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Mother-Tongue-Medium Education
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[A] Introduction: Mother-tongue-medium education: a controversial topic?

Human rights lawyer Fernand de Varennes (see also his 1996) writes on the back cover of a book (Mohanty et al., 2009), that the book “addresses directly a still surprisingly controversial topic: the indisputable value of education in one’s own language”. Mother-tongue-medium education IS controversial, but “only” politically. Research evidence about it is not controversial. If you, dear reader, live in a country where your own language is a/the official language, it has probably been self-evident for you that you (can) have your first language (L1) or mother tongue (hereafter MT) as your main teaching/learning language in school. Most speakers of numerically large languages in countries that have not been colonized are probably not even aware of the privilege that they are enjoying, when they can have their education through the medium of a language that they know and understand, and teachers with whom both they and their parents can communicate easily.

But for almost all the world’s Indigenous and Tribal peoples and many if not most Minorities (hereafter ITMs), and for most children in former colonies in Africa and Asia (regardless of their minority or majority status), this is a dream that they are still fighting for. “About 50 to 70 percent of the world’s 101 million children out of school are from minorities or indigenous peoples”, and “Over half of world’s school dropouts are from minorities” (said by Minority Rights Group International when launching their *2009 State of the World’s Minorities and Indigenous Peoples* report in July 2009).

If ITMs can attend school at all, they are mostly forced to accept education in an alien dominant language, in *submersion* programmes (see below). These are *subtractive*: they subtract from ITM children’s linguistic repertoire; the children learn (some of) a dominant language at the cost of their MTs. They should be *additive*, adding good knowledge of an official or dominant language to a thorough knowledge of the MTs. These children’s access to education is denied because of the wrong medium of education (see Tomaševski, 2001, Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010). This is a violation of ITM children’s human right to education.

It is fair to say that all solid research evidence shows that

- teaching ITM children through the medium of an alien dominant language can have and often has extremely negative consequences. Sociologically, educationally and psychologically it can be seen as genocidal (see, e.g., Skutnabb-Kangas 2000, Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar 2010).

- teaching ITM children mainly through the medium of their mother tongues minimally for 6-8 years, preferably longer, with good teaching of a dominant language as a second or foreign language (preferably with bilingual teachers), can lead to high levels of bi/multilingualism, and many other positive consequences. Under well-resourced conditions, with qualified teachers, high-quality materials, etc, 6 years might be just enough; under less fortunate conditions, with crowded classrooms, few materials, poorly qualified teachers with low salaries, etc, 8 years

seems to be a minimum (see articles in Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, Eds., in press). The longer ITM children have their MTs as the main teaching/learning languages, the better their school achievement and the better they also learn the dominant language.

The few counterarguments against *mother-tongue-based multilingual education* (hereafter MLE) for ITM children are political and not research-based.

The rest of the article addresses two issues extremely briefly:

1. It presents desirable *educational goals* for ITM children, and relates them to *non-models and weak models of bi-/multilingual education*, which do not reach the goals, and *strong models*, which do, summarizing some *results from research on MLE*.
2. In order to understand why the models which do not reach the goals are still chosen by politicians and school authorities (and also many parents), it presents *fallacies* (mistaken beliefs, based on false argumentation) that (have) guide(d) much of educational language planning for ITM children, and refutes them briefly.

[A] Educational goals and models for bi/multilingual education

A good educational programme for both ITMs and dominant group children leads to the following goals from a language(s), identity and competence point of view:

1. high levels of multilingualism;
2. a fair chance of achieving academically at school;
3. strong, positive multilingual and multicultural identity and positive attitudes towards self and others;
4. a fair chance of awareness and competence building as prerequisites for working for a more equitable world, for oneself and one's own group as well as others, locally and globally (e.g. Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010).

Once the goals have been clarified, the means to reach them need to be discussed, striving towards "ideal" conditions. "Ideal" models (and there are many) have to be adapted to the various contexts and realities on the ground, in different parts of a country, different districts and different schools (see Benson 2009). No models or programmes can be transferred directly to other contexts without localising them.

