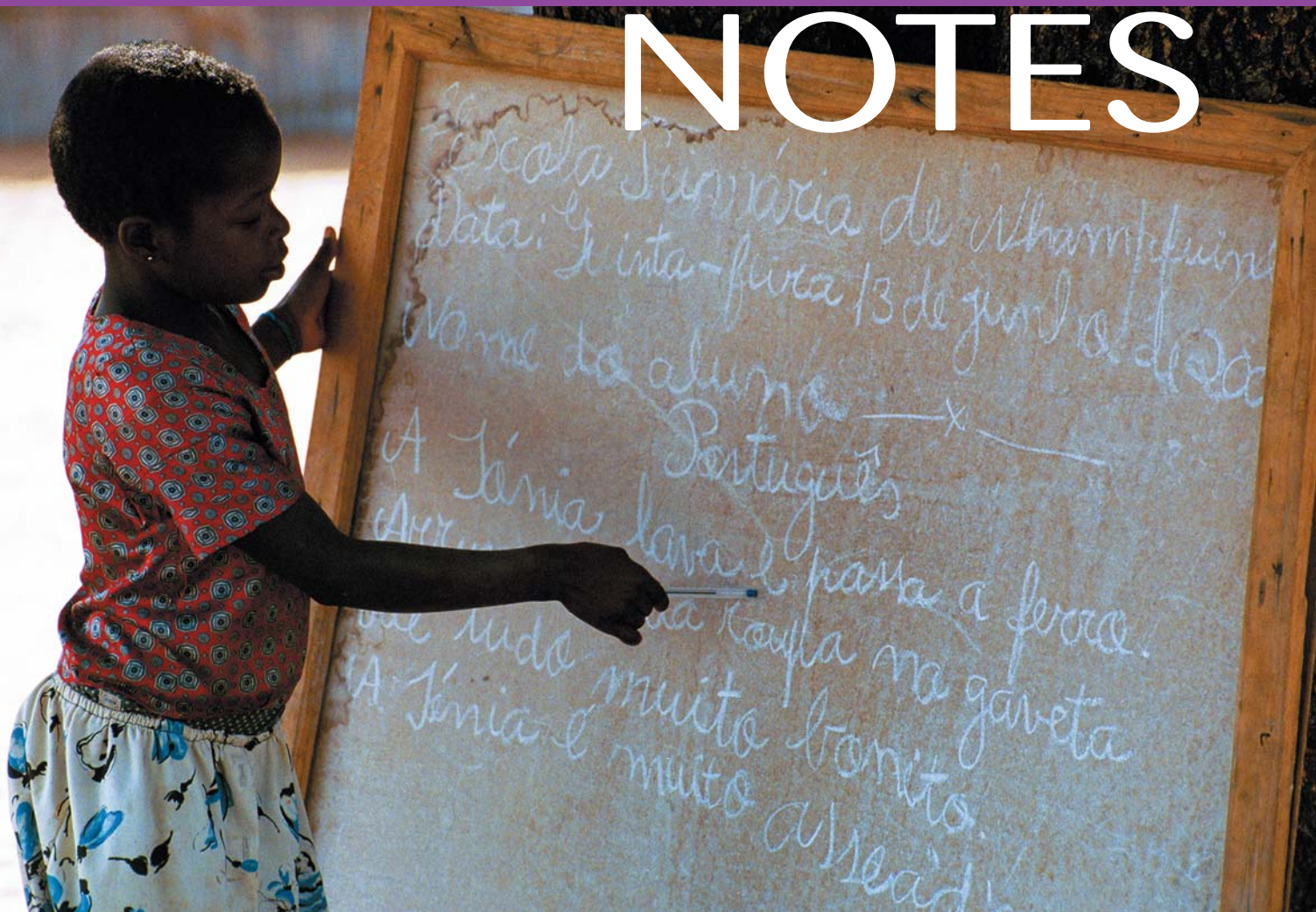


# Education NOTES



## In Their Own Language...Education for All

Fifty percent of the world's out-of-school children live in communities where the language of schooling is rarely, if ever, used at home. This underscores the biggest challenge to achieving Education for All (EFA): a legacy of non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition. In these circumstances, an increase in resources, although necessary, would not be sufficient to produce universal completion of a good-quality primary school program.

## That children learn better

if they understand the language spoken in school would seem an obvious observation—and indeed, it is borne out by study after study. Even where an important goal of schooling is for children to learn a second language, this too is facilitated by starting with a language children already know. Research provides convincing evidence that a second language is learned best when a first language is learned well. In the late-exit bilingual model, children learn to read in the language that they speak at home, with a second language introduced in the early grades. Instructional time in that language then increases gradually.

