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Language Policy and Education in Multilingual Societies:

Lessons from Three Positive Models

We know that children who begin their education in their mother tongue make a better start, and continue to perform better, than those who start school in a new language. When they go to school in their first language, they have increased self-confidence. Their parents and the school staff can communicate more easily. We know that when they have a good foundation in their mother tongue, they can succeed in learning a second and third language. We also know that mother tongue education helps speakers appreciate their own language and become committed to its use even as other languages prove more powerful in the society beyond the home village or community.

In this presentation I will discuss lessons to be learned from three countries that have embarked successfully on mother tongue education: Eritrea, Guatemala, and Papua New Guinea. All three are multilingual countries, as are virtually all countries of the world, but they are at different stages in the development of mother tongue educational programs. These cases

demonstrate the feasibility of education in the student's first language, and they counter common arguments that multilingual countries cannot afford to develop materials and train teachers in more than one language—that limited resources are better used to improve education in one language for use throughout the school years. This presentation draws on data come from evaluation studies in which I participated and from document review.

I will first describe the programs in these three countries and then discuss some of the lessons we can learn from their experiences.

Eritrea

Eritrea is a country of four million people, situated on the horn of Africa. For roughly the first half of the 20th century, it was an Italian colony. After World War II, there was a short military occupation by the British. This was followed by federation with Ethiopia and then incorporation by Ethiopia. For over 30 years Eritreans struggled for independence. In 1991, they succeeded, and in 1993 a nationwide vote ratified that independence.

Eritrea has nine languages that are spoken as a first language. As a mother tongue, most Eritreans speak either Tigrigna and Tigre, related Semitic languages. The official languages are Tigrigna, Arabic, and English. For both political and educational reasons, before independence Eritreans had decided to use the local languages for schooling. During the Italian period what little education there was, was in Italian. During the Ethiopian occupation, education was in Amharic, which is not a mother tongue in Eritrea. By 2002, the full elementary curriculum had been issued in eight of the nine Eritrean languages, and work was underway on the ninth. Communities were and are encouraged to use the local language for primary schools, but they are not obliged to do so. English is used in Grade 6 and beyond.

In 1996, I participated in the first evaluation of the mother tongue program. I was an SIL International consultant assigned to work with the language panels of the Ministry of Education. We found that about 60 percent of the schools had opted for the local language of the community as the medium of instruction. But there were very few textbooks. Classroom teaching was centered on recitation and copying from the blackboard. As you can imagine, there was much room for improvement. We recommended more textbooks and more teacher training, especially in teaching methods for active learning.

In 2002, the Ministry undertook a detailed examination of reading instruction in primary schools. With the help of consultants from SIL International, the team tested 2400 students in five schools in eight language areas. They also interviewed 120 teachers. They found that the two most critical areas for improvement were (1) the teaching of reading in Grade 1 and (2) preparing children to learn through English after Grade 5. Grade 1 reading weaknesses were due to poorly designed and used primers, with little practice reading connected text in Grade 1. Classroom activities were mainly copying and reciting. Weak preparation for study in English was due to lack of exposure to the vocabulary and grammar of academic English. The curriculum was weak, and there was not enough time for its implementation. The team made two principal recommendations: (1) rework the curriculum for grade 1, and assign to grade 1 the best prepared and best paid teachers; and (2) provide an extra year between Grades 5 and 6 to support the transition into English.

The Ministry accepted these recommendations, but questions remain as to whether they will be able to implement them. They are radical recommendations for even the most established school systems. However, there is one new and encouraging development: The government has

recently built a new teachers college to prepare teachers for mother tongue instruction.

Guatemala

Guatemala is the oldest and largest of the three countries being considered here. In 1821 it gained its independence from Spain. It has a population of about 12 million, of which about 40 percent are of Mayan Indian descent. Guatemalans speak more than 20 indigenous languages, most of which are Mayan languages. Spanish is the official language. Local languages may be used in primary school, but Spanish is the medium of instruction in the higher grades. Guatemala has the lowest literacy rate in Latin America. One reason for this is the low level of spending on education, one of the lowest in Latin America.

Guatemala has had a history of internal violence—warfare between military and paramilitary forces and the rural people (most of whom are of Mayan ancestry). The violence came to a nominal end with the Peace Accords of 1996, which brought the needs of indigenous and underserved populations to the forefront of the national agenda.

The Directorate of Bilingual and Intercultural Education is Guatemala's oldest and largest program for mother tongue education. It operates throughout the country, in about 1200 rural schools. Its origins go back 40 years to a kindergarten program for non-Spanish speaking children. That program aimed to improve learning for non-Spanish speaking children by exposing them to Spanish before entering primary school, which was conducted in Spanish.

In 1979, the government, with prodding and funds from the United States Agency for International Development, began a pilot project in bilingual education. The pilot used the transition model, beginning instruction in the language of the children, with some instruction in

Spanish and then transitioning gradually to all-Spanish in Grade 3 or 4. The pilot consisted of 10 schools in each of four areas with large numbers of speakers of four Mayan languages. The 40 pilot schools were paired with a control group of 40 schools in the same areas where children received instruction only through Spanish.