However, we know from research and experience worldwide what some of the general principles, ideal characteristics and prerequisites are for reaching the four goals and in showing respect for ITM's linguistic human rights (LHRs). Colin Baker (e.g. 2001) presents weak and strong models of bilingual education; I have added "non-models". Some are discussed below.

It is clear from both research and practical evidence that *subtractive submersion education* does not reach any of the goals and do not respect children's LHRs. In *submersion/"sink-or-swim" programmes*,

linguistic minority children with a low-status mother tongue are forced to accept instruction through a foreign majority/official/dominant language, in classes in which the teacher does not understand the minoritised mother tongue, and where the dominant language constitutes a threat to the MT, which runs the risk of being replaced; a *subtractive* language learning situation. In another variant, stigmatised majority children (or groups of minority children in a country with no decisive numerical and/or power majorities) are forced to accept instruction through the medium of a foreign (often former colonial) high-status language.... Submersion often occurs in mixed mother tongue classes, mostly without native speakers of the

language of instruction, but also in linguistically homogenous classes ... The teacher may not understand children's mother tongue(s). The foreign language is not learned at a high level, at the same time as children's mother tongues are displaced and not learned in formal domains (e.g., mother-tongue literacy is not achieved). Often the children are made to feel ashamed of their mother tongues, or at least to believe in the superiority of the language of instruction (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty 2008, pp. 12-13).

Submersion can (and often does) have several kinds of negative consequences socially, economically, and politically. It can cause very serious mental harm: social dislocation, psychological, cognitive, linguistic and educational harm, and, partially through this, also economic, social and political marginalization. It can also (and often does) cause serious physical harm, partly as a long-term consequence of the educational, economic and political marginalisation. It often curtails the development of the children's capabilities and perpetuates poverty (according to theories by Amartya Sen, economics Nobel laureate, Sen 1985; see Mohanty & Misra 2000). It is organized against solid research evidence about how best to reach high levels of bi/multilingualism and how to enable ITM children to achieve academically. Dominant-language-only submersion programmes "are widely attested as the least effective educationally for minority language students", May and Hill write (2003: 1). There are no examples in research of high degree of success *at a group level* where ITM children taught in an L2 would have succeeded. Even if some individuals may manage, they do it not because of the way their education has been organised but *despite* it.

"*Mainstream*" education for dominant group children in their own languages, even when foreign languages are taught as subjects, do not make them high-level multilingual either, unless they have extra exposure to the foreign languages (media, travel, etc). Both of these belong to non-models.

In *transitional early-exit and late-exit* programmes,

linguistic minority children with a low-status mother tongue are initially instructed through the medium of their mother tongue for a few years; the mother tongue is used as an instrument for acquisition of the dominant language, and content. In early-exit programmes, children are transferred to a majority-language medium programme as soon as they develop (some) oral communicative competence in the majority language, in most cases after one to three years. In late-exit programmes children may receive some instruction through L1 up to the fifth or sixth grade; sometimes the mother tongue is taught as a subject thereafter. For both program types, the primary goal is proficiency in the dominant language (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty 2008, p. 13).

Early-exit and even many late-exit transitional programmes for ITM children represent *weak models*. Even when children have a year or two of mother-tongue-medium education before being transitioned to education through the medium of a dominant language, the results are disastrous educationally, even if the child may psychologically feel a bit better initially. The children do not reach any of the educational goals listed above. According to Kathleen Heugh (2009), early transition to the international language of wider communication across Africa is accompanied by *poor literacy in L1 and L2, poor numeracy/mathematics & science; high failure and drop-out rates; and High costs/wastage of expenditure* (e.g. Alidou et al. 2006).

Late-exit programmes may achieve some of the goals to some extent, but even in them, children's capabilities are not developed maximally. The later the exit happens, the better the results.

