

Multilingual Learning in Low-Resource Contexts: Opportunities and Obstacles

Edited by Elizabeth J. Erling and John Clegg

Rationale for volume

It is widely recognised that access to quality education is imperative for learning in general, but also for community cohesion, participation in society, improved access to health, national skills development and the growth of the economy (Coleman, 2010; Hanuschek & Woessman, 2008; Williams, 2014). The importance of language, however, has often been overlooked in global initiatives to improve education. Education for All (EFA), for example, a UNESCO-led global movement started in 2000 aimed to make quality basic education accessible to all children and significantly reduce illiteracy. Initiatives undertaken within this movement prioritised increasing access to education, but in doing so were criticised for neglecting to focus on teaching and learning and the role of language therein (Alexander, 2015; Ferguson, 2013; Romaine, 2013). Accordingly, there has been increasing recognition of the role of language in reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a set of global targets to be achieved by 2030. Language is particularly central to achieving SDG 4, the stand-alone education goal, which states the intention to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (SDGs, 2015). In 2016, UNESCO released a Policy Paper entitled ‘If you don’t understand, how can you learn?’, arguing that quality education is dependent on the delivery of education in a language that students’ speak at home and in their communities. The report highlights that hundreds of millions of school children (as much as 40% of the global population) do not have access to education in a language they understand (UNESCO, 2016). The significance of this statistic in terms of limiting students’ abilities to develop foundations for learning is only now starting to gain widespread recognition. Increasingly research confirms that lack of access to the official medium of instruction of education is a strong predictor for educational failure, contributing to reduced classroom participation, exclusion from education and school dropout (Heugh, 2009; Pfllepsen, 2015; Pinnock, 2009; Trudell, 2016).

It may seem difficult to understand the lack of recognition of the importance of language in achieving quality of education when mother tongue education has long been promoted for early schooling by organisations like UNESCO (1953, 2003, 2008). This recommendation is in line with educational research that has repeatedly found that the prolonged use of children’s home languages in early schooling is critical for cognitive development (e.g. Cummins, 2000; Kosonen, 2005) and can enhance a later switch to bilingual and indeed monolingual L2-medium education (Alidou et al., 2006; Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2011; Heugh et al., 2007; Ouane & Glanz, 2011; Trudell, 2016). Use of students’ home and community languages as the medium of instruction has been found to be a good predictor of achievement (Ouane & Glanz, 2011; Smith, 2011; Smits, Huisman, & Kruijff, 2008; Trudell, 2016). There is also widespread recognition of the centrality of the quality of classroom interaction in achieving educational quality, and the role of local language in promoting interaction (Alexander, 2008; Pinnock, 2009; Tikly & Barrett, 2011).

Indeed, policies have been put in place in many low and middle income countries that promote the use of students’ “mother tongues” in the early years and global languages such as English in the later years (Simpson, 2017), and various models of Mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) have arisen (Benson, 2004). While such developments represent a step in the direction of improving educational outcomes through attention to language policy, the 2016 UNESCO statistics suggest that we are still a long way from providing education through a medium that all students understand. One reason for this stems from the assumption – often falsely made – that the local or national language promoted in policy is actually the language children speak at home. For example, in India the medium of instruction in government schools corresponds to the official language of each state (e.g. Hindi, Bengali). However, this language does not necessarily match the actual language used by students at home and in their communities (Erling et al., 2017). In addition, there has been a failure to recognise the rich multilingual repertoires that learners in often have and this has contributed to a delay in recognising such contexts as being appropriate sites for multilingual education and language supportive pedagogies (Clegg & Simpson, 2016; Tupas, 2015; Weber, 2014). Moreover, in many low and middle income countries, particularly in

Sub-Saharan Africa, the use of the “mother tongue” – even if it corresponds to the language that students speak at home – is usually advocated in policy only for use in the first three years of primary school, followed by an abrupt shift to the more widely used language to be used as the only medium of instruction for the remainder of schooling. There is a lack of evidence that this model of early exit transitional bilingual education is successful – with statistics in many countries suggesting that it neither ensures access to content nor language learning (Pinnock, 2009; Trudell, 2016).

