The Bangkok Statement on Language and Inclusion

Kirk R. Person, PhD
Senior Consultant, Literacy and Education
SIL International
kirk_person@sil.org
7,097 living languages in the world

50% are in Asia-Pacific

3,519 living languages in Asia-Pacific

A region of linguistic diversity

40% of the world’s children don’t have the chance to learn in their mother tongue
You are not alone...

About how many languages or dialects are spoken in your country:

- 1: 0%
- 2-5: 30%
- 5-20: 15%
- 20+: 55%

In your country, about how many languages are officially permitted to be used in school?

- 1: 32%
- 2-5: 47%
- 5-20: 11%
- 20+: 11%
Language matters...

In primary school, did you learn in your mother tongue?

- Yes: 13
- No: 7

How satisfied are you with children’s English language learning in your country?

- Extremely dissatisfied: 3
- Dissatisfied: 10
- Satisfied: 7
- Very Satisfied: 1
Expert input: MLE policy, pedagogy, data

Dr. Dina Ocampo, fmr. Deputy Sec of Education, Philippines

Dr. Carol Benson, Teacher’s College
Columbia University

Manuel Cardoso, UNICEF HQ
Share of children aged 7 to 14 with foundational reading and numeracy skills (National Statistical Office and UNICEF, 2019)
1. We, the ministers and designated ministerial representatives of sixteen countries in Asia and the Pacific; representatives of United Nations agencies, development partners and civil society organizations; and members of research and teaching communities, gathered in Bangkok, Thailand, from 24 to 26 September 2019, to explore the role of languages for education and development.

2. We acknowledge that the importance of language(s)-in-education policies, and multilingual education in particular, has been discussed in previous high-level meetings on education, as reflected in but not limited to the Jomtien World Declaration on Education for All (1990), the Suzhou Conclusions (2014), the Asia-Pacific Statement on Education Beyond 2015 (2014), the Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action (2015), and the United Nation General Assembly’s challenge to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (SDG 4).

3. Further, we recognize the clear progress made in the development of multilingual education policies and practices throughout the region, including research validating this approach in Asia-Pacific and elsewhere, as reported in previous Asia-Pacific multilingual education conferences (2003, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2016), and in policy forums convened co-currently with those conferences, beginning in 2008 and including this present gathering.
4. **Asia-Pacific is linguistically diverse.** Our region is home to 3,615 languages (more than half of the world’s 7,105 languages). People from all languages and cultures are valued citizens of our respective nations, in order to “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development” (SDG 16).

5. **Multilingualism is a reality, as well as an asset that should be fostered to benefit all.** Throughout Asia-Pacific, citizens are exposed to a variety of languages—local, regional, national, international. Proficiency in more than one language is prerequisite to decent work for the individual, and economic growth for the nation (SDG 8).

6. **Language and learning are linked.** Research demonstrates that the learning of children, youth and adults can be severely limited when they lack understanding of the language used by teachers, textbooks, and digital learning resources (SDGs 4.4, 4.6). This language gap contributes to higher dropout rates among vulnerable populations. School language policies can thus act as barriers preventing access to inclusive and equitable quality education (SDG 4), thus exacerbating social inequality (SDG 10).

7. **Policies related to language(s) of instruction impact learners at several key junctures,** including early childhood education and school readiness (SDG 4.2), the transition to primary education (SDG 4.1), and carry-through into secondary, tertiary, vocational, and lifelong education of various forms (SDG 4.4). Language policies at each level play an important role in creating a positive learning environment, while fostering enduring peace (SDG 16), gender equality (SDG 4.5), and sustainable development (SDG 4.7).
8. The main language of pre-primary and primary classrooms should be the one the children understand best. In cases where children no longer actively speak the “heritage language” of older generations, the “heritage language” can be taught as a subject, with the language understood best by the children used as the main language of instruction. Parents should encourage children to maintain their home language and culture, even as they study other languages and cultures.

9. Multilingual education does not distract from the study in and of national and international languages, but rather makes the learning of all languages more efficient. This is supported by longitudinal research conducted in several Asia-Pacific countries and elsewhere, which has found better learning outcomes in all subjects, including the national language and international languages such as English, among children in strong multilingual education programs which included the systematic introduction of additional languages at developmentally appropriate times.

