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Explaining Multilingual Education: Information on Some Tough Questions

Stephen L. Walter

A 1999 seminar on multilingual education has resulted in a book which summarizes the investigative work of the seminar participants from ten countries. This article provides a synopsis of the book. The evidence suggests that countries which do not develop and implement mother tongue education programs will incur long-term disadvantages outweighing any short-term gains that result from using only one language of education.

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1. Introduction

In 1996 and 1997, a series of ministerial-level meetings were convened in Africa to wrestle with the problem of educational failure in sub-Saharan Africa. In these sessions, it was noted that enrollment at the elementary level is decreasing in Africa, the only major region where this is the case (UNESCO 1995b; UNESCO 1998; UNICEF 1997). In a recent document prepared for the World Social Summit in 1996, we find the following summary statement characterizing the recent history of education in Africa:

Audience Africa considered the effects of the crisis besetting the continent since the end of the 1970's and the negative impact on education systems of the application of structural adjustment plans which had long ignored or disregarded the need to invest substantial financial resources in what were known as the social sectors. It observed that, after a period of expansion of some 20 years, education and training had been marked in recent years by the emergence of wide disparities between rich and poor, urban and rural areas and girls and boys. That was being compounded by the inability of education systems to move with the times and adapt to the requirements of an ever-changing world.

...the right to education is in jeopardy and democratization is in retreat as a result of economic and social inequalities, certain cultural traditions and a weakening of the role of the State. (UNESCO 1995a:4ff)

In the 1997 meeting in Harare, conferees took a hard look at the pros and cons of making more use of African languages in basic education. A working document from the conference states,

However, progress towards the development of an original indigenous identity and an educational ideology consistent with and adaptable to multilingual contexts will be held up as long as the indigenous languages are confined to limited roles and occupy a minimal place in education. The development of such languages and their transformation into national languages will continue to be affected by their limited access and their restricted role and function in the education field. (UNESCO 1996:13)

The authors of *Audience Africa* are even more direct in asserting,

In all cases, *Audience Africa* proposes guaranteeing to every pupil entering the formal system at least four years uninterrupted elementary study to prevent the relapse into illiteracy. This education must as far as possible be given in the child's mother tongue in such a way as to ensure bilingual education in a more widely used language. (UNESCO 1995a:4ff)

The Harare conference also talked of “decolonizing” and “Africanizing” education. While no one is clear on the precise meaning and full implications of these terms (‘decolonize’, ‘Africanize’), one clear implication is the need to investigate the use African languages as media of instruction in education in African nations.

The ideology is easy to state, but implementation is quite another matter. Apart from the various political and sociolinguistic issues raised by such a strategy, there is also the technical task of language development which must be attended to. Before a language can be effectively used as a vehicle of education, it must have a writing system, pedagogical literature, well-defined educational jargon, and appropriate technical vocabulary for topics in health, science, geography, mathematics, social science, etc. Conventions need to be established for punctuation, linguistic borrowings, place names, personal names, etc. Issues of standardization must be resolved in terms of minor dialectical variation, word breaks, and the semantic domain and scope of technical vocabulary. This implies the compilation and publication of a basic dictionary. Supplementary literature ought to exist to providing reading practice for the new reader. As if this were not sufficient, teachers must generally have mastered this body of knowledge before they can function effectively as teachers.

While there has been a fair amount of work done in language development on African languages, much of this work is fragmentary and uneven. A few of the more widely spoken languages—Hausa, Yoruba, Swahili, Lingala, Amharic—have a substantial written tradition and could easily be used as media of instruction in schools. Others have undergone considerable development, but would need more work to be used effectively. These include such languages as Wolof, Bambara, Moore, Sango, Munukutuba, Igbo, Dinka, Kongo, Jula, etc. Others such as Fulfulde are still essentially oral languages only. Beyond these more widely spoken languages lie another 2,000 languages, each with its own community of speakers some numbering only a few thousand.

While any one language may be spoken by only a modest number of people—perhaps 50-100,000—taken collectively, we are talking about the population of an entire continent. Many of the countries of Africa have no genuine common language. They are collectivities of language communities arbitrarily grouped together in a geographic region called a “country”. It is for this reason that most have chosen a colonial language as the language of education. Unfortunately, however, this choice may well be one of the reasons why education is failing in Africa.

2. Historical Perspective on Mother-Tongue or Multilingual Education

The nations which saw the rise of universal primary education and literacy were either linguistically homogeneous (for the most part) or home to two or three language communities which were functional extensions of national neighbors (e.g., the use of French, German, and Italian in Switzerland; the use of French and English in Canada). A high level of linguistic homogeneity is not, however, a sufficient condition for universal education, as evidenced by countries such as Egypt, Haiti, and Brazil.

