Building on Firm Foundations: Mother-Tongue Based Early Childhood Education

Catherine Young
SIL LEAD Asia
41-5 Soi 8 (Sailom)
Thanon Phahol Yothin
Samsennai, Phayathai
Bangkok, 10400
Thailand
catherine_young@sil.org

Fiona Morgan
SIL Bangladesh
House 8 Road 17
Uttara Sector 4
Dhaka 1230
Bangladesh
+8801715457908
fiona_morgan@sil.org

ABSTRACT
The goals of Education for All (EFA) are centrally concerned with access and equity. If children are excluded from education, they are denied their rights and prevented from developing their potential. Although many countries in Asia are making significant progress in meeting EFA targets, the challenge remains of expanding access to quality basic education to include marginalised groups, particularly learners excluded through ethnolinguistic identity.

The early experiences the child brings to school are fundamental in setting a foundation for cognitive and academic development. The early years of schooling form attitudes towards formal education which impact retention of learners in the school system. Such development is a function of the child’s interaction with all the structures of the environment in which he lives. The extent to which the student’s home language and culture are incorporated into the curriculum and smaller communities are encouraged to participate in their children’s education can be seen as inclusive strategies that value local ownership.

1. INTRODUCTION
It is twenty years since the Education for All movement first set governments the challenge of providing basic education for all children, youth and adults. Ten years later the Dakar Framework for Action set a target date of 2015 for governments to achieve this goal [12]. At the heart of this commitment is a concern for access and equity. Communities who are excluded from education are denied their rights and are unable to fulfill their potential to contribute to their local and national societies and to the global community.

Many countries in Asia have made significant progress towards meeting their EFA targets
but some groups within countries and across the region remain marginalized, including ethnolinguistic minorities – that is, communities whose language and culture are different from the national majority people group. In some Asian countries, less than 60% of the population has access to education in their first language [7].

In the Philippines, specific steps are being taken to address these challenges and a press release from January 20th 2010 notes that the government has institutionalized the pre-school system and mandated the use of the mother tongue as the language of instruction through Department of Education Order no. 74 s. 2009 as part of its efforts to reach the EFA goals. The PRIME project (Philippine Response to Indigenous and Muslim Education), funded through AusAid and the Government of the Philippines is also designed to improve access to quality education for disadvantaged groups [5].

2. BANGLADESH: THE NATIONAL CONTEXT
This paper will focus on the situation in Bangladesh and some responses to the challenges of providing appropriate education to those so often marginalised because of their linguistic and ethnic identity. Bangladesh is a country rich in languages and cultures. Bengali is the official and national language of Bangladesh and the medium of instruction at all levels of education. The right to use Bengali, rather than Urdu, was a central issue in the War of Independence against Pakistan in 1971 and language and national identity remain closely linked in Bangladesh.

Among the population of more than 140 million, 98% speak Bengali. According to the UNHCR there are more than 2 million indigenous people – known as Adivasis – living in Bangladesh [11]. The indigenous people themselves claim that there are around 50 indigenous communities [9]. Currently, the languages of some ethnolinguistic minority groups are used orally as “transitional” or “auxiliary” languages to explain the curriculum but within the government education system there is no explicit provision for the use of the languages of the Adivasi communities at any level of formal education. For this reason, many ethnolinguistic communities are facing the loss of their linguistic and cultural heritage and, simultaneously, lack access to relevant education that begins in a language that they speak and understand which would enable them to access national and global languages.

According to the EFA Global Monitoring Report 2006, Bangladesh has a low chance of achieving the EFA goals by 2015 [14]. The Bangladeshi government is, however, committed to the goals and has adopted the national “Primary Education Development Plan (PEDP) II” to address the low enrolment rate and improve the quality of delivery of primary education. The PEDP II makes reference to the needs of indigenous children and will take initiatives to consult indigenous communities on ways of increasing access to education. This would include prioritising the construction of schools, recruiting indigenous teachers and using local languages as the medium of instruction for Grades 1-2 [2]. Although the Education Development Plan includes these specific strategies, there has not yet been systematic implementation of multilingual education using local languages.

3. EARLY YEARS’ MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS
3.1 The Regional Context
In 2007, SIL Bangladesh, in partnership with Save the Children UK, began to provide technical support to a project run by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) of southeast Bangladesh. The EU was the major donor for the project.

