

Languages matter

Global guidance on
multilingual education



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The Global Education 2030 Agenda

UNESCO, as the United Nations' specialized agency for education, is entrusted to lead and coordinate the Education 2030 Agenda, which is part of a global movement to eradicate poverty through 17 Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Education, essential to achieve all of these goals, has its own dedicated Goal 4, which aims to *"ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all."* The Education 2030 Framework for Action provides guidance for the implementation of this ambitious goal and commitments.



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SHORT SUMMARY

Championing all learners' right to a quality education in languages they understand

The linguistic landscape has significantly changed in recent years. This evolution has been shaped by migration, technological developments, and growing recognition of multilingualism's cognitive, social and economic benefits. This guide presents up-to-date principles for language-in-education policies that recognize multilingualism as both a fundamental human characteristic and an essential educational approach.

It supports Ministries of Education and their partners in integrating multilingual education into policy and practice, with the goal of improving learning outcomes, promoting inclusion, and safeguarding linguistic and cultural identities, knowledge, and practices.

As this guide emphasizes, multilingual education is not just about language; it is about creating inclusive, equitable learning environments where linguistic and other forms of diversity are celebrated. Beyond this, it aims to cultivate inclusive societies where differences are recognized as strengths. Achieving this vision requires a radical transformation of education, from policy development to classroom practice. This transformation is an investment in a sustainable, cohesive, and prosperous future for all, where every learner is empowered to thrive in a multilingual world.

Our world is
home to over
7,000
languages



"Since wars begin in the minds of men and women it is in the minds of men and women that the defences of peace must be constructed"

Languages matter

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Foreword

Multilingualism is an inherent feature of the human experience.

However, despite the cognitive, social and economic benefits of multilingualism, many learners -- especially those from marginalized communities -- encounter significant barriers in accessing quality education in languages they understand. This challenge is further intensified by internal and international migration, leading to increasingly linguistically diverse cities and classrooms. At the same time, the digital revolution has introduced cost-effective methods for incorporating multiple languages in web-based and device-supported learning environments.

The new UNESCO guidance is designed to help Ministries of Education and key educational stakeholders place multilingual education at the core of their policy-making and practices to create more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational systems that benefit all learners.

Building on the principles outlined two decades ago in the 2003 publication, *Education in a Multilingual World*, this new guidance acknowledges important shifts in the recent decades. First, there is increased recognition of the multilingual nature of our world and the profound implications on education. Second, recent research reveals the numerous benefits of multilingualism. Multilingual individuals tend to exhibit higher levels of empathy, enhanced problem-solving abilities, a greater aptitude for learning new languages, and better recovery from brain injuries, compared to their monolingual counterparts.

These advantages are evident regardless of the specific languages spoken, meaning that fluency in endangered Indigenous languages offers the same cognitive benefits as fluency in global languages. Moreover, societies that embrace linguistic and cultural diversity often experience greater social cohesion than those with monolingual, assimilationist policies.

Therefore, multilingualism is not only an inherent feature of the human experience but also a valuable policy goal that should be actively pursued.

At its heart, this guide advocates for all learners. It champions their right to a quality education in languages they understand, supporting their path toward academic success, social inclusion, and a stronger sense of cultural identity. It speaks to, with, and for learners of all backgrounds, promoting a universal language we must all learn to embrace: the language of acceptance, peace, and inclusion.



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Acronyms

AI	Artificial intelligence
ASPnet	Associated Schools Project Network (UNESCO)
BICS	Basic interpersonal communicative skills
CALP	Cognitive academic language proficiency
CLIL	Content and Language Integrated Learning
CSO	Civil society organization
ECCE	Early childhood care and education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GPE	Global Partnership for Education
IBE	Intercultural Bilingual Education
ICT	Information communication technology
IDIL	International Decade of Indigenous Languages
L1, L2, L3	First language (L1), second language (L2) and third language (L3)
LOI	Language of instruction
MOOC	Massive Online Open Course
MLE	Multilingual education
MT	Mother tongue
MOHEBS	Modèle Harmonisé d'Enseignement Bilingue du Sénégal (Senegal's Harmonized Bilingual Teaching Model)
MTB-MLE	Mother tongue-based multilingual education
n.d.	No date
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OER	Open educational resource
PASEC	Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN (CONFEMEN Programme for the analysis of education systems)
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PRIMR	Primary Math and Reading
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEA-PLM	Southeast Asian Primary Learning Metrics
SEAMEO	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization
UIL	UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning
UIS	UNESCO Institute for Statistics
UNDESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UNDRIP	United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNESCO-IIEP	UNESCO Institute for Educational Planning

Glossary

Bilingual education	An education programme in which two languages are taught as subjects and used as languages of instruction. This differs from monolingual education programmes that use one language for instruction and may teach one or more additional languages as subjects but do not use them for instruction. Bilingual education can be considered a type of multilingual education.
Discrimination	Unfair treatment or arbitrary distinction based on a person's race, sex, religion, nationality, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, disability, age, language, social origin or other status.
Dominant language	A language that by reason of official status, number of speakers, economic power, or social prestige occupies a dominant position in a given area, country or region. It may or may not be the official or national language. This term contrasts with non-dominant language.
Early-exit	Transitioning from the mother tongue (L1) as a language of instruction to a dominant language of instruction after 4 or fewer years of schooling.
First language	The language that an individual has learned first and identifies with. It is also called mother tongue, mother language and/or home language.
Free, prior and informed consent	The principle affirmed in multiple United Nations documents related to Indigenous Peoples' right to give or withhold consent on any activities that affect their lands, resources and communities.
Heritage language	The language of a person's ancestors and cultural group. An individual's heritage language may be different from their mother tongue (L1).
Immersion	An approach in language learning programmes where the target language is used exclusively in instruction, with teaching methods and materials designed to support learners with limited or no proficiency in the language. This term contrasts with submersion.
Inclusion in education	A process that helps overcome barriers limiting the presence, participation and achievement of all learners in education by guaranteeing fair and quality learning conditions, processes and outcomes for all.
Indigenous language	The language(s) currently or historically used by Indigenous communities, Peoples or nations, considered integral to their heritage, knowledge systems or identity.
In-service teacher training	Further education, refreshing or upgrading of knowledge, skills and practices provided to a teacher who is already certified and/or teaching in a classroom.
Intercultural education	Education which aims to achieve a sustainable way of living together in multicultural societies through the creation of understanding of, respect for, and dialogue between different cultural groups.
Intersectionality	The consideration of different characteristics such as gender, age, ability, ethnicity, geography and socio-economic status.
Language (or medium) of instruction	The language(s) used for teaching and learning in an educational programme.
Language policy	An official government statement regarding the use of language(s) in the public domain, including courts, government offices, education and health services.
Language-in-education policy	An official government statement regarding the use of a language or languages in education, including as language(s) of instruction.
Language revitalization	The process of reclaiming, resuscitating and maintaining a previously marginalized language with little or no intergenerational transfer.

Late-exit	Transitioning from the L1 as a language of instruction to a dominant language of instruction after 5 or more years of schooling.
Linguistic repertoire	An individual's complete set of language and literacy skills, including local varieties, registers, dialects, accents, and both oral and written abilities, along with communicative and intercultural competence.
Minority language	The language spoken by either a numerically smaller population or a politically marginalized group, regardless of its size. In the latter case, the term 'minoritized language' is sometimes used.
Monolingual education	Education that uses one language—usually the official or national language—as the medium of instruction.
Mother tongue	The language an individual first learns, identifies with, or is recognized as a native speaker of, typically the language they know best and use most often. It may differ from their heritage language and can apply to both spoken and signed languages. This term is used interchangeably with "home language," "primary language," or "first language."
Mother tongue-based multilingual education	An education approach for both adult and young learners who are not fluent in the official language of education. Learners learn to read and write in their mother tongue first, then apply those skills to the systematic learning of other subject matter, including additional languages.
Mother tongue education	The use of the learner's "mother tongue" or first language as a medium of instruction, a subject of instruction, or both.
Multilingual education	The use of two or more languages in education, which may or may include the mother tongue. When the mother tongue is the primary language of instruction, it is called mother tongue-based multilingual education. Multilingual education can include bilingual education.
Multilingualism	Multilingualism refers to the use of more than one language in daily life.
National language	Language regarded as the chief language of a nation state (see "official language").
Non-dominant language	A language perceived as occupying a non-dominant position in a given area or country, often due to demographic or social factors. It is often, but not always, a minority language and contrasts with the term dominant language.
Official language	The language recognized by national or sub-national governments, de jure or de facto, to be used for specific purposes, including education.
Pre-service teacher training	Educational programmes designed to train future teachers to formally or informally enter the profession at a specified level of education. Also called initial teacher education or initial teacher training.
Second language	A language that is not a person's mother tongue but one they learned after their first language. A person can learn a second language at home, in the community, in school, at work or in places where they need to interact with people outside their own linguistic group.
Submersion	An approach in language learning programmes, also called the "sink or swim method", where the target language is used exclusively in instruction, with no teaching methods and materials designed to support learners with limited or no proficiency in the language. This term contrasts with immersion.
Transfer	The process of using the knowledge and skills acquired in one language to achieve the same knowledge and skills in another language.

Note: This glossary draws on: UNESCO. 2003. [Education in a multilingual world: UNESCO education position paper](#). Paris, UNESCO; UNESCO. 2006. [Education for all: Literacy for life](#). EFA 2006 Global Monitoring Report. Paris, UNESCO; UNESCO. 2017. [A guide for ensuring inclusion and equity in education](#). Paris, UNESCO; UNESCO. 2006. [UNESCO guidelines on intercultural education](#). Paris, UNESCO; UNESCO. 2018. [MTB-MLE resource kit: Including the excluded: promoting multilingual education](#). Bangkok, UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok.; UNESCO Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO-IIEP). [n.d.] [Glossary – UNESCO-IIEP Policy Toolbox](#). Paris, UNESCO-IIEP.

Executive summary

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promises to leave no one behind. However, over a quarter of a billion learners still lack access to education in the language they understand best, deepening the global learning crisis and hindering progress on economic growth and sustainable development.

Linguistic diversity is a key feature of our global society, with over 7,000 languages spoken worldwide. Internal and international migration has contributed to increased linguistic diversity in cities and classrooms. Meanwhile, the digital revolution has made it more affordable and efficient to integrate multiple languages into learning environments through digital resources. Decades of research on mother tongue-based multilingual education show that children's learning outcomes improve significantly when they are taught in languages they understand, particularly in the early years.

Multilingual education extends its benefits beyond young learners by supporting lifelong learning. It provides adults with the skills needed for higher education and better employment opportunities, while also contributing to the revitalization of endangered languages and the preservation of cultural knowledge. Indigenous and marginalized language communities are leading efforts to revive their languages through education.

Multilingual education is a cost-effective investment with long-term returns. Although initial costs for developing resources and training educators are required, the long-term benefits are substantial, including improved educational outcomes, social cohesion, inclusive economic growth, and sustainable development. Multilingual education can play a critical role in achieving several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG 4 on inclusive, quality education for all, and supports SDGs related to economic growth (SDG 8), reducing inequality (SDG 10), promoting peaceful societies (SDG 16), and climate action (SDG 13).

To achieve these outcomes, MLE requires a transformative shift in education policy and practice. This shift must involve collective action from governments, communities, educators, and development partners, tailored to each country's unique context.

This guidance aims to support this transformation. It builds on the principles outlined two decades ago in UNESCO's 2003 position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World*, and draws on new and growing evidence on the benefits of multilingual education. It aligns with key United Nations initiatives, such as the Transforming Education Summit, the General Assembly's declaration of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022–2032), and the global push to realise the SDGs by 2030.

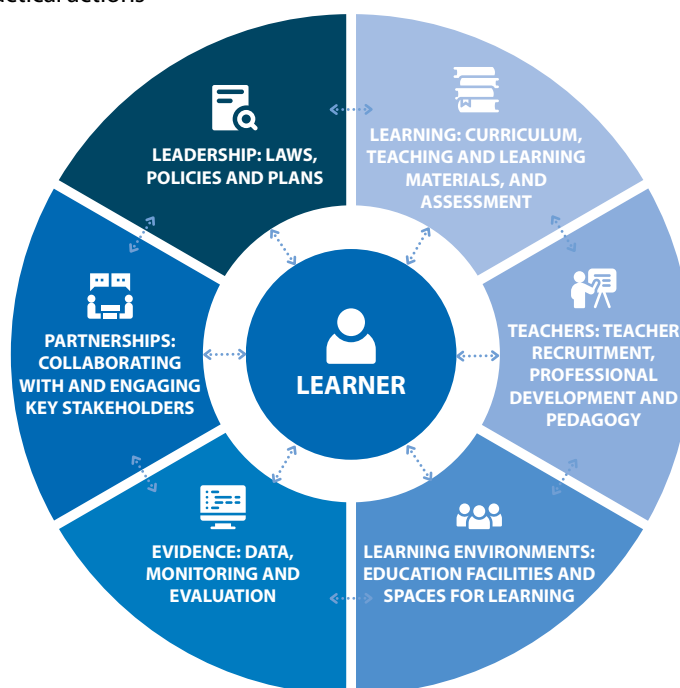
This publication includes a definition of multilingualism and multilingual education and explains how multilingual education is being applied in a variety of contexts. It introduces evidence on the cognitive, social and economic benefits of multilingual education. It offers evidence-based recommendations on practical actions that countries can take to initiate or strengthen multilingual education programmes in the areas of:

- **Leadership:** Laws, policies and plans
- **Learning:** Curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment
- **Teachers:** Teacher recruitment, professional development and pedagogy
- **Learning environments:** Educational facilities and spaces for learning
- **Evidence:** Data, monitoring and evaluation
- **Partnerships:** Collaborating with and engaging key stakeholders.

The report offers a set of recommendations grounded in the rights-based principles of social justice, equity, dignity, and the inclusion of marginalized languages and cultures. These are summarized in the following page (**Figure 1**).

The recommendations proposed in this guidance go beyond educational reform; they represent a vital investment in our collective future. This is a commitment to ensuring that no learner is left behind, regardless of linguistic background, and that every individual is equipped with the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to succeed in a multilingual and interconnected world.

Figure 1 | Summary of practical actions



Source: Authors.

Recommended actions

-  Conduct a situational analysis of the sociolinguistic and educational context to guide effective policy design and implementation and optimal resource allocation for MLE programmes.
-  Formalize political commitments to MLE within national education and legal frameworks, and national education policies, ensuring all learners' right to instruction in languages aligned with their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
-  Integrate MLE into the curriculum from the earliest grades, prioritizing mother tongue education to build foundational literacy and language skills, while fostering respect for learners' heritage languages and cultural backgrounds.
-  Develop culturally-responsive and contextually-appropriate learning materials in learners' languages, typically their mother tongue or L1, and align assessment strategies with MLE principles to ensure that assessments accurately reflect learners' content knowledge in the language(s) in which it was acquired.
-  Recruit teachers fluent in both the mother tongue and official language of instruction to enhance MLE, foster cultural and linguistic diversity and representation in the classroom.
-  Strengthen training for both pre- and in-service educators to effectively teach in multilingual settings, ensuring school leaders support the implementation of culturally responsive, engaging pedagogical approaches.
-  Create inclusive and culturally responsive educational spaces that promote language development, cultural exchange, social interaction, and the socio-emotional well-being of all learners, while respecting diverse learning styles and communication methods.
-  Integrate robust monitoring and evaluation systems within MLE programmes to assess their impact on learning, attendance, retention, and the overall educational experience for diverse language groups.
-  Strengthen relationships with and ensure the meaningful engagement of parents, caregivers, and local communities, including Indigenous Peoples, to ensure culturally-relevant MLE programmes that enhance learning, and address potential concerns about learners' development.
-  Develop partnerships with local, national and international organizations to secure technical expertise, resources, and access to good practice to support the implementation, scaling, and sustainability of MLE programmes, while facilitating capacity development and strengthening overall effectiveness.

Key messages

Linguistic diversity is a global reality

Our world is home to over 7,000 languages - 80% of which originate in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. With increased migration, classrooms with learners who speak different home languages are increasingly the norm.

Language is essential for learning

Learning in a language that a student doesn't speak fluently presents significant challenges. Yet, over a quarter of a billion learners lack education in the language they understand best. Multilingual education is a critical tool in addressing the global learning crisis.

Language and economic development are inter-connected

A strong education system is key to shaping active citizenship and developing a creative, skilled workforce. School language policies that fail to accommodate the linguistic needs of children, adolescents, and youth hinder national development and economic growth.

Multilingual education is a cost-effective investment

Although there are initial costs for developing linguistically appropriate teaching materials and training educators, MLE is a wise long-term investment that improves educational outcomes and fosters a more inclusive society, benefiting both the economy and social cohesion.

The digital transformation of education should benefit all languages

E-books and digital learning tools are revolutionizing access to MLE, offering new opportunities for Indigenous, ethnic minority, migrant, and refugee learners. The digital age holds the potential to advance MLE, making it more accessible and effective.

Multilingual education supports lifelong learning

Multilingual education is not only crucial for young learners but also offer significant benefits for adults, equipping them with essential skills to access higher education and secure better employment opportunities, fostering lifelong learning.

Multilingual education aids language revitalization

Up to 1,500 languages may disappear at the century's end, erasing valuable cultural, historical, and environmental knowledge. Indigenous and marginalized language groups are leading efforts to revive and preserve their languages through education.

Effective multilingual education thrives on collaboration

The most successful multilingual education initiatives are those developed through partnerships between governments, NGOs, linguistic experts, local teachers, community advocates, parents, and other stakeholders. Collaboration ensures that solutions are culturally relevant, sustainable, and responsive to learners' needs.

Multilingual education is essential for sustainable development and peaceful, just societies

By embracing linguistic and cultural diversity, multilingual education fosters social inclusion, equity, and inclusion, driving progress toward sustainable development. It empowers individuals, strengthens communities, and promotes peaceful coexistence, ensuring that no one is left behind as we work toward a more peaceful, just and resilient world.



Introduction

What is the aim of this guidance?

This UNESCO guidance is designed to support those implementing multilingual education (MLE). Building on UNESCO's 2003 position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World*, this guidance explores the rationale for and benefits of MLE for linguistically marginalized learners.

This guidance supports countries in their efforts to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, which aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all. It also presents MLE as an opportunity to foster

sustainable economic growth (SDG 8), reduce inequalities (SDG 10), combat climate change (SDG 13) and protect ecosystems below water (SDG 14) and on land (SDG 15), and promote peaceful, inclusive societies (SDG 16).

By reviewing the evidence and providing a series of actionable steps, this guidance aims to provide not just a source of information for those delivering MLE initiatives, but to inspire and guide delivery as part of a broader push for education system change.

Who is the guidance for?

This guidance is intended primarily for educational policymakers and key educational stakeholders at all levels of decision-making, including national and sub-national levels.

Secondary users of the guidance include school administrators, teachers and educators, as well as the entire education community.

The guidance will also hold interest for other stakeholders, such as civil society and non-governmental organizations (CSOs, NGOs), Indigenous Peoples' organizations, bilateral and multilateral agencies, teacher unions and policymakers in other sectors.

What is included in the guidance?

The guidance offers support to develop multilingual education policies, plans and programmes. It gives particular attention to languages spoken by Indigenous Peoples, ethnic minority groups, migrants and refugees.

Promising practice case studies and tools are embedded throughout the guidance. These provide examples of implementation in real-life contexts and can serve as resources that can be adapted to different contexts.

How is the guidance organized?

This UNESCO guidance is composed of a narrative text supported by rich examples from varied country contexts.

First, we situate the guidance in reference to UNESCO's 2003 position paper *Education in a Multilingual World*, affirming three principles that have guided multilingual education programmes worldwide.

The follow section defines multilingualism and multilingual education (MLE) and explains how MLE principles are being used in a variety of contexts in

support of the SDGs. It concludes that MLE is important for us all because it:

- Improves learning outcomes for learners from diverse linguistic backgrounds
- Enhances access and inclusion in education for linguistically marginalized learners
- Contributes to sustainable development.

Finally, the guidance describes steps policymakers and implementers can take to initiate or strengthen MLE programmes through practical actions related to:

- **Leadership:** Laws, policies and plans
- **Learning:** Curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment
- **Teachers:** Teacher recruitment, professional development and pedagogy
- **Learning environments:** Educational facilities and spaces for learning
- **Evidence:** Data, monitoring and evaluation
- **Partnerships:** Collaborating with and engaging key stakeholders.

This guidance complements past publications related to multilingualism, multilingual education, and inclusive education policies and practices. These are noted in citations, in examples, and in annotated lists of “Further Resources” found periodically through the text.

The guidance contains many examples, both inside the main text and set apart from it. The following icons are used to identify the latter:



COUNTRY EXAMPLES



FURTHER RESOURCES



PRACTICAL ACTIONS

This UNESCO guidance calls on policymakers to embed MLE in their education systems. It advocates for systemic change in education systems to ensure that no learner is left behind, regardless of their linguistic background. Such change is both necessary and urgent as we approach the 2030 deadline for the SDGs.



Our multilingual world: Then and now

UNESCO has long championed MLE as a means to improve learning outcomes and preserve linguistic and cultural diversity. Beginning with *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* in 1953, UNESCO's position was reinforced in 1999 when the UNESCO General Conference urged Member States to promote multilingual education. In 2003, UNESCO released *Education in a Multilingual World*, acknowledging the global reality of multilingualism and the challenges and opportunities it presents for education.

Education in a Multilingual World built on existing research, United Nations standard-setting instruments, UNESCO declarations and conventions, asserting three guiding principles:

- 1. UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction** as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers.
- 2. 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.
- 3. UNESCO supports language as an essential component of intercultural education** to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.

Since 2003, the linguistic landscape has become increasingly complex, influenced by factors such as internal and international migration, the expansion of digital learning tools, the accelerated loss and endangerment of Indigenous languages, the rise of global languages like English and Mandarin, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, and conflict on learning outcomes.

This complexity has been accompanied by a surge in empirical research and pedagogical innovation. Advances in brain science have provided new insights into how children acquire languages in both natural (family and community) and structured (schools, mass media) settings (Hayakawa and Marian, 2019; Bialystok, 2020). Longitudinal studies have provided evidence-based insights into the most effective language-related policies and practices to enhance learning outcomes (UNICEF, 2018; Cummins, 2021; World Bank, 2021). Furthermore, research into social and emotional learning has revealed how culturally-affirming pedagogies empower

marginalized learners, enhancing their self-concept and engagement with society (Jones et al., 2021; McBrien, 2022).

However, research also highlights the consequences of neglecting language. Disparities in learning outcomes between linguistic majority and minority learners can emerge in national test results and SDG 4 indicators (Pong and Landale, 2012; Cerna, 2019; UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020; Person, 2022). These gaps in educational achievement contribute to economic disparities and social tensions.

The statistics are sobering: In 2016, 617 million children were not acquiring foundational literacy or numeracy, with two-thirds in school but not learning (UIS, 2017). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 57% of 10-year-olds in low- and middle-income countries were unable to read a simple text; this figure had risen to 70% when schools reopened (World Bank, 2021). UNESCO (2025) estimates that 40% of children and youth globally lack access to education in their home language.

