

Mother-Tongue Education

We Must Teach Children in a Language They Understand

A Position Paper of the Universal Esperanto Association

Achieving SDG4: Quality education for all

The Universal Esperanto Association, the principal organization of speakers of the international language Esperanto, supports the use of the mother tongue in early education. We believe that the language that we grow up in is something to be preserved and nurtured because it constitutes a part of our identity. We believe that everyone has a right to use his or her own language. We also advocate the use of a neutral, non-partisan international language for global communication. Thus we seek linguistic unity in diversity.

“The best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil.”

In 1953, early in its history, UNESCO released its report *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education*. The report stated that the “best medium for teaching is the mother tongue of the pupil.” Students should be encouraged and taught in their mother tongue, whatever that mother tongue may be. Without proper education in their native language, they will lack the skills necessary to develop easy fluency in reading and writing. Of course, students living in post-colonial nations or who speak minority languages as their first language are at a disadvantage compared with those who speak an international or “elite” language as their primary language. If their language does not have wider use, they may, sooner or later, have to switch to a different language for their later education. Indeed, it is important that they do so if they are to participate fully in the lives of their countries and the wider world. But that transition is made easier by the confidence they have already developed in their own languages. Ideally it will lead to a multilingual educational environment in which more than one language is used as a language of instruction.

The mother tongue is the way in which children learn to perceive the world.

The world is full of languages – some six or seven thousand of them. For young children, their mother tongue is the way in which they learn to perceive the world, to make sense of their surroundings, to love and be loved. Their first language is the language that they learn at their mother’s knee. Many of these languages are not spoken by many people and not widely understood, but they constitute an important part of the cultural heritage that young people carry with them into the world. Students who first become literate in their mother tongue contribute a wealth of priceless resources to their community that are beneficial to everyone. Students educated in their mother tongue will be another voice and source of strength to advocate for their cultural groups. The key to keeping these local cultures alive is by using those languages at school and the local level. And the key to using these languages is to educate children in them.

Mother-tongue education builds confidence

The right of children to learn their mother tongue and continue their education using their mother tongue is not only important for their culture, it is essential for their psychological development. When children learn to read and write in their mother tongue, they achieve literacy faster and with greater confidence. When confidence in their ability to learn is implanted in them early, they are likely to become better learners later on. It has been shown in numerous large-scale studies in several countries that if indigenous and minority children have their education mainly using their own languages, their general school achievement is better and they learn the dominant language better than if their teaching is through the medium of the dominant language. Better learners become productive citizens. So mother tongue education is an important element in a successful education system. It is better than forcing children to learn to read and write in a language that they do not know as well, or perhaps hardly know at all. In environments where mother-tongue education is insufficiently addressed, students who speak other languages are put immediately at a disadvantage. Such an environment advantages the speakers of the dominant language.

Languages must be developed and teachers must be prepared.

A humane language-in-education policy requires investment – but failure to invest has negative political and economic consequences. Wide application of mother-tongue education may require that languages currently not used in education be developed and standardized sufficiently for such use. Writing systems must be created in some cases; programmes to preserve and cultivate smaller languages must be put in place; and young people from these communities must be trained as teachers, with an emphasis on literacy education. Minority languages that are more widely spoken will perhaps already have the teaching materials needed, and perhaps the teaching force required, to allow for continued use of the mother tongue for some subjects, in parallel with instruction in the dominant language in the community in question. Students must develop skills in the majority language in order to gain access to the larger society. If children do not have the opportunity to learn both languages properly, then they cannot fully exercise their rights.

The alternative is lack of access and loss of confidence.

The Final Report of a symposium on language and development recently sponsored by our Association and attended by some 120 academics, UN personnel, and others, points out that “if the languages pupils speak and understand well are not used as languages of instruction, they will not be given adequate access to the curriculum, nor to high-quality teaching and learning opportunities, and, as numerous studies have shown, will lose enthusiasm for learning and the economic advancement derived from it.” The report advocates “linguistically-aware educational policies” and “well-designed, mother-tongue-based, multilingual education.” By ignoring the role of language in literacy, education, and access to information, vulnerable populations, including linguistic minorities, are placed at economic, social, and health risks.

Bilingual education is cost-effective.

Bilingual education programmes are more cost-effective: they lead to higher retention and graduation rates. Students perform better on

test scores in all subjects, including reading and math. The cost of mother tongue educational programmes are outweighed by the efficient schooling savings after only two years. Such programmes also provide societies with the priceless cultural benefits of having a generation of students fully capable in two or more languages.

Special attention must be given to interrupted schooling and displaced populations.

Children who move from one country to another, as refugees or immigrants, face special problems. An essential part of effective policymaking for refugees and immigrants is the provision, wherever possible, of schooling in the languages of the children, and (in the case of immigrants) of strong programmes allowing them to transition from their own mother tongues to the language of instruction in the schools in question. If children are left to fend for themselves or are offered no schooling at all, they are far more likely to become unproductive or underproductive as adults.

Good bilingual education makes the learning of further languages easier.

Those education systems where children have a high level of linguistic unity are best placed to give them opportunities to learn additional languages. In this regard, Esperanto can serve as a useful bridge. A 1997 EKPAROLI study showed that students who learned Esperanto for six months and then their target language for eighteen months were far more advanced than those students who only learned their target language for two years. The UEA advocates that teachers and students learn Esperanto first. It helps students become aware of language characteristics which transfer into other learned languages (many vocabulary words transfer as well). In addition, its simplicity gives learners the confidence they need to speak the language with others. Even those education systems that must contend with a high level of linguistic diversity can encourage students to build on their own experience and develop fluency in further languages, including Esperanto. Esperanto is spoken and used in well over fifty percent of the member-states of the United Nations and offers a wide network of opportunities to learn about the world and to communicate with others on a neutral and non-partisan basis.

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