

Multilingual Education in Practice: A Reality Check

Introduction

One of the core founding beliefs of Language and Learning Foundation (LLF), a non-profit focused on improving foundational learning of children at scale, is that a formal inclusion of children's primary or strong languages in the teaching and learning process is crucial to improving learning in the early school years. Most early learning happens through the use of language, whether it is children talking or interacting with the teacher, thinking, reasoning, collaborating with other children, reading or writing. We believe that using children's most familiar language - a language they understand well and speak - for teaching and learning supports active engagement, self-confidence, better comprehension, verbal reasoning and expression, facilitates the learning of additional languages, ultimately leading to better learning.

Another core principle that guides our work is that a multilingual learning environment in the classroom with the use of 'mixed' language, including both familiar and less familiar languages, is important for children's language and literacy development in two or more languages as well as learning in all subjects. While our work has focused on the foundational stage of education, we firmly believe that children's familiar languages should continue to be used in a multilingual approach during primary school and beyond, as needed.

A corollary to our position stated above is that a language that is unfamiliar to children should not be used as an exclusive language of instruction until children acquire basic proficiency in it. Children studying through an unfamiliar language face a 'double learning disadvantage' since they must try and learn a new language and at the same time try and learn through that unfamiliar language (as Medium of Instruction [MoI]).

Primary school classrooms should be multilingual, given the presence of children's home languages and the teaching and learning of the state language and English. However, that is often not the case. Languages are taught in watertight compartments, ignoring the children's and teacher's own bi-/multilingual linguistic repertoires. The scope for use of two or more languages is also limited because there is little emphasis on beginning from children's orality and developing oral language in the early years. Teachers' attitudes towards multilingualism and the use of children's home languages are often the biggest constraint in introducing multilingual strategies as an integral part of teaching and learning.

Of course, all this will not be useful unless the current language and literacy teaching practices that are focused on the teaching of letters, choral repetition and copywriting are thoroughly overhauled. Therefore, our multilingual strategies are grounded within an overall balanced literacy approach for early language and literacy (ELL) development. A practical adaptation of the balanced literacy approach that we have followed from 2015 is the 'four-block model' of oral language development, systematic teaching of decoding, reading strategies and learning to

write. This model is now included in the National Curriculum Framework for the Foundational Stage 2023¹.

Rationale at LLF

LLF's mission is to improve children's foundational learning, encompassing language and literacy and early mathematics, at scale by working in collaboration with the government education system at all levels. For this purpose, we help integrate a multilingual approach into the state governments' foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) curriculum and instructional design from Balvatika² to Grade 3. Our effort is to ensure that multilingual education (MLE) is not treated as a separate approach or programme to be planned separately from the components of the FLN programme (also called NIPUN Bharat). At the heart of LLF's approach is the formal inclusion of children's familiar languages along with the state/regional language that is the official medium of instruction. This inclusion spans all facets, the curriculum and learning outcomes, children's learning materials, assessments, teacher professional development and academic support, and the overall teaching and learning process in early primary grades. The focus of our work has been on geographies where children's primary languages - the ones they understand well and speak when they first join Balvatika or school - are non-dominant languages (NDLs), i.e., they are not used for official purposes and in the education domain formally, and they have a lower status in society and within the school than the dominant state language and English. These include languages spoken by Adivasi population groups like Gondi and Halbi as also languages like Chhattisgarhi, Mewari and Wagdi that are widely spoken by other population groups.

School language situations in India

Language situations are complex and vary significantly within a state, a district or even a block. In some remote regions, such as those inhabited by the Saora tribal group in Odisha and the Koyas in Andhra Pradesh, children may speak only their own home language when they join school. In other places, home languages are influenced by other dominant languages of the region, e.g., the Wagdi language in the southern part of Dungarpur district in Rajasthan is highly influenced by Gujarati. Sometimes, it is not possible to assign specific language labels to the local language or identify linguistic boundaries where one speech pattern changes to another.