Even when models of bilingual education are implemented in policy, there are serious challenges in their implementation. These include a lack of recognition of the value of translanguaging and the continued use of students’ “mother tongue” in schooling beyond the primary level (Erling et al., 2017; Erling et al., 2016). There is also often a lack of a structured transitional period, no preparation for L2-medium education through L2 CALP in the yearly years, no L2-supportive teaching of subjects after the switch, a lack of teacher education structure to support this model, etc... There is also often a lack of appropriate multilingual resources. All of this means that policies which promote the use of students’ mother tongues are not always adhered to or given the time or resource needed to be effective, and, as a result, schools and communities often revert to using English as the ‘default medium’ (Erling et al., 2017). Contributing to the challenge of implementing mother tongue education are societal attitudes towards languages: research has demonstrated that there are conflicting perspectives in communities about which languages best serve countries and communities in terms of education and development (Erling et al., 2014; Mohanty, 2010; Opoku-Amankwa & Brew-Hammond, 2011; Trudell, 2007). Indigenous languages are often valued for cultural and community reasons, while international languages like English are perceived as enabling opportunities and access to wider communities. Further, low-cost private schools, which often privilege the use of international languages as media of instruction (particularly English), are gaining in popularity, often due to dissatisfaction with government school quality, an issue that is often conflated with medium of instruction (Annamalai, 2013; Erling et al., 2017; Nair, 2015; Rubagumya, 2003).

Given that linguistic diversity is increasingly common to most urban classrooms in the world, ensuring that learning is delivered in a medium of instruction that all learners can understand is becoming ever more pressing in the formal education systems of most countries of the world. Therefore, this volume seeks research contributions which explore some of the ways in which multilingual pedagogies are working to enhance learning in a range of low and middle income contexts, with the aim of sharing such findings across boundaries and contributing to a discussion of the role of language in ensuring quality education in any context.

Aims and scope

The aim of this volume is to provide a state-of-the-art collection of research about the role of language in content learning in schools in a wide range of low and middle income countries and other low-resource contexts. The focus will be on educational practices and pedagogies to support content learning and also the learning of dominant language(s). Chapters will focus on policies and practices that have emerged organically or through educational interventions to support learning. They will also explore various models of multilingual or plurilingual education and the opportunities and challenges in their implementation with regard to policy, practice and attitudes.

Theories and research into multilingual and plurilingual learning have often arisen in high-resource, elite bilingual contexts of formal schooling. Indeed, the term plurilingualism is usually reserved to describe European contexts, and not normally used with regard to low-resource contexts, where the focus tends to be on forms of mother tongue and multilingual instruction. Therefore, an additional aim of the volume is to forge connections between research about multilingual and plurilingual education initiatives in both “the global South” with “the global North”, where school populations are increasingly diverse and multilingual.

Call for proposals

We invite theoretically grounded, empirical chapters to be part of this volume. Among other topics, chapter contents might explore issues such as:

- the relevance of various linguistic and pedagogical concepts to low-resource contexts (e.g. CLIL, codeswitching, mother-tongue-based multilingual education, plurilingual education, translanguaging, etc.)
- the role of (flexible) multilingual or plurilingual learning and language supportive pedagogies in achieving the SDG goals of inclusivity, equity, quality and lifelong learning.

- official or grassroots interventions which have sought to resist inflexible language policies and/or enhance content and language learning in low-resource contexts through flexible multilingual, language-supported pedagogies (through focusing on the transition, teacher education, resource production, etc.).
- multilingual or plurilingual classroom discourse in content learning in low-resource contexts (both teacher-student and student-student interactions).
- the creation and evaluation of multilingual resources for teaching content and language.
- practices supporting fair and reliable assessment of content knowledge within L2-medium, multilingual and plurilingual education contexts.
- material and ideological challenges to implementing multilingual or plurilingual education approaches and language supportive pedagogies.
- research explorations of whether in educational research carried out in low-resource contexts substantiates the findings of research from high-resource contexts, i.e. high levels of L1 proficiency are required to achieve high levels of L2 proficiency and literacy (e.g. (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002).
- considerations of whether and, if so, how multilingual education can be effectively implemented in low-resource contexts where there are significant challenges in meeting the criteria for successfully implementing CLIL (cf. (Ball, Kelly, & Clegg, 2015; Coyle, 2008).
- ways in which development agencies, international organisations, and all stakeholders in education can better consider the role of multilingualism and medium of instruction in educational interventions, international assessments and policy reform.