In response to these developments, the upcoming 2030 deadline of SDG 4, and the designation of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032), UNESCO recognized the need to create this guidance. Informed by new research, UN declarations, and policy recommendations, it seeks to address the ongoing challenges and opportunities for MLE.

In developing this guidance, UNESCO reaffirms that the three principles outlined in the 2003 document remain relevant, though with some updates. For example, some scholars now prefer the terms “first language” or “home language” over “mother tongue,” recognizing that children raised in multilingual settings may have more than one “mother tongue” or may have acquired a language from a father or caregiver. Regardless, it remains essential to teach early literacy and numeracy in a language the child speaks fluently—usually the primary language spoken at home. Learning to read in an unfamiliar language is highly challenging, while literacy skills acquired in a familiar language can ease the learning of other languages. Thus, UNESCO upholds Principle 1.

UNESCO continues to support Principle 2. Research has shown that MLE promotes gender equality (Benson, 2005, 2012, 2016; Heugh et al., 2007; Lockheed and Lewis, 2012). A strong foundation in the first language helps linguistically marginalized children succeed in their societies. Studies also emphasize the importance of

maintaining a child's full linguistic repertoire throughout their education, meaning that the first language should not be abandoned after just a few years (García et al., 2016; Cummins 2021; UNESCO 2024c).

However, the terms “bilingual” and “multilingual” education are understood differently depending on the context. While the 2003 document focused on learners speaking marginalized ethnic minority or Indigenous languages in the Global South, this guidance acknowledges that bilingual and multilingual education now includes a broader array of situations. For example, in 1998, California voters in the United States of America rejected Spanish-English bilingual education for Spanish-speaking minority learners, but by 2016, this decision was reversed, as English-speaking parents sought bilingual programmes to enhance cognitive development and job prospects for their children. In some parts of Asia, “multilingual education” refers to using the national language alongside English or Mandarin, while in Europe the term may indicate the use of multiple European national languages as languages of instruction. Therefore, this document distinguishes between four contexts in which multilingual education can mean different things.

Principles 1 and 2 must, therefore, be understood through the lens of Principle 3. It is not only crucial for learners to learn their mother tongue and other languages in pedagogically sound ways, but also to engage with and learn from marginalized groups. This includes fostering respect for diverse languages and cultures through education that celebrates linguistic and cultural diversity at the local, national, and global levels. Additionally, the traditional environmental knowledge of Indigenous Peoples should be integrated into national curricula, recognizing that many solutions to climate change are already in practice within Indigenous communities, rather than being confined to scientific laboratories.

Principle 3's emphasis on intercultural education (and the closely related concept of “global citizenship education”) is vital in helping learners of all ages become ethical, empathetic, and respectful individuals, equipped to navigate the complexities and challenges of a rapidly changing world.

UNESCO's *Languages matter: Guidance on multilingual education* (2025) further strengthens and supports the three principles outlined in *Education in a Multilingual World* (2003), positioning multilingual education as a key tool for addressing the world's evolving needs.





What multilingual
education is

Multilingual education “promotes improved learning, respect for linguistic diversity and cultural understanding of learners. Furthermore, it facilitates the creation of inclusive learning environments that value and respect students’ diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.”

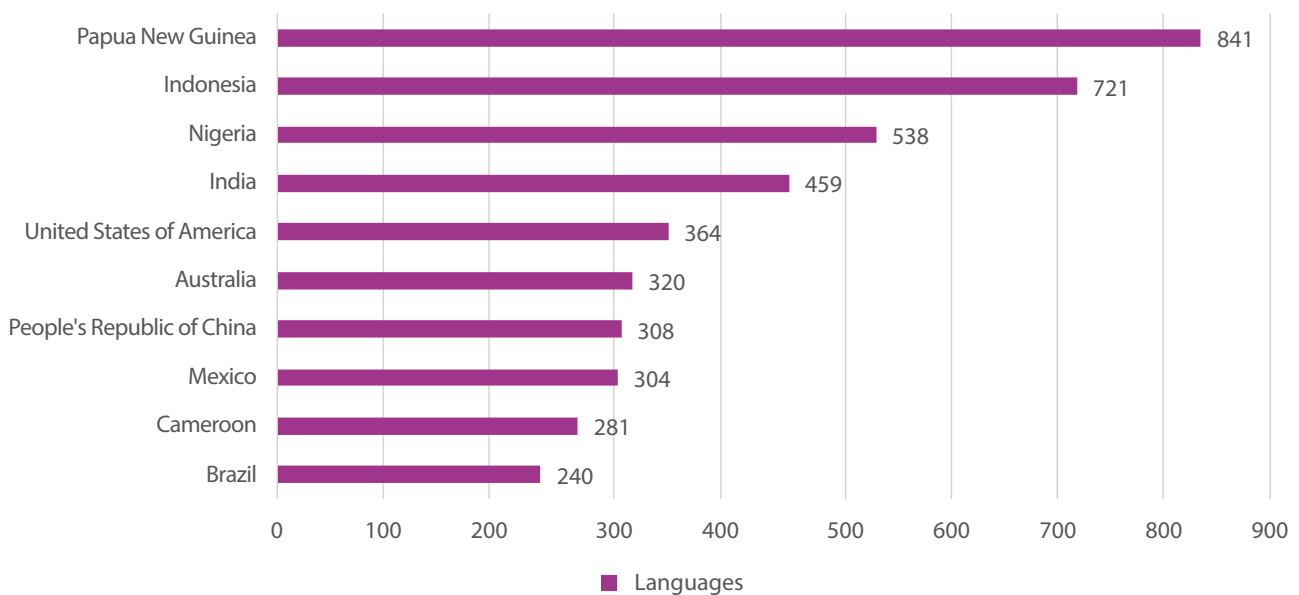
- Nwachukwu et al., 2024, p. 6.

What is multilingualism?

UNESCO’s World Atlas of Languages estimates that there are 8,324 languages, spoken or signed, as documented by governments, public institutions and the academic

community. Of these, 7,000 languages are still in use (UNESCO, n.d. 4). **Figure 2** lists the 10 countries with the most spoken languages.

Figure 2 | Ten countries with the most spoken languages, 2024



Data source: Eberhard, Simons and Fennig. (Eds.) 2024b. [Ethnologue: Languages of the World](#) website. Accessed online 13 January 2025.

Over 300 identified sign languages are used around the world. Some 78 countries have granted legal recognition to their national sign languages. Sweden was one of the first to do so (1981), while Panama (1992), Uganda (1995), Mexico (2005), Türkiye (2005) and New Zealand (2006) have led the way in their respective regions (World Federation of the Deaf, 2024).

Our planet’s linguistic diversity is threatened by the accelerated disappearance of languages. Some 1,500 languages may no longer be spoken by the end of this century (Bromham et al, 2022). As languages become extinct, vast amounts of cultural, historical, environmental and other knowledge is lost.

Multilingualism –the ability to use more than one language in daily life– is more common than monolingualism. By some estimates, between half and two-thirds of the world’s population use two or more

languages in their daily life (Baker and Wright 2021, Grosjean 2020).

Multilingualism offers significant benefits to both individuals and societies. It enhances cognitive abilities, including memory, problem-solving skills and mental flexibility. Bilingual and multilingual individuals may also experience delayed onset of age-related cognitive decline, potentially lowering the risk of conditions like dementia (Gallo, Kubiak and Myachykov, 2022; Bialystok, 2021). Additionally, multilingualism improves emotional competencies, including empathy and cross-cultural understanding (Koch, Kersten and Greve, 2024). It also provides career advantages, boosting career flexibility and mobility (Hardach, 2018).

What is multilingual education?

UNESCO (2003a, p. 17) defined multilingual education (MLE) as “the use of at least three languages, the mother tongue, a regional or national language, and an international language in education.”

However, an online search for “multilingual education” reveals many programmes, projects and approaches that do not align with UNESCO’s definition. In some understandings, multilingual education is more about a mindset than a specific language count. As a result,

some bilingual programmes are labelled multilingual, while others involve three languages but omit the learners’ first language (L1). In essence, the term has evolved to mean different things to different people.

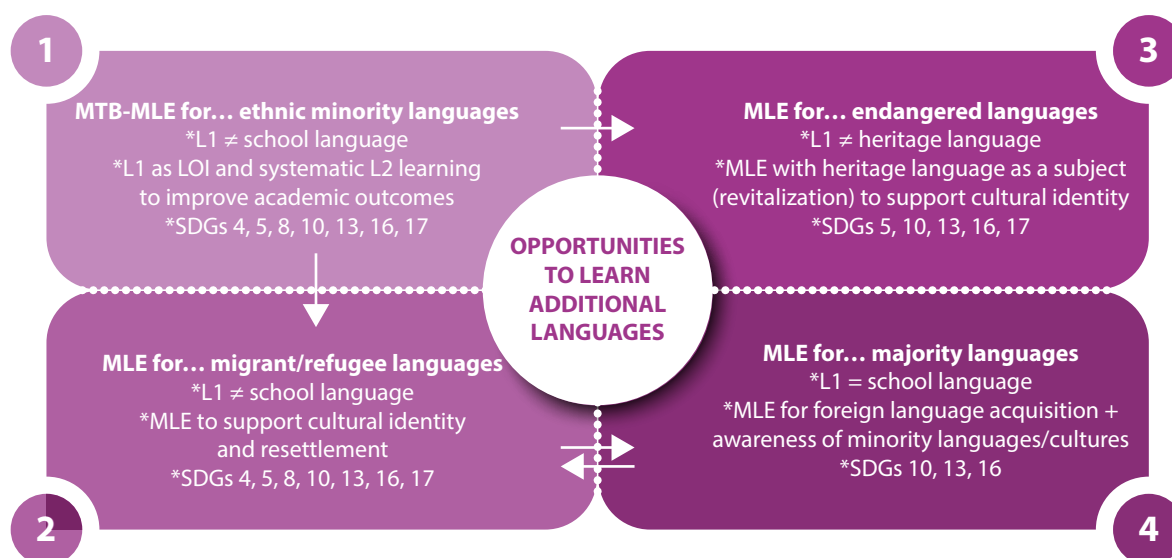
To address this, this guidance introduces a simple diagnostic tool to help policymakers and implementers understand what multilingual education might mean in their contexts.¹

The four contexts of MLE

Every language situation is unique, but there are also commonalities across different countries and societies that can inform the design of policies and programmes tailored to meet the needs of specific communities.

There are four general sociolinguistic contexts in which language-in-education policies and practices may be considered “multilingual,” as shown in **Figure 3**. These are offered here to help clarify various interpretation of MLE in different settings.

Figure 3 | The four contexts of multilingual education



Source: UNESCO and Bruno Maurer

1 Context 1: MTB-MLE for ethnic minority languages

This context arises when learners’ L1 differs from the language of instruction in schools, resulting in significant barriers to learning. Common issues in Context 1 include high dropout rates, low academic performance, and a lack of basic literacy and numeracy skills. Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), also known as First

language-based multilingual education (L1 MLE) is crucial in these situations. MTB-MLE aims to improve academic outcomes by developing a strong foundation in the L1 and then using that knowledge to help learners systematically acquire other languages. Over the past 20 years, there has been significant attention on Context 1 in Africa and Asia, with numerous publications from UNESCO, UNICEF, the World Bank, and others highlighting its importance.

¹ Throughout this document, the term multilingual education (MLE) will, unless otherwise specified, be used in a generic sense conveying the inclusion of more than one language in educational programmes, research, and policies.

Context 1 also contributed to the development of the SDG Thematic Indicator 4.5.2, which encourages countries to report on the “percentage of students in a) early grades, b) at the end of primary, and c) at the end of lower secondary education who have their first or home language as language of instruction.” Effective MTB-MLE interventions in Context 1 can positively impact other SDG 4 indicators (see **Table 1**).

Gender disparities in school attendance and academic performance are prevalent in many Context 1 settings. MTB-MLE has been shown to positively influence the education of girls and women (Benson, 2005, 2012; Heugh et al., 2007; Lockheed and Lewis, 2012), contributing to SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

In addition, MTB-MLE supports broader goals, including SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

UNESCO recommends that governments, development agencies, community advocates, and other actors recognize the potential of MTB-MLE to improve educational outcomes in communities where a mismatch between the home and school language(s) presents a barrier to learning.

Table 1 | SDG 4 indicators with direct relevance to learners in Context 1

4.1.0	Proportion of children/young people prepared for the future, by sex
4.1.1	Proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex
4.1.2	Completion rate (primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education)
4.1.3	Gross intake ratio to the last grade (primary education, lower secondary education)
4.1.4	Out-of-school rate (1 year before primary, primary education, lower secondary education, upper secondary education)
4.1.5	Percentage of children over-age for grade (primary education, lower secondary education)
4.5.1	Parity indices (female/male, rural/urban, bottom/top wealth quintile and others such as disability status, Indigenous Peoples and conflict-affected, as data become available) for all education indicators on this list that can be disaggregated
4.5.2	Percentage of students in a) early grades, b) at the end of primary, and c) at the end of lower secondary education who have their first or home language as language of instruction
4.5.3	Existence of funding mechanisms to reallocate education resources to disadvantaged populations
4.6.1	Proportion of population in a given age group achieving at least a fixed level of proficiency in functional (a) literacy and (b) numeracy skills, by sex
4.6.2	Youth/adult literacy rate

Data source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023. Accessed online 13 January 2025.

2 Context 2: MLE for migrant/refugee languages

The International Organization for Migration (2024) estimated that 281 million people lived in a country other than their country of birth in 2020—an increase of 153 million since 1990. Additionally, over 59 million people are displaced within their own countries. This has presented both challenges and opportunities for education systems.

Research in North America and Europe has shown that providing systematic L1 support for migrant learners, along with multilingual pedagogies, significantly enhances their long-term academic achievement and fosters greater parental engagement. High levels of L1 competence supports learners to succeed in their new settings. Parents should be encouraged to continue using the L1 at home, including through reading and writing, to complement their children’s learning in the new school language (Avermart, 2024; Capstick, 2018; Cummins, 2021; Thomas and Collier, 2002). This is equally relevant for

displaced learners in refugee camps, as a growing body of research shows across different contexts (Kua, 2018; UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2020; Le, 2021).

The connection of Context 2 to specific SDG 4 indicators depends on the education systems and legal framework of host countries. For example, countries with mandatory school enrolment laws tend to have fewer out-of-school migrant and refugee learners compared to countries with weaker protections. Regardless, supporting migrant and refugee learners' home languages can positively impact many of the same SDG 4 indicators as Context 1 (see **Table 1** above) and provide broader support for SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

UNESCO recommends that governments, international development agencies, and other actors integrate refugee and migrant languages and cultures into educational plans and programmes.

3 Context 3: MLE for endangered languages

In Context 3, learners' L1 differs from their heritage or ancestral language, especially among Indigenous and other linguistic minority groups. Heritage language transmission to younger generations may have been interrupted due to factors like negative attitudes towards

the language both inside and outside the community, proximity to dominant languages, compulsory boarding schools, and migration. Over the past 30 years, there has been an upsurge in scholarly interest in language endangerment, with a corresponding focus on documenting such languages. The death of the last native speaker of an endangered language is sometimes reported by global news organizations, highlighting the urgency of revitalization efforts.

In this context, many Indigenous Peoples' organizations, community groups, and scholars have launched educational projects aimed at revitalizing endangered heritage languages. These projects range from autonomous community-based initiatives to informal and formal education programmes developed with government agencies. When an endangered language is taught in school, it is often introduced as a subject, with the school's language serving as the language of instruction to teach the heritage language. However, some Indigenous communities have implemented immersion programmes where the heritage language is used exclusively, blending traditional and contemporary teaching methods. Indigenous women often play key roles as knowledge keepers and champions of Indigenous languages and cultures and should be intentionally and actively involved in the planning and implementation of such programmes (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2024). Technology is also playing an increasing role in language revitalization efforts, with new resources being developed on open-source platforms, artificial intelligence (AI)-powered apps and tools and other innovations. See examples in **Box 1**.



Box 1 | Keyboards for 2,400 languages—and more!

The digital transformation of learning holds great potential for education. However, some languages still lack the necessary digital resources to establish a strong presence in cyberspace or develop applications. Fortunately, this situation is changing.

Keyman is a free, open-source tool that enables users to develop keyboard layouts for their languages that can then be used on multiple platforms, including Windows, macOS, iOS, Android, Linux and the web. Keyboards are currently available for over 2,400 languages, with many more under development by Indigenous Peoples, NGOs, scholars, educators, and local language advocates. Keyman supports non-Latin scripts used for languages as diverse as Amharic, Bengali, Cherokee, Khmer, and Javanese (Keyman, n.d.). Keyman keyboards can be bundled into other digital products, such as the FirstVoices Keyboards app for Android and iOS developed by the First People's Cultural Council featuring keyboards for 94 Indigenous languages of North America and the Arctic.

UNESCO's Digital Initiatives for Indigenous Languages (UNESCO, 2023c) offers inspiring stories of how technology is being harnessed for cultural preservation and language revitalization, along with guidelines and good practices. Such efforts support the Recommendation Concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace (UNESCO 2003b) and the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence (UNESCO, 2022e).

The SDG 4 framework does not contain global or thematic indicators that correspond directly to the revitalization of endangered languages. However, Context 3 programmes contribute generally to SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals), as well as the Global Action Plan for the Decade of Indigenous Languages' call for "education policies, plans and programmes...to support mother tongue-based and multilingual education" (UNESCO, 2022c, p. 19).

UNESCO supports the efforts of community organizations, government agencies, academics, and others to document and revive endangered languages.

4 Context 4: MLE for majority languages

In Context 4, the learners' L1 generally corresponds to the official language in their country, typically the majority language. Policymakers and parents, however, often recognize the importance of developing proficiency in the official languages of other countries to enhance opportunities for mobility, tertiary education and career advancement. Many education systems seek to go beyond offering foreign language classes by using those languages as languages of instruction (LOIs) to teach subjects like math or science. This approach is commonly known as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) or similar classifications. Reference to MLE in Europe and international schools elsewhere generally refer to Context 4 situations. In North America, dual language and two-way bilingual programme also fall into Context 4.

Learners in Context 4 MLE programmes benefit from multilingualism, which enhances cognitive abilities including higher levels of empathy, better problem-solving skills, greater ease in learning new languages, faster recovery from brain injuries, and enhanced economic opportunities.

Context 4 programmes can contribute to SDG Target 4.7 (Knowledge to Promote Sustainable Development), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequality), SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions), as well as SDG 13 when the contributions of Indigenous Peoples to Climate Action are recognized.

UNESCO recommends that education systems in Context 4 build awareness of Contexts 1, 2, and 3 in education programmes related to global citizenship, peace and sustainable development.

As demonstrated in **Figure 3** by dashed lines and arrows the boundaries between these contexts are not rigid but permeable. There are common trajectories between them and movement between contexts is frequent, particularly in certain situations. For example, ethnic minority languages can easily become endangered languages when intergenerational transmission is disrupted, especially in communities living along major roads or rivers, where they are more exposed to other languages (Bromham et al, 2022). Speakers of ethnic minority languages may also become migrants or refugees, sometimes with limited proficiency in the national language of their birth country. Examples include Quechuan speakers migrating to North America or Europe, Karen refugees from Myanmar resettling in North America or Europe, Nepali speakers from Bhutan resettling in the United States of America, and Kurdish speakers from Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Türkiye migrating to Germany. Similarly, speakers of major languages may also become refugees or migrants, as has been the case with the influx of Ukrainian speakers into other European countries. In such cases, migrants may enter Context 4 schools in their new host countries.

Moreover, individuals from all contexts have the right to learn additional languages based on their needs and interests, as illustrated in the centre portion of **Figure 2** above.

Classifying MLE models

Significant variation exists in the implementation of MLE programmes, particularly concerning the timing of the transition from the first language to additional languages. This section outlines key terms used to classify MLE approaches in general, and MTB-MLE in particular. In **early-exit** models, the transition from the L1 as a language of instruction to a dominant language of instruction occurs by grade 3. This early transition can lead to gaps in both linguistic and cognitive development, as learners may not have sufficiently mastered their mother tongue to successfully adapt to a new language of instruction by the transition year. As a result, early-exit programmes are often described as “weak” models.

In **late-exit** models, the transition from the L1 as a language of instruction to a dominant language of instruction occurs after 5 or more years of schooling. The extended use of the L1 as a language of instruction has been shown to have a positive impact on academic outcomes, as learners maintain and develop their first language skills, which can enhance their overall cognitive and academic development (Ouane and Glanz, 2011; Ball et. al, 2019; Trudell, 2024). Thus late-exit programmes are often described as “strong” models. See examples of both models in **Box 2**.

Closely related to the concepts of early and late exit is the extent to which programmes formally allow learners to continue to develop their mother tongue skills. Programmes which replace the mother tongue as a language of instruction with a dominant language at a set point are termed “subtractive.” In contrast, programmes that allow the mother tongue to continue to play a role within the curriculum alongside another language of instruction are termed “additive”.



Box 2 | MLE models in Ethiopia and Kiribati

Ethiopia has supported the inclusion of the mother tongues in education since 1994. However, the implementation of MTB-MLE programmes varies by region. Assessment data from 2000 and 2008 demonstrate that learners who received eight years of L1 instruction outperformed those who had only four or six years of L1 before transitioning to English. This indicates that the number of years of L1 learning is a key predictor of successful entry into Ethiopian secondary schools, supporting the argument for late-exit models (Schroeder et al., 2021).

Kiribati employs a “two languages interaction model” which gradually introduces English while maintaining Te Kiribati, the national language. This additive model is structured as follows:

Year	Te Kribati	English
Pre-school	95%	5%
1	90%	10%
2	80%	20%
3	70%	30%
4	50%	50%
5-6	40%	60%
7-9	30%	70%
10-13	20%	80%

Data source: Ministry of Education, Republic of Kiribati, 2011, p. 34.

The rationale behind this model is that “beginning strongly in the first language first and then transferring to the second language has positive consequences for students” (Ministry of Education, Republic of Kiribati, 2011, p. 35).

UNESCO advocates for late-exit, additive MLE programmes that promote language maintenance, multiliteracy, and the preservation of cultural identity.

Two other frequently discussed terms in language-in-education are **submersion** and **immersion**, which both represent essentially monolingual approaches.

Submersion, sometimes referred to as the 'sink or swim method', occurs when learners are placed into classrooms using a language that they are unfamiliar with, without any specialized language learning support. This can often be overwhelming for learners, particularly those from ethnic minority or migrant backgrounds (Contexts 1 and 3), who are expected to acquire proficiency in the dominant language through exposure alone, without explicit instruction. In such settings, learners are submerged in a language environment designed for native speakers of the official language, which often leads to academic struggles and isolation, for reasons discussed in **Box 3**.

Immersion, in contrast, does provide some form of language learning support. It allows learners whose mother tongue differs from the language of instruction to gradually acquire proficiency in a new language through structured programmes. Where the learner comes from a dominant language community (Context 4), immersion can be effective (as seen in French-English immersion programmes in Canada and some dual language programmes in the United States of America). However, for minority language speakers (Contexts 1 and 3), immersion can be problematic if the learners' own language and culture are not affirmed, and if they lack basic literacy skills in any language. A notable example is Indigenous language immersion programmes (Context 3) which aim to support heritage language revitalization and cultural preservation (McIvor and McCarty, 2017).