In several regions, people have stopped using their ancestral language and have adopted a local regional language. For example, Adivasi groups in parts of Raigarh district of Chhattisgarh have adopted Chhattisgarhi as their home language. It is common to have two or more home languages in the same village or a small urban area. There could be a link or contact language

¹ National Curriculum Framework for School Education. (2023), pp. 225-226. NCERT.
https://ncert.nic.in/pdf/NCFSE-2023-August_2023.pdf

² The Balvatika programme is envisaged as a one-year programme before Grade 1, for age group 4+ to 5+ years. This 'Preparatory Class' focuses on developing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities and also early literacy and numeracy in children, through a play-based approach.

which is used for wider communication between different ethnolinguistic groups in some regions. The contact language itself is often a hybrid of other languages. In Assam, Sadri is a language of wider communication among the tea garden communities, whose home languages may be Mundari, Kurukh or Santhali. There are some communities where multilingualism is the norm and children grow up speaking two or more languages.

There is very little systematic data on languages that children understand and speak at age 5 or 6 in different regions. To begin work in any area, it is important to understand the varied language situations in the classrooms. LLF has worked with state governments to implement a simple language mapping exercise to document the following information for each school:

1. *Home languages of children:* Which languages do children know well at the time of admission to Grade 1? Is there more than one primary language in a classroom?
2. *Children's proficiency in the Medium of Instruction:* What is the level of proficiency among children aged 5 or 6 in understanding and speaking the language used as MoI?
3. *Teacher's proficiency in children's home languages:* How well can teachers understand and speak the home language(s) of children?
4. *Existence of any link language:* The survey also determines whether a link language is available in the classroom as well as the children's ability to understand and speak that language.

The extent of 'learning disadvantage' faced by children also depends on other factors, such as the relationship between the children's strong language and the MoI (for example, the linguistic distance), teachers' attitudes towards the children's language(s), the languages actually used by teachers during teaching, language and literacy teaching methods, home literacy environment, and parents' attitudes and aspirations. These will be identified during later, more detailed sociolinguistic studies.

In order to ascertain appropriate strategies for a multilingual approach to the teaching and learning of FLN, LLF has identified four major categories or typologies of language situations in classrooms³:

Type I: Students speak a regional **language that has some similarity** with the school language (MoI).

Type II: Most students have a limited understanding of the school language when entering Grade 1 AND almost **all students have the same first/home language** AND the **teacher understands/speaks the children's language**.

Type III: Most students have a limited understanding of the school language when entering Grade 1 AND almost **all students have the same first language** AND the **teacher does not understand/speak the children's language**.

Type IVa: Some/most students have a limited understanding of the school language AND **students belong to 2 or more first language groups**. The teacher understands/speaks one of the children's languages. There is a link language that most children understand.

³ Jhingran, D. (2005). Language disadvantage: The learning challenge in primary education. APH Publishing.

Type IVb: Some/most students have a limited understanding of the school language AND students belong to 2 or more first language groups. The teacher understands/speaks one of the children's languages. There is no link language that most children understand.

Findings of language mapping from Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan

In Chhattisgarh, data collected from 29,755 primary schools reveals that 95 per cent children at age 5 speak a home language that is different from Hindi⁴. Apart from the languages spoken primarily by Adivasi communities like Halbi, Gondi (Dantewada), Gondi (Bastar), Bhatri Gondi (Kanker), Kurukh, Dorla, Madiya, Baigani, Dhurvi and Kamar, almost 70 per cent children speak languages like Chhattisgarhi, Sargujia, Sadri, Bagheli, Bhojpuri, Singraulia, and Bundelkhandi that have been grouped under Hindi in the 2011 Census. 75 per cent of children study in schools/classrooms that can be categorised as Type II, III or IV above, i.e., they face a moderate to severe learning disadvantage on account of their home language being different from Hindi, which is the MoI in almost all schools. A vast majority of these schools are in the Type II category where almost all children in Grade 1 have the same home language and have a limited understanding of standard Hindi when they join school. Approximately 15 per cent of teachers have a limited understanding of the children's languages in their classrooms. This proportion is much higher, at 27 per cent, for the Adivasi areas.

