Beyond Bilingual Education: Multilingual Language Education in Nepal[1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the framework for implementing multilingual language education (MLE) countrywide in Nepal. I outline key tenets of MLE, explain the rationale for implementing it in the Nepali context, and describe the MLE framework that formed the basis of trainer workshops. The framework is divided into 7 topics: 4 of which are specific to MLE, and 3 of which are widely discussed in the literature on bilingual education and therefore not discussed in this paper. I argue that MLE should be implemented in other countries for both educational and socio-political reasons relating to the educational well-being of linguistic minority children.

Keywords: multilingual language education (MLE), indigenous minorities, Nepal, MLE framework, linguistic human rights

Resumen

El propósito del presente manuscrito es describir el marco para la implementación de la educación multilingüe de idiomas (EMI) por todo el país de Nepal. Esbozo los conceptos claves de la EMI, explico la lógica para la implementación de la misma en el contexto nepalí, y describo el marco de EMI que formó la base de los talleres para formadores. El marco se divide en 7 temas: 4 de los cuales son específicos a la EMI, y 3 de los cuales son discutidos ampliamente en la literatura sobre la educación bilingüe, que entonces no se presentan en este artículo. Argumento que la EMI debe ser implementada en otros países para razones tantas educativas que socio-políticas, relacionando esto al bienestar educacional de los niños de las minorías lingüísticas.

Palabras claves: educación multilingüe de idiomas (EMI), minorías indígenas, Nepal, marco para EMI, derechos humanos lingüísticos

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If politicians and language policy makers in countries around the world, countries like Colombia, Japan, and Canada, decided to teach every child through the medium of their mother tongue (L1), what sort of resistance would they encounter? What would be the benefits of all children receiving L1-based instruction as well as instruction in the official language of their homeland (bilingual education)? What if politicians and language policy makers agreed to offer L1-based instruction to all children even if that meant instruction in over 100 languages in one country? Though the issues that such a venture would raise might sound impossible to resolve, the government of Nepal plans to offer L1-based instruction to every child in the country. The right to L1-based instruction has been enshrined in the Constitution since 2007 (Government of Nepal, 2007; Nepal Law Book Society, 2007). Furthermore, all children in Nepal also learn Nepali and English from grade 1 onwards, which means that Nepal is implementing multilingual language education (MLE).[3]

Were another country to attempt to replicate the Nepali model, one might well imagine the counter-arguments such a move would meet. One reasonable argument would be: "We don't even know what a countrywide MLE program would look like." This paper outlines the framework for implementing MLE countrywide in Nepal. In it, I briefly describe the Nepali context, and the rationale behind introducing MLE there. This is followed by an overview of the MLE framework that was the basis for workshops I gave to introduce the concept of MLE to the teachers and writers of the materials. I begin by outlining key tenets of MLE.

Key Tenets of MLE

For language education to be classified as MLE, more than two languages must be used as languages of instruction. That is, at least three languages must be used for content-based instruction, not just taught as subjects [e.g., as second or foreign languages (L2/FL), García, Skutnabb-Kangas & Torres-Guzman, 2006]. In the Nepali case, those languages include: children's L1, which may be indigenous/minority languages; Nepali, the official language of Nepal, and English as a Foreign Language (EFL). In the Nepali MLE program that I was involved in, all three languages were taught from grade 1 onwards,

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[3] Due to space limitations, I do not present a historical overview of previous or concurrent MLE projects in Nepal, or focus on program shortcomings (for a discussion of program *glitches* and *growing pains*, see Taylor, 2010). For information on teaching English as a foreign language in public and private schools in Nepal, and discussion of where English is situated in the debate around multilingual education, see Giri (2007 & 2009) as those topics are beyond the scope of the present paper.

though only the indigenous/minority language was used as a medium of instruction in the primary grades, and Nepali and English were taught as subjects.