Box 3 | Conversational skills vs. academic language proficiency

Adults sometimes mistakenly assume that if a child can have a basic conversation in a second (L2) or third (L3) language, they are ready to learn in that language. They are then surprised when the child fails to thrive in the new LOI.

It is important to distinguish between basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP):

- BICS refers to the everyday, conversational language used in social contexts which can typically develop in one to three years.
- CALP refers to the academic and technical language which grows in importance in each successive school grade. CALP skills take much longer to develop: five to seven years for children who had some mother tongue-based education, seven to ten years (and sometimes never) for children who never studied in a familiar language (Cummins, 2008; 2021).

BICS and CALP represent the distinction between learning a new language as a subject (focusing on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, etc.), and using that language as the primary LOI for other subjects (Heugh et al., 2019).

This is why late-exit models are more effective than submersion, immersion and early-exit models.

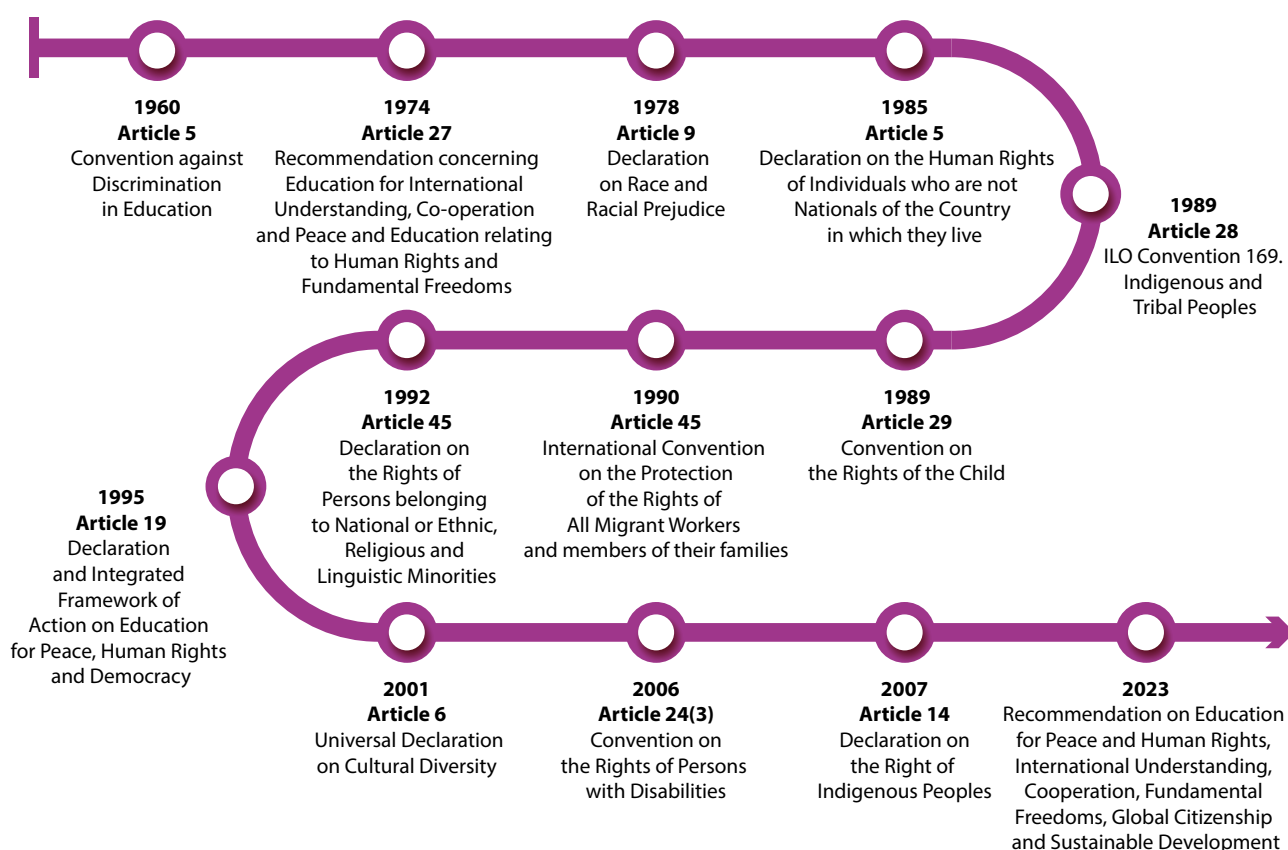


MLE and United Nations normative frameworks

UNESCO's work on MLE is framed by numerous normative instruments. Language rights are recognized in various provisions enshrined in international human rights law, including those related to the prohibition of discrimination, the right to freedom of expression, the right to privacy, the right to education and the right of linguistic minorities to use their own language with others in their group (United Nations Special Rapporteur

on Minority Issues, 2017). The integration of language rights into educational policies and practices helps to ensure the realization of the right to education for all without discrimination, particularly for marginalized populations such as minorities and Indigenous Peoples. A central aspect of these language rights in education is the use of learners' languages as the medium of instruction whenever possible and for as long is feasible. See **Figure 4**.

Figure 4 | United Nations international normative instruments related to languages in education



Source: Authors.

Current status of MLE

Globally, momentum for MLE is growing, as its crucial role in fostering effective learning—particularly during the early grades—becomes increasingly recognized. Additionally, MLE’s broader benefits in public life are gaining attention. As outlined later in this document, MLE is highlighted in several key global frameworks, such as the Global Action Plan for the Decade of Indigenous Languages (UNESCO, 2022c), the follow-up to the Transforming Education Summit, World Bank publications, and national language-in-education policies. Despite this growing recognition, challenges remain in ensuring all learners have education in the language(s) they speak and understand most fluently.

The association of a single language with national identity and unity emerged largely from European nationalism in the 19th and 20th Centuries. This led to the establishment of monolingualism as a perceived ideal, a concept that was further propagated through colonial influence (King, 2018). As a result, educational systems often prioritized the status of a single dominant language.

The consequences of this are still visible today. Globally, 40% of learners are not taught in the language they speak and understand fluently (UNESCO, 2025). In some countries, this figure rises to 90%, affecting more than a quarter of a billion learners (World Bank, 2021). Globally, only 351 languages are used as languages of instruction, while an additional 336 are taught as subjects (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2023).

Concerns about the cost of MLE are often cited as a barrier, though these are largely unsubstantiated (see **Box 4**). However, significant challenges remain in ensuring equitable access to MLE. Many education systems face political, logistical, and resource-based obstacles. Among these are issues such as insufficiently trained teachers, a shortage of multilingual learning and teaching materials (which may be further compounded by the lack of established orthographies) and policy opposition—particularly from those prioritizing national or international languages over local languages. These factors continued to hinder the effective implementation of MLE.



Box 4 | Is MLE expensive?

Research in Latin America, Africa and certain areas of Europe has demonstrated that MTB-MLE programmes can lead to significant long-term savings for governments, due to reduced drop-out and grade repetition rates. Initial costs to produce mother tongue teaching and learning materials are often recuperated over time. A World Bank analysis, for instance, found that a shift to Indigenous language-based bilingual education in Guatemala could save the government five million United States dollars annually (Patrinos and Velez, 2009).

Mae Hong Son Province in northern Thailand offers another example. Around 20 ethnic minority languages are spoken by more than half of the population here. Despite nearly 100% school enrolment, the province consistently ranks lowest in Thailand's Human Achievement Index, with standardized testing scores among the lowest in the country. Only 45% of 3- to 4-year-olds are developmentally on track for literacy and numeracy. In this context, starting MTB-MLE in 20 schools serving the largest minority language group would cost less than 1% of the provincial education budget. Much of this cost could be covered by reallocating funds from other areas, such as professional development, literacy skills development, and small school improvements (Person, 2022).

The International Commission for Financing Education Globally (2016), which includes world leaders such as former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Gordon Brown and former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard, found that "mother tongue/bilingual instruction" was the most cost-effective of 20 common interventions aimed at improving children's learning. It ranked far above other strategies, such as school feeding programmes, cash transfers and even computer-assisted learning. Similarly, UNICEF's Investment Case for Education and Equity (2015) ranked mother-tongue instruction as the third most impactful of 13 interventions affecting the "survivability of disadvantaged students." Simply put, MLE not only improves learning outcomes but also makes dropout less likely.

Beyond the initial cost of implementing MLE programmes, policymakers should consider the long-term economic and social benefits. A study linking ethnic fractionalization, language-in-education policy and economic growth in 54 sub-Saharan countries found that the "use of indigenous languages in schools is associated with an economically meaningful increase in the probability of reading for individuals with seven or fewer years of schooling" while "the retention of colonial languages is an important factor in explaining economic failures" (Laitin and Ramachandran, 2022, p. 1).

MLE is not necessarily needed in all 7,000+ languages in the world. Strategic data-based decision making is crucial. Developing MLE in a mere 3% of the total number of languages spoken in sub-Saharan Africa, for example, would benefit some 86 million children (UNESCO, ADEA and the African Union, 2024).

However, some countries have made notable strides in promoting linguistic inclusion. Examples include New Zealand's 1987 Māori Language Act, Morocco's 2011 Constitution recognizing Tamazight alongside Arabic, Nigeria's 2022 National Language Policy, Canada's 2019 Indigenous Languages Act, Peru's 2021 National Policy on Native Languages, Oral Tradition, and Interculturality to 2040, Cambodia's 2024-29 Multilingual Education National Action Plan, Samoa's 2011 Bilingual Education Policy Handbook, and Vanuatu's Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan 2020-2030. Despite these advances, non-dominant languages continue to face marginalization in legislation, policy and practice. In many regions, insufficient funding limits the implementation of language revitalization and preservation programmes, leaving communities without the resources needed to promote linguistic diversity and protect endangered languages (UNESCO, 2022a).

The implementation of MLE differs widely by region. More than half of African countries (31) have established bilingual or multilingual education policies. Among these, 23 require a transition to a second language before grade 5. Additionally, 80% of the countries with policies state that the local languages of instruction used in the early grades should continue to be taught as subjects later on (UNESCO, ADEA and the African Union, 2024). In the 22 countries of sub-Saharan Africa fewer than 20% of learners are taught in the language they speak at home (UNESCO, 2022f).

Some adult education programmes support literacy in local languages. Algeria's Multilingual National Strategy for Literacy, for instance, provides an 18-month bilingual literacy course in Tamazight. The programme, which serves mostly rural and female participants, won the 2019 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize (UNESCO, 2019a). Similarly, Senegal's adult literacy programmes, managed by civil society

organizations, provide instruction in six local languages (UNESCO, 2020a).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, the Intercultural Bilingual Education (IBE) model has been implemented for five decades, aiming to preserve and include Indigenous languages in education (see **Box 5**). Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Peru have embedded Indigenous language IBE in their national systems. While this model initially aimed to integrate

Indigenous communities into national life, it was rooted in an assimilationist perspective. Today, however, countries are working to make IBE more adaptable and less assimilationist by tailoring it to local contexts and focusing on an empowerment approach for Indigenous communities (López, 2021). Despite these efforts, limited resources continue to be a significant barrier to the effective implementation and expansion of such programmes.



Box 5 | Mexico's IBE programme supports Indigenous learners

In the 1990s, Mexico joined numerous Latin American countries in adopting IBE to provide culturally and linguistically inclusive schooling for Indigenous communities. In 1992, the Mexican Constitution was amended to recognize the country's multicultural and multilingual identity, followed by the General Education Law in 1993, which promoted national linguistic diversity.

Under the IBE model, Indigenous learners receive instruction in their mother tongue from kindergarten through grade 3, with a gradual shift to Spanish, reaching full transition by grade 6. Strategies to support IBE include:

- **Alternative IBE pre-school and primary curriculum standards** incorporating pedagogic principles, objectives, educational materials, and teacher training tailored for Indigenous language instruction and cultural diversity.
- **Student assistance programmes** including transportation, meals, accommodation, and scholarships for learners in need.
- **Indigenous language and culture classes** in primary schools to support the learning of Indigenous languages and promote awareness of Mexico's cultural diversity.
- **Strengthened school-community partnerships** that foster intercultural dialogue to help preserve and transmit oral traditions and cultural heritage.

The expansion of IBE schools in the late 1990s motivated more Indigenous parents to send their children to school. Census data reveals that school enrolment for Indigenous children aged 5–14 rose from around 80% in 1990 to over 90% by 2015 (Santibañez, 2016). However, gains in learning outcomes, secondary school completion, and tertiary education access for Indigenous learners have been limited. A strong pipeline of qualified, motivated teachers with the necessary language skills is needed to fully realize IBE's potential in closing achievement gaps (Morales, 2023).



The Asia-Pacific region has witnessed a growing number of MTB-MLE pilot projects, policy initiatives and innovations. Cambodia and India have developed some of the region's strongest MTB-MLE-friendly policies, with Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand recently enacting policies supportive of MTB-MLE and the revitalization of endangered languages. Asian organizations who have received the UNESCO King Sejong Award for Literacy for their work in MTB-MLE include Mahidol University in Thailand (2016), The Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences in India (2022) and the Himalayan Literacy Network in Pakistan (2023). A regional working group (see **Box 6**) is also supporting transformative action.

Several Pacific Island countries such as Kiribati, Samoa, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, and Vanuatu have policies that support the inclusion of local languages in education. However, implementation tends to be stronger in Polynesia, where linguistic diversity is lower than Melanesia. The Pacific Regional Culture Strategy 2022-2032, launched at the Pacific Forum Leaders meeting in July 2022, emphasizes the protection of "arts, cultural heritage and languages" as a key priority (Pacific Community, 2022). Issues of language, culture and Indigenous knowledge continue to be actively discussed across the Pacific, especially considering climate change, migration and education reform.



Box 6 | The Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group

In 2003, Mahidol University, SIL and UNESCO convened the "Conference on Language Development, Language Revitalization and Multilingual Education in Minority Communities in Asia." The overwhelming response from 300 participants from 30 countries led to formation of the Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group (Bang, 2013; UNICEF, 2018).

The Working Group exists to promote positive MTB-MLE policies and practices, strengthen MTB MLE knowledge and information and strengthen MTB-MLE networks and partnerships. It is co-chaired by the UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok (serving as the secretariat) and the UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. Its institutional members include British Council, CARE, Equitable Education Fund, Foundation for Applied Linguistics, Good Neighbors, Mahidol University, Pestalozzi Children's Foundation, the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), SIL Global, Save the Children and the World Bank.

Key activities include:

- **International conferences:** As of 2024, the Working Group has organized seven international conferences, with over 2,600 participants. These conferences have contributed to MTB-MLE knowledge and evidence generation, featuring more than 600 presentations on MTB-MLE projects, language-in-education policies, foundational learning, migrant education, digital resources for minority languages, the International Decade of Indigenous Languages, and links between language and the SDGs.
- **High-level policy forum series:** The Working Group organizes closed-door meetings for ministers and their representatives alongside the conference series. Key outcomes include the 2019 Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion (endorsed by 16 countries, available in eight languages) and the 2023 Bangkok Priorities for Action on First Language-based Multilingual Education (endorsed by 20 countries).
- **MLE knowledge products:** The Working Group has published numerous publications, case studies, and policy briefs on advocacy, programme planning and monitoring, and learning assessment. Webinars have been organized in response to share regional insights, while a newsletter keeps policymakers, implementers, and researchers updated on recent developments, including research findings, and event announcements.
- **Language-in-education mapping exercise and MLE country profiles:** The MLE WG maintains online profiles of over 40 Asia-Pacific countries, offering valuable insights into language-in-education policies and MTB-MLE implementation.

While the Arab States region is home to a diverse array of languages, Arabic remains the primary language of instruction (LOI) in most countries. However, in some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, English has increasingly become the dominant LOI, particularly in higher education, and scientific research (UNESCO, 2023d). This shift is especially evident in countries such as Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where English is commonly used to teach a wide range of subjects. This trend reflects the region's economic priorities and aspirations to integrate more fully into the global economy.

Bilingual education programmes in the Arab States have developed in response to a variety of historical, political, and economic factors. International languages, primarily English and French, are frequently used alongside Arabic, especially in international and private educational institutions. English has grown in prominence as a LOI. For example, in countries like Egypt, Qatar, and the UAE, English has become the medium of instruction for many subjects. These shifts are part of broader efforts to modernize and internationalize education, as seen in initiatives such as the UAE's Vision 2021 (Government of the United Arab Emirates, 2010; Zacharia, 2017). In contrast, French continues to be an LOI in Lebanon and parts of the Maghreb, including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, particularly in technical fields and higher education (Rodriguez-Farah, Lugo, and Lozano Bachioqui, 2020).

Efforts to incorporate regional languages and dialects into national education systems are also underway in several Arab countries, including Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia (see **Box 12** below). However, these efforts face considerable political and social challenges, including tensions over national identity, integration, and the practical difficulties of implementing multilingual curricula (Zacharia, 2017). In Iraq, the 2005 constitution guarantees the right to educate children in their mother tongue in government schools, marking a significant step toward linguistic inclusion. However, the implementation of this right varies across regions and is contingent upon local resources and political dynamics (Ibid., Or, 2017).

African countries stand to benefit most from the implementation of MLE policies, especially considering the large number of learners who are underperforming

in education systems dominated by colonial languages such as English, French and Portuguese. Ethiopia has long established MLE programmes in all major languages, and South Africa's constitution grants official status to 11 languages, including their use in education. Notable MLE pilot projects have been undertaken in Cameroon, Kenya and Morocco, while countries like The Gambia, Nigeria and Senegal have recently adopted MLE friendly policies (Erling et al, 2021).

Since 2013, the International Organization of La Francophonie's *Ecole et langues nationales* (School and national languages) has been driving efforts to support language inclusion in approximately 15 French-speaking countries across sub-Saharan Africa. The initiative promotes the use of 44 national languages, reaching over 7 million children and benefiting 262,000 teachers, primarily at the primary education level.

In Europe, the promotion of language teaching, learning, and multilingualism is considered a crucial area of cooperation to enhance quality, equity, inclusion, and success in education and training (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2023). Various frameworks support language learning, especially for minority groups. The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Council of Europe, 1992) promotes and safeguards the languages of traditional minorities across the continent. A regular report (Council of Europe, 2023) tracks signatures, ratifications, and specific reservations or declarations related to the Charter. The Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (Council of Europe, 1994) stands as the first legally binding international agreement dedicated to protecting national minorities, helping preserve and develop their languages, traditions, and cultures.

Multilingualism is recognized as one of the eight essential competences needed for "personal fulfilment, health, employability and social inclusion" (European Union, 2018, p. 1). Around one-third of European countries offer additional language instruction to newly arrived migrant learners. A smaller group of countries—including Austria, Estonia, Lithuania, Norway, Slovenia and Sweden—provide home-language instruction for migrant-background learners, subject to specific conditions. See **Box 7** for more on how Europe is embracing migrant languages.

 **Box 7** | European minority regions embrace migrant languages

Europe is home to numerous regional minority languages, many of which were once banned in schools but are now used as languages of instruction in their respective regions. Research conducted in these areas has informed modern theories of multilingual education.

Catalonia is a prime example. In the early 20th Century, 90% of residents spoke Catalan as their mother tongue. However, government-encouraged migration led to a sharp increase in non-Catalan speakers. Prior to 1975, the Catalan language was prohibited in schools, in favour of a Spanish monolingual approach. With the restoration of democracy, Catalan was reintroduced as a language of instruction. The Education Law of 2009 (Comunidad Autónoma de Cataluña, 2009) mandates that learners cannot be segregated by language, all learners must achieve fluency in both Catalan and Spanish (and in the Aran Valley, Aranese), and all learners must study at least one foreign language.

Catalonia has recently experienced a rapid rise in the number of international immigrants. A census by the Grup d'Estudi de Llengües Amenaçades (Study Group of Modern Languages) at the University of Barcelona found that more than 300 languages are spoken by migrants of 170 different nationalities. Some 21% of learners have an immigrant background and many speak a language other than Spanish or Catalan at home.

In response, education officials have introduced Catalan language classes for both children and adults. Schools across all levels work to valorize the learners' languages. Officials report that migrant children generally show strong proficiency in Catalan, with the number of Catalan speakers increasing both through birth and migration. However, Catalan faces pressures from Spanish in media, social networks and other contexts, which is weakening its use in daily life (Grup d'Estudi de Llengües Amenaçades, n.d., and M. Pereña, personal communication, January 2025).

Similar trends are visible in other regions, such as the Basque Country, Friesland and Wales, where areas that once fought for the right to use their languages in schools are affirming the linguistic and cultural identities of newly arrived migrant and refugees.



While regional approaches are crucial to expand MLE and promote linguistic diversity, there are also global initiatives aimed at safeguarding and promoting endangered languages. One such initiative is the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (see **Box 8**), which focuses on protecting Indigenous

languages that are at risk of extinction. This global effort goes beyond preservation; it strives to ensure that these languages remain relevant in areas such as education, culture, and identity. By securing the place of Indigenous languages in these domains, the Decade aims to ensure their continued vitality for future generations.

Box 8 | International Decade of Indigenous Languages

The United Nations General Assembly (Resolution A/RES/74/135) proclaimed the period between 2022 and 2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. The Decade aims to raise global awareness about the critical situation of many Indigenous languages, and to mobilize stakeholders and resources for their preservation, revitalization and promotion, in alignment with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).


The proclamation of an International Decade follows the 2019 International Year of Indigenous Languages. UNESCO serves as the lead UN Agency for the implementation of the Decade, in cooperation with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and other relevant UN Agencies. A Global Action Plan (UNESCO, 2022c) outlines the vision and implementation framework for the Decade, with the aim to leave “no one behind, no one outside by 2032.”

The Global Action Plan calls for many language-in-education related activities, including:

- **Development of education policies, plans and programmes** that support mother tongue-based and multilingual education.
- **Improvement of Indigenous and multilingual education competencies** by developing professional standards and skills among teachers, educators and language specialists through training at all education levels, beginning in early childhood care and education.
- **Creation of community-based programmes, systems, and institutions**, including adult education initiatives, that are culturally appropriate for Indigenous Peoples, incorporating distinctive training methods and ancestral knowledge. Special attention is given to Indigenous girls and women, as well as to Indigenous People-run institutions for the teaching, learning and transmission of languages across generations.
- **Capacity building among Indigenous Peoples** in digital skills relevant to the creation and dissemination of culturally appropriate content.

Composed of Indigenous representatives from multiple countries, the IDIL Global Task Force advocates and supports the development of national and regional action plans created by governments, Indigenous organizations or CSOs based on the framework outlined in the Global Action Plan. The Task Force has established four ad-hoc groups, each consisting of individual experts, with one group specifically focused on educational provisions in Indigenous languages.

As with any initiatives involving collaboration between outside organizations (governments, development agencies, CSOs, etc.) and Indigenous Peoples, it is essential to uphold the principle of free, prior and informed consent in all language-in-education programmes. For further guidance on how to do this, see the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), 2016.