Language mapping in Rajasthan was conducted in 20,928 primary schools in 9 districts, mostly in the southern part of the state, where there is a significant home-school language gap⁵. 36 per cent of children in Grade 1 had a very limited understanding of Hindi and 72 per cent could only speak a few words of Hindi. 12 per cent teachers have a limited ability to speak the children's languages in their classroom and another 46 per cent have only a basic proficiency in speaking the children's home languages. Similar to Chhattisgarh, 78 per cent children study in classrooms that fall in the Type II, III and IV categories and face a moderate to severe learning disadvantage.

Clearly, it is not possible to achieve strong foundational learning outcomes in these areas unless a multilingual approach that includes children's home languages is made a part of the instructional design and teaching and learning process in primary grades.

Approaches for multilingual education (MLE) where children's understanding of the school's MoI is limited in Grade 1

At LLF, we have developed a categorisation of MLE approaches and programme designs

⁴ The Chhattisgarh language mapping report can be accessed at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/18LtXpSRly20YnHhKcGLKy2YTXHAEJd-O/view?usp=drivesdk>

⁵ Language mapping in Rajasthan was conducted in the districts of Dungarpur, Banswara, Chittorgarh, Pali, Pratapgarh, Sirohi, Rajsamand, Udaipur and Jaipur. The report can be accessed at:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1aDkukvWHpYQSmjtXTBvMyVMqBcL6OiQy/view?usp=drivesdk>

to suit different language situations.

- 1. A first language (L1) based MLE programme** involves using children's first language as the MoI for primary education for several years. Children develop academic competence in that language. The state official language (L2) is taught as a subject until children develop some academic competence before it is introduced as the MoI. For a year or two in late primary grades, both languages (L1 and L2) could be used as MoIs for different subjects. Children's L1 would continue to be used to explain difficult concepts, and higher order thinking and expression tasks even in later grades. This is often called the MTB-MLE (mother tongue-based MLE) approach.
- 2. Extensive and strategic use of the children's L1 (along with L2), while the official language (L2) remains the MoI:** An unfamiliar language is used as the official MoI, while the children's L1 is used extensively in the oral domain and for early decoding and reading. Literacy development takes place in the L2, while the use of 'mixed' languages (or translanguaging) helps in the development of both L1 and L2.
- 3. Working with multiple home languages by using the classroom's multilingualism as a resource:** Teachers use a variety of strategies to support children's use of their home languages in the initial grades to support thinking, reasoning, and fluent expression. Translation, comparing and contrasting different languages, translanguaging, children learning from each other, and the use of teaching assistants are suggested as strategies for such classrooms.
- 4. Including children's first languages to the extent possible when the teachers do not understand/speak their L1:** Teachers could pick up some vocabulary by listening patiently to children and using bilingual dictionaries that may be available. They could get help from older children, other school staff and members of the community. However, it is crucial to note that such a language situation in the classroom is highly undesirable.

Other strategies are needed when children migrate seasonally to a location where a different language is used as the MoI.

LLF's approach and strategies for multilingual education

While there is strong evidence from India and across the world that using the children's L1 as the MoI for several years is the best way to improve learning, this approach has been tried out only in small MLE projects. It is an intensive approach that requires the development of a curriculum, textbooks, teacher professional development, assessment tools as well as academic support to teachers in the languages selected as new MoIs. The introduction of a language that has earlier not been used as an MoI also presents other challenges like the presence of variants (often called dialects) of that language even within the same region, e.g., variants of Wagdi in southern Rajasthan or of Gondi in South Chhattisgarh. It also requires political and administrative will and support from the community, as well as the availability of teachers who are proficient in children's L1.

The language mapping in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan described above has shown that the largest number of schools fall in the Type II category where most children have the same home language and have a limited understanding of the standard form of the language used as the MoI when they join school, and where the teacher has a reasonable proficiency in that language. Since LLF has chosen to work at scale in collaboration with state governments, our work has initially focused on the approach defined above. When we select an administrative unit like a block or a district for introducing a multilingual approach to foundational learning, several schools of Type III (where the teacher does not speak the children's L1) and Type IV (where there are two or more first languages without a link language that all children understand/speak) are also included. We are beginning to work on strategies for these language situations; however, our major work is focused on Type II schools.