Please direct any queries and your proposals, containing a title and 300 word abstract, to Elizabeth Erling by **21 October 2018**: elizabeth.erling@uni-graz.at

References

- Alexander, R. (2008). *Towards dialogic teaching: Rethinking classroom talk*. York: Dialogos.
- Alexander, R. (2015). "Teaching and learning for all? The quality imperative revisited." *International Journal of Educational Development*, 40, 250–258.
- Alidou, H., Boly, A., Brock-utne, B., & Satina, Y. (2006). Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor, 1–186.
- Alidou, H., & Brock-Utne, B. (2011). Teaching practices – teaching in a familiar language. In A. Ouane & C. Glanz (Eds.), *Optimizing Learning and Education in Africa – the Language Factor*.
- Annamalai, E. (2013). India's economic restricting with English: Benefits versus costs. In J. W. Tollefson (Ed.), *Language policies in education: Critical issues* (pp. 191–207). London: Routledge.
- Ball, P., Kelly, K., & Clegg, J. (2015). *Putting CLIL into Practice*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Benson, C. (2004). The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality. *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2005, The Quality Imperative*, 1–24.
- Clegg, J., & Simpson, J. (2016). Clegg and Simpson for CE 2016. *Comparative Education*, 52(3), 359–374. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/03050068.2016.1185268>
- Coleman, H. (2010). *The English Language in Development*. London. Retrieved from <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/english-language-development>
- Coyle, D. (2008). International Journal of Bilingual Education and Content and Language Integrated Learning : Towards a Connected Research Agenda for CLIL Pedagogies Content and Language Integrated Learning : Towards a Connected Research Agenda for CLIL Pedagogies, 50. <https://doi.org/10.2167/beb459.0>
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, Power, and Pedagogy: Bilingual Children in the Crossfire*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Erling, E. J., Adinolfi, L., & Hultgren, A. K. (2017). *Multilingual classrooms: Opportunities and challenges for English medium instruction in low and middle income countries*. Reading. Retrieved from <https://www.educationdevelopmenttrust.com/en-GB/our-research/our-research-library/2017/r-multilingual-classrooms>
- Erling, E. J., Adinolfi, L., Hultgren, A. K., Buckler, A., & Mukorera, M. (2016). Medium of Instruction (MOI) policies in Ghanaian and Indian primary schools: An overview of key issues and recommendations. *Comparative Education*, 53(3), 294–310.
- Erling, E. J., Seargeant, P., & Solly, M. (2014). English in rural Bangladesh. *English Today*, 30(4), 15–21. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078414000352>
- Ferguson, G. (2013). The language of instruction issue: Reality, aspiration and the wider context. *Multilingual Education in Africa: Lessons from the Juba Language-in- Education Conference*, 17–22.
- Hanuschek, E. A., & Woessman, L. (2008). The role of cognitive skills in educational development. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 46(3), 607–668. <https://doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.1257/jel.46.3.607>