 Further resources

- **UNESCO. n.d.3. UNESCO World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE) website. Paris, UNESCO.** WIDE allows the comparison of education outcomes between countries, between groups within countries and between overlapping disparities such as language, wealth, location and gender.
- **UNESCO. n.d.4. World Atlas of Languages website. Paris, UNESCO.** This interactive and dynamic online tool documents different aspects and features of language status in countries and languages around the world.
- **Eberhard, D.M., Simons G.F, and Fennig C.F. (Eds.). 2024a. Ethnologue: Languages of the world. 27th edition. Dallas, SIL International.** Ethnologue is a catalogue of the languages of the world, providing information on each language including estimated number of speakers, geographical distribution, use in education, and ISO 639 standard language codes.
- **UNESCO Institute for Educational Planning (UNESCO-IIEP). n.d. UNESCO-IIEP Policy Toolbox. Paris, UNESCO-IIEP.** This online catalogue presents policy options to guide action on learner completion, learning and equity and inclusion. Among the many topics included are: Language of Instruction, Equity-sensitive curriculum and Equitable and inclusive policies and legislation.



Why multilingual education matters

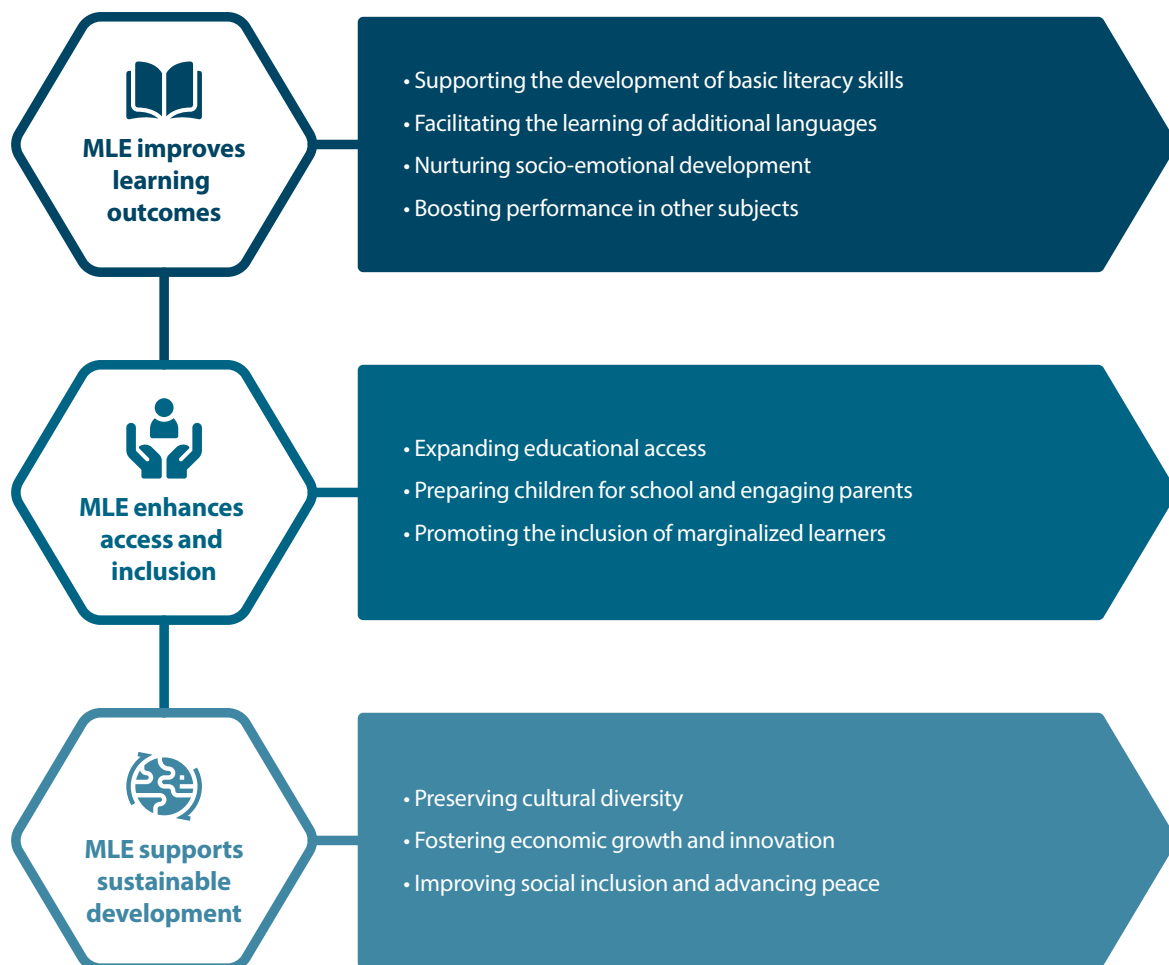


MLE is recognized as a well-established strategy for creating more inclusive education systems and as a catalyst for sustainable development. By delivering instruction in the language(s) the learners best understand, MLE both enhances learning opportunities and builds educational environments and communities grounded in equity and inclusion.

This section details the benefits of MLE and underscores its potential role in education systems. It is organized into three sub-sections:

- **Improving learning outcomes:** MLE positively impacts learning outcomes across subjects. By facilitating literacy in learners' mother tongues, MLE supports the development of basic literacy skills, nurtures socio-emotional development, smooths the learning of additional languages, and boosts performance in other subjects including science and mathematics.
- **Enhancing access and inclusion:** MLE improves educational access, encourages parental engagement, and reduces the chances that a student will drop out of school. With 251 million children out of school globally (UNESCO, 2024a), MLE can play a transformative role in increasing access to education by promoting the inclusion of marginalized learners.
- **Supporting sustainable development:** MLE promotes sustainable development. By preserving cultural diversity, fostering economic growth and innovation, enhancing social inclusion and cohesion, and supporting environmental protection, MLE can contribute to green economies and peaceful societies.

Figure 5 | Why MLE matters



Source: Authors

Improving learning outcomes

Supporting the development of basic literacy skills

Reading is a complex cognitive process wherein symbols are matched with sounds (decoding), which are then combined with other symbols and sounds in the reader's mind to form meaning. Writing can be seen as the opposite process, wherein the meaning in the writer's mind is expressed through symbols arranged in a particular order, allowing others to reconstruct the author's intended meaning. Both processes rely heavily on phonemic awareness (the internalized knowledge of individual sounds in a language), phonological awareness (how individual sounds are combined to form words), and grammatical awareness (how words come together to convey meaning). It is very difficult for a learner—especially a young child—to acquire basic reading and writing skills in a language they do not understand. Without having internalized the unknown language's sounds or grammar, they are unable to construct meaning effectively.

Thailand offers a clear example. Data from UNICEF's Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey revealed that 74% of children aged 7 to 14 from Thai-speaking households had acquired foundational reading skills. In contrast, only 43% of children from non-Thai speaking households achieved the same. The child's home language was found to be the single most significant factor in predicting literacy, surpassing factors such as household income or geographic location (rural vs. urban settings) (National Statistical Office and UNICEF, 20020; Person, 2022). MTB-MLE programmes have been proven to be highly effective in improving literacy among children from non-Thai speaking households (Person, 2022; Pestalozzi Children's Foundation and Foundation for Applied Linguistics, 2019; UNICEF, 2018).

Global research underscores the effectiveness of teaching foundational skills in a learner's L1 for both

comprehension and retention (World Bank, 2021; Trudell, 2023; Poudel and Costley, 2023; UNESCO, 2021a). Using the L1 as the LOI removes the additional cognitive load associated with learning in an unfamiliar language, enabling learners to focus on acquiring new knowledge and developing literacy skills across all academic subjects. As a result, MTB-MLE promotes better learning outcomes, improved information retention, cognitive development, and increased classroom confidence (MTB-MLE Network, 2013, UNESCO, 2011; 2020a). Literacy skills acquired through the L1 transfer to additional languages, facilitating the transition to multilingual learning (UNESCO 2018a).

Evidence of this can be found in the Dungarpur District of Rajasthan, India, where an MTB-MLE programme introduced in 2019 has significantly improved language skills and classroom engagement among Indigenous learners who speak Wagdi. Early assessments showed marked improvement in learning outcomes, directly attributed to learning to read in their mother tongue rather than in an unfamiliar language (World Bank, 2021).

Other data from Europe and Africa further underscore the importance of L1 in developing reading proficiency:

- In Europe, the 2022 PISA survey revealed that adolescents were over 40% more likely to understand reading materials if the language matched their home language (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2023).
- In Africa, children who learned in a familiar language were 30% more likely to read with understanding by the end of primary school compared to those taught in an unfamiliar language (UNESCO, n.d.3) Results from a programme to improve early grade reading in Kenya are presented in **Box 9**.



Box 9 | Mother tongue-based education improves early grade reading in Kenya

A randomized control trial in Kenya demonstrated that a mother tongue-based programme significantly improved early grade reading skills among children. The trial, carried out in language-homogeneous areas across two counties, divided the school zones into three groups. The first treatment group received the Primary Math and Reading (PRIMR) programme, which included teacher training, coaching, and instructional materials in English and Kiswahili, aimed at enhancing oral reading fluency and comprehension. The second group, called PRIMR-MT, incorporated all components of the base PRIMR programme but added materials and training in the children's mother tongue. The control group initially received no intervention but later received the most effective programme identified in the study (Piper, Zuilkowski, and Mugenda, 2014).

The trial results revealed that the PRIMR-MT programme led to statistically significant improvements in several reading-related areas compared to the control group. These improvements included notable gains in letter-sound fluency, oral reading fluency, and reading comprehension, with effect sizes ranging from 0.37 to 0.56 standard deviations. Additionally, learners in the PRIMR-MT programme showed a higher percentage of learners meeting government benchmarks for reading fluency and comprehension in grades 1 and 2 (Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele, 2016).

Facilitating the learning of additional languages

One's proficiency in a second language is closely linked to their competence in their first language (UNESCO International Institute for Capacity Building in Africa, 2013; Trudell, 2023). For this reason, MTB-MLE introduces additional languages only after learners have established strong literacy and cognitive skills in their L1.

MTB-MLE does not hinder the acquisition of a second or third language; rather, it enhances language learning by fostering skills development and cognitive flexibility, which in turn facilitates the learning of additional languages (Tribushinina and Mackaaij, 2023; UNICEF, 2016). MLE does not negatively affect learning or interfere with the acquisition of global languages (Adamson, 2021; Borges and Lyddy, 2024; Sorace, 2007). For example, a study in South Africa on language instruction by grade found that receiving mother tongue instruction in the early grades (1, 2, and 3) leads to improved English proficiency in later grades (4, 5, and 6) (Coetzee and Taylor, 2013).

Once reading skills are established in the L1, they can transfer to reading in other languages, provided the learner has developed speaking and comprehension skills in those languages. Proficiency in reading and understanding texts in a second language enhances learning outcomes. Learners who study subjects in their L1 tend to gain a deeper understanding when

those subjects are taught at a higher level in a second language. Additionally, bilingualism offers cognitive and socioemotional benefits beyond mere language proficiency (Sun et al., 2021).

Late-exit MTB-MLE programmes, where children learn in their mother tongue for the first six to eight years, have proven to be particularly effective for skill transfer. Research indicates that children who receive instruction in their mother tongue during these early years outperform their peers who are taught solely in the official language or who transition too early (before ages six to eight) to the official language, as seen in the subtractive model (Walter and Dekker, 2014; UNICEF, 2018; Schroeder et al., 2021).

For MLE to succeed, teacher training and preparedness, along with effective curriculum design, are essential. Well-trained educators equipped to deliver bilingual education can effectively support learners by scaffolding their learning in both languages (Ertugruloglu, Mearns and Admiraal, 2023). The curriculum must be designed to align with this process, strategically integrating the second language (L2) at appropriate stages of a learner's educational journey and adapting the curriculum as needed. Such integrated measures will not only foster academic success but also lay a strong foundation for both L1 and L2, promoting inclusion and enhancing overall learning outcomes.

Nurturing socio-emotional development

Limited understanding of the LOI in early childhood care and education (ECCE) can have a significant impact on children’s socio-emotional development. Research in Australia has shown that children who struggle with the LOI experience increased anxiety when separated from their parents (Farndale et al., 2016). Similar findings have been reported in the United States of America, particularly among children from migrant families with limited English proficiency (Kang et al., 2014).

MLE can support children’s learning and socialization, helping them manage and express their emotions effectively (García and Wei, 2014; Adamson et al., 2024). The success of MLE is maximized when teachers and caregivers are well-trained to guide the socio-emotional development of learners. Programmes that are contextually adapted, supported by continuous professional development, and aligned with the children’s home language(s) and cultural context(s) are generally more successful (McInnes et al., 2024).

Learners who receive instruction in their L1 during the first six to eight years of schooling often show higher self-esteem compared to those who transition to a second language (L2) too early (Heugh et al., 2007; Ball, 2011;

Thomas and Collier, 1997; Collier and Thomas, 2017). Early language development is closely tied to socio-emotional growth, affecting learners’ maturity, relationships, self-esteem, and overall well-being.

Policies that address the socio-economic and linguistic challenges faced by learners from migrant backgrounds can significantly improve educational outcomes. Positive changes in attitudes towards these learners, along with the promotion of inclusive, multicultural school environments, have been shown to enhance academic achievement (OECD, 2023). Providing targeted resources and teacher training and taking steps to mitigate bias in assessments and classroom interactions are crucial for ensuring equitable education for all learners (Hachfield et al., 2010; Moon Sung et al., 2012). See **Box 10** for an example of efforts to support diverse language learners in the United States of America.

Using a learner’s L1 at any stage of education not only enhances cognitive abilities but also supports positive emotional development, including self-confidence, self-esteem, and a strong sense of identity. These factors are essential for achieving successful learning outcomes and promoting overall well-being (Cummins, 2009).



Box 10 | Supporting diverse language learners in the United States of America

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL), established in 1959, was created to bridge the gap between academic research and the practical world of language learning. CAL acts as a clearinghouse that provides teachers and policymakers with evidence-based research on language use, language learning, and effective teaching methods.

CAL’s mission has grown in importance in recent years, as 20% of the population of the United States now speaks a language other than English at home. The growing number of learners from non-English-speaking backgrounds presents both challenges and opportunities for educators and school systems.

CAL’s areas of expertise include adult literacy, dual language and multilingual education, English learning for migrant and refugee adults and children, Indigenous languages, assessment for multilingual learners, the study of world languages, and the development of language-in-education policies. CAL provides expert guidance to government policymakers and organizes both online and in-person professional development opportunities for teachers, school administrators, community language school advocates, and non-profit organization staff.

For more information, see the [Center for Applied Linguistics website](#).

Boosting performance in other subjects

MLE has been shown to positively impact learner performance across various subjects. Research indicates a link between young learners' literacy and numeracy skills, supporting the use of a learners' L1 to build foundational skills in mathematics (Dahm and De Angelis, 2017; Trudell et al., 2021).

For example, in Cameroon, an MTB-MLE programme during the first three years of schooling resulted in improvements in both English and mathematics, with learners in grades 1 and 3 showing gains of 1.1 to 1.4 standard deviations compared to a control group. Similarly, a study in Peru found that Indigenous Quechua-speaking children attending Quechua-medium schools outperformed their peers in Spanish-speaking schools by 0.54 standard deviations in mathematics, even after controlling for factors such as resource availability (World Bank, 2021).

In Odisha, India, MTB-MLE learners made notable strides in both mathematics and language skills,

alongside increased engagement, better attendance, and heightened self-confidence. Teachers reported greater job satisfaction, while parents and community members expressed more involvement and positive feedback (UNICEF, 2012).

A compelling example from the Solomon Islands shows how integrating Indigenous languages into education can strengthen connections between local knowledge and scientific understanding. Learners documented Indigenous environmental knowledge in their native language, Marovo, marking the first time for 90% of these learners to write substantial texts in their mother tongue. This initiative not only reinforced cultural heritage but also deepened students' understanding of the relationship between language, local knowledge, and science (Sudoh and Darr, 2022). **Box 11** highlights another example of how cultural practices can be integrated into various subjects to enhance learning.





Box 11 | Incorporating cultural practices and community engagement in Hmong MLE

The Hmong are a large ethnic group spread across several Southeast Asian countries. Like many Indigenous Peoples, they have a rich cultural heritage expressed through weaving, song, dance and other ethnoarts. Recent efforts to develop Hmong MLE materials demonstrate how cultural practices can be incorporated into various school subjects, including physical education, morals, maths, science and reading. These lessons are further reinforced through participation in community events, such as the Hmong New Year Celebration, as shown in the example below.



Source: Adapted from Foerster and Saurman, 2021, p. 128 © 2021 SIL International*. Available under CC-BY-NC-SA.

While there are clear benefits, some teachers may hesitate to teach subjects like mathematics and science in their mother tongues, especially if they are more familiar with these subjects in another language and lack the relevant vocabulary (Essien, Saprie, and Taylor, 2023; Piper, Zuilkowski, and Ong'ele, 2018). Addressing this requires community agreement on key terms and specialized

teacher training. In primary grades, teachers can use the "Sandwich Method," which involves introducing key concepts in the L1, explaining corresponding L2 academic vocabulary in the L1, teaching the lesson in the L2, and then reviewing and checking for comprehension in the L1 (Pestalozzi Children's Foundation and Foundation for Applied Linguistics, 2019).

Enhancing access and inclusion

Expanding educational access

When learners are taught in their L1, they are more likely to engage actively in both formal and informal education settings. L1 instruction allows learners to build on their existing knowledge and personal experiences, making it easier to grasp new concepts and retain information. This approach increases engagement but also reduces dropout rates and fosters regular school attendance, all of which contribute to improving overall educational accessibility (World Bank, 2021).

MLE expands educational access for linguistically marginalized learners in two main ways:

- **Enhancing access for minority language speakers:** Many learners from Indigenous, ethnic minority, refugee, and migrant backgrounds face significant barriers when education is provided in an unfamiliar language. L1 instruction reduces these barriers, making participation in education more accessible and enjoyable, and lowering the likelihood of dropout.
- **Promoting inclusion and social cohesion:** MLE fosters an inclusive school culture by valuing the linguistic and cultural diversity of all learners. This inclusivity nurtures a sense of belonging and helps mitigate the risk of exclusion based on ethnic or linguistic differences. MLE plays a key role in reducing prejudice and fostering social cohesion.

Despite increased primary school enrolment in many regions, enrolment rates for marginalized communities, including Indigenous and minority language speakers, often remain low (UNESCO, 2020). L1 instruction significantly improves a child's likelihood of completing primary education (Barrett and Bowden, 2022; Schroeder et al., 2021; Trudell and Young, 2016; UNESCO, 2016).

Mexico's *Modelo Educación para la Vida y el Trabajo* (Education for Life and Work Model) has successfully increased educational access for youth and adults with limited or no formal schooling. Focussed on Indigenous communities, the programme has led to higher enrolment and boasts high satisfaction rates, with 92% of learners reporting improved self-esteem, better living standards, and increased support for their children's education (Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos, n.d.). Other examples of efforts to expand mother tongue instruction, and revitalize Indigenous Languages are included in **Boxes 12** and **13**.



Box 12 | Advocating for mother tongue as a medium of instruction in Morocco

Since gaining independence, Morocco's education policy has primarily followed a monolingual approach, known as Arabization, which made Standard Arabic the primary instructional language in public schools. However, recent policy changes have shifted towards multilingual education, incorporating mother tongues and foreign languages in early education.

A key milestone came in 2003 with Morocco's National Education and Training Charter, which advocated for the teaching of Tamazight, an Indigenous language. Subsequently, Tamazight was granted official language status, and its integration into the national curriculum began. Despite this progress, Moroccan Arabic and Darija—the mother tongue for most Moroccans and the dominant language in daily life—have largely been excluded from formal education. However, recent discussions have focused on the inclusion of Darija in educational settings, and even its potential standardization alongside Standard Arabic and Tamazight.

Moroccan Arabic has evolved into a functional and widely-used language across various domains of Moroccan society. It is now used by national organizations, academic circles and media platforms, including advertising, online content, cartoons, and children's programming. Darija also plays a prominent role in television and radio broadcasts, highlighting its integration into both public life and private discourse. This widespread use underscores Darija's societal relevance and strengthens the argument for its inclusion in educational settings.

Source: Based on Redouane, 2024.



Box 13 | Promoting Indigenous language revitalization in Malaysia

Malaysia's education system has historically allowed Chinese, Malay, and Tamil as LOIs in schools serving learners from these ethnic groups. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (2013–2025) recognizes the unique needs of Indigenous learners and emphasizes the importance of tailored approaches to address barriers related to language, access, and equity in education (Maratin et al., 2022). This acknowledgement has paved the way for MTB-MLE and language revitalization initiatives in the state of Sabah, which is home to more than 50 Indigenous languages.

Sabah's commitment to preserving Indigenous languages is exemplified by two notable initiatives: the *Kurikulum Bahasa Etnik Sabah* (KBES) and the inaugural Language Champions Awards. These efforts highlight innovative, community-driven approaches to language revitalization, with a clear focus on intergenerational transmission and educational inclusivity.

The KBES focuses on revitalizing four endangered languages—Kadazan, Lotud, Murut Timugon, and Tatana. Aligned with MTB-MLE principles, the KBES integrates culturally immersive pedagogical methods such as thematic Big Books, Big Busy Pictures, visual aids, and traditional songs to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences. The programme is a collaborative effort involving the Sabah State Education Department, local schools, and community stakeholders.

In a parallel initiative, the first-ever Language Champions Awards was held on 24 August 2023, to honour individuals who have made exemplary contributions to the preservation and revitalization of the Dusun and Kadazan languages. Award categories, including Most Promising Teacher, Trailblazer, and Community Language Champion, recognized innovative teaching, community mobilization, and sustained advocacy for Indigenous language education.

For more information, see: Maratin, Stephen, and Lasimbang, 2024.



Preparing children for school and engaging parents

Children's learning journeys begin long before they enter formal education, rooted deeply in their home environments and languages. These early experiences shape foundational knowledge and skills which, when aligned with formal education, can drive a child's success in school. However, the transition from an experiential, home-based learning style to the structured environment of school can often be challenging. This challenge is compounded when the LOI is different from the home language, which can disrupt a child's learning progress and undermine their confidence (Kioko, 2015; Carter et al., 2020).

Using a child's home language in early education helps bridge the gap between familiar experiences at home and the new, structured learning environment at school (UNESCO 2020b; UNESCO and UNICEF, 2024; Adamson, 2021). Early childhood programmes that use the child's mother tongue, along with established communication networks and active parental involvement in school activities, support children in adapting to this new learning environment. Activities suggested for the home, combined with parent participation in school events create continuity between home and school learning. This fosters educational readiness and confidence in learners (UNESCO, 2007a, Chapman de Sousa, 2019). It also can improve parents' involvement in their children's education (Hayakawa et al., 2013, Reynolds et al., 2017).

UNESCO recommends that ECCE be provided in home languages to support emotional and intellectual development, enhance school readiness and promote inclusion (UNESCO, 2022d). The significance of MLE and the use of mother tongue as the LOI is further emphasized in the *Tashkent Declaration and Commitments to Action for Transforming Early Childhood Care and Education* (UNESCO, 2022f). Additionally, the Asia-Pacific Regional Network for Early Childhood (2022) advocates for the mother tongue to be the primary LOI in ECCE centres.

Language barriers can discourage parents from engaging with schools and staff, limiting their ability to participate actively in their children's education. Offering mother tongue classes signals respect for linguistic diversity and can create a welcoming environment that reduces these barriers, allowing multilingual parents to feel acknowledged and involved (Housel, 2020).