The pilot project was a major undertaking. Textbooks were written in the four major languages. Mayan-language speaking teachers were trained in the use of their Mayan language in the classroom. They were encouraged to appreciate their Mayan heritage, both the language and the culture. All this occurred at a time of extensive civil strife, when it was dangerous to support any initiative related to the Mayan people.

Results of the pilot project showed that Grade 1 and Grade 2 bilingually taught children were learning Spanish as well as their counterparts in the all-Spanish schools, despite less classroom time devoted to Spanish. Furthermore, they dropped out less and were promoted more than their peers in all-Spanish classes.

Based on this success, the program was expanded to 400 schools, then 800. The program now provides instruction in 14 languages for 230,000 rural children in 1200 schools, as I mentioned earlier.

There are also a number of other bilingual education programs that operate in departments with large numbers of Mayan-language speaking children. Some are partially funded by other governments, the United States, Germany, and the European Union. Others are assisted by international agencies, UNICEF for example.

The bilingual programs have yielded many positive results, in terms of student achievement, reductions in educational costs, acceptance of bilingual education, and

development of Mayan professionals.

Bilingually educated students do well in classrooms where the program is well implemented. An evaluation of students from the 1986-1991 period showed that bilingually taught children outperformed students in comparison schools on seven out of 10 measures of academic achievement; on the three other measures the average scores were about the same. Unfortunately, when the program was expanded, it was difficult to maintain the quality of the early project. There were and are many so-called bilingual schools where the bilingual program is not well implemented—where the teacher is not bilingual in the language of the community or where the teacher is bilingual in the language of the community language but prefers to teach most of the day through Spanish. Administrators are conscious of this problem and are actively trying to correct the deficiencies.

In terms of educational costs, an evaluation covering the years 1991-1996 revealed that bilingual schools are more cost effective than their counterparts, even with the additional operating costs. It costs less to produce a sixth grade graduate from the bilingual schools than from the all-Spanish schools because those in the all-Spanish schools tend to repeat grades more often than the others before they graduate. Another study, conducted in 2003, compared promotion rates for bilingual schools and Spanish-only schools in primarily indigenous areas. This study looked at Grades 1 – 4, between the years 1991 and 1999. The promotion rates for the bilingual schools were higher than those for the all-Spanish schools, especially for Grade 1. This represents a considerable saving to the Ministry of Education budget.

Bilingual education has had a positive effect on attitudes toward the mother tongue in Guatemala. A 2002 study compared Grade 6 graduates from both bilingual and Spanish-only

schools in 1987, 1991, and 2001. Bilingual researchers found that those who had attended bilingual schools chose to use their Mayan language with the researchers more often than did those who had attended Spanish-only schools, despite the fact that students in the bilingual programs demonstrated proficiency in Spanish. In addition, the researchers found that the importance of bilingual education and the teaching of Mayan culture have been widely accepted by graduates from both bilingual and Spanish-only school. Both types of graduates said they would send their children to a bilingual school, if that were possible.

Another major accomplishment of Guatemala's bilingual program has been the development of Mayan professionals through scholarships and work opportunities. When the pilot project began twenty-five years ago, there were only a few Mayan professionals; now there are many. They belong to organizations such as the Academy for Mayan Languages, the National Council of Mayan Education, and the Association of Mayan Researchers of Guatemala, organizations that work to preserve and strengthen the place of Mayan language and culture in the country.

The rise of Mayan professionals can be attributed, at least in part, to leadership gained through working in the bilingual programs and through education scholarships which enabled the Mayan teachers to attend the universities. I remember that in 1985 when a new constitution was written, textbook writers from the bilingual education project were hired to translate the constitution into the four major Mayan languages. This was not too helpful to the textbook effort, but it did highlight the value of the Mayan languages. Though professional Mayans are still few in number relative to their share of the population, there are now Mayan politicians, officials in the Ministry of Education, professors at the universities, and others dedicated to

preserving their language and culture. The government now refers to the bilingual programs as “bilingual/intercultural,” signifying that all the cultures represented by Spanish and by the indigenous languages are important parts of the fabric of Guatemalan life.

Papua New Guinea

Papua New Guinea—called PNG—is a Pacific island nation with a population of over 5 million spread over 1400 islands. In 1975 it gained its independence from Australia.

Papua New Guineans speak more than 800 languages. There are two lingua franca: Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu. Tok Pisin, a Melanesian pidgin based on English, is used widely, particularly in the north and in the capital, Port Moresby. Hiri Motu, a trade language, is used in the south. The official languages are English, Tok Pisin, and Hiri Motu.

Prior to and after independence, English was the only medium of instruction in formal education. Vernacular languages and Tok Pisin were permitted in non-formal education. But with the Education Reform of 1995, the policy and practice changed. As part of a major reform of formal education, the country is gradually extending the use of local languages and Tok Pisin as the media of instruction through the first three years of schooling, called elementary school (preparatory, Grade 1 and 2). Thereafter, English is the medium of instruction.