Skutnabb-Kangas (1995) set out key tenets of MLE almost 2 decades ago. To achieve multilingualism through education for minority language children, there are six key criteria:

1. The language that is least likely to develop to a high formal level should be used as the main language of education for the first 8 years of education;
2. Children with the same L1 should be grouped together initially, especially for cognitively demanding, decontextualized subjects;
3. All children's L1s should be equally valorized and they should all have equal knowledge of the language of instruction. In dual language programs, the practice is to alternate between programs. For example, if half of the children in the Nepali MLE program spoke Maithili and the other half spoke Tharu, the teacher could use Maithili all day on Monday, then Tharu all day on Tuesday, and keep alternating like that, or the teacher could speak one language in the morning and the other one in the afternoon. In that way, both groups of children would understand the language of instruction for half of the time and not understand for the other half of the time: an equitable solution;
4. Teachers should be bi- or multilingual, though it is more important for them to be fluent in the children's L1, which is the language of instruction in the primary grades, than in their L2, the official language, until later on in the children's schooling;
5. EFL should be taught by teachers who know the children's L1; and
6. Children should study both their L1 (e.g., an indigenous/minority language) and their L2 (Nepali) as compulsory subjects all the way through to school completion so as to become biliterate in those languages. (Adapted from Skutnabb-Kangas, 1995)

MLE provides minority language children with sustained instruction through their L1, as is the case with bilingual education. Indeed, research conducted in North America and Africa supports the assertion that there is strong convergent evidence between minority language children receiving L1-based instruction in bi-/multilingual language education programs and meeting educational success (Alidou, Boly, Brock-Utne, Diallo, Heugh, & Wolff, 2006; Collier & Thomas, 1989, 1999; Cummins, 1981, 2009a; Heugh, 2009). The empirical work and reviews of related long-term studies conducted by the researchers cited above show that students who receive L1-based instruction for the longest time (e.g., 8 years) experience the most positive educational outcomes. Therefore, MLE was selected to increase the likelihood of children in Nepal staying in school for primary education; however, that was not the only reason for introducing MLE into the Nepali context.

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Why MLE in the Nepali context?

Yadava (2007) claims that 104 ethnic languages are currently spoken in Nepal and that they come from 4 different language families: Indo-European (Indo-Aryan), Tibeto-Burman, Austro-Asiatic, and Dravidian. Some 80% of all Nepalis speak an Indo-Aryan language such as Tharu, which was included in the MLE project. There are up to 57 Tibeto-Burman languages in Nepal, which are spoken by 19% of the population. Two Tibeto-Burman languages included in the program were Limbu and Newar. Only 0.19% of all Nepalis speak a language from the third language family, Austro-Asiatic. One such language, Santhali, was included in the MLE project. Finally, only 0.13% of the Nepali population are speakers of a Dravidian language (such as Jhangar [or Uranw], which was included in the MLE project).

Though some 48% of the population speak Nepali as their L1 (Giri, 2009), over 50% of the school-aged population speak a language other than Nepali as their L1 (Yadava, 2007). This discrepancy has implications for setting appropriate language-in-education policies, developing culturally and linguistically responsive programs, teaching practices, and grouping children. For instance, Yadava (2007) cites school-level educational statistics compiled in Nepal in 2005, and states that of the 4,502,697 students who were enrolled in primary level grades in Nepal, 1,602,047 came from indigenous/minority groups, and that the majority of children who dropped out of school did not speak Nepali as their L1. As Yadava (2007) explains:

> Nepal is a mosaic of linguistic diversity. However, previous centralized regimes established assimilationist policies which entrusted a single language, Nepali, with all power and prestige while minority languages were looked upon as inferior and were suppressed. With the growing awareness of individual rights there has been focus of [*sic*] minority accommodation. It is with these perspectives that we have proposed . . . a policy for transitional bilingual education. (p. 17)

Children who do not stay in school have reduced educational and economic prospects (Mohanty, 2008), and children who do not understand the language of instruction and who feel that their background knowledge (language, culture) is devalued, do not stay in school (Cummins, 2009b & 2009c). Indeed, the drop-out rate for indigenous/ minority children in grade 1 is 50%, which places them significantly more at risk of academic underachievement than is reflected in Nepal's overall national literacy rates (Yadava, 2007).

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Table 1

National Average Literacy Rates in Nepal in 2001 and 2005-2007 for Groups Other than Tribal/Minority Populations. (Adapted from Yadava, 2007)

2001	2005-2007
54% of overall; males: 65%; females: 42%	57% of adults; males: 70%; females: 44%
	79.3% of youths (15-24 years old); males:
	85%; females: 73%

The national rate for children remaining in school up to grade 5 increased from 58% to 79% between 1999 and 2004. Therefore, a 50% drop-out rate from grade 1 for indigenous/minority children is striking. This discrepancy in figures between the national average and that of minority-language children also explains the rationale behind introducing the transitional bilingual educational model (the MLE) described by Yadava (2007).