10. Language(s)-in-education policies and practices are most effective when based on evidence. Twenty-first century realities demand that our citizens master more knowledge and develop new skills more quickly than any previous generation. Therefore, decisions on which language to introduce when, and how each language should be taught, should be based on scientific evidence and a clear understanding of local sociolinguistic realities. This is of particular importance to learners from disadvantaged language communities, including ethnolinguistic minority and migrant populations, as well as to better-resourced learners who may be prematurely compelled into learning academic content communicated exclusively in an international language they have not yet mastered.
11. We hereby declare our commitment to the realization of “inclusive and equitable quality education” (SDG 4) in relation to the language needs of all learners, while respecting and enhancing current policies in each country, by:

i. **Highlighting language(s)-of-instruction issues**, including relevant research, policies and practices, in the national education discourse.

ii. **Fostering investment for quality multilingual education** by strengthening financial systems to focus on effective practices, prioritizing the systematic expansion of successful multilingual education pilot programs.

iii. **Enhancing the quality of multilingual education** by developing clear policies, strategies and guidelines, including monitoring systems and action plans, particularly for pre-primary and primary, with the option for continued first language maintenance support through secondary, and tertiary studies, as well as adult education, even as other languages (national, international) are introduced.

iv. **Diversifying the teacher workforce and building teacher capacity** through clear policies, strategies and guidelines, including action plans for the recruitment and deployment of teachers who are native speakers of local languages, acknowledging that the identification of such individuals may need to begin while they are in secondary school, and that additional mentorship and support will be necessary through the teacher preparation process.
v. **Gathering data disaggregated by home or first language**, correlated to the school attendance and learning outcomes of primary-aged children (SDG thematic indicator 4.5.2).

vi. **Strengthening partnerships with relevant stakeholders and partners**, including parents, local communities, non-state actors, academics, the Asia Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group, and international development organizations, to develop pedagogically sound multilingual education programs, supported by well-trained teachers and quality learning materials in all relevant languages.

vii. **Preparing national progress reports** for future Asia-Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group conferences, to be held every three years throughout the 2030 agenda. Additionally, we will encourage our respective governments to track developments in language(s)-in-education issues, including progress on thematic indicator 4.5.2, in future Voluntary National Reports and regional ministerial-level meetings.
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Output of the High-level Policy Forum on Multilingual Education convened in parallel to The Inclusion, Mobility and Multilingual Education Conference: Exploring the Role of Languages for Education and Development

25 September 2019, Bangkok, Thailand

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[English] [Thai] [Myanmar] [Malay] [Bahasa Indonesia] [Khmer] [Tetun] [Sun]

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How can the Statement help you?

• Establishes basic understanding about language-in-education issues
• Includes an accountability mechanism
• Aligns with global priority to “build back better”
• Provides a roadmap for cooperation (government, NGOs, academics, international organizations)
  • No one can do this alone
  • Most successful language-in-education policy reforms resulted from years of cooperation on local, national and international levels, including pilot projects, longitudinal studies, policy dialogue, etc. (Kosonen and Person, 2021)
Indigenous Languages and Education Network for Policy and Practice
Partnering for impact in support of the
United Nations International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032

The Indigenous Languages and Education Network for Policy and Practice (ILE Network) is being formed in response to the Los Pinos Declaration and the United Nations General Assembly’s proclamation of 2022-2032 as the International Decade of Indigenous Languages (IDIL). UNESCO’s IDIL Global Action Plan notes that “the scope of work envisaged…is beyond the capacity of any single nation, country, stakeholder group, generation, scientific discipline, policy framework or set of actions,” and calls for global partnership to realize IDIL’s vision.

The ILE Network will connect indigenous groups, Ministry of Education officials, language rights activists, academics, and other key stakeholders to work, learn, innovate and plan together to advance indigenous languages and education during the IDIL.

The Network will be co-convened by SIL International, UNESCO Bangkok Asia and Pacific Regional Bureau for Education and Salzburg Global Seminar, and will focus primarily on serving two connected agenda, depending on the context:

1. Inclusion of indigenous and minority languages in multilingual education
2. Revitalization of indigenous languages
Future plans

- Additional translations are welcomed!
- Text may be slightly adjusted in future to accommodate more endorsing member states
  - BUT if your country is interested, do not hesitate to contact UNESCO Bangkok immediately