However, teaching through the medium of an L2 does not necessarily lead to a low degree of success: dominant group members can be taught through the medium of a foreign language, with a high degree of success, in *immersion programmes*. These belong to *strong models* of bilingual education. They reach the goals to a large extent. In *immersion programmes for dominant language speakers*,

parents of linguistic majority children with a high-status mother tongue ... choose voluntarily to enroll their children in a programme in which instruction is conducted through the medium of a foreign/minority language. Most of the children ... [have] the same mother tongue. Teachers ... are bilingual so that children can initially use their own language and still be understood. ... [The] children's mother tongue is not in danger of being replaced by the language of instruction. Although children enrolled in French immersion programmes in Canada initially represented a largely homogenous Anglophone population, increasingly, children whose mother tongue is neither English nor French are enrolling in these programs (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty 2008, pp. 6-7).

Another fairly recent type (e.g. Hawai'i, Aotearoa, the Saami) is *revitalization immersion for Indigenous peoples or minorities*. Here,

dominated-group children who have partially or completely lost their ancestral language choose voluntarily, among existing alternatives, to be instructed through the medium of the Indigenous/minority language, in classes with children with the same goal and target language, in which the teacher is bilingual so that children can initially use their dominant language, and in contexts in which that language is not in danger of being replaced by the Indigenous/minority language; an additive language learning context (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty 2008, p. 7).

A third strong model is *language maintenance or language shelter* programmes. Here, ITM

children (often with a low-status mother tongue) choose voluntarily, among existing alternatives, to be instructed through the medium of their mother tongue, in classes with minority children with the same mother tongue, in which the teacher is bilingual and there is a pedagogically sound instructional programme in the majority language as a second or foreign language, also provided by a bilingual teacher (Skutnabb-Kangas & McCarty 2008, p. 8).

All strong models have a good chance of achieving all the educational goals listed. In addition, they respect children's LHRs. Comparison of several types of programmes for ITM children have been done (including children in African and Asian countries with many ethnolinguistic groups and no numerical majorities, often with an ex-colonial language as a dominant language):

- a) completely dominant-language medium *submersion* education from grade 1;

- b) *early-exit transitional* programmes, with mother tongue medium education for the first 1-2 years, followed by using a dominant language as the teaching language;
- c) *late-exit transitional* programmes where the transition from a mother tongue medium programme to a dominant language medium programme is more gradual but is mostly completed by grade 5 or 6; and
- d) *maintenance* programmes where the mother tongue is the main medium of education at least for the first eight years, or even longer.

Results on academic achievement show unanimously that the children from programme types a) and b) are as a group never likely to reach a native-like competence in the dominant language, at the same time as they will not learn their own language properly either (they do not learn to read and write it, for instance, even if a writing system and materials exist) (e.g. Williams 1998, 2006; Ramirez 1992; Thomas & Collier 2002; Alidou et al. 2006; Mohanty 1995, 2009; Panda & Mohanty 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Their academic achievement results are mostly very poor at a group level. Children in late-exit transitional programmes (c) fare somewhat better, but even their results are much below what they could be.

Solid research shows that the longer ITM children in a low-status position have their own language as the main medium of teaching, the better the general school achievement and the better they also learn the dominant language, provided, of course, that they have good teaching in it, preferably given by bilingual teachers. In addition, they learn their own mother tongues well (in addition to the list above, see, e.g. Thomas & Collier 2002, May & Hill 2003; Heugh et al. 2007; several articles in Garcia, Skutnabb-Kangas & Torres-Guzman (Eds.) 2006, Skutnabb-Kangas et al. (Eds.) 2009, Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, in press, and Tollefson & Tsui (Eds.) 2003; see also Cummins 2009). If we want to learn from research and experience, mainly MT-medium education of ITM children should last minimally 8 years. Everything else is irrational and costly compromises.

The results also show that the length of MTM education is more important than any other factor (including socio-economic status) in predicting the educational success of ITM students, including their competence in the dominant language.

An example: Ethiopia has an innovative and progressive national education policy, in principle based on 8 years of MTM education. Regions have the authority to make their own decentralized implementation plans. Some regions transfer to English medium already after 4 or 6 years. The Ministry of Education commissioned a study across all the regions (Heugh et al. 2007; see also Heugh 2009, Benson 2009, Heugh & Skutnabb-Kangas, in press). Ethiopia's efficient collection of system-wide assessment data shows very clear patterns of learner achievement at Grade/Year 8, 10 and 12. Those learners who have 8 years of MTM education plus English as a subject perform better across the curriculum than those with 6 years of MTM. These, in turn, do better than those with 4 years. The learners with 8 years of MTM also show similar results in English despite much less school expose as compared with those who have shifted to English medium much earlier. The only ones exceeding them are children in the capital who hear English daily.