Historically, the question of the language of instruction in basic education has been one variously of religious, economic, or political control and only to a lesser extent, one of education. However, as the following excerpt demonstrates, at least some linguistically diverse nations realized early on in their history that linguistic diversity was going to be an issue in education,

Most African countries have adopted one, or in some cases two, languages of wide currency as their official languages. In so far as these languages, for many children, are not their mother tongue, the study of them gives rise to teaching problems, and in certain countries calls for an improvement in the quality of education. (UNESCO 1962:17-18)

The end of the colonial period was accompanied by the creation of well over 100 autonomous states. The vast majority of these were *not* linguistically homogeneous. These new and linguistically diverse nations had to make decisions about education practice within their borders. Most adopted the simple strategy of borrowing or adopting a colonial or European language for use in basic education. This strategy bypassed a plethora of potentially thorny problems including competition between ethnic groups for adoption of one language versus another for use in education, the need to develop one or more local languages for educational purposes, the lack of a local curriculum, the lack of teachers, and the lack of national educational standards and infrastructure.

Another strategy was that of adopting a trade language as the national language (Indonesia, the Philippines, Tanzania, etc.). This strategy had the merit of promoting national identity, though there is emerging concern in some of these countries that there has been an accompanying loss of access to global markets and to scientific advances.

Yet a third strategy was that of adopting one (or more) internal languages as the national language and the language of education (Ethiopia, China, Burma, Thailand, Afghanistan, Russia). In most cases, the language adopted was the language of power.

What have been the consequences of these policies in terms of educational outcomes? A few countries stand out as “success stories”. Countries such as Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, and Korea have achieved nearly universal education and high rates of national literacy in the span of 40-50 years. Others such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Mexico have pushed enrollment and literacy rates into the 90 percent category. On the other hand, countries such as Pakistan, Afghanistan, Zaire, Nigeria, and Tanzania have made marginal if any progress in educating their populations during the same time period. All of these countries are linguistically fragmented, some highly so.

The educational data generally available from many of the linguistically diverse countries does little to clarify the relative effectiveness of current approaches to language policy in education. For example, Madagascar reports a national literacy rate of 67.7 percent. At the same time, only 17.8 percent of children reach level five in school. The Democratic Republic of Zaire reports 77 percent illiteracy but only 33 percent of children reach the fifth level (both numbers are probably highly inflated). Even in the Philippines, which seems to be progressing well, only 64.7 percent of children reach level five in their elementary education (UNICEF 1997).

Conversely, there are cases like Egypt where it is reported that 86.7 percent of students reach level five in school but the country still has a national literacy rate of only 51.5 percent. Similarly, Syria reports that 87.8 percent of children reach level five in school but with a national literacy rate of only 71 percent. Then there are the countries such as Burkina Faso, Haiti, Guinea, Mozambique, and Mali where less than 20 percent of children reach level five in school and national literacy rates are not much better (UNICEF 1997).

The role that language (of instruction) plays or might play in such countries tends to be obscured by seemingly more obvious issues of poverty, religion, instability, culture, and questionable reporting of data. What is the role of language in determining or predicting educational outcomes? Does language really matter?

Despite the intuitive and emotive appeal of the notion of mother tongue¹ or first language education, few countries have made more than token efforts at implementing such programs. India allows state languages to be used as languages of instruction though Hindi is promoted as the “preferred” language of the country. Ethiopia has recently promoted the use of the more widely spoken languages of the country as languages of instruction in school though this was done largely for political rather than educational reasons. Guatemala has a twenty-year-old program in which the four most widely spoken Mayan languages are used as languages of instruction in basic education. Cameroon is home to a somewhat unofficial program of mother tongue education embracing more than twenty of that country’s languages. Papua New Guinea—the champion of linguistic diversity with 850 languages spoken among just four million people—has also recently inaugurated a large scale mother tongue education program which now includes more than 200 local languages as media of instruction (Ruth Ray, personal communication).

Probably the most thoroughly researched and heavily documented multilingual education program—the French Immersion Program in Canada—is *not*, strictly speaking, a mother tongue education program, which fact has thoroughly confused many casual observers (Baker 1966; Cummins 2000). If it is really true that education is most effective in one’s first language, why is it possible that English-speaking children in Canada are being effectively educated in French-medium classrooms? And, if education via a second language works in Canada, why should it not work everywhere vitiating any and all arguments in favor of mother tongue education?