The model was, however, not only introduced for educational purposes; it was also introduced for socio-political purposes. That is, while bilingual education and MLE are intended to increase the educational and economic prospects of minority language speakers, they are also introduced to ensure students' linguistic human rights (LHRs). Indeed, there is a cyclical relationship between the educational and socio-political purposes of bi-/multilingual language education and economic prospects of minority language speakers. That is, without LHRs and L1-based instruction, their educational and economic prospects are limited (Mohanty, Mishra, Reddy, & Ramesh, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas & Dunbar, 2010).

Skutnabb-Kangas (1998) explains that recognition of an individual's LHRs implies being able to:

1. fully learn, use in most official situations (including schools), and identify with her L1(s) and have that identification accepted and respected by others;
2. learn (one of) the official language(s) of the country of residence and thus become bilingual (or trilingual, as the case may be);
3. not have a change of L1 imposed, which encompasses supposedly "voluntary" language shift if the individual does not know about the possible long-term consequences of such a shift (i.e., an uninformed shift would be viewed as imposed rather than fully voluntary);
4. profit from the state education system, no matter what her L1 may be (p. 23).

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When the Maoist government came into power in Nepal in 2007, it introduced an Interim Constitution guaranteeing indigenous/

minority children the right to L1-based instruction (Nurmela, Awasthi, & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2010; Government of Nepal, 2007). That is, the Interim Constitution guaranteed that children's LHRs would be respected.

Prior to 1991, Nepali-medium instruction was mandatory for all students. Policy changes for language in education came slowly because as Yadava (2007) explains, under the *Panchyat* regime (during the time of the monarchy), there was a *one nation/one language* policy and a deliberate plan to eliminate all languages other than Nepali. The status quo changed subtly in 1991 because a new constitution was passed which recognized an individual's right to L1-based instruction in primary grades; however, the policy had no "teeth." In contrast, Yadava (2007) explains how a series of events led to growing awareness of individual rights and a focus on minority accommodation. These events included:

- public demonstrations and a linguistic human rights conference organized by the Nepali Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN) in 2000;
- the involvement of the Nepali government in the Dakar Forum (Education for All/EFA), the goal of which is to make quality primary education accessible to all children (including indigenous/minority children), and a focus on L1-based instruction to meet that goal; and
- the election of a Maoist government in 2007, which instituted a new constitution and endorsed a policy of transitional multilingual education to achieve the EFA/Nepal (2004-9) goals (Nurmela et al., 2010; UNESCO, 2000; UNESCO, n. d.; Yadava, 2007).

At present, Nepali is the official language of the country, all children's L1s are recognized as national languages, and they have the right to L1-based instruction. The population is highly politicized and demands their LHRs; however, many more schools need to offer L1-medium instruction, not just courses in children's L1 as a subject. Dhakal's (2010) newspaper report gives an idea of the numbers involved and the challenges the Nepali government faces:

> Under the joint cooperation of the Nepal government and Finland, test MLE classes were held at seven schools of six districts for a period of one and half year, starting from 2007. Now, the government has started holding classes in eight different mother languages in 21 schools of six districts . . . [The] School Sector Reform Programme . . . had planned to launch mother tongue classes in 7,500 schools by 2015 for basic level education. But according to a report, 17,000 schools have already started teaching students in their mother tongues.

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While Dhakal's (2010) report does not say whether the 17,000 schools were teaching students' L1 as subjects or their L1s were the medium of instruction, the report gives an idea of the magnitude of what Nepal is undertaking. This observation begs the following question: What is the basis of such an educational program?

The MLE Framework

Before describing the actual MLE framework, it is useful to explain its place within the overall MLE project in which I was involved.

The MLE Project and Project Objectives

The MLE pilot program that I was involved in included seven school districts and nine indigenous/minority languages. The program was the result of a cooperative project between the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Nepali Ministry of Education, and was broadly supported by grassroots Nepali organizations such as the teachers' federation, the Nepal Federation of Nationalities (NEFEN), and the International Work Group on Indigenous Affairs. As Nepal is the 12th poorest country in the world, it is dependent on donor agencies for 50% of its educational budget (Collins, 2006; World Bank, 2001). Therefore, it was not unusual for a foreign government to be involved in an educational project in Nepal.

