Carol Benson is a longtime collaborator with PRAESA and a believer in multilingualism for all.

She holds a PhD in Social Sciences and Comparative Education from the University of California Los Angeles, U.S. and was based for many years at Stockholm University, Sweden.

She has worked in many parts of Africa, Latin America and Asia as a teacher trainer, curriculum and materials developer, researcher and evaluator in mother tongue-based multilingual education. Current interests include language-in-education policy change, the role of language in girls' education and L1 literacy and learning strategies.

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L1-based multilingual education and EGRA: Where do they meet?

Carol Benson

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Carol Benson
Independent researcher and consultant in educational language issues
http://languageissuesineducation.zohosites.com/
cbenson57@hotmail.com

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L1-based multilingual education and EGRA:
Where do they meet?

PRAESA

Carol Benson

I would like to dedicate this paper to the memory of friend and colleague Karen Wiener, who was committed to questions of literacy and multilingualism, and who stimulated me to think about these questions in new ways.

Contents

1. Introduction

The current worldwide focus on literacy is driving efforts to improve education in high-income countries as well as to guide educational development in low-income countries. Even though literacy means different things to different actors, and there are arguably different types of literacies, the term (in the singular) is often used synonymously with reading, i.e. LITERACY = READING, and presumed to represent basic education, i.e. READING = EDUCATION. What concerns me is that it is not clear to users of these terms how learners' own languages are involved in the process.

The purpose of this paper is to integrate theoretical understandings and practices from the field of multilingual education (MLE) with those from the field of literacy in educational development. The latter field has, in recent years, been dominated by a reading skills test known as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA). Like the term literacy, the term EGRA represents many assumptions that are not clearly defined. EGRA is now associated with a range of assessment instruments, a type of analysis discussed between donors and ministries of education, and a way to focus literacy-based interventions. It has so influenced the United States' approach to educational development that Goal 1 of the USAID strategy 2011–2015 (USAID 2011:1) is 'Improved Reading for 100 million children in primary grades by 2015'. The agency uses reading as a proxy for literacy, which is presumed to be a precondition for 'educational progress and therefore ... economic and developmental opportunity' (USAID 2011:9). EGRA has also influenced donor support to education worldwide, despite (or because of?) its roots in research and thinking on English monolingual native speakers. In this paper I will show how this underlying monolingual ideology has limited the possibilities thus far for EGRA to influence multilingual education policy and practice.

This paper takes a wider view to include educational research on the teaching and learning of reading and writing in multilingual settings as well as literature from the social sciences on literacies and multiliteracies. It is informed by theoretical principles and experiences in bi-/multilingual and intercultural education with a focus on primary teaching and learning. These are relevant to current discussions of 'early literacy' because so many low-income countries that are targeted for early literacy interventions are multilingual and are challenged to offer equitable education to members of non-dominant groups. Some key terms in this field are L1- or mother tongue-based bi-/multilingual education, bilingual intercultural education, Indigenous education and 'first language first'. Research on bilingual teacher training, linguistic and orthographic development, multilingual curriculum and materials development are included. The overarching argument is that language is a 'transversal' (cross-cutting) theme that influences any activities in learning initial reading and writing and in developing literacy skills over one's lifetime. In multilingual settings, we need to pay attention to all languages to make literacy and learning both more efficient and more effective.

2. Effective practices

An underlying assumption of EGRA proponents is that there are 'best practices' in literacy measures and approaches that can be applied around the world. I take the position that there are no best practices that can be 'replicated'; rather, there are *effective practices* based on *theoretically sound principles* that can be *adapted* to the conditions of each context. I argue that principles can only be judged as sound if they are based on international research and documented practice in a range of contexts.

In the context of international development, UNESCO (in Boven & Morohashi 2002) considers an effective practice a **creative and sustainable** practice that:

- provides an effective response to a need;
- serves as an inspirational guideline; and
- contributes to policy development.

Further, an effective practice should:
- demonstrably improve people's quality of life;
- represent a partnership between public, private, and civic sectors of society; and
- be socially, culturally, economically and environmentally sustainable.

In this paper, use of the term effective practice thus indicates that the intervention is culturally and contextually appropriate and theoretically sound, i.e. supported by or building on existing theory and research. This means that contexts and conditions at the time of the intervention should be made explicit if lessons are to be learned for application to other contexts (see Annex A for a suggested framework for reporting).

An excellent illustration of this point is found in Schroeder (2013), who explores whether Western strategies for developing independent reading skills are appropriate in multilingual African contexts. She points out that Western educators tend to assume that the aim of reading is comprehension, and that children are merely learning to decode familiar vocabulary and syntax encountered in texts. Schroeder contrasts this with the expectation of Kenyan educators (in a study by Klaas & Trudell 2011) that children will require about four years to start understanding what they 'read' in English, a language they do not speak at home. Differences between languages themselves also have implications for literacy learning strategies. For example, speakers of languages like Ndogo (a Sudanese language with many monosyllabic words) are averse to nonsense syllable drills of the *ma-me-mi-mo-mu* sort, while speakers of other African languages with long, polysyllabic words find the rhythm and repetition enjoyable (Schroeder 2013:246–7). Appropriate reading strategies should thus reflect the linguistic and cultural contexts of use.