3. Understanding mother tongue education – separating the wheat from the chaff

During the summer of 1999, SIL International and SIL at the University of North Dakota organized a graduate seminar in multilingual education to investigate these and related issues.² A group of linguists and educators from ten different countries gathered to study and analyze both the theory and practice of mother tongue education. One of the major objectives of the seminar was that of sorting through the many conflicting claims made about multilingual and mother

¹ The terms *bilingual education*, *multilingual education*, and *mother tongue education* have been used in various ways in the literature. In this paper, these terms are used as follows. The *mother tongue* is typically the first language of the child and the language of the home. *Mother tongue education* is education via the *mother tongue*. *Mother tongue education* implies a linguistically homogeneous community, a teacher who speaks this language, and curriculum materials in the mother tongue. It is worth noting that *mother tongue education* is the norm in most western nations.

In this paper, the term *bilingual education* is used to refer to an educational scheme in which the child receives educational instruction in at least two languages with *one* of these being the *mother tongue* of some/all of the children in the classroom. The second language is normally a language of wider communication, often the official or national language. In practice, there is enormous variation in the sequencing and usage of the two languages. It is assumed that more advanced levels of education will take place in the second language rather than the mother tongue.

In this paper, *multilingual education* is used primarily as a synonym for *bilingual education*. The primary difference, when it is a difference, is that *multilingual education* schemes may well involve three or more languages rather than just two. Even so, it is still assumed that the *mother tongue* will normally be a part of the early educational experience of the child.

² Seminar participants and the countries represented were: Angela Prinz (Chad), Cyrus Murage and Leila Schroeder (Kenya), James D. Emejulu and Yolande Nzang-Bie (Gabon), Patricia Davis (Peru), Jaking Marimyas and Ruth Ray (Papua New Guinea), Diane Morren and Ron Morren (Guatemala), Cathy Davison (Mali), Elke Karan (Central Africa Republic), Jean Seraphin Kamdem (Cameroon), Ilene Foote (Congo), Stephen Walter (SIL International).

tongue education in an effort to understand what works and what does not work and why (or why not).

A second objective for the seminar was to make the results of the work of the seminar available to others. Accordingly, the primary product of this seminar was a book— *Explaining Multilingual Education*—which summarizes the investigative work of seminar participants.

Conceptually, the book is divided into two parts. The first part explores the case for mother tongue education by (a) examining demographic and educational data from the more linguistically diverse countries and (b) explaining recent research in the United States which provides probably the most compelling empirical case for multilingual education yet published.

The second part of the book provides a reasonably complete sketch of how to actually develop and launch a program in multilingual education in contexts where the proposed language of instruction has not previously been used as a vehicle for formal education. The five chapters in this section—Policy and Planning, Language Development, Curriculum and Materials Development, Teacher Training, and Documentation and Evaluation—outline the major conceptual and development work which must be done to implement a viable program.

4. Is mother tongue or multilingual education worth the effort?

Part one of *Explaining Multilingual Education* consists of a single chapter by Walter which explores in some detail the facts and phenomena of multilingualism in developing countries. (The focus is on developing countries because the languages of such countries are much more apt to be underdeveloped or underutilized with respect to formal education.)

The second part of the chapter presents the results of recent research in the US which makes a strong empirical argument for mother tongue education. This research (cf. Thomas and Collier 1997) is given careful consideration, not merely because of its conclusions, but also because of the sheer scope of the study (a longitudinal study involving more than 60,000 students in 25 school districts in every region of the US), a scope which makes the results difficult to ignore.

By following the educational careers (through grade 11) of non-English speaking children in selected US schools and by comparing the results of six different levels of educational support in the mother tongue, Thomas and Collier present a convincing picture of the differential outcomes of these six different approaches. In the summary presentation of their findings, Thomas and Collier report that students with no mother tongue educational support finish, on average, between the 11th and 22nd percentile nationally, depending on how their early education was handled.³ Children receiving one to three years of mother tongue instruction in the earliest grades finish, on average, between the 24th and 33rd percentile relative to national norms. Those with a full six years of mother tongue educational support finished, on average, at the 54th percentile, which is *above* national norms. Finally, those put in mixed classrooms with native speakers of English in which instruction is provided both in the mother tongue of the minority language children *and* in English (with both groups of children learning both languages) finished, on average, at the 70th percentile, well above national norms.