Nurmela et al. (2010) describe how, under the *Education for All* program (2004-09), jointly funded by the Government of Nepal and a development partner (the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs), the Nepali Ministry of Education introduced an MLE program for model-building purposes in 2006. The formal objectives of the project were to:

1. Create a conducive policy environment for MLE;
2. Develop an institutional structure that would facilitate a bottom-up approach to the implementation of sustainable MLE, and coordinate MLE activities;
3. Strengthen the educational sector's capacity to implement MLE by focusing on institutional structural development at central, district, and community levels;
4. Create and establish models of learning environments that would facilitate non-Nepali speaking students' learning and prepare them to continue their education after the primary level, and
5. Establish models of support networks for schools implementing MLE. (Adapted from Nurmela, n. d.).

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At the ground level, the program goals were to develop indigenous/minority communities' capacity to create L1-based primary

level programs in the primary years in local schools and to institute culturally relevant pedagogy (i.e., teaching familiar topics to local children; Hough, Magar & Yonjan-Tamang, 2009; Nurmela et al., 2010). An additional goal of the project was to develop linguistically/ culturally responsive teaching materials.

To be able to develop and teach these materials, material developers and teachers needed to understand the MLE Framework. Nepal's National Center for Educational Development (NCED), an offshoot of the Ministry of Education, prepared teacher training manuals in the original 9 languages included in the project, and then in 15 languages by the summer of 2009. I conducted two workshops for material writers and teacher trainers in the winter and summer of 2009 to introduce the theoretical and practical aspects of MLE laid out in the MLE framework. The participants needed to understand the framework well enough to lead trainer-of-trainer workshops to cascade the MLE program out gradually to all other minority language groups throughout the country.

The MLE framework. The NCED prepared the MLE framework to meet the following objectives:

1. to provide support to teachers delivering L1-based education (e.g., pedagogical training, development, and provision of L1-based materials, etc.);
2. to offer guidelines to teachers and other stakeholders to help respond to minority students' MLE needs at early stages of basic education;
3. to develop positive attitudes among MLE stakeholders towards employing mother tongues as a medium of instruction;
4. to utilize local and global knowledge on MLE principles and practices for the use of mother tongues in schools to ensure both the cognitive and holistic development of children, and
5. to develop strategies for the use of language(s) based on the additive approach to languages (i.e., adding an L2/Nepali and L3/English on to the L1 rather than replacing the L1) for intrinsic (empowerment) and instrumental (pedagogical) purposes. (Adapted from NCED, 2008)

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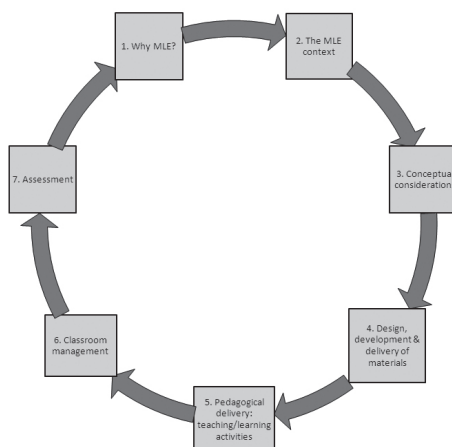The MLE Framework was divided into seven topics:

Figure 1. The MLE framework (Adapted from NCED, 2008).

For purposes of this paper, I only provide brief summaries of the content included in Topics 1 to 4 as Topics 5 to 7 are commonly discussed in the literature on bilingual education (e.g., how to scaffold activities to draw on learners' linguistic and cultural capital or what they already know; how to organize teaching in multi-grade classrooms, and how to avoid discriminatory assessment—testing children in their L2 when it is only taught as a subject, not as a medium of instruction for literacy and numeracy in the primary grades). Those aspects of Topics 1 to 4 which I describe pertain more specifically to MLE.

Why MLE? Four rationales were presented for why MLE was being introduced across Nepal. The first dealt with *enrichment*. The idea behind this notion was that by recognizing indigenous/minority children's non-mainstream Nepali home cultures and values, they would be valorized, allowing children's self-esteem to grow and encouraging them to feel as though school was for them too. Furthermore, the use of their L1 was doubly empowering: enabling them to express themselves better, and serving as a solid basis on which to build their L2 (Nepali).