The hilly terrain, cultural and ethnic diversity and administrative structures of this region distinguish the Hill Tracts from the rest of the
country. Decades of political and social unrest have prevented CHT from keeping pace with development in other areas of Bangladesh. However, the CHT Peace Accord of 1997, which put an end to two decades of insurgency in the Hill areas, opened up new opportunities in the region and in 2006, the UNDP initiated preliminary research for the implementation of the “Basic Education – Chittagong Hill Tracts” (BE-CHT) project. The project was designed to include, as a major component, the development of mother tongue based multilingual education. Phase One of the project involved the development of a curriculum to serve pre-primary pupils aged 4 to 5 years old in eight languages of the Hill Tracts – Tripura (Khagrachari and Ushoi), Marma, Chakma, Tangchangya, Bawm, Mro and Khyang.

When children begin their education in an unfamiliar language, they spend much of their early schooling attempting to understand the language of the classroom, rather than engaging with the subjects being taught. This early discouraging experience leads to low self-esteem and negative attitudes towards formal education. The inevitable result is low retention rates as many minority language speakers drop out of school. Studies by the Indigenous Children’s Education Forum in Bangladesh stated that “failure to engage indigenous students in meaningful ways results in classroom experiences that are incomprehensible and culturally invalidating. The result is that indigenous children often lose interest, under-perform and drop out, and remain trapped in conditions of deprivation and marginalization” [9]. In 2001 more than 60% of indigenous children from the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh were dropping out of school – a much higher rate than the estimated national average [1]. High levels of grade repetition and drop-out result in low levels of system efficiency and quality of learning. Learners who drop out of school in the early years do not acquire the literacy skills or other social and academic skills required to access employment opportunities which will contribute to family income and break cycles of generational poverty [13].

The mother-tongue based multilingual education curriculum for the first year of pre-primary education in BE-CHT was designed to be delivered exclusively in the pupils’ mother tongue and to reflect the culture of the community with which the learners are familiar. It is planned that, as the programme develops, children will be introduced to oral Bengali (the national language) in their second year of pre-school education and to English in fourth grade (9 and 10 year olds) [11].

3.2 Community Involvement
The educational process is more multidimensional than it seems on the surface and is broader than the relationship between the learner and the teacher. Incorporating the learners’ home language and culture into the curriculum encourages smaller communities to participate in their children’s education and to take local ownership. Cummins emphasises social networks at the heart of successful education [4]. Relationships between stakeholders in the educational process can provide or destroy the environment in which students choose to participate in or withdraw from schooling, contributing to increased enrolment and more effective retention of learners in the educational process. Collier and Thomas’ research found that parents of children in multilingual school systems “feel welcomed, valued and respected, and included in school decision-making” [3]. This enables parents to reinforce the link between learning at home and in school. Parents who understand the education system are also more likely to send their children to school.

As described in the paper by my colleague, Zenith Sarker, a central objective of community-based language and development programmes is the promotion of local participation in decision-making and implementation. Projects supported by SIL Bangladesh are designed to build capacity for planning, developing and sustaining local ownership as communities work together to
define and address their own language and development goals without sacrificing their languages and cultural identity. In the BE-CHT project, SIL Bangladesh and SC-UK helped train communities in the formation of language and development committees. The members of these committees and those identified by the committees were involved in all stages of the multilingual education programme development and implementation.

3.3 Curriculum Design
An appropriate curriculum for children in the early years needs to provide a meaningful context for learning by building on what the learners already know – beginning with the known and systematically introducing new information and concepts. The early experiences the child brings to school are fundamental in setting a foundation for cognitive and academic development. Where education systems fail to value these experiences, children struggle to make a link between their learning at home and the school environment. In the BE-CHT project, participants from the local language committees described above, local NGOs and other institutions drafted a list of preliminary learning outcomes, compatible with the Bangladesh Operational Framework for Pre-Primary Education. This included an emphasis on children observing and understanding the place where they live and beginning to understand their own culture [8].

An effective early years’ curriculum should provide young children with opportunities to play, learn and make choices, without experiencing a sense of failure. Such a curriculum is multisensory and encourages the use of visual, auditory, oral and tactile strategies in learning. The “Operational Framework for Pre-Primary Education” produced by the Bangladeshi Government lists five broad categories of child development: physical, cognitive, linguistic, emotional and social [10]. These areas of development were integrated in the planning of learning activities for the BE-CHT project. One way of integrating the key areas of development is to adopt a thematic approach to planning, incorporating themes and topics that are familiar to the learner.

The CHT curriculum is based around themes from seasonal events, daily activities and the local environment. Community members used a community calendar, describing seasonal activities, to identify key events in their year. They also listed activities that were not tied to a particular season such as hunting, fishing and gardening [8]. Recognition of the local calendar may also help to improve access to schooling, by encouraging a more flexible timetable in response to local conditions [6]. Carefully chosen themes can provide a window into the culture of indigenous children, helping them relate their school experience to their everyday life. The themes provide the background to all the subjects taught and encourage learners to integrate their knowledge, rather than artificially breaking it down into curriculum areas [8].