Burkina Faso (e.g. Ilboudo & Nikiema, in press), Peru (Perez 2009, Perez & Trapnell, in press) and many other countries are now either implementing or on the verge of implementing minimally late-exit transitional programmes. In Orissa, India (Mohanty et al. 2009, Panda & Mohanty 2009), and in Nepal (Hough et al. 2009, Yonjan-Tamang et al. 2009, Taylor, in press), very promising experiments are also

taking place. See, for instance, the new National Multilingual Education Resource Centre in India <http://www.nmrc-jnu.org/>. In the Saami country (e.g. Aikio-Puoskari 2009; see also the Resource Centre for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in the Norwegian part of the Saami country www.galdu.org) and in the Basque country (e.g. Cenoz 2009) and in many other places, (mother-tongue-based) MLE lasts even longer, with very positive results. There are now many books describing successful mother-tongue-based multilingual education (search in <http://www.tove-skutnabb-kangas.org/en/Tove-Skutnabb-Kangas-Bibliography.html>).

[A] Fallacies

In teaching languages, one can often identify a set of guiding principles that teachers and education authorities follow to achieve good results. Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas 1986 (see also Phillipson 1992a, chapter 6) presented 'the five key tenets' of teaching English as a second or foreign language; we saw all of them as fallacies. Many researchers have worked on them more generally, also in relation to other dominant languages (e.g. Cummins, Benson, Heugh). Below is my latest synthesis based on all of us, and more. These tenets, which have in guided much of ITM education all over the world, are scientifically false and can rather be (and have been) labeled fallacies. Many have already been refuted implicitly above. Still, many parents, teachers, administrators and politicians still believe in these fallacies. I will use "English" as an example, but any dominant language can be used instead.

1. Children have learned their L1 by the time they enter primary school (*mastery-of-mother-tongue-equals-BICS fallacy*). BICS, Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills, implies speaking fluently, with a native-like accent, about concrete everyday things in contextualized face-to-face interaction; see Jim Cummins' web page at <http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/> for the concepts BICS and CALP). Children master BICS-related aspects of their L1 around 5-7 years of age whereas CALP-related aspects start approaching maturity only in the late teens. According to this fallacy ITM children need no more MT teaching in school since they already 'know' it; what they master is BICS but many years of MTM teaching is needed to develop their CALP to a high level.

2. Once children can speak English this means that they can learn through English (use it as a medium of teaching the curriculum) (*L2-BICS-equals-L2-CALP fallacy*). BICS-related aspects of an L2 can develop in school in a couple of years whereas it takes 5-9 years to develop age-appropriate CALP, again depending on the conditions. CALP-levels are decisive for school achievement; ITM children should not be taught through the medium of an L2 in de-contextualised linguistically and cognitively demanding subjects before their L2 CALP is fully developed, i.e. certainly not before grade 7, and under some conditions later.

3. The earlier English (L2) medium instruction begins, the better the results, also since children learn languages faster than adults (*early start fallacy*). Several types of programme have shown that if teaching a foreign language as a subject or teaching through the medium of a foreign language is *additive*, it **can** start early. Also early foreign language teaching in 'mainstream' programmes shows it. But a large longitudinal Swedish study (Holmstrand 1982) showed that the gains of starting a foreign language as a subject early were minimal. In general, adults are better

language learners than children. Immersion programmes show that *additive* early start with a foreign medium is perfectly possible. On the other hand, if the learning of another language is *subtractive* (as it is in all the non-forms and weak forms of bilingual education), the earlier it starts the worse.