The second rationale dealt with language promotion. By including minority languages in the Constitution and using them as the medium of instruction, they would be further developed, in a sense, *protected* from dominant languages and, hopefully, their speakers would be less prey to language shift. Included in this focus was an emphasis on language survival, revitalization and promotion, as well as official recognition of oral traditions.

The pedagogical rationale focused on the use of the L1 in the teaching/learning process. Children who are instructed in a dominant group language that is not their L1 require time to catch up to their dominant group peers who are, however, a moving target as their L1 skills continue to develop in an age-appropriate manner. Therefore, minority language children are at a disadvantage compared to dominant-group peers schooled in their own home language. Children who are educated in their mother tongue are at an advantage compared to their peers schooled in what is, for them, a second language. When children receive L1-based instruction, they do not experience linguistic/cultural blocks to their learning as they do not have gaps in their comprehension of lessons, do not require translation, etc. All children need L1-based curricula, textbook materials, source books, and support materials. Otherwise, they have to use resources produced in the dominant group language, which defeats the purpose of L1-based instruction to develop literacy in the L1. Another consideration is that assessment must be conducted in the language of instruction to attain valid measures of student learning.

The final rationale involves learning (the cognitive development rationale), but it could also be viewed as a linguistic rationale as it is closely linked to Cummins' (1981) interdependence hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that when children learn a concept in their L1, that knowledge will transfer to another language. For instance, if they learn about "what democracy entails" in Limbu, that knowledge will transfer to Nepali when they gain sufficient skills in Nepali to express themselves in that language; hence, time spent learning an indigenous/minority language is not wasted. If, on the other hand, they are taught about democracy in a language they do not understand, there will be no conceptual understanding to transfer to another language.

In an MLE program, when children have established a solid basis in the language of schooling (i.e., academic language) through their L1, they can gradually be introduced to learning other languages as subjects (e.g., Nepali/L2, English/L3) and, later, when they are proficient enough in their L2 (and/or L3), they can be introduced to instruction through the medium of their L2 (and/or L3). The rationale is that knowledge learned in a language that children know well can be linked to key vocabulary in another language and the same concept will be understood. If, however, teachers try to teach children a new concept in a language they have not mastered, they will not have the cognitive foundation on which to attach the new knowledge. Even if someone translated a few key words for them, that would be insufficient for concept formation to occur in the minds of the students.

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Teachers must use children's local (indigenous) knowledge as the basis for learning; linking and widening it to regional, national, and global levels. Teachers can make links between children's indigenous knowledge and how those same concepts work in broader society (e.g., religious ceremonies learned in the home culture can be linked to ceremonies of state elsewhere as the notion of a *celebration* is shared in both cases, and understood by the child). They can use children's existing schemata (mental organization of how the world works) and build on them by making analogies, generalizations, categorizations, etc.

MLE context. Topics discussed in the MLE context category include global and local realities (e.g., the growth of linguistic diversity due to international population shifts, internal migration, and national indigenous/minority groups such as those in Nepal); language policies; binding international legislation to which Nepal is a signatory; local level practices; cultural-, bio-, and linguistic diversity; language ecology; and where the MLE program fits into all of these. For the section on international legislation, I discussed how international bodies such as the United Nations developed language statements in the form of recommendations, position papers, declarations, treaties, etc. that states may choose (not) to endorse. One such instrument is the UNESCO (2003) position paper entitled "Education in a Multilingual World" and another is the United Nations (2007) "Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples." In this regard, I stressed Skutnabb-Kangas' (2000) warning: that treaties and other international instruments intended to protect indigenous/minority languages are not binding legislation, and many signatories of treaties choose to ignore them.