We have established the following non-negotiables for ourselves for any initiative for including children's languages through a multilingual approach:

- Children's languages are used formally in teaching and learning. The teacher would herself use and allow and encourage children to respond in their L1, read-aloud or tell stories in both languages, explain difficult words and concepts using L1 etc.
- Languages are not taught and learnt in water-tight compartments. Children learn new languages by using their strong, familiar language as a scaffold. The use of 'mixed' language is a powerful strategy in the process of learning unfamiliar languages.
- An MLE classroom reflects tolerance and mutual respect for all children's languages and cultures. Children's contexts and experiences are used extensively in the classroom.
- A multilingual approach for teaching-learning should be used across the curriculum where any difficult text or concept or higher order thinking, and reasoning work is carried out using children's L1.

Strategies for extensive and strategic use of the children's L1 (along with L2), while the official language (L2) remains the MoI

As mentioned earlier, the multilingual approach and strategies that we promote are integrated with the four-block approach to the teaching of early language and literacy (ELL). Some of the big shifts in the design of ELL teaching practice that are being attempted state-wide in the 5 states of Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Assam are (a) the inclusion of a strong oral language development component in the language class to build on children's orality, promote oral language comprehension and expression, (b) support to emergent literacy development activities, (c) systematic teaching of decoding skills, (d) encouraging 'reading by children' as opposed to the dominant practice of choral repetition after the teacher or another student, (e) enhancing discussion and higher order comprehension work during reading of texts, and (f) promoting writing composition by children as opposed to the dominant practice of

copywriting⁶.

The multilingual approach and strategies that form an integral part of the above ELL framework include the following:

1. Teaching and learning in the beginning months of school should be conducted in children's home languages alone. At this time exposure to other languages in a natural setting can be included.
2. Emphasis on oral language development throughout the early grades through stories, conversations, reading aloud with discussion initially in the familiar language, and later in other less familiar languages.
3. Using children's familiar languages extensively across subjects for explaining any new concept or information, meaning-making, higher order thinking or reasoning tasks and creative expression by children.
4. Balanced and strategic use of L1 and L2 per children's level of proficiency at any point in time and depending on the nature of academic work, e.g., home language for new or difficult concepts, higher thinking and expression; the unfamiliar language for literal questions, simple discussions, familiar content or concepts. There is no formula that can be suggested for this balance and the teacher is best placed to decide in the classroom.
5. Accept and encourage mixed use of home language and school language for greater understanding and learning. For example, children speak in their L1, teacher responds in L2 or a mix of L1 and L2, teacher adjusts the mixed use of L1 and L2 to help children understand and children use a mix of languages for better expression and communication. The objective is to equip the teacher with a range of uses of mixed language that promote communication and comprehension.
6. Take the help of children's home languages in teaching how to read and write. For example, teaching decoding using familiar words from children's L1 and accepting mixed language expressions in writing.
7. Include good practices for teaching unfamiliar languages (L2, L3) like a strong focus on initial oral language development, explicit teaching of vocabulary and extending to simple phrases and sentences, exposure to the unfamiliar language through interesting conversations and stories at a comprehensible level, using familiar texts that have been already read loud and discussed extensively in L1, not forcing children to speak and use the unfamiliar languages too early etc.
8. Include children's cultural and contextual knowledge in teaching-learning processes. This helps children significantly in navigating and comprehending some parts of an unfamiliar language.

While the approach is similar across Type II language situations, the extent of emphasis on the inclusion of children's home languages and the time taken for children to acquire a good initial understanding of the standard school language varies in different contexts.

⁶ Conversations/ Interview with Dhir Jhingran. (2023). *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 20(2), 236–255. Can be accessed at DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/09731849231185>

This variation depends on children's exposure to the standard form of the school language and the extent of similarity or differences between the children's home and school languages. Thus, the instructional design and teacher development programmes for areas like Ambala district in Haryana where children speak a variant of Punjabi, or in Bhilai in Durg district where children speak Chhattisgarhi at home, but have some exposure to Hindi outside home and through media like TV, would be quite different from those in the district of Bastar in southern Chhattisgarh where children have little familiarity with Hindi and their home language Halbi has much lower similarity with Hindi.