4. The more time the school spends on teaching and using English, the better children will speak English (*maximum exposure fallacy*). Provided the quality of the instruction in L2 is the same in two models, one with maximum exposure to L2, the other with much less exposure to L2, but high quality MTM instruction instead, two types of result have emerged: Either there is *no relationship between time-on-task and L2 results*, meaning both groups perform equally well in L2, despite the MTM group having had much less exposure to L2. Alternatively, there is a reverse relationship: the **less** time is used on instruction through the medium of the dominant language, the **better** the results in L2, again provided that the time is instead used on both good MTM teaching and good subject teaching of L2, given by bilingual teachers (Ramirez 1992, Cummins 2009).

5. If other languages (i.e. children's L1s) are used much, standards of English will drop (*subtractive fallacy*). This is an old fallacy. For instance, the Norwegian School Law of 1880 (the 'Magna Carta subtractive fallacy of Norwegianisation'), paragraph 3, said: 'Instruction in the school is in the Norwegian language. The Lappish or Finnish languages are used only as a means of helping to explain what is impossible to understand for the children ... Even if the majority of the children in a group do not understand Norwegian, the teacher must always keep the above regulations in mind and remember that it is imperative that the Lappish and Finnish languages are not used more than absolutely necessary.' (quoted in Lind Meløy 1980, pp. 122-123).

Compare this with the policy offered to children in Africa and Asia almost 100 years later, in the pedagogical tradition which still dominates English teaching: 'The teaching of vocabulary should be mainly through demonstration in situations. When, however, a very brief explanation in the mother tongue is sufficient to ensure that the meaning is fully and accurately understood, such explanation may be given.' (Makerere Report 1961: 13, probably the most influential document on policy and methods for teaching English in ex-colonial countries; Phillipson 1992a, chapter 6). Today, in all parts of the world, the use of the mother tongues of ITM children is still restricted or forbidden, through regulations, or through the educational structure where teachers do not know the MTs of their children.

6. English is best taught monolingually (*monolingual fallacy*). This fallacy is closely related to the subtractive fallacy. It prevents contrastive teaching where the languages are compared and where the teacher can show what in the *common underlying proficiency* for both languages (Cummins) can be used by the children and what they need to learn separately for both languages. The fallacy prevents or delays the development of the metalinguistic awareness (knowing how languages function) that seems to be the main causal factor in most of the cognitive and other benefits accruing from high-level multilingualism (e.g. Mohanty 1995).

7. The ideal teacher of English is a native speaker (*native speaker fallacy*). Quality second/foreign language teaching depends on teacher qualifications, not nativeness. There are few aspects where well-qualified non-native teachers cannot be as good as

or better than native speakers (Phillipson 1992b, Rampton 1990, Skutnabb-Kangas 2000). Monolingual teachers are bad role models for children who are to become bilingual. In my view, a monolingual language teacher for ITM children is per definition incompetent.

8. If ITMs are taught in their own groups/classes/schools, especially through the medium of their own languages, this prevents integration and leads to/is segregation, ghettoisation (*segregation fallacy*). To counteract the segregation fallacy, distinctions between physical as opposed to psychological segregation/integration, and between segregation as a goal or a means are helpful. For many ITMs, at least initial physical segregation from dominant group members seems to be a necessity in order to enable later integration psychologically and competence-wise. If physical segregation in MTM-classes ensures that students have a better chance of acquiring the prerequisites for later integrating themselves linguistically, content-wise, psychologically and physically, then initial physical segregation is used as a positive means towards a later integrationist goal. ITM students are, of course, psychologically integrated in MTM classrooms with other children with whom they share a MT. Here they have a better chance of being appreciated for who they are and what they know, rather than the system defining them as deficient or below the norm, as is often the case when they are physically 'integrated' in dominant group. Forced initial physical integration into a dominant language and dominant group classroom may prevent dominated group students from acquiring the competencies they need (Skutnabb-Kangas 1984, 2000).

These beliefs in a monolingual L2-teaching methodology, monolingual teachers, maximum exposure, and the other fallacies, which result in forbidding the minority language or restricting its use, have today developed from the earlier more crude forms to their present more sophisticated forms. These are at least equally effective in committing linguistic genocide but without letting children and parents notice that this is what is happening. It is extremely important to recognise that the ideology is still the same.

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