- Heugh, K. (2009). Literacy and bi/multilingual Education in Africa: recovering collective memory and expertise. In T. Skuttnab-Kangas, R. Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty, & M. Panda (Eds.), *Social Justice through Multilingual Education*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Heugh, K., Benson, C., Bogale, B., & Yohannes, M. (2007). Final report study on medium of instruction in primary schools in Ethiopia, (December 2006).
- Kosonen, K. (2005). *Education in local languages: Policy and practice in Southeast Asia. First languages first: Community-based literacy programmes for minority language contexts in Asia*. Bangkok.
- Mohanty, A. K. (2010). Languages, inequality and marginalization: Implications of the double divide in Indian multilingualism. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 205(205), 131–154. <https://doi.org/10.1515/IJSL.2010.042>
- Nair, P. S. K. (2015). *Does Medium of Instruction Affect Learning Outcomes?—Evidence Using Young Lives Longitudinal Data of Andhra Pradesh*. India. Retrieved from [http://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/ESP-WP-No 68-09-08-2015-Nair.pdf](http://www.younglives.org.uk/sites/www.younglives.org.uk/files/ESP-WP-No%2068-09-08-2015-Nair.pdf)
- Opoku-Amankwa, K., & Brew-Hammond, A. (2011). “Literacy is the ability to read and write English”: Defining and developing literacy in basic schools in Ghana. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 14(1), 89–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670051003692857>
- Ouane, A., & Glanz, C. (2011). *Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multi-lingual education*. Hamburg.
- Pflepsen, B. (2015). *Planning for Language Use in Education: Best Practices and Practical Steps to Improve Learning Outcomes*. Washington, DC. Retrieved from <https://globalreadingnetwork.net/eddata/planning-language-use-education-best-practices-and-practical-steps-improve-learning-outcomes>
- Pinnock, H. (2009). *Language and education: the missing link. How the language used in school threatens the achievement of Education for all*. Retrieved from <http://www.unesco.org/education/EFAWG2009/LanguageEducation.pdf>
- Romaine, S. (2013). Keeping the promise of the Millennium Development Goals: Why language matters. *Applied Linguistics Review*, 4(2), 219. <https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2013-5001>
- Rubagumya, C. (2003). English medium primary schools in Tanzania: a new “linguistic market” in education? In B. Brock-Utne, Z. Desai, & M. Qorro (Eds.), *Language of Instruction in Tanzania and South Africa*. Dar es Salaam: E&D Limited.
- Simpson, J. (2017). *English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries: a British Council perspective*. London. Retrieved from https://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/attachments/pub_h106_elt_position_paper_on_english_in_basic_education_in_low-_and_middle-income_countries_final_web_v3.pdf
- Smith, M. (2011). Which in- and out-of-school factors explain variations in learning across different socio-economic groups? Findings from South Africa. *Comparative Education*, 47(1), 79–102.
- Smits, J., Huisman, J., & Kruijff, K. (2008). *Home language and education in the developing world*. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0017/001787/178702e.pdf>
- Thomas, W. P., & Collier, V. P. (2002). *A national study of school effectiveness for language minority students’ long-term academic achievement*. Santa Cruz, CA. Retrieved from www.crede.ucsc.edu/research/llaa/1.1_final.html
- Tikly, L., & Barrett, A. M. (2011). Social justice, capabilities and the quality of education in low income countries. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 31(1), 3–14. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2010.06.001>
- Trudell, B. (2007). Local community perspectives and language of education in sub-Saharan African communities. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 27(5), 552–563. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2007.02.002>
- Trudell, B. (2016). *The Impact of Language Policy and Practice on Children’s Learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa*. Retrieved from [https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF\(2016\)LanguageandLearning-FullReport\(SingleView\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF(2016)LanguageandLearning-FullReport(SingleView).pdf)
- Tupas, R. (2015). Inequalities of multilingualism: challenges to mother tongue-based multilingual education. *Language and Education*, 29(2), 112–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.977295>
- UNESCO. (1953). *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*. Switzerland.
- UNESCO. (2003). *Education in a multilingual world (Education Position Paper)*. Paris, France: UNESCO. Paris.
- UNESCO. (2008). *Mother tongue matters: Local language as a key to effective learning*. Paris. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0016/001611/161121e.pdf>
- UNESCO. (2016). *If you don’t understand, how can you learn? Global Education Monitoring Report. Policy Paper 24*. Retrieved from [https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/if-you-don’t-understand-how-can-you-learn](https://en.unesco.org/gem-report/if-you-don-t-understand-how-can-you-learn)
- Weber, J.-J. (2014). *Flexible Multilingual Education: Putting Children’s Needs First*. Bristol: Multilingual Matters.
- Williams, E. (2014). “English in African politics of education: capital or capital illusion?” *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 225, 131–145.