

CHAPTER-20

Mother tongue–based multilingual education and curriculum design

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ABSTRACT

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has become a strong teaching method that values learners' language and cultural backgrounds as important resources. This approach is based on the idea that children learn best when teaching starts in a language they understand. MTB-MLE supports cognitive growth, academic success, and social inclusion. This study looks into MTB-MLE, its theoretical foundations, and its importance in modern education systems, especially in multilingual and postcolonial settings. It also discusses principles and models for designing MTB-MLE curricula, focusing on challenges and effective practices. Drawing from global and Indian viewpoints, this paper argues that good curriculum design is key to the success of MTB-MLE and vital for achieving fair and quality education.

KEYWORDS: Mother Tongue–Based Multilingual Education, curriculum design, multilingualism, language policy, inclusive education

1 Introduction

Crucial Role of Language in Learning, Developing an Identity and Social Participation. In societies where many languages are spoken, the choice of language of instruction has a significant impact on access and outcomes of education. Many education systems have historically privileged dominant or “colonial” languages as media of instruction, often marginalizing those whose language at home is different from that of the school. This results in low comprehension levels, high drop-out rates, and poor academic performance of linguistically diverse learners.

The issue of linguistic disparity between learners and educators is a key challenge for the education sector. MTB-MLE (Mother Tongue–Based Multilingual Education) seeks to address this issue through the use of learner’s first language (mother tongue or home language) as the basis of learning, while additional languages are added gradually. International organizations, including UNESCO, strongly support MTB-MLE for better quality, equity and inclusion in education. The classroom practices can be enhanced through insightful curriculum design based on MTB-MLE principles. The paper looks into the idea and practice of MTB-MLE, and critically analyses curriculum design strategies that promote multilingual learning.

2 Concept of Mother Tongue–Based Multilingual Education

MTB-MLE or Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education is an approach to teaching learners in their mother tongue at the beginning of their education with the introduction of second language and third language systematically and gradually. The most-used first language is early childhood education (for instance, kindergarten 1, kindergarten 2, primary 1) and then it is taught as subjects and thereafter used as media of education in later years.

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As defined by UNESCO, MTB-MLE is a learner-centred process that recognizes and utilizes linguistic diversity, leading to additive multilingualism instead of substitute of the first language. It differs from transitional bilingual education which seeks to transfer learners relatively quickly to a dominant language. On the other hand, MTB-MLE aims to develop high levels of proficiency in a number of languages that the child comes to learn. The key features of the MTB-MLE are as follows:

- Use of the mother tongue as the main medium of instruction in early grades
- Gradual introduction of second and third languages
- Cultural relevance of curriculum and materials
- Community involvement in education

3 Theoretical Foundations of MTB-MLE

MTB-MLE is based on several linguistic, psychological, and educational theories.

3.1 *Linguistic Interdependence Theory*

According to Jim Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis, a person's first language can facilitate learning a second language in certain contexts. A mother tongue that is rich in literacy and cognitive skills provides a solid basis for learning other languages.

3.2 *Sociocultural Theory*

Vygotsky's theory stresses the importance of language and interaction in cognitive development. Learning in a familiar language is helpful for meaningful interaction, scaffolding and understanding, all of which improve learning.

3.3 *Constructivist Learning Theory*

Constructivism posits that learners actively construct knowledge. When language instruction takes place in the mother tongue, students build relationships with what they already know and their life experience, thus making meaning and learning.

4 Importance of Mother Tongue in Education

Using the mother tongue in education offers numerous cognitive, academic, and socio-emotional advantages.

4.1 *Cognitive and Academic Benefits*

Research consistently shows that children grasp concepts better in a language they understand. Mother tongue instruction boosts comprehension, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills. It also lessens the cognitive load caused by trying to learn content in a new language.

4.2 *Social and Emotional Benefits*

Learning in the mother tongue supports learners' identities and builds their self-esteem. This fosters a supportive classroom environment where learners feel valued and confident.

4.3 *Educational Equity*

MTB-MLE promotes fairness by lowering language barriers in education. This is especially helpful for learners from marginalized and indigenous communities, contributing to higher retention and completion rates.

5 Multilingual Education in the Indian Context

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries, with hundreds of languages and dialects spoken. The Indian education system has long acknowledged the importance of the mother tongue through policies like the Three-Language Formula. The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly emphasizes using the home language or mother tongue as the medium for instruction, at least until Grade 5 and ideally until Grade 8.

Despite policy backing, implementation faces challenges like a shortage of trained teachers, lack of quality learning materials, and socio-political attitudes favouring English. Therefore, effective curriculum design is crucial for putting MTB-MLE into action in Indian classrooms.

6 Curriculum Design for MTB-MLE

Curriculum design requires systematic planning of learning goals, content, teaching methods, and assessment. In the context of MTB-MLE, curriculum design must meet multilingual and multicultural objectives.

6.1 Principles of MTB-MLE Curriculum Design

A strong MTB-MLE curriculum should include:

- Learner-centred: Responding to learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds
- Additive: Promoting multilingualism without diminishing the mother tongue
- Developmentally appropriate: Matching learners' cognitive and linguistic stages-Context-sensitive: Reflecting local knowledge, culture, and realities

6.2 Language Allocation and Progression

Curriculum design should clearly define the role of each language throughout different schooling stages. The mother tongue should dominate early years, with gradual exposure to second and third languages. Language progression should be planned carefully to avoid premature transitions.

6.3 Integration of Language and Content

In MTB-MLE, language and content learning are intertwined. Subjects like mathematics, environmental studies, and social science are taught through the mother tongue, ensuring clarity in understanding while supporting language growth.

7 Teaching–Learning Materials and Pedagogy

Curriculum design needs to be backed by suitable teaching and learning materials and teaching practices.

7.1 Development of Materials

Textbooks and learning resources should be created in the mother tongue, using local stories, examples, and cultural references. Multilingual glossaries and parallel texts can aid in transitioning to additional languages.

7.2 Pedagogical Approaches

Interactive and participatory teaching methods are crucial to MTB-MLE. Techniques such as storytelling, group work, project-based learning, and oral traditions draw on learners' language strengths to encourage active engagement.

8 Assessment in MTB-MLE Curriculum

Assessment practices must match the principles of MTB-MLE. Early assessments should be conducted in the mother tongue to measure learners' understanding accurately. Formative assessment methods, such as observation, portfolios, and oral tasks, work well. As new languages are introduced, assessments should gradually include multilingual skills.

9 Challenges in Implementing MTB-MLE Curriculum

Despite its advantages, MTB-MLE faces several hurdles:

- Shortage of trained multilingual teachers
- Limited quality materials in mother tongues
- Societal preference for dominant or global languages
- Administrative and policy-related obstacles

Addressing these challenges requires ongoing political commitment, investment in teacher training, and community involvement.

10 Best Practices and Recommendations

Successful MTB-MLE programs around the world emphasize the following:

- Training teachers in multilingual teaching methods
- Involving the community in curriculum development
- Continuous monitoring and assessment
- Aligning language policies with curriculum goals

Curriculum designers should create flexible and inclusive frameworks that accommodate language diversity while maintaining academic standards.

11 Conclusion

Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education is a game-changing approach that views language as a resource rather than a barrier. Good curriculum design is vital for the success of MTB-MLE, ensuring that language diversity is reflected in education planning, teaching, and assessment. By building learning on the mother tongue and promoting multilingualism, education systems can improve learning outcomes, advance social justice, and protect linguistic and cultural heritage. In multilingual settings like India, MTB-MLE offers a practical path toward inclusive and fair education, provided it has solid curriculum design and ongoing institutional support.

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