If these numbers hold up under the scrutiny of additional research, they make a forceful case that language is, indeed, a critical mediating component in effective long-term education. If the effective use of language as an instrument of instruction makes the difference between scoring at

³ Thomas and Collier (1997) actually report their data in terms of NCE levels. In this paper, I have converted these NCE levels to percentiles since percentiles are more commonly used and give a clearer indication of performance relative to national norms. The interested reader is referred to their paper or to Part 1 of the book for a more detailed explanation of the relationship between these two measures.

the 11th percentile nationally and the 70th or even the 54th percentile nationally, one would think that no responsible parent, community, school, or nation would opt for the inferior choice.

It is, of course, easy to argue that such comparative results apply only to the US or to Western nations which spend heavily on basic education. While Thomas and Collier make no claims about the implications of their research for education in developing countries, they do propose an explanatory model for their findings which can be readily extended to educational experience in developing countries. The introductory chapter in this volume explores some of these implications in a preliminary way.

Is mother tongue education worth the effort? Based on the research of Thomas and Collier, it is tempting to give an unqualified “yes” to this question. However, this would be too simplistic to satisfy most readers so it is necessary to consider the question more carefully. Wayne Thomas notes (keynote address, BEAM 2000) that if their research findings hold true, the state of California may well have sold its economic birthright by the enactment of Proposition 227 abolishing bilingual education. In a very competitive labor market needing highly skilled workers, a state can ill-afford an educational model which consigns a large percentage of its student population to the 11th percentile educationally. As the residents of many developing countries can attest, states with low-quality education systems quickly become inferior economically, politically, culturally, socially, and technologically. Thomas predicts that California will pay a huge price for this decision in terms of an unskilled and unprepared workforce and an accompanying loss of competitiveness in holding or attracting top-flight businesses.

However, there is not yet solid empirical evidence from developing countries on which to base definitive claims about the educational (or other) advantages of mother tongue or multi-lingual education. We do have plenty of negative evidence that current models are ineffective. Further, with a high percentage of the population in developing countries being locked into a “treadmill” lifestyle of ignorance, poverty, and bare survival, it is not an overstatement to suggest that a lot of human potential is being wasted. Any practice, system, or technology which offers hope and opportunity ought to be valued very highly, offsetting many, if not all, of the up-front costs of making such help available.

There are less tangible costs to consider—political costs, social costs, cultural costs, etc. Even in these areas, there is room to argue the positive benefits of mother tongue education. Thomas and Collier suggest that the best models of bilingual education also bring strong positive benefits in terms of vertical social integration and positive attitudes towards minority languages and cultures. As a specialist in international conflicts noted (Rusty Richards, personal communication), ethnic conflicts are not based on mutual effort to support and appreciate one another’s languages and cultures, but the effort to destroy, dominate, replace, or obliterate one’s language and culture. Support for mother tongue and bilingual education is a statement of affirmation and appreciation. Conversely, models of education which bypass, deny, or denigrate mother tongues create large reservoirs of animosity, ambivalence, and identity loss on the part of minority language communities. The cost is high, but hard to measure.

Is mother tongue education worth the cost? Vigorous debate will continue on both sides of the issue. But, the evidence is mounting that the ‘real’ answer is a strong, “Yes!”

5. What does it take to plan and launch a program in mother tongue education?

One of the least understood and most baffling issues in mother tongue education is that of language development. This problem is most acute when one considers the case of languages which have never before been used in formal education and which may not even have a written form. Part II of *Explaining Multilingual Education* undertakes to explain in considerable detail

just how one goes about preparing to use a language as a medium of instruction for the first time. As the interested reader will quickly discover, some of this material requires some expertise in linguistics or education, and so it is not directly usable by a person or community with no technical expertise. On the other hand, one does not need to have a PhD in linguistics or education to do solid constructive work in the areas described in this part of the book.

5.1 Policy, planning and funding

In the first chapter of Part II, Murage and Prinz present the general rationale for multilingual education based on recent research and a review of several cases studies. They then discuss the practical policy-related issues which underlie any consideration of whether or not to launch a multilingual education initiative. Much of this analysis applies more at a local or regional level than at a national level, reflecting the authors' experience.

In addition, Murage and Prinz investigate, in a preliminary way, some of the cost issues involved in preparing for a multilingual education program especially in the case of a language which has not previously been used for (formal) educational purposes. Critics of the notion of bilingual or multilingual education have long maintained that the preliminary cost incurred in developing a mother tongue or multilingual education program is, by itself, a sufficient reason for not considering this option. Others have suggested (Patrinos and Velez 1996; Thomas and Collier 1997) that higher set-up costs are more than offset by later gains in educational efficiency.

