, both oral and written. It includes an innovative teacher training program and comprehensive support for lesson planning with multilingual tools. The talk will highlight diverse assessment practices to engage students through formative, multilingual assessments at individual and classroom levels. [Click here to access the recording of the interaction.](#)

Assessing Multilingual Learners Multilingually

The 3rd webinar in the NCMLEI Webinar series titled "Assessing Multilingual Learners Multilingually" is scheduled for December 3rd with Dr. Carol Benson. This session will explore an assets-based approach to teaching and assessing emergent multilingual learners, emphasizing the benefits of using learners' L1 and additional languages. Learn research-backed strategies for developing comprehensive assessments that capture students' full knowledge and potential. [Click here to access the recording of the webinar.](#)



NEW HORIZONS

Launch of Common Understanding of MLE Document:

The consortium will officially release this foundational document. Outlining MLE practices and implementation strategies in India, the document arrives at a common understanding of the salient questions around the what, why and how of MLE in India.

HOW TO REACH US?

Email: ncmle_india@languageandlearningfoundation.org