## Benefits of the Use of First Language Instruction

First language instruction results in (i) increased access and equity, (ii) improved learning outcomes, (iii) reduced repetition and dropout rates, (iv) socio-cultural benefits and (v) lower overall costs.

**Increased access and equity.** Bilingual programs have generally been instituted in rural areas, among more marginalized populations. They have been widely shown to help those children stay in school

longer, reach higher levels of education overall and increase social mobility.

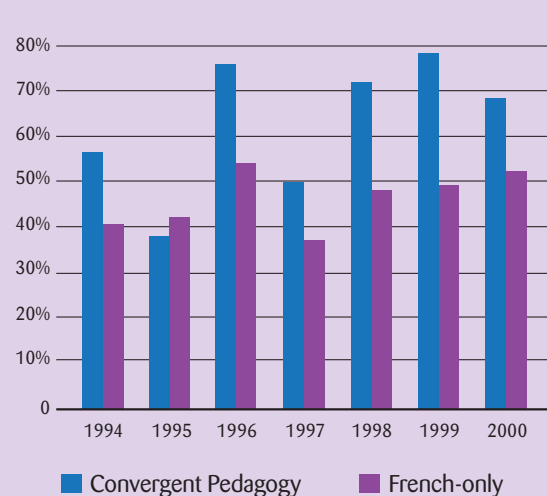
**Improved learning outcomes.** In Mali, end-of-primary pass rates between 1994 and 2000 for children who transitioned gradually from a local language to French were on average 32% higher than for children in French-only programs (see Chart 1).

The use of a language that children understand allows teachers to use more active and more effective teaching methods. Supporting mastery of the first language promotes the cognitive development needed to more easily learn a second language. In Brazil, for example, first language teaching has been linked to better acquisition of literacy skills. Several independent studies with indigenous populations have demonstrated that the use of children's home language has been successful in raising levels of literacy in the local language and the national language (Portuguese), as well as raising achievement levels in a variety of academic subjects. In Burkina Faso, children with initial literacy in the Mooré language before beginning instruction in French achieved better results in French and mathematics than students who had only participated in French-language schooling. The use of local languages also ensures that the knowledge children bring to schooling is used as a basis for further learning.

**Reduction of repetition and dropout.** In Mali, where about 10% of primary school children are in classrooms that use first languages as languages of instruction; these children are 5 times less likely to repeat the year and more than 3 times less likely to drop out of school. In bilingual schools in Guatemala, covering about 15% of the population, grade repetition is about half that of traditional schools, while dropout rates are about 25% lower. These results are all the more significant because children receiving instruction in first languages are often from more at-risk populations.

**Socio-cultural benefits.** The use of local languages for instruction often leads to inclusion of more local content in the curriculum and greater participation of parents and community members as classroom resources. Parents are better positioned to become involved in the school and to feel that their knowl-

**Chart 1: End-of-primary Examination Pass Rates, 1994-2000**



Source: Bender, 2005.

edge and their culture are valued. The legitimization of local languages that comes from their use in schooling can strengthen children's, families' and communities' sense of inclusion in schooling. The use of local languages in formal education has a positive impact on adult literacy as well. As parents see their children successfully learn to read and write in their own language, the parents are often motivated to attend literacy classes as well.

**Lower Costs.** The financial benefits of the use of local languages in education derive largely from decreases in repetition and dropout. In the few cases where these benefits have been calculated, the savings have considerably outweighed the incremental costs of establishing and maintaining schooling in local languages (production of learning materials, teacher training, etc.). In Mali, for instance, a World Bank study found that French-only programs cost about 8% less per year than mother-tongue schooling, but the total cost of educating a student through the six-year primary cycle is about 27% more, largely because of the difference in repetition and dropout rates. Similar benefits have been found in Guatemala (see Table 1).

## If It Works So Well, Why Isn't Everyone Doing It?

Many developing countries have been reluctant to adopt a policy of delivering basic education in local languages. Donors have also not given high priority to such policies and in some cases have actively opposed them. Governments have cited goals such as the reduction of ethnic tensions and national unity as reasons to use foreign languages in education, although there is limited support in recent history for the unifying role of a single national language in a multilingual country. Other countries have decided to use several or even all of their national languages in order to avoid internal conflict. For example, upon independence, the Government of Eritrea committed to providing public education in all of its languages, in part to avoid internal disunity.