It was particularly important for the MLE workshop participants to understand the UNESCO (2003) recommendations as they pertain to MLE:

- UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers;
- UNESCO supports bilingual and/or multilingual education at all levels of education as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies; and
- UNESCO supports language as an essential component of inter-cultural *education* in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights. (p. 27)

Other topics included in this category included: MLE *fundamentals*, teacher development, and materials development. The fundamentals discussed included the need for continued support of a child's mother tongue throughout her school years, or for 4 to 8 years (depending on her

circumstances) until she has developed cognitive/academic language proficiency in the language (Alidou et al., 2006; Baker, 2006; Coehlo, 2007; Collier & Thomas, 1989 & 1999; Cummins, 1981 & 2009a; García, 2009). It is noteworthy that this fundamental was overlooked in the Nepali MLE program design (it was designed as an early-exit program) compared to the Ethiopian MLE design (a late-exit design, see Heugh, 2009). In the Teacher Development section, I stressed the need to introduce teachers to the basic principles of and rationale behind MLE, and to instruct teachers about appropriate teaching programs and practices to meet MLE goals. With regard to materials development, I stressed that state-developed materials are not generally written in minority languages. Therefore, communities need to develop their own teaching materials and, indeed, how to develop suitable indigenous materials was the focus of my second workshop (Taylor, 2010).

Conceptual considerations. LHRs are one of the key notions introduced in this category as are issues of language and power, and key tenets of L2 teaching and learning. With regard to issues of language and power, workshop participants/future trainers-of-trainers need to understand the connection between (a) the supports received by languages that are used as the medium of instruction (e.g., literate materials developed, vocabulary expanded, etc.) as compared to (b) what happens to languages that do not receive those sorts of supports (i.e., they become viewed as unsuitable to meet the needs of "modernity" and barriers to children's academic future). These decisions are reflected in language policies, including those involving the language of instruction. They need to understand power relations in order to also grasp how children directly feel the impact of language policy decisions. For instance, minority language children who are schooled in languages they do not know or have not mastered are in powerless situations unless their communities are in a position to fight and change the status quo (e.g., by launching an MLE program).

Design, development and delivery of materials. For this unit, I stressed that MLE teachers and material developers must conduct a needs assessment to identify the sorts of materials that they should develop. I suggested that they adopt a *funds of knowledge* approach to community values and knowledge, and compare existing material to see whether it relates to local knowledge and values, or needs to be indigenized. By *funds of knowledg*e, Moll and González (1997) refer to the knowledge base and strategies that children learn at home and in their local community. These authors also stress that minority language children and children from other marginalized backgrounds do not arrive in school with no language and no prior knowledge, contrary to the stereotypes and misconceptions that teachers hold of children from

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backgrounds different from their own (Moll & González, 1997). This concept holds explanatory value for why teachers who do not share children's L1 or cultural/values (unwillingly) stigmatize them, leading to the 50% drop-out rate for grade 1 discussed earlier in this paper.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This paper began with a question that would likely be asked of politicians and language policy makers around the world if they decided to teach every child through the medium of their mother tongue: What would a countrywide MLE program look like? Though each country would develop programs that meet their local needs, the MLE framework developed in Nepal would be a good starting point for countries considering implementing L1-based instruction and has been well conceptualized, as is noted above. A political platform that offers L1-based instruction in over 100 languages would be an ambitious undertaking for any country, not to mention one without great financial reserves; the venture not only has pedagogical and materials development implications, but requires an analysis of each local context.

Additionally, the role of English as a global *lingua franca* must be considered. As Giri (2009) notes, English is at the heart of the L1-based MLE issue as parents are aware of its value and students must pass an English exam to obtain their School Leaving Certificate (SLC); however, for the 50% of indigenous/minority children who quit school in grade 1 and their parents who have a grade 5 education at best, passing a high school English exam is a moot point. To raise the national literacy level, these children must stay in school and all of the participants in the workshops I delivered reported that full cohorts were finishing the grade 1 MLE program. People talk with their feet, and they are saying volumes by keeping their feet firmly planted in MLE classrooms and demanding double the number of MLE classrooms that the government projected would be necessary in 2010 (Dhakal, 2010; Hough, 2009).

The educational basis of MLE programs like their bilingual education predecessors is clear, but socio-political considerations are as likely to shape MLE as they are to shape bilingual programs, either confining them, constraining them, or supporting them and allowing them to flourish. However, politicians and language policy makers interested in meeting EFA goals and increasing national literacy rates are strongly advised to look at successful MLE initiatives, learn from them, indigenize them, and "do the impossible" just as Nepal is doing. A path that meets the needs of children in Nepal has been laid out. Other countries may now learn from this unique model in order to design a path to academic success that will best serve the future generations of their own citizens.

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