The move to the use of local languages began with the provincial government of the North Solomons province. In 1980 the government, with help from the University of Papua New Guinea and SIL International, introduced the *Viles Tok Ples Priskul* (preschool using the language, or talk, of the village, or place). The school was organized in response to parents’ demands for a relevant education for their children, one that would teach them village values and prevent alienation of the children from village life. The preschool enrolled children six to eight

years of age in a non-formal program in the local language, preparatory to formal primary school taught in English.

The movement spread throughout the North Solomons province and into other areas, initiated by missions, other non-governmental organizations working with the communities, and the provisional governments. In 1995 an SIL International survey estimated that about half of the children in Papua New Guinea had access to vernacular language education.

In a 1993 report to UNICEF, evaluators from the National Research Institute of New Guinea wrote that “*Tok Ples Skuls* are an obvious success story. . . . It has been observed that ‘graduates’ do better in the formal system than their counterparts who did not attend *Tok Ples Skuls*. Also children come out of *Tok Ples Skuls* with an enhanced ability to function in their own language and with an appreciation of their own culture, something parents found was systematically undermined by the National Community School system.” (Ahai & Bopp, 1993, p. 57)

In 1992, with the success of the *Tok Ples Skuls*, the National Department of Education proposed restructuring the formal education system, creating a village-based school for the first three years in the local language (preparatory and Grades 1 and 2), with bridging to English in the second half of Grade 2. A school using English, more centrally located, would follow for the remaining primary grades (Grades 3 through 8).

In 1993, three provinces began implementing the reform: East New Britain, Milne Bay, and New Ireland. In 1995 the reform became official government policy. At present, all provinces have begun to implement the reform, phased in gradually as materials are developed for the as-yet-unwritten languages, as teachers are trained, and as communities build facilities for

the Elementary Schools. At the end of the year 2000, some 380 language groups were participating, with plans to add more in subsequent years. The original idea was to have finished the reform in 2004, but introduction is taking longer than was expected.

Lessons

What lessons can we draw from the experiences using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction in these three countries? There are at least three.

First, it can be done. Countries can embark on programs of mother tongue education. When countries decide to educate all of their children, they can begin mother tongue programs. Sometimes the countries use a top-down approach. Eritrea is an example of this. The government decided for educational and political reasons to encourage communities to use the local languages in the beginning years of education. Sometimes the programs begin in the other direction—from the bottom up. Papua New Guinea is an example of this approach. Villagers wanted their children to appreciate their own culture and values. They were convinced that beginning the children's education in the local language would help prevent the alienation that came with education solely in a foreign language, in this case English.

The second lesson from these three successful examples is that mother tongue education can be done within the government's education budget—at least once the programs are up and running. It is true that at the beginning outside financing and technical assistance are useful. Guatemala has had a number of partners—governmental and non-governmental organizations—encouraging and assisting their bilingual programs. Papua New Guinea has benefited from the help of more than 100 organizations within the country—churches, universities, linguistic groups, women's groups, and many others, as well as funds and assistance from Australia and

the World Bank. However, Eritrea has largely built their program on their own, with some technical assistance from SIL International and a grant, I believe, from Sweden for textbooks.

Once the programs have begun, the news is that mother tongue education can actually save the government money. In Guatemala, students from bilingual schools tend to move more quickly through the education system. To illustrate: Each primary school year in Guatemala costs about US\$145. If a Spanish-only educated student completes her six primary years in eight years, her education has cost the government $8 \times \$145$ or US\$1160. But if a bilingually educated student completes her six primary years in six years, her education has cost the government $6 \times \$145$ or US\$870. This represents a saving of US\$290.

Another source of savings is in teacher salaries: In Papua New Guinea the village teachers are chosen from the village. They do not have to be fully credentialed teachers, only Grade 10 graduates. So the Ministry does not have to pay them as much as they would pay a professional teacher. Now, granted, there's an inequity built into the system that I hope the PNG government will one day address. Guatemala has done this. When the bilingual program began, the teachers were "promoters"—indigenous persons who were graduates of primary school, bilingual in the Mayan language and in Spanish, and motivated to participate in their community. Assisted by successive projects, many financed by the United States, many of these promoters are now fully qualified as teachers and earning the salary of professional teachers.

The third lesson is most relevant to the theme of this conference. It is this: Mother tongue education contributes to preserving language diversity. In Eritrea, Beja is a language used by approximately 3 percent of the population, traditionally nomads. It has been the last indigenous language to be used in primary school. It did not have a formal written system. Last year

linguists from SIL International and a team of 15 enthusiastic Beja speakers codified the language in both Arabic and Latin script. They wrote down scores of Beja folk tales, stories that can be used in the primary school. They have produced a small dictionary of about 5000 words. All of this effort will contribute, we assume, to maintaining this language.

When a society assigns its indigenous languages the important function of educating young speakers of those languages—as Eritrea, Guatemala, and Papua New Guinea have done—it increases the range of social functions that the languages serve and recognizes their value in a domain that had been dominated by languages associated with colonization. Although preserving the inventory of world languages may not be chief among local consideration in choosing the language of education, preserving the vitality of a society’s languages and cultures, as in the three cases examined in this presentation, can aggregate to preserving language diversity around the world.

References

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