Multilingual education strategies that build on children's home languages can help create inclusive and supportive school environments. By respecting and leveraging the diversity learners bring, these strategies ensure a smoother transition into formal education and foster sustained parental engagement, ultimately enhancing the learning experience. See example in **Box 14**.



Box 14 | Top-down and bottom-up efforts to engage parents in Luxembourg

Luxembourg's *National Reference Framework on Non-Formal Education for Children and Young People* emphasizes the importance of cooperation between teachers and parents, as well as the promotion of home languages, acknowledging their significant impact on children's self-esteem and identity formation (Ministère de l'Éducation nationale, de l'Enfance et de la Jeunesse and Service National de la Jeunesse, Luxembourg, 2021, p. 47). A study by Kirsch and Bergeon-Morin (2023) on the implementation of this policy in select ECCE centres found that while 'top-down' efforts to promote multilingual education and foster parent collaboration are important initial steps, they alone are insufficient to foster effective collaboration between educators, parents, and children.

For successful implementation, educators require both guidance and training on multilingual literacy practices and effective strategies for engaging parents. Additionally, there is also a need to create inclusive, collaborative spaces that welcome families from diverse backgrounds while considering their expectations. To make these collaborative moments meaningful for children, parents, and educators, all participants must value each other's expertise, engage in 'bottom-up' planning, and reflect collectively on the processes and outcomes.

Supporting the inclusion of marginalized learners

The Education 2030 Framework (UNESCO, 2016) underscores the critical need to address all forms of exclusion and marginalization within education. It specifically calls for combating inequalities in access, participation, and learning outcomes, with a particular emphasis on gender equality. The framework stresses that education systems must be designed to serve all learners, with special attention to those who have historically been excluded from educational opportunities. These excluded learners often include ethnic and linguistic minorities, Indigenous Peoples, individuals with special needs and disabilities, and refugee and migrant populations. These learners often face the dual challenge of navigating a new language and adapting to unfamiliar education systems.

For linguistically marginalized learners, the exclusive use of a dominant language in schools can send a subtle but harmful message: that their home languages and cultures are somehow “less valuable.” This exclusionary practice can alienate minority learners, leading them to feel that they must choose between academic success and preserving their cultural identity. While some minority language learners may succeed in dominant-language settings, it often comes at a significant personal and cultural cost, especially for those who have already experienced displacement and trauma (UNESCO, 2018).

MLE is part and parcel of a broader vision of inclusive education (UNESCO, 2024e, 2020a, 2017) which views diversity as an asset rather than a barrier. This inclusive approach not only upholds linguistic diversity but also fosters environments in which learners’ unique identities are recognized and honoured and seen as opportunities to enrich learning (Premasirirat, 2019). While MLE provides a strong foundation, achieving SDG 4 requires system-wide reforms to embed diversity in all its forms within educational structures, ensuring that every learner’s

success, socio-emotional well-being, and cultural identity are supported. Collecting and using data on learners who are most at risk of underachievement, marginalization, or exclusion is essential for ensuring true inclusion in and through education. See example of efforts to promote inclusive education in **Box 15**.



Box 15 | Promoting language-inclusive education in Finland

Finland supports the creation of inclusive education environments for learners with migrant and multilingual backgrounds. For example, preparatory education programmes help immigrant learners integrate into pre-primary, primary, or lower secondary education by providing additional support in Finnish language skills. Other programmes focus on teaching Finnish and Swedish as L2, enabling learners to develop their linguistic and cultural identities in a diverse and media-rich society. Beyond language instruction, students also can receive support in their home languages for studying other subjects, promoting holistic and inclusive learning experiences (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2025).

To support language awareness in schools, Finland has used the Council of Europe’s *Roadmap for schools to support language(s) of schooling* (Dahm et al., 2021). The roadmap can help schools establish tailor-made whole-school strategies to develop learners’ competences in the LOI. It includes a self-assessment tool, a promising practices database, and a coordinator’s package to support implementation.

Contributing to sustainable development

Sustainable development “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” (UN, 1987, p. 43). This vision encompasses the well-being of people, the protection of ecosystems, and the preservation of natural resources.

Achieving sustainable development requires balancing economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. MLE plays an essential role in supporting all of these areas.

Preserving cultural diversity

MLE is crucial for preserving minority and Indigenous languages, championing cultural diversity, and fostering inclusive, peaceful societies. By supporting the development and revitalization of languages, MLE enables the creation of writing systems that allow communities to produce written materials in their first languages, including textbooks and supplementary readers. This aligns with several SDGs, notably SDG 16, which emphasizes the importance of peaceful and inclusive societies.

Protecting languages through education safeguards the cultural knowledge embedded within them. When local cultures and languages are integrated into the curriculum, the bond between language and culture is reinforced. Protecting cultural heritage through language ensures that communities can maintain their resilience and preserve their unique identities.

The *Kusi Kawsay School* in Peru is a prime example of a holistic education model that integrates social values like reciprocity, equity, and social justice, while placing a strong emphasis on Indigenous knowledge and sustainable development. Awarded the 2021 UNESCO-Japan Education for Sustainable Development Prize, the school showcases a model of learning that prioritizes cultural empowerment and community cohesion. Through interactive hands-on activities, learners engage with key themes like gender equality and climate change, combining traditional knowledge with contemporary educational practices (UNESCO, 2021b). This model nurtures personal growth and collective responsibility, empowering learners to address global challenges while preserving their cultural heritage. Another example of the integration of traditional knowledge into educational content can be seen in **Box 16**.



Box 16 | Revitalizing cultural practices and languages: The Urak Lawoi cultural calendar

The Urak Lawoi are a seafaring minority group with communities historically spread across what is now Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Thailand. In a concerted effort to revitalize the endangered Urak Lawoi language, researchers from Mahidol University, supported by the Pestalozzi Children’s Foundation, partnered with the Urak Lawoi community on Koh Lanta Island, Thailand, to create a cultural calendar as part of a school-based initiative. The calendar illustrates activities conducted throughout the year, such as the harvesting of specific fish and sea creatures at various times, agricultural practices, traditional foods and even the patterns of foreign tourist visits.

This information informed the development of curriculum and learning materials which are currently in use including cultural posters, big and small books, games and other learning materials that aligned to the cultural activities the children would experience each month. Additionally, it was shared in intercultural education classes in neighbouring schools serving learners from other ethnic and religious communities. The cultural calendar has fostered a greater appreciation for Urak Lawoi Indigenous knowledge and stewardship of natural resources across the island.

UNESCO has been supporting the safeguarding of languages and cultures as part of its contribution to the International Decade of Indigenous Languages. For example, in Gabon, UNESCO, in partnership with the Gabonese National Commission for UNESCO and other stakeholders, launched the “*Je parle Koya. Je parle Baka*” (I speak Koya, I speak Bako) project. This initiative aims to promote and protect the Koya and Baka languages in Gabon. In 2023, an ethnographic survey collected common expressions and cultural lexicon from these regions. ‘Capsules’ were then shared through social media and television, helping younger generations reconnect with and take pride in their linguistic and cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2024d).

In addition to community-based efforts like the example above, academic institutions are also playing a crucial role in supporting language revitalization. Professors from the University of British Columbia and Purdue University (2024), for instance, developed a massive open online course (MOOC) entitled *Indigenous Languages: From Policy and Planning to Implementation and Assessment*. This course empowers learners to design and implement language plans that align with the goals of language reclamation, revitalization, and education at both the individual and community levels. Tailored for Indigenous community members, educators, policymakers, and practitioners, the course ensures that participants have access to vital learning tools without requiring high-bandwidth resources, making it accessible to a broad range of learners.



Fostering economic growth and innovation

MLE also fosters economic growth and innovation by nurturing creativity, enhancing problem-solving abilities and improving educational outcomes among marginalized populations. Research shows that educational approaches that embrace multilingualism can spark greater creativity and equip learners with the skills needed to tackle complex challenges (Fürst and Grin, 2021). MLE encourages learners to think flexibly and adapt to new environments, boosting their academic performance and enhancing their ability to innovate in diverse contexts (World Bank, 2018). These cognitive benefits are particularly valuable in today's globalized economy, where adaptability and creative problem-solving are essential for driving innovation.

Furthermore, MLE increases access to higher education and vocational training, empowering individuals to break the cycle of poverty (UNESCO, 2008; Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group, 2017). Migrants and refugees can leverage MLE to utilize their existing skills more effectively, resulting in positive outcomes for both their families and the broader economy (UNESCO, 2019).

MLE also facilitates social and economic mobility by improving job access and increasing economic participation. For example, Switzerland attributes 10% of its gross domestic product (GDP) to its multilingual heritage, which includes French, German, Italian and Romansh, while the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland has been estimated to lose approximately 3.5% of its GDP annually due to relatively poor language skills among its population (Hardach, 2018). In South Africa, an increase in mother tongue-based education from four to six years corresponded to a rise in wages, highlighting the economic benefits of MLE (Eriksson, 2014). Countries that promote multilingualism experience significant benefits, including increased export success and a more innovative workforce (Hardach, 2018; Fürst and Grin, 2021).

Multilingual education has the potential to stimulate growth in national and international language industries (UNESCO, 2019). These industries encompass the

creation of educational materials and the development of language technologies which, in turn, generate job opportunities for speakers of local languages. Additionally, MLE fosters the creation of specialized products and services in human language technologies, which are crucial for improving education and communication in various languages. This not only leads to increased local employment opportunities but also strengthens technical capacities at different levels of the educational system (Ouane and Glanz, 2011). See examples in **Box 17**.



Box 17 | Enhancing economic opportunities through MLE

In the early 1990s, Ethiopia's Federal Ministry of Education decentralized its education system, establishing 11 Regional Education offices across the country. In nine of these regions, teams of language professionals and applied linguists collaborated with university linguists to develop specialized terminologies. This collective effort not only led to the creation of regional and local publishing industries but also fostered skill development and expertise, generating job opportunities and promoting local and regional engagement at various educational levels (Ouane and Glanz, 2011).

In contrast, although South Africa's Constitution guarantees equal status for its 11 official languages, the publishing sector is predominantly dominated by English and Afrikaans. As a result, most African languages are confined primarily to school textbooks, limiting access to academic and recreational reading materials in those languages. Promoting the value of local languages through MLE could help stimulate growth in associated language industries, such as publishing, translation, and digital content creation (Möller, 2013).

Improving social inclusion and advancing peace

MLE can help reduce social inequalities for Indigenous Peoples, ethnic minorities, migrants and refugees by providing them with essential language skills and knowledge. This empowerment not only enhances their ability to engage with the wider community but also fosters social inclusion, enabling these groups to participate more fully in economic, educational, and social opportunities.

As migration continues to increase, so does the diversity within communities in destination countries. However, research in contact theory suggests that limited social interaction between diverse groups is strongly correlated to increased prejudice and discrimination (De Coninck et al., 2020).

To counter this, education planners can play a key role in promoting social cohesion by embedding multicultural

perspectives and experiences within the curriculum. By doing so, MLE helps facilitate understanding, empathy, and communication across cultural boundaries, fostering a more harmonious and integrated society. This approach aligns with the objectives of SDG 16, which aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development (UNESCO, 2024c). See an example in **Box 18**.

Improved social cohesion has broad benefits towards the creation of inclusive and peaceful societies. Learning about different languages and cultures within a structured educational setting encourages learners to see diversity as a strength rather than a source of conflict. This mindset of mutual respect and tolerance can play a key role in preventing discrimination and violence, thereby contributing to peace.



Box 18 | Language learning for adult migrants' and refugees' employability and social cohesion

Literacy and language programmes are essential pillars of inclusion for adult migrants and refugees, providing them with the tools they need to integrate into host societies (UNESCO, 2019c). In Germany, for example, strong German speaking, reading, and writing skills were linked to a 19% higher probability of employment and an 18% increase in wages among refugees (Hanemann, 2018). Successfully transitioning into employment has been identified as the most crucial pathway for refugee well-being, fostering a sense of belonging and enhancing their participation in society (King and Lulle, 2016).

Programmes such as the Young Adult Migrant English Course at Melbourne Polytechnic in Australia offer tailored language instruction across three levels, preparing learners for integration into mainstream technical and educational pathways (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2017). Similarly, the Promotion of Literacy and Training of Immigrants of the African Communities Living in Cabo Verde Programme (2016-2020) combined literacy training, Portuguese language instruction, and vocational skills development, including computer skills and carpentry. The programme led to significant improvements in learners' communication skills and vocational competencies, with African women reporting greater empowerment through enhanced literacy and numeracy skills (Andrade, 2018).

While fluency in host languages is critical for social cohesion, it is equally important for host populations to recognize and understand the value of refugees' first languages. After the arrival of Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Germany, for instance, there was a notable surge in interest in Arabic language courses (Wierth, 2017).

Multilingual literacy and language programmes can help societies to create more inclusive environments that benefit both refugees and the host population, fostering mutual understanding and long-term social cohesion.

Supporting environmental protection

Indigenous populations are particularly vulnerable to the impact of climate change, yet their traditional knowledge systems offer valuable insights into mitigating environmental degradation. Indigenous Peoples possess a deep, intergenerational understanding of their environments, including knowledge of ecosystem management and sustainable practices. This knowledge is often inextricably tied to the languages through which it has been passed down across generations (Couée, 2024; Price, 2024).

Many of the world's Indigenous languages are spoken in regions that are also hotspots of biodiversity. These languages encode traditional knowledge that has evolved alongside these ecosystems and integrating them into education can play a crucial role in addressing the climate crisis. By recognizing the significance of Indigenous knowledge within education frameworks, we can equip

learners with the tools to tackle environmental challenges in ways that honour and preserve both Indigenous languages and cultures (UNESCO, 2022c).

Incorporating Indigenous languages into education not only helps preserve this invaluable traditional knowledge but also strengthens local communities by passing down sustainable practices to future generations. Traditional practices including ecosystem management, natural resource extraction, and sustainable artisanry, often require fewer resources, lower energy consumption and reduced capital investment, thereby supporting sustainable livelihoods, green economies and environmental conservation (UNESCO, 2023b). Examples of how Indigenous knowledge and languages are being integrated into educational systems to ensure the longevity of both cultural and linguistic heritage and biodiversity are included in **Boxes 19** and **20**.



Box 19 | Educational resources based on Indigenous understandings of the ocean in New Zealand

The Canoe is the People project highlights the rich Indigenous Pacific knowledge of the ocean environment, focusing on traditional open ocean wayfaring. It aligns closely with formal education systems by providing a resource pack that integrates traditional knowledge into school curricula. The pack includes a comprehensive curriculum framework, marking schemes, lesson plans, and evaluation forms, making it both accessible and easy for educators to use (UNESCO, n.d.2)

A key component of the project is audiovisual documentation featuring master navigators and canoe builders, enabling elders and experts to pass on their specialized knowledge and skills. This documentation plays a vital role in preserving the traditional art of navigation and canoe building—essential elements of Pacific identity and maritime heritage. By using modern media tools, including animations, images, and texts in both English and Māori, the project ensures that content is engaging and accessible to a broad audience, enhancing the learning experience.

The Canoe is the People project exemplifies how blending traditional wisdom with modern educational methods creates a powerful model for integrating cultural heritage into contemporary learning. It helps Pacific youth reconnect with their ancestral knowledge while achieving formal learning objectives, preserving Indigenous maritime traditions and fostering a deeper connection to both the environment and cultural identity for future generations.

For more information, see the [UNESCO website](#).



Box 20 | Promoting environmental stewardship in the early years in Botswana

Botswana’s Bokamoso pre-school programme offers a compelling example for how Indigenous knowledge and languages can be integrated into educational systems. Rooted in the traditional knowledge of the San people, the Bokamoso programme uses nature-based learning tools while emphasizing community involvement in curriculum development. This initiative not only trains local language speakers to become pre-school teachers but also ensures the inclusion of traditional skills and knowledge within the classroom. By doing so, it fosters a deeper connection to local culture and ecosystems, creating an educational environment that respects and celebrates the richness of Indigenous heritage (UNESCO, 2009).

Similar initiatives have been undertaken in other regions around the world. Programmes in Belize, Canada, Kenya, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands show how blending scientific and traditional knowledge with local languages can promote environmental stewardship and biodiversity conservation.

Furthermore, integrating Indigenous languages into education—while ensuring the observance of free and prior informed consent guidelines—can foster cultural pride and empowerment among Indigenous populations. When Indigenous languages are validated within the

education system, it not only elevates the status of Indigenous communities but also encourages their active participation in decision-making processes. This sense of inclusion is linked to improved socio-emotional well-being and greater engagement in shaping their futures.



Further resources

- **European Commission, European Education and Culture Executive Agency. 2023. Key data on teaching languages at school in Europe. 2023 edition. Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union.**
This document presents education policies and data on the number, range and time devoted to foreign language teaching, language support provided for newly arrived migrant learners, transnational mobility of foreign language teachers and other topics.
- **UNESCO. 2022. From rights to country-level action: Results of the tenth consultation of Member States on the 1960 Convention and Recommendation. Paris, UNESCO.**
This document presents the results of the tenth consultation of Member States on the implementation of the 1960 Convention and Recommendation (covering the period 2017-2020). The analysis was based on 82 reports received by the Secretariat in 2020.
- **Daigneault, A.L, Bögre Udell, D., Tcherneshoff and K., Anderson, G.D.S 2022. The language sustainability toolkit. Version 2.0.0. Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages and Wikitongues.**
This toolkit includes techniques to document and promote languages, and organize communities to speak these languages, along with case studies.
- **UNESCO. 2023. Culture: At the heart of the Sustainable Development Goals. The UNESCO Courier. Paris, UNESCO.**
Culture is who we are, and what shapes our identity – and language is a large part of this. Placing culture at the heart of development policies is the best way to ensure a human-centred, inclusive and equitable development.
- **University of British Columbia and Purdue University. 2024. Indigenous Languages: From Policy and Planning to Implementation and Assessment. EdX website.**
This course empowers learners to develop and implement language plans that support individual and community goals for language reclamation, revitalization, and education. Designed for Indigenous community members, teachers, policymakers, and practitioners, the course offers accessible digital learning without the need for high-bandwidth resources.



Practical action

for multilingual education

This section outlines key actions to ensure the successful delivery of MLE. These actions are not intended as one-size-fits-all guidelines, as the effective implementation of MLE requires a nuanced, context-sensitive approach that respects the unique cultural, linguistic and societal dynamics of each region. Central to this approach is the prioritization of local voices, the recognition of contextual intricacies, and the active involvement of stakeholders at every stage of decision-making. By ensuring that the needs of learners are understood and addressed,

MLE can be tailored to meet the specific challenges and opportunities present in diverse educational settings. **Figure 6** highlights six critical areas that are central to the successful delivery of MLE, providing a framework for designing and implementing effective multilingual education programmes. These areas can guide educators, policymakers, and communities in creating inclusive, sustainable, and culturally responsive learning environments.

Figure 6 | Action areas essential for effective MLE programmes



Source: Authors

Leadership: Laws, policies and plans

Effective implementation of MLE requires a strong and multi-faceted leadership approach. This involves establishing supportive policies and frameworks, ensuring community support, and transforming socio-linguistic and related data into actionable plans that bring policy vision to life in the classroom.

Integrating language rights in national education and legal frameworks



PRACTICAL ACTION: Formalize political commitments by embedding mechanisms for language rights in national education and legal frameworks, ensuring learners' rights to receive instruction in languages that align with their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Actions promoted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Minority Issues (2017) include to:

- **Respect language rights as fundamental human rights** by ensuring that all persons have the right to receive education and other services in the language that they understand best. Ensure education policies protect this right, using local languages as a LOI wherever possible.
- **Utilize the proportionality principle**, guaranteeing equitable support for multiple languages by balancing resources and educational opportunities.
- **Promote tolerance, linguistic diversity, and mutual respect** by fostering an education environment that values linguistic diversity and encourages understanding across cultures, including in curriculum and school policies.

Practical examples of legal frameworks for Indigenous and minority languages are included in **Box 21**.





Box 21 | Legal frameworks for Indigenous and minority languages

Promoting bilingual education through national education laws

- **Guatemala:** Support to multi- and inter-cultural bilingual education is reflected in several legal texts, including the National Education Law, Decree No. 12-91 (El Congreso de la Republica de Guatemala, 1991). Article 57 (p. 15) states that “bilingual education is carried out to affirm and strengthen the identity and cultural values of the linguistic communities.” This provision is supported through the training of pre-primary and primary teachers in linguistic, communicative, cultural, sociolinguistic and pedagogical competences in 22 Mayan languages, reaching nearly 11,000 teachers (UNESCO 2022b).

Enabling sub-national legislation

- **Australia:** Australia’s New South Wales, home to the largest Indigenous population in the country, has enacted landmark legislation to recognize the importance of Aboriginal languages. The Aboriginal Languages Act 2017 No. 51, which came into effect in 2020, established the Aboriginal Languages Trust—a government agency tasked with promoting, preserving, and revitalizing Aboriginal languages across the state. Its mandate includes to “promote effective Aboriginal language activities”, including “education and employment opportunities in Aboriginal language activities” (New South Wales Government, 2019, pp. 5-6).
- **Canada:** Canada’s Yukon Territory Education Act (RSY 2002) supports the provision of education in Indigenous languages. This includes not only the teaching of Indigenous languages but also the training and employment of qualified Indigenous language teachers along with “activities relevant to the culture, heritage, traditions, and practices of the Yukon First Nation served by the school” (Yukon Territory Government, Canada, 2002, p. 31).

Supporting vocational education and training in minority languages

- **Serbia:** Serbia’s Law on Dual Education regulates dual vocational education and training and the protection of learners in the workplace. Article 22, related to work-based learning contracts, stipulates that “If the curriculum of teaching and learning is carried out in the language of a national minority, it is the employer’s obligation to organize and implement learning through work in the language of that national minority” (Government of the Republic of Serbia, 2019, p. 9).

Including Indigenous stakeholders in policy development

- **Canada:** Canada’s 2019 Indigenous Languages Act was co-developed with First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Nation through extensive collaboration and collaborative work. It aims to support Indigenous Peoples in their efforts to reclaim, revitalize, maintain and strengthen their languages, and includes mechanisms for Indigenous governments, governing bodies and organizations to collaborate in policy development for the Act’s implementation (Government of Canada, 2019).
- **Mexico:** Mexico’s General Law of Linguistic Rights of Indigenous Peoples, enacted in 2003, recognizes Indigenous languages as national languages and aims to preserve and revitalize them. Policies are developed with Indigenous communities to provide bilingual education, promote media in Indigenous languages, and ensure access to government services in these languages (Government of Mexico, 2003).

Creating a supportive policy environment



PRACTICAL ACTION: Ensure that MLE is embedded in national education policy, ensuring sustainable and transformational change.

Key steps to strengthen MLE policies and ensure they meet the linguistic and educational needs of diverse communities include to:

- **Affirm MLE as a national policy priority**, recognizing its role in improving educational quality, equity and inclusion and broader societal benefits.
- **Conduct research on language use and educational needs**, collecting accurate, context-specific data language usage patterns, specific educational needs, and the relevance and effectiveness of current MLE initiatives to inform policy adjustments and improvements.
- **Embed MLE and language development within lifelong learning policies**, offering first language instruction beyond primary school into secondary,

tertiary and adult education and as part of non-formal education initiatives.