5.2 Initial language development

In the majority of bilingual education programs in the US and Canada, the two languages involved are major languages—English and Spanish, English and French. In such cases, both languages are highly developed for educational purposes with well-defined conventions for spelling, word breaks, punctuation, technical jargon, metalanguage, etc. Pedagogical materials abound, there is plenty of supplementary reading material, and trained teachers can be found (though not always in the quantity or location needed).

How does one proceed when one of the target languages has never before been used in formal education? Emejulu and Nzang-Bie investigate this question in considerable detail in their chapter on “Initial Language Development”. In their discussion, Emejulu and Nzang-Bie split this question in two parts using the classic sociolinguistic distinction between corpus planning and status planning.

Status planning addresses the broader questions of language policy, language attitudes, choice of (standard) dialects, and the many issues involved in officialization and acceptance of a “new” language. Corpus planning is a more technical task addressing linguistic questions of analysis, codification, standardization, expansion (addition of needed technical terms), etc. Emejulu and Nzang-Bie give a very good overview of this process and provide the reader with a considerable set of references and additional resources on the language development process.

5.3 Curriculum development and second language acquisition

After addressing initial language development, a second major step which must be taken before a language can be used as a medium of instruction is the development of curriculum materials. In Chapter 3 of Section II, Davis, Marimyas, Morren, and Ray provide extensive material from their own personal experience in developing curricula for mother tongue education programs. This includes ideas on establishing scope and sequence, general principles of curriculum development, and a review of some of the major instructional issues to be worked out in developing curricula for mother tongue education programs.

A significant component of any multilingual education program is the provision of instruction in the second (or third) language—the language of more advanced education. Since second

language instruction and learning are well-established academic traditions, there is plenty of research and numerous models to draw from in developing curricula for this area. What is lacking, however, is much established knowledge on how to do this with untrained teachers working in resource-poor instructional environments. Since the authors of this chapter have all had experience working in just this sort of context, the materials presented here represent a wealth of practical experience in what works and what does not.

At the end of the chapter are a number of Appendices containing some very useful reference materials and guidelines for developing and implementing instructional curricula for second language learning.

5.4 Training, supervision, and administration

It is widely acknowledged that good teachers are important to good education. Most countries have established teacher-training institutions to supply teachers to their schools. However these institutions are normally structured to prepare teachers to teach only in a/the language of wider communication. Where will teachers come from to teach in mother tongue classrooms if/when these are organized? This question is taken up in Chapter 4, “Training, supervision, and program administration”.

In this chapter, Davison, Kamden, Karan, and Morren outline general principles of teacher training and then give case studies demonstrating how teachers have been trained to teach in mother tongue classrooms. Very helpful sections include guidelines on teacher selection, the training process, the content of training, and a listing of typical oversights in teacher training.

In addition to the section on training are brief sections on supervision and administration. While these functions in mother tongue education programs are not conceptually different from ‘normal’ programs, they are nonetheless critical especially in the early phases of program operation because so much is new and untested.

The case studies included in the chapter are drawn from several countries and provide helpful and practical insight on the implementation of mother tongue instructional programs.

5.5 Documentation and evaluation

New or experimental programs should be documented so that the broader professional world can benefit from lessons learned in such programs. Foote and Schroeder take up this topic in Chapter 5, “Documentation and Assessment of a Multilingual Education Program”.

Program documentation and assessment must begin before program activity is launched. This is normally accomplished by setting up appropriate management information systems and training program staff to use these from the onset of the program. Foote and Schroeder provide some useful but by no means exhaustive ideas on how to set up such systems in a new program.

Assessment and evaluation are especially critical tasks in new or experimental programs. Stakeholders and decision-makers need good evaluative information to inform policy construction. Good assessment and evaluation, however, are sophisticated tasks requiring high-level expertise. Foote and Schroeder address these needs in only a general way, deferring to specialists for more detailed guidance and information.

6. Conclusion

No doubt it is daunting to contemplate the idea of developing and implementing an education program using a language never before used in formal education. Such an effort does entail a substantial amount of work. On the other hand, if the model of educational effectiveness set forth by Thomas and Collier proves valid, it will be defensible to assert that the cost and the consequences of *not* using such languages in education are going to be extremely high. The

higher the percentage of a nation's population which speak such languages, the higher the long term cost in terms of educational failure and under- or nondevelopment.

With the knowledge, technology, and expertise now available—including the content of this book—there are few, if any, compelling technical reasons why education should not be made available to *all* children in their mother tongue. Then, and only then, can it fairly be said that the benefits of education have been made universally accessible.

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