3.4 Developing Learning and Teaching Materials
Community members in CHT also took part in workshops to produce materials for the MLE schools. Community participation not only ensures that the materials are culturally appropriate but also helps to make such a programme financially viable. Respected and interested members of the community were invited to join each workshop, particularly language committee members and community members skilled in reading and writing local languages. The participation of the community in materials production also increased the understanding of the rationale for mother-tongue based multilingual education in the local communities and local ownership of the programme itself.

The materials developed for the CHT pre-primary curriculum included a series of illustrated “Big Books” which can be shared with a whole class. “Big Books” help to develop children’s pre-reading skills including
prediction, observation and sequencing, at the same time as introducing information. They offer children a chance to become familiar with the direction of print and the idea that print carries meaning. Key to the use of “Big Books” is the promotion of dialogue between the teacher and learner – equipping the teacher to ask powerful questions which encourage the child in critical thinking.

The community also helped to write “listening stories” designed to be read aloud to children to develop their listening skills, memory, imagination and prediction skills. The stories were drawn from a variety of sources including traditional cultural stories as well as those newly written by community members. Teachers are encouraged to read the story expressively and to follow up with questions about the content.

Large, brightly-coloured pictures were produced to accompany each of key themes. The theme pictures provide a starting point for discussion about information associated with the picture (for example, local plants and animals) and encourage learners to be creative and express their thoughts imaginatively. Further series of pictures were developed to help students learn key facts and information. These show information about the theme in greater detail, for instance the different uses of plants in worship, for festivals and food. The pictures can be displayed around the classroom to help to create a stimulating learning environment. The children’s work is also displayed to encourage them to take pride in it and to develop a sense of belonging in the classroom. Display boards can be made by the community using local materials such as woven palm. Alternatively, where the classroom does not have solid walls, display materials can be hung on string across the room.

Young children respond well to rhymes with rhythm and action. In Bangladeshi mainstream education there is widespread use of Bengali poetry and songs. The CHT curriculum uses rhymes collected by local community members in the children’s first language. The teacher discusses the content of the songs or rhymes with the children and teaches them to the children line by line, reinforcing them through daily repetition [8].

3.5 Active Learning

In the BE-CHT project a flexible, integrated approach to learning is also encouraged in the layout of the classroom and the structure of the school day. Five areas, known as “learning centres” are established in the classroom, so that children can learn independently or in groups. Each child spends 10 minutes in each of the five centres carrying out different types of activities provided by the teacher including maths, pre-literacy, crafts, games and drama. Teachers develop a daily routine for the children and try to ensure all areas of development are covered in daily and weekly lesson plans. The structure of the school day helps children to understand what they need to do and when, encouraging a calm, positive learning environment. The emphasis on active learning gives children the opportunity to use their imagination, experiment and ask questions.

It is essential that the pre-primary curriculum allows children to develop their speaking and listening skills. There is a strong positive correlation between early oral language skills and the later development of literacy [4] but often the oral stage is overlooked in formal education. The participatory learning activities included in the CHT programme encourage children to talk and thereby to think using language. Even in the early stages of the pre-primary project, teachers were impressed by the confidence and participation of learners in the classroom. Early writing grows out of “speech written down” so confident talkers are likely to become confident writers. Talking reinforces learning as children fix ideas in their minds and develop them by discussing their learning with others [8].
4. Conclusion
A strong MLE programme needs to build on firm foundations, valuing and developing the oral skills that young children bring to school, without rushing literacy. Instead of regarding classroom talk as disruptive this approach sees nurturing children’s oral skills as central to their cognitive and linguistic development. An emphasis on active learning and positive classroom management strategies makes this first, formative experience of school a positive one, encouraging children to take responsibility for their own learning and to persevere with formal education.

Effective mother tongue based early childhood education should prepare children to learn the national language of education and additional languages, as appropriate, without sacrificing their home language and ethnolinguistic identity. It is hoped that the children of the Chittagong Hill Tracts will become global citizens whose education is enriched, rather than hindered by their membership of a minority group. For the children to reap the maximum benefit from the MLE programme, schools in CHT will need to maintain an interactive and multilingual methodology throughout primary education. This is an ambitious goal but one that can be achieved with the continuing co-operation of donors, NGOs and, crucially, local communities. If EFA’s targets are to be met, indigenous children throughout Asia must be offered similar opportunities to begin their education in their mother tongue.

5. References