- **Integrate MLE into teacher recruitment and training**, including policies related to teacher deployment and transfer and ongoing professional development (see section on *Teachers*).
- **Facilitate inter-ministerial coordination** between Ministries of Education, Labour, Culture, Finance and Environment, among others, to integrate MLE policies with national priorities and ensure resource allocation, policy alignment and cross-sectoral support.

Examples of national policies supporting MLE are included in **Box 22** and policy advice on the integration of the English language into education is provided in **Box 23**.



Box 22 | National policies supporting MLE



INDIA

India's *National Education Policy's* (Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2020) core principles focus on:

- **Respect for diversity and local contexts** across curricula, pedagogy, and policy
- **Equity and inclusion** at the cornerstone of all decisions, ensuring all learners can thrive
- **Technology integration** to overcome language barriers, improve access for Divyang learners, and enhance educational planning and management.

On multilingualism, the policy specifies:

- **Medium of instruction:** The home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language will be the LOI through at least grade 5, preferably grade 8 or beyond. The home/local language will be taught as a subject thereafter.
- **Three-language formula:** This will continue with flexibility, respecting State/regional preferences and Constitutional provisions. States and learners can choose the three languages, as long as at least two are native to India.

For higher education, the policy supports:

- **First language maintenance:** More institutions will use the mother tongue/local language for instruction, or offer bilingual programmes, to increase access, improve the Gross Enrolment Ratio, and strengthen Indian languages.



SAINT LUCIA

Saint Lucia's *National Language Policy* (Saint Lucia Ministry of Education, 2018) aims to ensure that all learners are:

- **Communicatively competent** and functionally literate in French Creole and Standard English by the end of secondary education.
- **Bilingual** in French Creole and English by the end of primary education.
- **Communicatively competent** in at least one foreign language by the end of secondary education.

The proposed model for early primary education includes:

- **1½ – 2 hours** of French Creole instruction for all learners.
- **1½ – 2 hours** of English instruction for all learners.
- **Language awareness activities** integrated into instruction through rich materials, activities, and interactions.
- **1 hour** of enrichment activities for groups.
- As learners progress, content across the curriculum is taught in both languages, as determined by teaching staff.
- **French Creole** is studied as a subject through secondary school.
- **Introduction of a third language** (French or Spanish) in grade 6, as determined by the school.

NIGERIA

Nigeria's *National Language Policy* (Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council, 2022) aims to:

- **Promote effective teaching and learning** of Nigerian and foreign languages at all educational levels.
- **Preserve Nigerian languages** and protect them from extinction by recognizing their status and incorporating them into educational programmes.
- **Empower Nigerian languages** as tools for mass literacy development.
- Strengthen and promote the **equitable use** of all Nigerian and foreign languages.
- Ensure the effective use of **sign language**.

The policy also specifies that mother tongue will be the LOI from ECCE through primary education to ensure positive learning outcomes.

CAMBODIA

Cambodia's *Multilingual Education Action Plan* (Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, Kingdom of Cambodia, 2019) aims to:

- **Expand demand for and supply** of inclusive and equitable quality MLE programmes and sustainability for Indigenous Peoples, especially children.
- **Improve access to quality MLE**, linking with mother tongue, cultures, traditions and customs of Indigenous Peoples.
- **Promote participation and collaboration** between Indigenous communities and relevant stakeholders.

Building on the lessons learned from its initial plan (2015–2018) and the related evaluation findings (UNICEF Cambodia et al., 2019; Ball and Smith, 2021), the plan aims to ensure that all Indigenous Peoples have access to inclusive, equitable, and high-quality MTB-MLE, as well as lifelong learning opportunities.

TONGA

Tonga's *Education Policy Framework* (Ministry of Education, Government of Tonga, 2004) outlines key issues and outcomes, including:

- **Proficiency goals:** Learners will achieve proficiency in Tongan, develop understanding and speaking skills in English by the end of Year 6, and attain competence in both oral and written English by the end of secondary school.
- **LOI:** Basic literacy will be established in Tongan before the introduction of English. Tongan will be the primary language of instruction in government primary schools up to Year 3. From Years 4 to 6, a bilingual approach (Tongan and English) will support instruction, with English becoming the main language of instruction from Year 7 onwards.
- **Cultural integration:** Tongan language and culture will be integrated into the curriculum and taught in all schools from Years 1 to 13.

Box 23 | Policy advice on the English language

Politicians and parents worldwide recognize English as an economically valuable language, opening pathways to higher education and career advancement. As the most widely taught foreign language worldwide, English holds a prominent place in many educational systems. However, significant questions remain about the most effective methods to teach it, particularly in low-resource settings.

In response to the global evidence highlighting the importance of strong mother tongue skills in learning additional languages, the British Council has conducted extensive research and issued publications related to MLE. These include:

- Coleman, H. (Ed.). 2011. *Dreams and realities: Developing countries and the English language*. London, British Council.
- British Council. 2019. *Using multilingual approaches: Moving from theory to practice*. London, British Council.
- British Council. 2019. *English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries: A British Council perspective*. London, British Council.

Based on this research, the British Council cautions parents and teachers against “bypassing the home language” to go “straight for English” (British Council, 2015, p.1).

For more information, see the [British Council](#) website.



Moving from policy to planning



PRACTICAL ACTION: Move beyond policy commitments to develop clear, actionable MLE implementation plans that can stimulate meaningful, measurable educational impact.

Key steps for effective MLE implementation planning include to:

- **Define and set measurable objectives to gauge the effectiveness and impact of MLE programmes.** Develop both qualitative and quantitative indicators that can be tracked over time, including the number of schools implementing MLE, learner achievement in multiple languages, community satisfaction levels, among others.
- **Assign clear departmental roles and responsibilities** to ensure accountability within the Ministry of Education. Specify roles, such as policy development, funding, programme monitoring and evaluation, ensuring that responsibilities are clear and there are no gaps.
- **Plan for sustainable programme expansion,** with a sustainable growth model for scaling MLE programmes
- **Secure continuous financial support** including initial set-up and ongoing operations through a financial plan that identifies funding sources, including government allocations, grants, or partnerships.
- **Empower Indigenous communities in educational planning** through their active participation in the development and implementation of educational plans that reflect their priorities. Support these communities to contribute to curriculum and the creation of teaching and learning materials.

See **Box 24** and **Figure 7** for examples of national and regional efforts to scale up MLE planning and implementation.



Box 24 | An MLE Roadmap for Southeast Asia

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO), founded in 1965, is a regional intergovernmental organization promoting cooperation in education, science and culture among 11 Southeast Asian countries. SEAMEO has been instrumental in supporting MLE in the region, including as a founding institutional member of the Asia Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group.

In support of the 2023 Bangkok Priorities for Action on First Language-Based Multilingual Education (UNESCO, 2023a), SEAMEO's Regional Centre for Quality Improvement of Teachers in Language supported the development of a Southeast Asian Roadmap for MLE to guide countries at various stages of MLE implementation. The roadmap provides guidance on six tracks:

- 1. Access track:** To support children of ethnic minority, migrant and refugee backgrounds who are at a high risk of dropout
- 2. Learning track:** To create culturally and linguistically appropriate curriculum, teaching and learning and materials and assessment.
- 3. Teachers track:** To recruit, train and support MLE teachers.
- 4. Policy track:** To create integrated and budgeted language-in-education policies.
- 5. Data track:** To establish systems to collect and analyze data on linguistically marginalized children.
- 6. Community track:** To develop partnerships with parents, community leaders, and organizations to support MLE.

The roadmap marks the first collective effort in Asia to advance MLE-related goals. It serves as a model for other regions and organizations worldwide.

Source: Based on Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Quality Improvement of Teachers and Other Educational Personnel in Language, 2024.


Figure 7 | Excerpt of an implementation plan for MLE in Liberia in 15 languages

Actions	Year 1				Year 2				Year 3			
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
Research												
Identify education officials	x	x										
Identify possible supporting partners	x	x										
Identify possible funding agencies	x	x	x	x								
Prepare preliminary research materials		x										
Train community researchers		x										
Collect and document baseline information				x	x							
Awareness raising & mobilization												
Develop advocacy materials	x											
Do advocacy in district and province		x	x		x	x			x	x		
Do advocacy in communities		x	x	x				x	x	x		
Mobilize communities	x	x	x	x				x	x	x		
Meet with district officials, principals & teachers of selected schools				x	x			x	x			x
Curriculum and instructional materials												
Establish educational goals for K1 & K2 (with MOE)		x										
Develop curriculum for K1 and K2 based on MOE competencies		x	x									
Identify cultural themes for each week			x									
Develop & test primers [to introduce letter-sound relationship in the MTs]		x	x	x								
Develop Oral English lessons			x	x	x							
Get MOE approval for K1 and K2 curriculum and teaching materials					x							

Note: The boxes with Q1, Q2, Q3 and Q4 for each year show which activities were supposed to take place in each of the four quarters of each year. This is an extract from a longer plan. MT=Mother Tongue.

Source: Adapted from UNESCO 2018a, pp. 80-81.

Raising awareness and mobilizing stakeholders

 **PRACTICAL ACTION:** Communicate the benefits of an MLE approach and raise awareness about the social and educational value of all languages in the country to foster local ownership and community engagement.

Key strategies to raise awareness and mobilize stakeholders include to:

- **Develop a multi-level communication strategy** to foster broad support for MLE:
 - **Community level:** Dialogue with educators, parents, local leaders, and influential community members to promote local languages and MLE programmes. Actions could include hosting community events, informational workshops, or participatory discussions.
 - **District/provincial level:** Engage education officials and media outlets to advocate for MLE implementation. Actions could include collaborating with district officials to share MLE information through regional platforms, encouraging local media to highlight MLE successes, and fostering regional advocacy for policy support.
 - **National level:** Communicate with national leaders, universities, international organization, and NGOs to build support and secure funding. This could involve sharing research, case studies, and impact data to demonstrate MLE's contribution to national education goals.
- **Use a mix of traditional and digital media** to reach different segments of the community, including

radio, TV, newspapers, and social media, tailored to community media consumption.

- **Showcase successful MLE projects** using testimonials from learners, parents, and educators, as well as learning outcome data.

Examples of community and trans-national awareness-raising efforts are found in **Boxes 25** and **26**.



Box 25 | Community mobilization to revitalize the Tlingit language

Tlingit is one of the 23 officially recognized languages in the state of Alaska in the United States of America (Stremple, 2024). While 10,000 people in 16 communities have Tlingit heritage, only 500 are fluent speakers of the language (Alaska Native Language Center, n.d.). Community members and academics have collected a great deal of linguistic and cultural information and created Tlingit language learning courses for all age levels and abilities. These are posted on a webpage and shared across social media channels. Community advocates organize Tlingit language classes and special events to celebrate their language and culture.



Box 26 | A think tank supports multilingual education

Founded shortly after World War II, Salzburg Global aims to overcome barriers and open up a world of better possibilities by facilitating focused dialogue on global challenges. Recently, the organization has seen a growing interest in language-in-education issues among its diverse international fellows. As a result, the Salzburg Global Center for Education Transformation has made language policy one of its six priority areas.

The Salzburg Statement for a Multilingual World (Salzburg Global, 2018), translated into 50 languages, urges government officials, researchers, educators, civil society, the media, corporations, and international organizations and funders to:

- **Develop language policies, practices and technologies** that support cohesive and dynamic societies with positive attitudes to multilingualism.
- **Actively support language rights, diversity and citizenship** in official documentation and public messaging.
- **Tackle all instances of discrimination, prejudice, bias and inequality** associated with language and literacy.
- **Recognize that minorities, migrants and refugees possess high linguistic capital** that is of great value for our present and future world.

For more information, see the [Global Salzburg website](#).



Further resources

- **UNESCO. 2020c. Tools for planning and monitoring programmes of multilingual education in Asia. Bangkok, UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok.**

This booklet presents 13 research instruments from UNESCO's regional study on language use in classrooms in ethnolinguistic communities. It helps teachers and administrators gather data for planning, monitoring, and evaluating MLE programmes. It complements the five booklets of UNESCO's [MTB-MLE Resource Kit – Including the Excluded: Promoting Multilingual Education](#) (2018).

- **Beacco, J.-C., and Byran, M. 2007. From linguistic diversity to plurilingual education: Guide for the development of language education policies in Europe. Strasbourg, Council of Europe.**

This guide is designed for language education policymakers, offering insights into policy formulation, decision-making factors, and implementation considerations. It also offers analyses of existing policies in Europe and is accompanied by over 20 reference studies providing policy analysis.

- **Malone, S. 2010. Planning mother tongue-based education programmes in minority language communities. Resource manual for planning and implementing mother tongue-based education programmes in non-dominant language communities. Dallas, SIL International.**

This book focuses on planning and implementing education programmes for lifelong learning in minority language communities, aimed at mother tongue speakers but also useful for those supporting these communities.

- **Trudell, B. and Young, C. (Eds.). 2016. Good answers to tough questions in mother tongue-based multilingual education. Dallas, SIL International.**

This book provides answers to questions often asked about MTB-MLE programme development and implementation, including orthography standardization, teacher preparation, the transition to additional languages, and management of multiple languages in the curriculum.

- **Trudell, B. and Dekker, D. (Eds.). 2023. Good answers to tough questions in L1-based multilingual education (Vol. 2). Dallas, SIL International.**

This follow-up to the 2016 book addresses additional questions related to school language mapping, advocacy, leveraging learners' whole linguistic repertoire, and digital learning tools.



Learning: Curriculum, teaching and learning materials, and assessment

Effective MLE curriculum design requires carefully crafted teaching materials and assessments that promote literacy and subject-area competencies, with assessments being supportive rather than summative and aligned with MLE goals.

Integrating MLE into the curriculum



PRACTICAL ACTION: Integrate MLE into the curriculum with an emphasis on mother tongue education from the earliest grades. This approach builds foundational literacy and language skills while fostering respect for learners' heritage languages and cultural backgrounds.

Key considerations include to:

- **Encourage teachers and caregivers to use learners' home languages exclusively** in early childhood and pre-primary programmes.
- **Introduce language skills systematically**, listening before speaking, speaking before reading, reading before writing.
- **Introduce learners systematically to additional languages**, only after they have mastered the corresponding skills in their mother tongue, using similar methodologies and materials.
- **Engage with community stakeholders to integrate local culture, knowledge and values** into the MLE curriculum.

Examples of efforts to integrate mother tongue into curricula are included in **Box 27**.




Box 27 | Integrating mother tongue in curricula

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

The government of Aotearoa New Zealand has committed to expanding the teaching of Māori in the national education system. *Tau Mai Te Reo*, the Māori Language in Education Strategy (Aotearoa New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2022), supports cross-agency collaboration covering early learning, schooling and tertiary education. It aims to grow the number of Māori language learners, expand access to Māori LOI education services, and fully integrate the Māori into the national identity. It is part of a broader whole-of-government Māori Language Strategy (Ministry of Māori Development |Te Puni Ko Kōkiri, 2019).


SWEDEN

In 2014, the Swedish National Agency for Education (Skolverket) developed specific syllabi to support Sweden's national minority languages across various types of compulsory education. This initiative applied to general primary and lower secondary education, education for learners with disabilities, special schools for learners with more significant disabilities, and Sami schools offering culturally relevant education. The curricula, implemented in 2016, covered Finnish, Romani Chib, Meänkieli, and Yiddish, designed to teach these languages both as first languages for native speakers and as second languages for learners. This marked a significant step in preserving and promoting minority languages within Sweden's education system (UNESCO, 2022b).


LEBANON

In Lebanon, special schools offer instruction in sign language and Braille to help close educational gaps and ensure that children with disabilities can learn. This is linked to a draft implementing decree for the *Compulsory Education Act No. 150 of 17/8/2011*, issued by the General Education Directorate which stipulates that a disability, by itself, is not a sufficient reason to exclude a learner from attending school (UNESCO, 2022b).


CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC

In its *Education Sector Plan 2020-2029*, the Government of the Central African Republic (2020) introduced Sango as the LOI for the first two grades of primary school. A pilot programme, led by the Ministry of Education in two prefectures (including the capital), is testing this approach before wider roll-out. The National Institute for Research and Pedagogical Animation is coordinating the development of the new curriculum and teaching materials specifically adapted to *Sango*, rather than translating existing French materials. The government plans to continue using Sango as the primary LOI for the first two years, with French gradually taking a larger role through primary school (UNESCO, 2022f).

Developing MLE teaching and learning materials



PRACTICAL ACTION: Develop reading, learning materials, and textbooks in learners' languages, usually mother tongue or L1, to strengthen their literacy, reading and writing skills. Ensure materials are culturally relevant and contextually appropriate.

Key actions for developing MLE teaching and learning materials include to:

- **Engage community members to develop culturally relevant, engaging materials** that are clear, age-appropriate, engaging and resonate with local culture, including the use of illustrations that reflect local community traditions and knowledge and directly relate to the text.
- **Seek community consensus on the subject-specific vocabulary** needed to teach subjects like mathematics and science in learners' L1, ensuring terms are both linguistically accurate and culturally meaningful.
- **Expand access to digital resources** to reduce printing costs, while enhancing the availability of materials that can be easily updated and shared.
- **Integrate traditional and modern teaching methods**, including combining Indigenous pedagogical practices like storytelling and experiential learning with contemporary approaches such as journaling and digital tools.
- **Facilitate the introduction of additional languages** by creating materials and applying teaching techniques similar to those already familiar to learners in their L1, ensuring a smooth transition and reinforcing linguistic continuity.

Box 28 highlights examples of national initiatives aimed at developing MLE teaching and learning materials, while **Box 29** details efforts to broaden access to e-books in Indigenous, minority and migrant languages.



Box 28 | National efforts to develop MLE teaching and learning materials



ERITREA

The government of Eritrea has mandated that all children receive primary education in their mother tongue. Supported by a \$25.3 million grant from the Global Partnership for Education (GPE), the government has printed and distributed over 1 million textbooks and teachers' guides. These materials include resources for mathematics, science, English, and mother tongue studies, available in nine languages (GPE, 2019).

To ensure the effective implementation of mother tongue instruction, a language committee was formed for each language community. These committees are tasked with gathering essential technical terminology, vernacular expressions, grammar, and newly coined words. Their work guarantees that learning materials are both linguistically accurate and culturally relevant, contributing to the success of the mother tongue education programme in Eritrea.



UZBEKISTAN

In Uzbekistan, the government's ECCE programme focuses on enhancing early reading in children's mother tongues. With support from GPE, a home-based early reading programme was developed to assist families who are unable to enrol their children in pre-primary centres.

As part of this programme, over 685,000 children received storybooks in Karakalpak, Russian, and Uzbek. The programme also encourages both mothers and fathers to participate in home-based reading activities, with a particular emphasis on involving fathers to challenge gender stereotypes and promote shared responsibility in early education.

The success of this programme led to broader impacts, including a 2016 presidential decree that expanded access to early learning and prioritized the enhancement of ECCE quality across Uzbekistan (GPE, 2019).

MEXICO

The National Commission of Free Textbooks in Mexico has established an Indigenous education section to support MLE from grades 1 to 6. Through this initiative, textbooks are produced and distributed in 64 Indigenous languages and their variants, including Huichol, Mazateca, Mixtec, Tlapaneca and Totonaca, among others.

In a country where 10% of the population is Indigenous and 6.5% speak one of the 68 native languages, this effort helps ensure that children can learn in their mother tongue, promoting language preservation and cultural identity. This programme highlights Mexico's commitment to inclusivity in education, supporting linguistic and cultural diversity across the country (UNESCO, 2022b).

INDONESIA

In 2022, Indonesia's Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology initiated a decree under the Merdeka Belajar (Free to Learn) platform to revitalize 38 local languages across 12 provinces. This initiative engaged language community elders to develop culturally relevant learning models, integrate updated curricula, and create local language content for education.

The resources produced include language and literature materials aimed at reinforcing local cultural identities. To maximize accessibility, the Ministry shares pedagogical content via YouTube and on a website run by Badan Pengembangan dan Pembinaan Bahasa, the agency responsible for language development in 30 provinces. This platform emphasizes the importance of preserving and celebrating Indonesia's linguistic diversity as part of the country's educational framework.

For more information, see: [Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology, Government of Indonesia](#).

GHANA

'Libraries Without Walls', run by the Foundation for Educational Equity and Development in Ghana, is a transformative initiative aimed at enhancing literacy for children in underserved communities by bringing educational resources directly to them. Awarded the 2024 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize, this programme combines mobile libraries and digital tools to make learning more accessible, particularly in rural and marginalized areas.

Since its launch in 2017, the programme has reached over 3,000 children every year, providing books, educational materials, and digital tools in several local languages and English to those lacking access to traditional libraries. It has significantly reduced educational disparities; 75% of its beneficiaries are girls and young women, helping address gender gaps in education and literacy.

For more information, see: UNESCO, 2024g.

THE PHILIPPINES

Beginning in 2009, and especially after 2013, the Department of Education (DepEd) was deeply involved in facilitating the creation of MTB-MLE materials for 19 of the larger language groups in the Philippines. However, many numerically smaller language groups, including Indigenous Peoples, also wanted MTB-MLE.

In 2019, *DepEd Order 21* (Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines, 2019) provided clearer guidelines that empowered communities and local schools to initiate their own MTB-MLE programmes for kindergarten through grade 3. The guidelines established a set of foundational criteria, known as the "4 Minima," which included orthography, a grammar guide, a word list, and storybooks. For materials developed in Indigenous communities, the order also stipulated the requirement for evidence of free, prior, and informed consent. Additionally, the order outlined a process for local field testing, review, and approval to ensure the materials were culturally and linguistically appropriate. Once finalized, these resources were uploaded to DepEd's Learning Resource Portal.

The response was overwhelming, with communities across the country developing thousands of MTB-MLE materials in over 80 languages, including sign language (Arzadon, 2024).

 **Box 29** | E-books in Indigenous, minority and migrant languages

Open educational resources (OER) platforms are becoming increasingly accessible and are bridging linguistic divides. While around 90% of content in higher education repositories with OER collections was created in Europe or North America, localized solutions are emerging (UNESCO, 2023e, p. 2). Some of these have been shown to have positive impacts on learning for children who speak minority languages (Zhao et al, 2022).

StoryWeaver, a nonprofit initiative by Pratham Books in India, hosts over 64,000 stories in 375 languages, with over 60% of the stories in Indigenous languages. Of these, 10% are classified as vulnerable or endangered by UNESCO (UNESCO, 2023e.). The platform allows for the translation and creation of bilingual storybooks, which are widely used by Ministries of Education, literacy organizations, and language collectives for both digital and offline educational applications (Butcher et al., 2023).

Bloom Editor is a free online software programme with an easy-to-learn interface designed especially for creating and translating books in Indigenous and minority languages. The tool has become increasingly feature-rich, enabling users to create e-books (including talking books), primers, leveled readers, comic books, picture dictionaries, reading comprehension games and wall calendars. Sign language videos can be incorporated into the e-books, as well as talking image descriptions for the visually impaired. Materials can be printed, added to apps, exported as videos and uploaded to the Bloom Library, which currently hosts 21,103 books in 933 languages.