Programmes that have included children's first languages have shown good results

An evaluation of learning outcomes at the end of Grade 3 in Dungarpur district has shown that students in intervention schools performed significantly better in all skills including listening comprehension, narration, oral reading fluency and reading comprehension compared with students in control schools⁷. Findings from the programme in Durg district have also shown similar results. As mentioned above, these programmes included a structured instructional design for early language and literacy development using a four-block model, in addition to the strategies for bi-/multilingual instruction outlined above. Since good early literacy practices and the multilingual approach were integrated into one design, it has not been possible to attribute the high learning gains to any one dimension of the intervention.

Learning and thoughts for the future

While almost all teachers (who belong to the children's cultural and linguistic community) who are part of LLF's multilingual education programme in Rajasthan, use the local language extensively, most of them would like to move children to use more Hindi in a quicker timeframe than suggested. Also, they articulate that the need for using L1 is mainly because the children don't understand Hindi in the first two years.

The other pattern that has emerged through an in-depth research conducted in the Rajasthan schools is that the use of L1 and L2 separately or in a mixed form is not really strategic in nature. The research shows that while the children get a good first language oral language environment and get exposure to Hindi (L2) as well, it is not done in a planned or purposive manner. LLF's MLE programme has also focused mainly on defining the main principles that should help teachers decide the balance between two or more languages and the extent and nature of use of mixed language. It is difficult to define language use more specifically as the contexts differ significantly, e.g., the level of children's understanding of the school language. Clearly, more guidance and examples are needed for teachers on patterns of 'purposive translanguaging'. Some programmes and research studies have shown good results from the development and use of bilingual lesson plans that provide structured guidance for using home and school (MoI) languages for teaching of specific content. These have been developed mostly for subject content for

⁷ Dungarpur evaluation report can be accessed at:

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vA3U_XdBgakQX8HRrhWqRKqCtq7D3LjM/view?usp=drivesdk

later primary or middle school grades and for language pairs like Marathi-English or Telugu-English. However, this approach may not be appropriate for use with young children with more flexible content and for non-dominant languages where language situations form more of a continuum rather than a clearly defined proficiency in the school language.

Assessments continue to be a challenge for any multilingual education initiative that includes children's familiar languages. With the FLN mission (NIPUN Bharat), there is a strong focus on grade-wise learning outcomes and centralised assessments with test items developed at the state level are now the norm in most states. While we have made some progress in supporting more flexible bilingual assessments at school level, the state-wide standardised assessments cause problems because the district and block educational administration and schools are concerned about the preparation and performance of children in these centralised assessments that test on skills like oral reading fluency only in the school language. This causes a 'backwash' effect as teachers tend to tilt the balance towards the school language and focus exclusively on word recognition skills, early production in the unfamiliar language and memorisation.

Only a small number of teachers who don't know the non-dominant language make an effort to acquire basic conversational skills in these languages to support good communication with children. With centralised recruitment becoming the norm now, teachers from very different contexts get deployed to these locations with high linguistic and cultural diversity. There is a need to advocate for some language quotas for teachers, at least for the remote locations and language backgrounds from where teachers are not likely to be recruited through the aptitude-based teacher eligibility tests. Pre-service teacher education also does not prepare them for classroom diversity and the need for supporting a multilingual environment.

The understanding of educational administrators about multilingual education is still inadequate even where an MLE programme has been implemented for some years and this limits teachers' adoption of good multilingual practices.

In conclusion, introducing children's familiar languages for teaching and learning in the early years of education as part of a multilingual approach is crucial to improving foundational learning at scale. There is evidence to show that this can be done with some success. As a starting point, there is a need to build a clear vision of multilingual education and create a strong multilingual awareness in the education system at all levels.

The most 'learning disadvantaged' children in the country today are those that study in poorly taught 'English-medium' schools as they are likely to turn out to be 'semilinguals' who are not proficient in any language and depend only on rote memorisation because their comprehension of English is highly inadequate to understand the curriculum at any point.