



# Mother tongue, please!

THERE IS SUFFICIENT RESEARCH TO SHOW THAT MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION (MTB-MLE) CAN HELP IMPROVE LEARNING LEVELS OF STUDENTS. **ANANNYA CHAKRABORTY** DISCUSSES THE KEY ROLE OF TEACHERS IN DRIVING MTB-MLE AND THE SYSTEMIC CHALLENGES OF SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGING TEACHERS IN SUCH PROGRAMMES.

The International Mother Language Day celebrated on 21 February 2020 every year was introduced by the General Conference of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in November 1999 to promote linguistic and cultural diversity.

According to UNESCO, 43 per cent of the estimated 6 000 languages spoken are unsafe and at risk of extinction as the generation that speaks them dies out. If languages continue to disappear, there is a high likelihood that societies around the globe will disinherit their traditional and cultural heritage.

When it comes to education, UNESCO estimates that as much as 40 per cent of the population is not educated in the language they speak or understand. It also points out that there are many advantages of learning in one's own mother tongue – children learn better and faster than those studying in second languages, they have enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem in classroom participation, and they perform better when tested in official language at a later stage. In short, when students are taught in their home language in the formative years, it results in better educational performance in the long term.

In light of this evidence, the discourse of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) promotes using the mother tongue as the language of instruction with a gradual transition to other languages (Language 2 or Language 3) as a child progresses in primary schooling (Read more UNESCO, Mohanty, A. et al 2009).

With the goal of providing quality education to all children, education systems across Asia have rolled out targeted multilingual education programmes for the inclusion of learners from ethnic and tribal communities who face cultural and language disadvantages. Such programmes are specific to regions that have a higher

percentage of ethnic minorities – mainstream education may continue to use English or the dominant language as the medium of instruction in school education.

### Teaching in a language children master

UNESCO published a report in 2007 describing China's mother tongue-based bilingual education. The report showed that such programmes often teach children briefly in ethnic minority languages, before rushing towards a transition to the national language.

In the hilly districts of Bangladesh, the *Daily Star* reports that children are taught in their mother-tongue from pre-primary level to grade two, while Bangla (the dominant language) is introduced grade 3 onwards. Beginning in 2012, the government decided to publish books in ethnic languages so that appropriate teaching and learning material would be available to schools. Similarly, in Pakistan, Rahman (2019) states that there are sporadic interventions with language activists running schools in home languages while formal education continues in English or Urdu.

In India, the Odisha MTB-MLE programme is well known, with the Government of Odisha implementing it since 2007. Given the large tribal population in the state, the government rolled out the programme with the objective of ensuring teaching children from tribal communities in their mother tongue in order to improve their learning and address issues of achievement gaps. Additionally, the programme was designed to ensure that the school environment would be less removed from the immediate cultural context of a tribal child.

It is slightly different in Europe and USA where education systems focus on effective teaching in multicultural classrooms with children coming from immigrant families and diverse language groups. Jeffery & Beuningen note in 2019 that teachers have

the challenging task of building intercultural understanding and multilingual competencies. The study provides the example of Netherlands which has the highest level of multilingualism with over 90 per cent Dutch citizens speaking an additional language and over 75 per cent able to communicate in two languages in addition to their L1.

### Teachers driving education in mother-tongue

Several studies have highlighted the central role of teachers in addressing the vernacular divide within and outside classrooms. Menon et al write in their 2014 study that teachers not only have a pivotal role in classrooms but also in responding to language policies that affect their students. Thus, teachers can alter the classroom experiences of pupils from diverse language and cultural backgrounds.

UNESCO points out that teachers can collaborate with local educators and community leaders to understand the cultural backgrounds of their students. Moreover, if teachers use home languages of pupils, parents and community members are able to support the learning of their students.

While the language policy of countries generally guides their practices, research also points out that a section of teachers have been working on the ground to help students cope with the language of instruction in bilingual classrooms. Anderson & Lightfoot in their 2019 study investigated translanguaging practices in Indian classrooms using English as the medium of instruction. The study revealed that minority teachers actively engaged in 'translanguaging' although teachers from English medium institutions refrained from using L1. However, the use of L1 varied across regions – urban, semi-urban, or rural. The study recommended that English language teacher education should provide cohesive support to translanguaging practices.

There is ample research and documentation on the advantages of using mother-tongue in education, some studies showcase the field-level challenges from MTB-MLE programmes implemented in various regions. Evidence suggests that education systems need to support teachers to tackle the challenges of teaching in a classroom with children from ethnic minority backgrounds.

The *Daily Star* reported that in Bangladesh, the training provided to teachers for teaching in schools running an MTB-MLE-based programme was limited to 14 days. Teachers were expected to master the ethnic script and deliver lessons based on this short period of training. Lack of training hindered effective teaching in classrooms even when resources were invested in the development of teaching learning material.

Teacher recruitment is another challenge while rolling out MTB-MLE programmes. Teachers belonging to tribal communities may not have the required qualifications. To address this issue, the MTB-MLE programme in Odisha notified in 2012 that teachers with fluency in tribal languages would be recruited on a contract basis, even if they had lower than the usually stipulated qualifications. After joining, they were required to acquire the prescribed qualifications within a stipulated time. Additionally, when there was a shortage of teachers fluent in tribal languages, teachers from non-tribal backgrounds but fluent in the target language could be engaged in the programme. *Shiksha Sahayaks* from the MTB-MLE programme have recently been promoted to Junior Teachers after completion of three years of continuous and satisfactory service.

Although learning English or a dominant language enables intercultural communication, the advantages of education in the mother tongue cannot be ignored. To implement mother tongue-based education,

most programmes would require teacher education that supports the endeavours of MLE teachers in classrooms. Menon et al highlight that teacher education programmes ‘could prepare prospective teachers to look critically at the way different languages are used in schools and to value their own, and their students’, emergent capabilities with languages’. To summarise, teachers need formal training and support to deliver targeted pedagogies for the benefit of students from ethnic minority classrooms **T**

Do you think education in the mother tongue helps students grasp concepts better? Send your views to [commsindia@acer.org](mailto:commsindia@acer.org) giving reference to the article.

<sup>1</sup>According to Census 2001, there are 62 Scheduled Tribes in the state constituting 22.1 per cent of the total population of the state.

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## LINKS

- [http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/imld2015-infographic-en\\_01.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/ED/pdf/imld2015-infographic-en_01.pdf).
- <https://pragativadi.com/odisha-govt-promotes-mle-shiksha-sahayaks-to-junior-teacher/>.

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