The Heritage Language Resources Hub provides links to digital reading material collections that support the languages of migrants and refugees. This online resource hub is dedicated to languages that are less widely spoken, or more dispersed in the diasporas, and do not have easily accessible literature for child and adult learners. The materials are valuable for reading together in families.

Furthermore, UNESCO, with support from GPE, has developed over 300 open-source digital e-books in minority languages, catering to children in Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, and Timor-Leste (UNESCO, 2023f). These resources support inclusive literacy development in local languages, which plays a crucial role in educational equity and linguistic preservation.



Aligning assessment strategies to support MLE



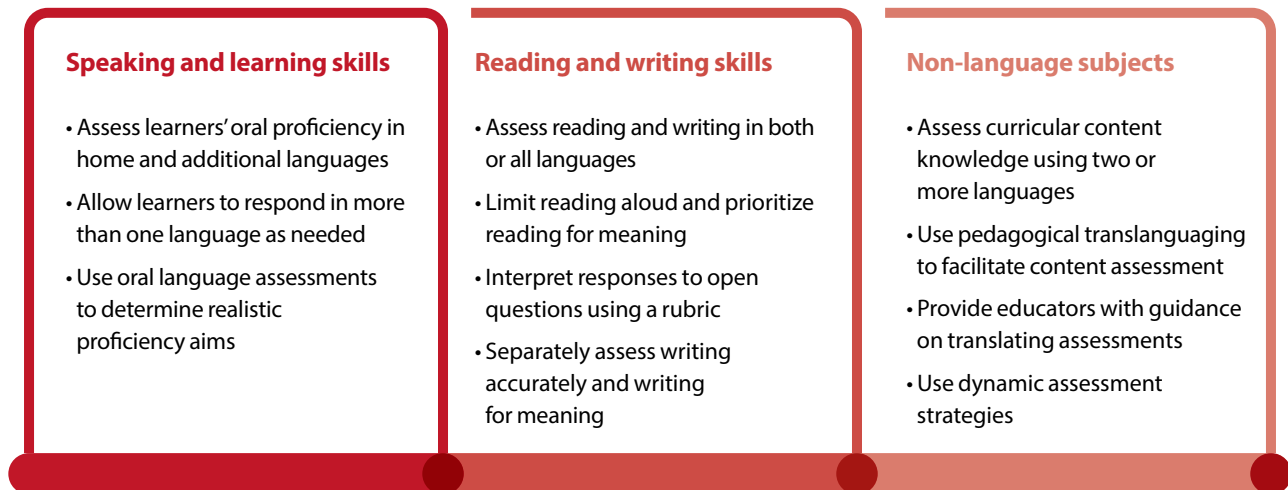
PRACTICAL ACTION: Align assessment strategies with the principles of MLE to ensure that learners' linguistic abilities are recognized as strengths and that assessments accurately reflect learners' content knowledge, rather than just language proficiency.

Assessment strategies for MLE include to:

- **Assess in home language:** Provide learners with opportunities to be assessed in their home language or mother tongue, especially in the early stages of schooling. This ensures that assessments reflect content understanding rather than proficiency in the official school language. Consideration should also be given to the classroom language used for teaching.
- **Emphasize formative assessment:** Use a greater proportion of formative assessments (as opposed to summative assessments) to focus on understanding rather than mere knowledge retention. This approach promotes inclusive teaching practices and supports ongoing student development.
- **Integrate diverse assessment styles:** Employ multiple assessment formats (e.g., oral, written, visual) to capture learners' comprehension of content. Designing assessments that allow for different expressions of understanding ensures that language barriers do not hinder learners from demonstrating content mastery.
- **Adopt holistic evaluation strategies:** Implement holistic evaluation methods that celebrate learners' multilingual skills. Such strategies track both content understanding and progress in language acquisition, encouraging educators and peers to appreciate linguistic diversity as an asset rather than a limitation.
- **Train on equitable assessment practices:** Incorporate equitable assessment practices for multilingual learners in both pre- and in-service teacher training programmes. This equips educators with the skills to assess diverse learners effectively, ensuring fair and inclusive evaluations.

Strategies to strengthen learning assessments at the classroom-level for emergent multilingual learners are presented in **Figure 8**.

Figure 8 | Strategies for assessing emergent multilingual learners



Source: Based on UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2024, p. 35.

 Further resources

- **Malone, S. 2013. Resource for developing graded reading materials for mother tongue-based education programmes. Dallas, SIL International.**
This resource supports the development of graded reading materials for early years mother tongue-based education programmes in ways that are culturally relevant.
- **UNESCO. 2018a. MTB-MLE resource kit: Including the excluded: Promoting multilingual education. Bangkok, UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok.**
This kit offers comprehensive guidance for developing multilingual educational curricula, teaching and learning materials, with practical tools, strategies and frameworks to create effective multilingual educational systems.
- **British Council. 2019. Using multilingual approaches: moving from theory to practice. A resource book of strategies, activities and projects for the classroom. London, British Council.**
This book, for teachers who teach English as a subject or use English as a LOI in linguistically diverse, resource-poor communities, includes practical strategies and activities, and an abridged list of resources for multilingual education.
- **Foerster, E., and Saurman, M.B. 2021. Producing culturally relevant language development teaching materials manual and handouts. Edition 4. Dallas, SIL International.**
This manual is designed to accompany a training on the development of culturally relevant materials to advance language learning. It includes handouts, case studies, examples of materials and how these can be used in different programmes.
- **UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office. 2024. Guidance for classroom-based assessment of multilingual learners: Assessing languages, literacies and learning across the curriculum. Bangkok, Regional Office in Bangkok and UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office.**
This publication offers guidance for the systematic planning of assessment for multilingual learners, including diagnostic, formative and summative assessments. It provides resources for the development, implementation and interpretation of assessments that accurately document the skills and assets of emergent multilingual learners.



Teachers: Teacher recruitment, professional development and pedagogy

The effective delivery of MLE depends on recruiting teachers fluent in both learners' mother tongue and the official language; these teachers must then be deployed in schools where their language skills match learner needs. Continuous in-service professional development is important for deepening teacher competencies.

Recruiting and deploying teachers for MLE



PRACTICAL ACTION: Recruit teachers based on their ability to effectively communicate with their learners. By employing teachers who are fluent in both the mother tongue and the official language, MLE can be strengthened while fostering inclusivity and cultural representation in the classroom.

Considerations on teacher recruitment and deployment include to:

- **Recruit multilingual teachers** who are able to speak, read and write both the learners' mother tongue and the official school language.
- **Ensure a diverse educator mix**, deploying teachers who represent the linguistic diversity of their communities and surrounding areas.
- **Expand innovative teacher training pathways** that provide entry points for aspiring teachers from Indigenous and local communities. See an example in **Box 30**.
- **Align teacher deployment with language fluency**, ensuring that teachers are placed in schools where their language skills match the needs of the learners.



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Box 30 | Innovative career pathways for MLE teachers

Many countries address teacher shortages by hiring community members on a provisional basis as temporary teachers or teaching assistants. These individuals are often given pathways to receive additional training, enabling them to eventually become fully qualified government teachers.

The same approach can be used in MLE programmes. When there is a shortage of certified teachers fluent in a local language, community members can be recruited as temporary teachers or teacher assistants and trained in MLE methodologies. Trained community members have proven to be highly effective in many MLE settings. Their natural social connections often lead to greater parental involvement and increased accountability to the local community. Additionally, local teachers provide children with relatable role models.

Since MLE programmes are often located in rural areas, teachers accustomed to urban conveniences may view these postings as hardships, leading to high teacher turnover. This negatively impacts learners, who suffer from a lack of continuity in their education. The high attrition rate reinforces the need to recruit and train community members as teachers.

That said, cultural outsiders are not necessarily ineffective in MLE contexts. Teachers from different language groups can work effectively in MLE programme, particularly when paired with local teacher assistants who speak the community's language(s).

Strengthening pre- and in-service training to ensure quality MLE instruction



PRACTICAL ACTION: Strengthen teacher training to ensure quality, effective MLE, equipping both pre- and in-service educators with the skills to teach in both the mother tongue and official language(s). Ensure school directors and local education officials are aware of and, ideally, involved in the training to understand MLE, support teachers, and address potential questions from community members.

Key components of pre-service MLE teacher training include to support future educators to:

- **Understand orthography and spelling conventions**, as some trainees may have little or no experience reading and writing their own mother tongues.
- **Present lessons using MLE materials and teaching techniques**, with opportunities for constructive feedback.
- **Expand access educational materials**, such as flashcards, posters, big books, small books and games, to enhance the learning experience and draw on local culture.
- **Apply assessment strategies** that allow for the evaluation of learners' progress through formative testing rather than summative assessments alone.
- **Manage classrooms in ways that foster** structured, productive, and inclusive learning environments for all learners.

In-service teacher training should build on pre-service training to:

- **Ensure teachers receive feedback from peers, supervisors and school directors**, addressing their strengths and weaknesses in lesson delivery and classroom management.
- **Build teachers' digital skills** to enhance teacher pedagogies and learner engagement.
- **Expand peer learning and collaboration** so that teachers can share experiences, learn from each other and offer ongoing support.
- **Deepen and refine pedagogical skills**, enabling them to integrate these more effectively into daily teaching practice.

See an example of a teacher competency standards framework in **Box 31** and examples of teacher training programmes in different contexts in **Box 32**.



**Box 31** | MLE teacher competency standards framework

The *MLE Teacher Competency Standards Framework*, developed by The Inclusive Education Foundation's TeacherFOCUS project, provides a structured approach to supporting teachers in multilingual classrooms, particularly in low-resource contexts. This framework aims to establish and validate effective teaching practices and includes an observation tool designed to measure and support teacher development. When an area for improvement is identified, educators can use the Learn-Choose-Use Teacher Toolkit to learn and apply new MLE strategies.

The framework is divided into three key domains:

- **Domain A: Professional Knowledge and Understanding** addresses the foundational knowledge teachers need to effectively instruct in multilingual environments. Competencies include an understanding of language acquisition processes, multilingual pedagogical theories, and the cultural contexts relevant to the learners they teach.
- **Domain B: Professional Skills and Practices** focuses on the practical skills required for effective instruction in multilingual classrooms. It covers pedagogical strategies, classroom management techniques, assessment practices, and methods for language scaffolding, ensuring teachers can support learners' linguistic and academic development.
- **Domain C: Professional Values and Dispositions** addresses the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours teachers should demonstrate in multilingual settings. Competencies in this area encourage teachers to value linguistic diversity, respect cultural backgrounds, and foster an inclusive classroom culture.

Each domain contains specific competency standards that provide clear benchmarks for what teachers should know and be able to do. These standards outline the minimum requirements necessary for a teacher to be considered competent in multilingual contexts. They also highlight how teachers' knowledge, attitudes, skills, and actions contribute to advancing learners' language learning and overall academic success.

Source: Based on Tyrosvoutis, 2019. Available under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

**Box 32** | Teacher professional development programmes in different contexts**COLOMBIA**

In 2009, the Colombian government officially recognized the *Sistema de Educación Indígena Propio* (Own Indigenous Education System) initiative, which highlights education efforts led by Indigenous communities.

The Autonomous Indigenous Intercultural University (*Universidad Autónoma Indígena Intercultural*), trains Indigenous teachers across all education levels, offering its own curricula and content. The university has created programmes ranging from four to 11 semesters, leading to professional, technical, or university degrees that are officially recognized by the State. It also offers specialized programmes, such as Community Pedagogies and Mother Earth Revitalization Professional qualifications (UNESCO-IIEP, 2021).

**AUSTRALIA**

A three-pronged team-teaching model was created for the Northern Territory Bilingual Programme, focusing on: learning together, teaching together, and planning together, with a Teacher-Linguist assigned to each school (Angelo et al., 2022).

- **Learning together** includes regular professional sessions covering local language and cultural trainings, traditional language literacy learning and pedagogical strategies and curriculum delivery for subjects like math and science.
- **Planning together** involves all educators—assistants and community members alike—collaborating on class planning, learning outcomes, strategies, and roles.

- **Teaching together** applies the skills gained through planning and learning, ensuring effective classroom instruction.

DENMARK

Denmark's four-year Teacher Education programme emphasizes inclusion and support for diverse learners. This includes (UNESCO,2022b):

- **Special needs training**, which incorporates both special needs and remedial education.
- **Danish as a second language**, a mandatory subject designed to support bilingual learners, fostering an inclusive educational environment.

EUROPEAN UNION

The Supporting Multilingual Classrooms initiative addresses the challenges outlined in the European Council's 2019 *Recommendation on Language Teaching* and the 2022 Council of Europe *Recommendation on Plurilingual and Intercultural Education for Democratic Culture*. The initiative provides training workshops across European Union Member States and the European Centre for Modern Languages, focusing on the linguistic integration of migrant learners. These workshops target language and subject teachers, teacher educators, and school leaders, covering whole-school strategies, holistic approaches to language learning, and adapting teaching methods to meet the needs of migrant learners.

For more information, visit the [European Centre for Modern Language website](#).

THAILAND

Thailand's Equitable Education Fund (EEF), established in 2018, aims to reduce educational inequality and improve teacher effectiveness through research and evidence-based solutions. EEF's Homegrown Teacher project offers scholarships, mentoring, and stipends to hundreds of young people from remote areas, with the promise of teaching positions in their home communities upon graduation. Many of these future teachers come from ethnolinguistic minority groups and speak one of the six mother tongues currently used in MTB-MLE programmes in government schools. Three regional teacher training institutions have collaborated with Mahidol University, the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation, the Foundation for Applied Linguistics, UNICEF Thailand, and the Delegation of the European Union to Thailand to develop MTB-MLE courses for Homegrown Teachers, as well as workshops and materials for teaching Thai as a Second Language to ethnic minority and migrant children. Additionally, a MOOC for pre- and in-service MTB-MLE teacher training has been developed.

For more information, visit the [Equitable Education Fund \(EEF\) website](#).

Enhancing pedagogical approaches



PRACTICAL ACTION: Support teachers to implement pedagogical approaches in multilingual settings that foster a supportive, engaging, and culturally-responsive learning environment.

Key strategies to enhance pedagogical approaches include to:

- **Deliver differentiated instruction**, designing lessons that address varying levels of language proficiency among learners and ensure all learners can engage with the content. This may include scaffolding techniques such as visual aids, simplified language, or pre-teaching key vocabulary.
- **Promote collaborative learning** to support language development. Arrange mixed-language proficiency groups that encourage language exchange and mutual support, making content understandable and relevant for all learners.
- **Implement collaborative teaching** where teachers with similar or different linguistic backgrounds work together to enhance the development of language skills among learners.
- **Integrate experiential learning** including hand-on projects, field trips, art projects, cultural experiences, films, and more, to foster deeper understanding of key concepts and make learning engaging.
- **Promote inclusive classroom practices**, ensuring all voices are valued and considering learners' comfort levels with participation. Techniques such as pair-sharing and small group discussions can help encourage everyone's involvement.
- **Enhance play-based strategies**, incorporating games and other enjoyable activities to promote social interaction, creativity, and collaborative learning.
- **Leverage available technology** to support learning, using resources like online dictionaries, e-books, audio-video materials and other AI-powered tools to enhance learning.
- **Encourage learners to use whichever languages they feel most comfortable speaking** in discussions or assignments, enabling them to draw on their entire language repertoire to support their learning.

An example of pedagogical strategies for bilingual ECCE programmes is included in **Box 33**.



Box 33 | Bilingual Nests strategy in Bolivia

Bolivia's Bilingual Nests strategy is promoting Indigenous language use in early childhood education, led by the Ministry of Education with the Plurinational Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures and supported by UNICEF. The programme focuses on integrating Indigenous languages into daily activities in childcare centres, helping children develop linguistic skills in their home languages from an early age. Teachers use storytelling, songs, casual conversations, and games in Indigenous languages, making language learning a natural part of the daily routine (UNICEF, 2021).





Further resources


- **Bruggink, M., Swart, N., van der Lee, A. and Segers, E. 2022. Putting PIRLS to use in classrooms across the globe: Evidence-based contributions for teaching reading comprehension in a multilingual context. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and Springer.**
This open access book provides teachers and teacher educators with approaches to strengthen reading comprehension instruction, particularly when teaching reading to multilingual schools. Good practices from Chile, England, Georgia, People's Republic of China, and Spain are shared, along with practical tips and lessons.
- **Tyrosvoutis, G. 2019. The multilingual education teacher competency standards framework. Teacher FOCUS Myanmar.**
This report provides an example of a MLE teacher competency standards framework covering professional knowledge and understanding, professional skills and practices and professional values and dispositions. Each area highlights minimum requirements and critical attributions. An MLE teacher competency classroom observation tool is also included, enabling consideration of teacher practice.
- **Beacco, J-C, et al. 2016. A handbook for curriculum development and teacher training: The language dimension in all subjects. Strasbourg, Council of Europe.**
The handbook is aimed at those responsible for curriculum development, pedagogical materials, and teacher education at national or school levels. It suggests measures to integrate linguistic norms and competencies into curricula, materials, and teacher training, with strategies that address language issues across disciplines and educational levels.



Learning environments: Education facilities and spaces for learning

To deliver effective and quality MLE, it is important that schools are seen by all stakeholders as inclusive and welcoming spaces that accommodate the linguistic needs of all learners.

Building welcoming educational facilities and spaces

 **PRACTICAL ACTION:** Create inclusive and welcoming educational spaces that enhance language development, cultural exchange, and the socio-emotional well-being of all learners.

Practical steps include to:

- **Ensure multilingual signage across the learning environment**, including classroom signs, labels, directions and informational displays. This exposes learners to different languages, fosters cultural appreciation, and promotes an inclusive environment. See example in **Box 34**.
- **Designate language zones or spaces** where learners can speak various languages freely, without fear of making mistakes. These areas encourage language practice, boost confidence, and support natural language acquisition.
- **Organize flexible and inclusive seating arrangements** that encourage collaboration and peer interaction, particularly between learners from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. This set-up facilitates inclusive learning and nurtures cross-cultural communication.



Box 34 | Designing multilingual classrooms in Nepal

In Rajbansi and Santhal classrooms in Nepal, the implementation of MLE has had a positive impact on student engagement and self-expression. Classrooms are decorated with letters, words, and visuals that celebrate the cultural heritage of the Rajbansi and Santhal communities. Labels in the Rajbansi and Santhal languages, alongside those in other languages, create an inclusive and welcoming environment that resonates with learners' cultural identities.

This culturally rich environment has been shown to boost learners' confidence, as they encounter familiar words and symbols that make it easier for them to participate. Moreover, it has facilitated peer connections, with interactions between learners from different linguistic backgrounds fostering mutual respect and friendships across cultures. The decorations act as a continuous visual reinforcement, supporting language acquisition while helping learners connect new knowledge to their cultural context (UNESCO, 2011).

Fostering social interaction and socio-emotional well-being



PRACTICAL ACTION: Create culturally-responsive and inclusive learning spaces that promote social interaction and socio-emotional well-being, while acknowledging and respecting diverse learning styles, communication methods, and languages, thereby reducing anxiety and fostering a welcoming educational environment for all learners.

Practical steps include to foster social interaction and socio-emotional well-being include to:

- **Create a culturally-responsive learning environment** at acknowledges and respects the diverse communication styles, social norms, and values unique to each linguistic and cultural group within the school.
- **Encourage inclusive participation** by considering learners' cultural comfort zones, incorporating group work, public speaking, and collaborative activities that boost confidence and foster a sense of belonging for all learners.
- **Establish partnerships with local organizations and centres** including museums, libraries, and community centres to expand resources for multilingual education. See example in **Box 35**.



Box 35 | Creating a literate environment in Guatemala and Honduras

The Riecken Foundation has fostered a literate environment in 65 farming communities across Guatemala and Honduras through community libraries. These libraries serve more than traditional roles by offering reading programmes and literacy courses in Indigenous languages such as Garifuna, Mayan Chorti, and others, effectively engaging all generations, including Indigenous communities.

Key components of the programme include:

- **Bebetecas** (libraries for babies) that promote early childhood reading for children up to 5 years of age, encouraging parents to engage in activities that foster lifelong reading habits.
- **Literacy courses** tailored to participants' needs, with libraries providing free access to books, computers, and the internet.
- The involvement of **Indigenous elders** who share traditional stories, which are then transcribed and translated into Spanish, preserving local cultural heritage.
- The creation of **bilingual books** in Indigenous languages and Spanish, developed through community participation.
- **Training programmes** for facilitators of nutrition reading initiatives, in collaboration with partners like the Institute for Nutrition in Central America and Panama, as well as regular professional development for librarians to enhance the delivery of their programmes.

For more information, see: UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2024.

Adopting inclusive learning methodologies



PRACTICAL ACTION: Adopt inclusive teaching and learning strategies that accommodate and celebrate the linguistic and cultural backgrounds of all learners.

Practical steps to adopt inclusive learning methodologies include to:

- **Promote culturally-responsive teaching strategies** that respect and incorporate learners' linguistic backgrounds, allowing them to engage their full linguistic repertoires for all subjects.
- **Incorporate cultural contexts into lesson design**, using content that makes learning meaningful and applicable to real-life experiences. See example in **Box 36**.
- **Design programmes to meet the unique experiences and perspectives of migrant and refugee learners**, including lessons tailored to different age groups and goals—such as adapting to the workplace for older learners.



Box 36 | Creating an inclusive learning environment in Canada

Silver Creek Public School in Ontario, Canada, is home to 320 learners, representing 29 different home languages. Approximately one-third of the student body speaks English as their primary language, while the “top 5” languages spoken, apart from English, are Arabic, Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Urdu.

In 2020, Silver Creek became a Language Friendly School, joining a global network of 55 schools across 11 countries on four continents, coordinated by the Netherlands-based Rutu Foundation. This partnership helped Silver Creek develop a school culture that embraces all languages and cultures. Staff were offered professional development opportunities to help them understand how to transform linguistic and cultural challenges into valuable learning resources. Parents were encouraged to continue speaking their home languages with their children, with the understanding that this would enhance, rather than hinder, their English language acquisition and academic progress.

The school created a rich linguistic landscape, with signs and student work displaying multiple languages and cultural elements (such as food, architecture, etc.), making the learning environment more inclusive and welcoming. New learners are greeted by “language ambassadors”—peers who share their home languages, and who are encouraged to continue speaking their languages whenever possible (Rutu Foundation, 2022).

Silver Creek Public School demonstrates how creating language-friendly spaces can positively impact student happiness, academic achievement, and community engagement.



Further resources

- **UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning (UIL). 2016. Literacy in multilingual and multicultural contexts: Effective approaches to adult learning and education. Hamburg, UIL.**
This publication provides examples of adult literacy programmes offered in minority languages, including programmes for migrants and refugees and Indigenous languages. It highlights intercultural approaches to teaching and learning with a focus on adult learning and education.
- **European Centre for Modern Language. 2022. Supporting multilingual classrooms. Graz, European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe.**
This initiative provides training workshops to help European Union Member States ensure quality education for migrant learners, bridging the achievement gap with non-migrant learners. It highlights advanced linguistic skills as key competencies supporting learning, employability, and social cohesion.
- **Benson, C. and Young, C. 2016. How can mother tongue-based MLE be carried out in classrooms where three or more languages are represented in mother tongues? In: Trudell, B. and Young, C. (eds). Good answers to tough questions in mother-tongue based multilingual education. Dallas, SIL International.**
This paper considers contextual factors to consider in developing multilingual strategies for linguistically heterogeneous classrooms. It provides guidance on appropriate strategies and offers directions for future research.