A more pressing obstacle to the use of local languages in schooling has to do with high development costs

**Table 1. Simulated Cost Savings and Benefits as a Result of Reduced Repetition and Dropout Due to PRONEBI**

	<b>PRONEBI</b>	<b>Traditional</b>
<b>Repetition Rates (1991)</b>	<b>.25</b>	<b>.47</b>
<b>Annual Unit Costs</b>	<b>Q 246</b>	<b>Q 235</b>
<b>Number of Indigenous Students (1991)</b>	<b>96,194</b>	<b>653,413</b>
<b>Total Cost of Repetition</b>	<b>Q 5,892,005</b>	<b>Q 72,169,440</b>
<b>Simulated Savings Due to PRONEBI</b>		<b>Q 32,147,955</b>
<b>Dropout Rates (1991)</b>	<b>.13</b>	<b>.16</b>
<b>Simulated Decrease in Dropouts Due to PRONEBI</b>		<b>3,927</b>
<b>Simulated Annual Incremental Earnings Due to PRONEBI</b>		<b>Q730,422</b>

**Source: World Bank, HCO Dissemination No 60, October 1995.**

and weak implementation capacity. In many developing countries, materials in even one language are scarce, which leads to an understandable reluctance to try to publish books in several languages, where it is harder to achieve economies of scale. Yet technologies like desktop publishing are changing the situation. Papua New Guinea, for instance, has published materials in hundreds of languages by using a basic 'shell book' format. As of 2000, the country was using 380 languages in schooling. The Democratic Republic of the Congo has long published materials in the four languages which are regional *lingua franca*. Mali is currently providing education in 11 languages with materials made available in each language.

A further challenge is that where there are many languages, formerly centralized approaches to teacher development and deployment will need to be modified. To address this challenge, countries can decentralize the recruitment of teacher candidates and pre- and in-service teacher training can also be managed regionally rather than centrally.

Another obstacle is that parents and teachers may resist the use of the mother tongue as a language of instruction. In Mexico, researchers have found that some parents who speak Triqui believe that Spanish



is more important in school because it is the “language of progress.” Similarly, in Haiti, many parents resist the use of Creole as the language of instruction because the mother tongue is thought to be the language of the poor and the oppressed. A campaign to explain language policy and its benefits is an essential part of any solution but ultimately, resistance will continue unless the education system is designed to value what children themselves bring to the learning process. Further, parents who hesitate to send their children to a mother tongue-medium classroom are often convinced of its value when they see children in the bilingual program outperforming their official-language counterparts by the end of the 4th grade—in the official language.

Resistance will continue unless the education system supports the use of local languages in several ways: ensuring a constant supply of appropriate textbooks and other materials, training teachers in the benefits of using local languages for instruction as well as in appropriate methods, and ensuring that high stakes examination systems reward the skills in which children instructed in local languages excel (i.e. redesigning exams to emphasize reading, writing and problem solving, not just extensive memorization of second language texts). Mali, for instance, overcame some teacher resistance by designing the reform to include (i) teacher training in active and effective teaching methods, (ii) a transfer to the second language in the early grades and (iii) changing examination policies and ensuring ‘quick wins’ for teachers, students and parents. Literacy classes for adults can also reduce parental reluctance and provide legitimacy for local language.

## Lessons Learned

The use of first languages as languages of instruction can contribute to the attainment of EFA goals and should be a part of the World Bank’s dialogue with educators and policy-makers. Particular attention should be paid to the following issues:

- Policy formulation around language of instruction issues and successful implementation require political commitment and the support of parents and community members.
- Bilingual programs are most successful where the goal is to make children literate in their first language and also to acquire fluency in the second (usually the former colonial) language; these should not be either/or propositions.
- The policy environment of language reforms must be carefully managed, with significant training and planning, to include:
  - Consensus building and awareness campaigns among teachers, parents and NGOs;
  - Professional development for teachers;
  - Curriculum and teaching materials development and consistent provision of high or equivalent quality materials at the classroom level; and
  - Financial support, particularly for initial investment costs.

**This note series is intended to summarize lessons learned and key policy findings on the World Bank’s work in education. The views expressed in these notes are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the World Bank. For additional copies of Education Notes, please contact the Education Advisory Service by email at [eservice@worldbank.org](mailto:eservice@worldbank.org) or visit the web site: <http://www.worldbank.org/education/>**

**This report reflects contributions from Penelope Bender, Nadine Dutcher, David Klaus, Jane Shore and Charlie Tesar. Photographer: Eric Miller, 2002**