Evidence: Data, monitoring and evaluation

Evidence and data are crucial for designing effective MLE programmes that meet learners' linguistic and cultural needs, with preliminary research and strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems to ensure quality, efficiency, and impact.

Carrying out thorough preliminary research



PRACTICAL ACTION: Conduct a thorough situational analysis of the sociolinguistic and educational context to identify challenges and opportunities and use the data to ensure effective policy implementation and optimal resource allocation for MLE programmes.

Key practical actions include to:

- **Conduct sociolinguistic research** to assess learners' language proficiency, spoken fluency, and literacy levels, while also evaluating attitudes toward mother tongues and other languages.
- **Promote the collection of intersectional data** which not only identifies languages spoken but also gender, age, socioeconomic status, disability, migration status, geographic location and other factors that can affect access to education, learning and opportunities.
- **Address foundational questions for programme development** to ensure a solid foundation for policy decisions, resource allocation, and stakeholder collaboration, and a sustainable framework for the MLE programme, including:
 - What resources (e.g., community groups, materials, policies) are available to support MLE?
 - What strategies can maximize the effective use of these resources?
 - What obstacles might delay or hinder programme implementation and sustainability?
 - Which additional agencies or organizations can support MLE, and how can they contribute?
- **Identify and mobilize national, regional, and local resources** that can assist with MLE programme design and implementation.
- **Evaluate and mitigate potential obstacles** that could hinder programme implementation and sustainability, developing strategies to mitigate these risks.
- **Engage all relevant stakeholders**, including learners, parents, teachers, local officials, and incorporate diverse perspectives in programme design and implementation.
- **Support efforts to standardize local languages**, including creating or revising orthographies (writing systems) and spelling guides with input from community members, linguists and government officials.





Box 37 | Language mapping in India

The state-wide language mapping initiative in Chhattisgarh, India, marks a significant step in understanding and addressing the linguistic diversity of learners in primary education. Conducted by the Department of School Education in collaboration with the Language and Learning Foundation and UNICEF India, this comprehensive mapping encompassed 412,973 grade 1 learners from 30,000 government primary schools.

The analysis categorized classroom language situations into four typologies, which provide insights into how language dynamics affect teaching and learning, considering regional language similarity; teacher proficiency in learners' languages; teacher language barriers; and diverse language groups.

The analysis included a preliminary mapping of the regional linguistic context and a typology of language situations in the classroom. The language mapping data provided insights on: a) first and other languages that children use and understand when they join school in Grade 1; b) teachers' proficiency in different languages including the first languages of children; and c) the existence of 'link' languages in areas where children belong to different first language groups.

The findings underscored the need for tailored educational strategies that respect and integrate the linguistic diversity of learners in the area and included recommendations for educational policymakers and practitioners.

For more information, see: Language and Learning Foundation, UNICEF India, Ministry of Education, Government of India, 2023.

Monitoring and evaluating existing and future MLE programmes



PRACTICAL ACTION: Integrate robust M&E systems within MLE programmes to better understand their impact on learning outcomes, attendance, retention and the broader educational experience for diverse language groups.

Practical actions include to:

- **Disaggregate data by learners' first or home language** and correlate this with their school attendance and learning outcomes. Additionally consider the intersection of other factors such as gender, age, socioeconomic status, disability and geographic location to gain a deeper understanding of how these variables influence educational access and outcomes.
- **Develop and review language-learning outcome indicators** to track the relationship between learners' language and their performance on foundational SDG 4 indicators (4.6.1, 4.6.2, 4.6.3, and 4.5.2), using these for mid- and end-term national and regional reviews. The post-2030 framework should further deepen data on languages and education.
- **Engage Indigenous Peoples and community members** in data planning and collection to ensure a nuanced and accurate representation of local language use and its impacts.
- **Assign responsibilities** for assessing learners' progress and MLE programme components through regular observations and formative testing in the appropriate language(s) to monitor comprehension and learning. Key tasks include:
 - **Classroom observation** and documentation.
 - **Formative testing** in the appropriate language(s) to assess comprehension and learning. See **Box 38** for an example of tools for the M&E of MLE programmes.
- **Integrate M&E findings into global reports** to promote visibility, accountability, and the sharing of good practice, including contributing to country reports under the 1960 Convention on Education against Discrimination (UNESCO, 1960, 2023g).
- Leverage regional learning assessment tools for contextual data. Regional assessments, such as the *Programme d'analyse des systèmes éducatifs de la CONFEMEN* (CONFEMEN Programme for the analysis of education systems—PASEC) and the Southeast Asian Primary Learning Metrics Programme (SEA-PLM), supported by SEAMEO and UNICEF, assess the impact of home language on learning outcomes and can offer valuable intersectional contextual data to inform educational strategies.

**Box 38** | Tools for the monitoring and evaluation of MLE programmes

A set of 13 tools that programme staff can use to monitor and evaluate MLE programmes were produced by UNESCO's Regional Office in Bangkok with partners researching and implementing MLE in Australia, Nepal, the Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam. These tools, which have been field-tested and used for data collection across various countries, include self-administered questionnaires, interview guides for individual and focus group discussions, and a classroom observation form. While these instruments are broadly applicable, they are generic and should be adapted to local contexts, making them globally relevant.

Resources from the UNESCO Resource Kit (UNESCO, 2018a) can further support M&E efforts:

- The *Programme Implementers' Booklet* offers examples of how the information gathered using these tools can be analyzed to assess the progress of MLE programme implementation and inform M&E processes.
- The *Implementers' Booklet* provides guidance on how to adapt the tools for different contexts.
- The *Policy Makers' Booklet* shares evaluation results from several MTB-MLE programmes implemented across Asia, Africa, and Latin America.




Further resources

- **UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS) . 2018. SDG indicator 4.5.2: Recommended approaches for measurement. Technical Cooperation Group (TCG) Fifth Meeting, Mexico City. TCG5/REF/5. Montreal, UIS.** This note presents proposes a definition, a formula for measurement and recommendations to measure SDG indicator 4.5.2 (percentage of students in primary education whose first or home language is the language of instruction) with existing data sources.
- **UNESCO. 2020c. Tools for planning and monitoring programmes of multilingual education in Asia. Bangkok, UNESCO Regional Office in Bangkok.** This publication provides tools that MLE programme staff can use in the monitoring and evaluation of their programmes. It complements the five booklets of UNESCO's *MTB-MLE Resource Kit – Including the Excluded: Promoting Multilingual Education* (2018).
- **Benson, C. 2016. Addressing language of instruction issues in education: Recommendations for documenting progress. Background paper commissioned by UNESCO for the Global Education Monitoring Report 2016: Education for people and planet. Creating sustainable futures for all. Paris, UNESCO.** This paper offers evidence-based recommendations for documenting international progress towards MTB-MLE. It includes suggested indicators and questions for evaluating progress and examples from country contexts.

Partnerships: Collaborating with and engaging key stakeholders

Strong and sustainable MLE programmes depend on the cooperation of multiple stakeholders, working alongside local communities and efficient partnerships at local, sub-national, national, and international levels to enhance resource utilization, information sharing, and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, resulting in a more robust educational framework.

Fostering partnerships with parents, caregivers and communities

 **PRACTICAL ACTION:** Strengthen relationships with parents, caregivers and communities to promote MLE and address potential concerns about its impact on learners' development.

Key actions include to:

- **Support outreach and engagement** through community meetings, workshops, and informational sessions. Collaborating with headteachers, local NGOs, and respected community leaders can facilitate discussions on MLE.
- **Develop structured communication channels** with parents to keep them informed about MLE developments and gather their feedback, ensuring two-way communication and clarifying how MLE supports children's learning and cultural identity.
- **Encourage parental and caregiver participation** in school activities, such as open houses, cultural celebrations, and language workshops, where they can observe MLE in action.
- **Facilitate peer networks among parents** to build a supportive community for MLE, including the formation of parent groups or workshops focused on language development at home.
- **Link non-formal, informal and formal education settings** to promote community engagement and lifelong learning.



Box 39 | VoXmi programme in Austria

The 'voXmi' programme, launched in 2008 by Austria's Federal Ministry of Education, aims to create inclusive educational environments in linguistically diverse classrooms at the country's largest university colleges of teacher education. With over 62 institutions involved, the programme integrates children's and families' languages into learning, offering educators training in language-friendly teaching methods and responsible digital media use. It also promotes parental engagement, provides ongoing professional development for teachers, and combats exclusion, racism, and linguisticism to foster social cohesion in migrant communities. The programme was awarded the 2024 UNESCO King Sejong Literacy Prize (UNESCO, 2024g).

Involving local communities



PRACTICAL ACTION: Develop partnerships with local communities including Indigenous Peoples, to ensure culturally-relevant MLE programmes that enhance learning and promote diversity.

Practical steps to involve local communities include to:

- **Actively involve Indigenous Peoples and local communities** in MLE programme design, respecting their right to free, prior, and informed consent, and ensuring the curriculum reflects local values and traditions. See example in **Box 40**.
- **Formalise agreements with communities** to define roles, responsibilities, and participation in MLE, including shared governance for decision-making.
- **Implement capacity-building initiatives** that promote two-way learning, where local and Indigenous community members enrich educators' understanding of culturally relevant teaching practices, knowledge, and skills, while educators support the development of leadership, pedagogical, and curriculum design skills within the community.
- **Collaborate with community leaders** to advocate for linguistic and cultural diversity, involving them in cultural events and activities that celebrate local traditions.



Box 40 | Revitalizing Indigenous language and culture through community-based learning in Brazil

In São Paulo, Brazil, one UNESCO Associated Schools Project Network (ASPnet) school offers free community-based learning programmes to revitalize Okinawan, an endangered language Indigenous to Japan. This language is present in Brazil due to historic immigration patterns dating back to the early 20th century and is spoken primarily by elderly citizens.

The *Exatus Colégio e Vestibulares Eireli* serves as a community centre, research hub and classroom for community members of all ages offering language courses and courses on traditional Okinawan dance, music and art. It is also involved in researching, collecting, publishing and translating material on the Okinawan language and culture, as well as offering a meeting space for those of Okinawan heritage to discuss and support the culture and language (UNESCO, 2022g).



Partnering with national and international organizations



PRACTICAL ACTION: Establish partnerships with national and international organizations to provide technical expertise and resources that support the implementation and scaling of MLE programmes. These collaborations can help ensure the sharing of best practices, facilitate capacity development, and strengthen the overall effectiveness and sustainability of MLE initiatives.

Actions to further enhance partnerships include to:

- **Promote multi-stakeholder cooperation channels** with stakeholders from national, regional, and local levels.
- **Create knowledge exchange platforms** to facilitate knowledge exchange and resource sharing between international and national organizations.
- **Collaborate with universities and academic institutions** on local research and educational materials development.
- **Engage digital technology developers** to create accessible learning solutions for all learners.
- **Partner with international organizations, NGOs, and intergovernmental bodies** to secure technical and financial support for MLE programmes.

See examples of partnerships supporting MLE implementation in **Box 41**.



Box 41 | Partnerships supporting MLE implementation



EUROPEAN UNION European Education Area (2021-2030)

The Council resolution on a new strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training towards the European Education Area and beyond, adopted in February 2021, identified the support of language teaching and learning and multilingualism as a concrete action for European cooperation to ensure quality, equity, inclusion and success in education and training.

European cooperation is pushed through incentives like the European Language Label award given to innovative methods that proved to be effective in the promotion and diffusion of knowledge of the numerous idioms existing in the EU. The European Language label awards cooperative approaches by evaluating effectiveness in promoting intercultural dialogue and transferability in terms of good practice, among others.

For more information, see the [European Commission](#) website.



SENEGAL Harmonized Bilingual Learning Model 2019

The implementation of the Modèle Harmonisé d'Enseignement Bilingue du Sénégal (MOHEBS, Senegal's Harmonized Bilingual Teaching Model) calls for effective partnerships between key actors; strong coordination between different intervention levels; and decentralized and devolved management.

This involves engaging a vast array of stakeholders at every level including local stakeholders; school-level staff; district officials; inspector bodies; and national level bodies.

For more information, see: Konan, 2024.



Further resources

- **United Nations. 2007. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). New York, United Nations.**
The Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples establishes a universal framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity, wellbeing, and rights of the world's Indigenous Peoples. It addresses both individual and collective rights to education, health, employment, language and more.
- **UNESCO. 2018b. UNESCO policy on engaging with Indigenous Peoples. Paris, UNESCO.**
This Policy guides the Organization's work in all areas of its mandate that involve or are relevant for Indigenous Peoples and of potential benefit or risk to them. It ensures that the Organization's policies, planning, programming and implementation uphold the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). 2016. Free prior and informed consent: An Indigenous Peoples' right and a good practice for local communities. Rome, FAO.**
This manual is designed to support project implementers to incorporate free prior and informed consent into project design and implementation, ensuring that Indigenous Peoples' rights are respected. It includes practical guidance and examples of good and bad practice.
- **RTI International. 2015. Planning for language use in education: Best practices and practical steps to improve learning outcomes. Washington, DC, United States Agency for International Development.**
This guidance provides guidance on language use in education, including key factors to consider in the planning stage. Stakeholder considerations is one of the five areas of consideration.





Conclusion

ملا نبيس الكشافة
وجوهنا بالحب والاحترام

Since the publication of UNESCO's 2003 position paper, *Education in a Multilingual World*, significant progress has been made in MLE. Today, MLE is recognized not only for enhancing learning outcomes and fostering inclusive classrooms but also for protecting endangered languages, strengthening social cohesion, stimulating economic growth, and contributing to sustainable development. As part of the broader transformation of education systems, MLE supports linguistically marginalized learners while benefiting the entire educational landscape—and societies at large.

As we approach the 2030 deadline, MLE is crucial for achieving the vision of SDG 4, which calls for quality, inclusive education for all. It also contributes to other SDGs, such as economic growth (SDG 8), reducing inequality (SDG 10), promoting peaceful societies (SDG 16), and supporting climate action through the preservation of local, sustainable practices (SDG 13). Education is the cornerstone of sustainable development, and when quality, inclusive education is accessible to all, particularly linguistically diverse learners, the likelihood of meeting SDG targets is significantly enhanced.

MLE goes beyond language preservation; it is about creating inclusive, equitable learning environments that value and celebrate linguistic and cultural diversity. It fosters inclusive societies where differences are seen as strengths. Realizing this vision requires a radical transformation in education, from policy to practice.

For this transformation to succeed, governments, civil society, the private sector, academia, development partners, communities, schools, and families must work together, with actions tailored to each unique context. This guidance has put forward practical actions to facilitate this transformation, which are summarized below in **Figure 9**.

These actions align with the foundational principles outlined in UNESCO's 2003 document, *Education in a Multilingual World*. These principles emphasize the importance of:

- **Mother tongue instruction** to enhance educational quality by leveraging the knowledge and experiences of both learners and teachers.
- **Bilingual and/or multilingual education at all educational levels** to promote social and gender equality, and to support the fabric of linguistically diverse societies.
- **Language as a key component of intercultural education**, fostering understanding among different population groups and ensuring respect for fundamental rights.

This transformation of education is not only an investment in future generations but also a critical step toward strengthening social cohesion, preserving the environment, advancing inclusive economic growth and fostering sustainable development. Ultimately, it is an investment by all of us, for all of us.

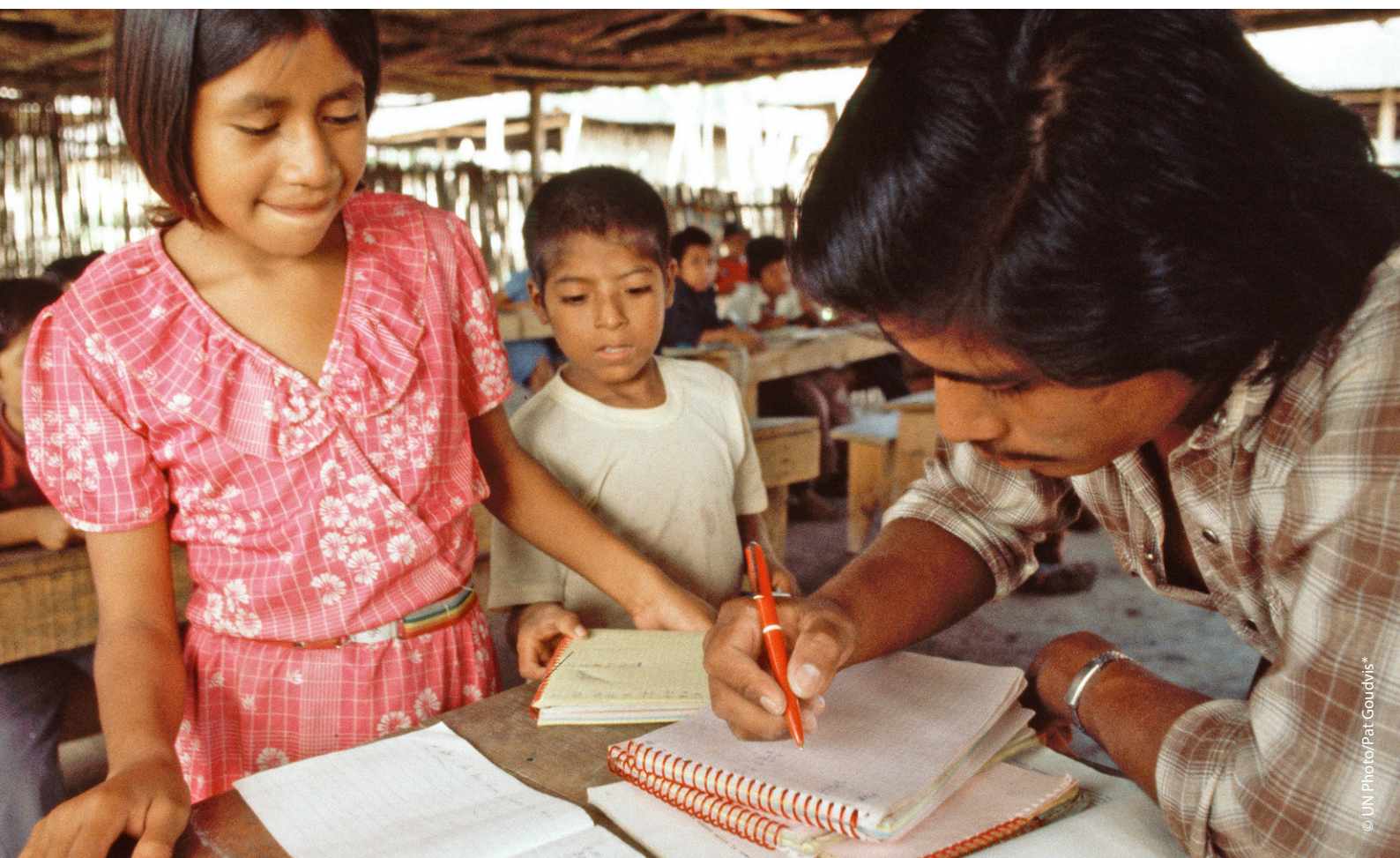
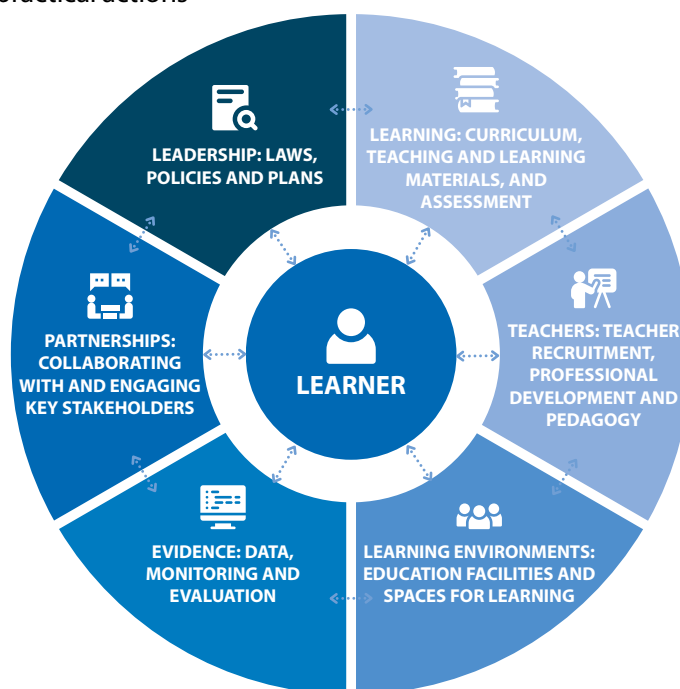


Figure 9 | Summary of practical actions



Source: Authors.

Recommended actions

-  Conduct a situational analysis of the sociolinguistic and educational context to guide effective policy design and implementation and optimal resource allocation for MLE programmes.

 Formalize political commitments to MLE within national education and legal frameworks, and national education policies, ensuring all learners' right to instruction in languages aligned with their cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

 Integrate MLE into the curriculum from the earliest grades, prioritizing mother tongue education to build foundational literacy and language skills, while fostering respect for learners' heritage languages and cultural backgrounds.

 Develop culturally-responsive and contextually-appropriate learning materials in learners' languages, typically their mother tongue or L1, and align assessment strategies with MLE principles to ensure that assessments accurately reflect learners' content knowledge in the language(s) in which it was acquired.

 Recruit teachers fluent in both the mother tongue and official language of instruction to enhance MLE, foster cultural and linguistic diversity and representation in the classroom.

 Strengthen training for both pre- and in-service educators to effectively teach in multilingual settings, ensuring school leaders support the implementation of culturally responsive, engaging pedagogical approaches.

 Create inclusive and culturally responsive educational spaces that promote language development, cultural exchange, social interaction, and the socio-emotional well-being of all learners, while respecting diverse learning styles and communication methods.

 Integrate robust monitoring and evaluation systems within MLE programmes to assess their impact on learning, attendance, retention, and the overall educational experience for diverse language groups.

 Strengthen relationships with and ensure the meaningful engagement of parents, caregivers, and local communities, including Indigenous Peoples, to ensure culturally-relevant MLE programmes that enhance learning, and address potential concerns about learners' development.

 Develop partnerships with local, national and international organizations to secure technical expertise, resources, and access to good practice to support the implementation, scaling, and sustainability of MLE programmes, while facilitating capacity development and strengthening overall effectiveness.

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Languages matter

Global guidance on multilingual education

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development promises to leave no one behind. However, over a quarter of a billion learners still lack access to education in the language they understand best, deepening the global learning crisis and hindering progress on economic growth and sustainable development.

This guide is designed to assist Ministries of Education and key educational stakeholders integrate multilingual education into their policy-making and practices, with the goal of creating more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational systems that benefit all learners. It outlines current principles for language-in-education policies that view multilingualism as both a fundamental human characteristic and a vital educational approach. The guide also includes key actions for advancing multilingual education policies, plans, and programmes, alongside promising case studies, practical tools for real-world implementation, and resources that can be adapted to various contexts.