3. Terms and principles from the literature

3.1 Reading and Writing

Reading can be defined as a combination of *decoding*, i.e. interpreting written code into language, and *meaning-making*, i.e. understanding what is decoded (e.g. Hoover & Gough 1990). Reading and Writing are the literate counterparts to Listening and Speaking, all of which make up language and communication. Listening and Reading are considered *receptive skills* because they do not require learners to independently generate words, but they are interactive in that learners' prior knowledge and experience must be engaged for receptive communication of meaning to occur. Speaking and Writing are considered *productive skills* because they require learners to independently put thoughts into words that can be understood by others. Productive skills grow out of *communicative competence* (Hymes 1972), which combines proficiency in grammar[1], discourse, sociocultural/sociolinguistic rules and communication strategies (Canale & Swain 1980).

Reading and Writing, as the literate forms of a language in which one communicates, are thus two sides of the same coin. Educational research and practice has long supported the teaching of Reading and Writing simultaneously in an integrated manner so that learners make the connection between oral and written communication (Gleason 1995; Goodman & Goodman 1983). Both Reading (as a combination of decoding and meaning-making) and Writing (as a combination of *encoding* and meaning-making) are part of the *social practice of literacy*, and cannot be 'simplified' into basic skills that a person either has or does not have.

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1. *Grammar* consists of 'knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology' (Canale & Swain 1980:29).

Bi- and multilingual education is built on a strong body of evidence that once learners acquire rules for decoding, which may involve phonetic, syllabic, pictographic or other representations, these rules can be applied to other languages written similarly, whether or not learners already understand and speak these languages (Bialystock 1991; Cummins 1981). However, the initial learning of reading, which combines decoding with meaning-making to facilitate the psycholinguistic guessing strategies that contribute to *automaticity*, is **only possible if learners understand and speak the language** (Williams & Cooke 2002). *Automaticity*, involving speed, effortlessness, autonomy and lack of conscious awareness, relies on the simultaneous comprehension of what is being decoded (Kuhn et al 2010:231). Without comprehension, decoding becomes a mechanical and meaningless skill, made infinitely more difficult by the lack of communication. For example, if learners encounter exceptions to 'spelling' (decoding) rules, they have no basis for guessing what word/concept is represented.

3.2 Literacy: Autonomous skills *vs.* social practice

As New Literacy Studies scholars (Street 2003; Gee 2004) point out, there are two diverging models of literacy, the first of which dominates development work and the second of which explains why traditional literacy programs rarely if ever accomplish their aims. The first, known as the *autonomous model of literacy*, assumes that literacy is a set of skills that, once acquired, will have (positive) effects on other social and cognitive practices. This model 'disguises the [Western/Northern] cultural and ideological assumptions that underpin' literacy, presenting them as 'neutral and universal' (Street 2008:4). An example would be expecting people with strong oral traditions to read story books to their children at home. Another would be testing isolated decoding skills without consideration for how they will be applied to meaning-making.

The alternative model known as the *ideological model of literacy* posits that literacy varies by cultures and conditions, that engaging with true literacy (combining decoding and meaning-making) is a social act, and that multiple modes of literacy (*multimodality*[2]), or *literacies*, are represented in learners'

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2. Kress (2003) argues for recognition of modes other than 'written' literacy in a Western/Northern sense; these are visual, gestural, kinesthetic and three-dimensional (Street, 2008:5).

backgrounds, experiences and future needs. This model recognises and incorporates diverse reading and writing practices into instruction, considers the sense made by children and adults of new communicative practices they have learned, and demonstrates how power relations can be (re-)negotiated through classroom interaction and beyond. This model has been criticised for not yet producing an *alternative pedagogy* for literacy, but it has raised awareness of how Western/Northern literacies and methodologies have often been privileged over Indigenous literacies, particularly in development approaches. As an assessment of isolated skills, EGRA is clearly an example of this practice.

Specialists have mixed opinions of EGRA measures. They are characterised positively by literacy specialist Wagner (2010) as *hybrid* assessments in that they are intended for low-income contexts, they are smaller, quicker and cheaper (SQC) than large-scale cross-national measures of literacy, and they are flexible enough to address 'key problems such as ethnolinguistic diversity'[3] (Wagner 2010: 747). Relatively speaking, Wagner finds EGRA's approach to local contexts and languages more inclusive of marginalised groups than most large-scale assessment studies. However, many of us who work in MLE (e.g. Benson 2013; Schroeder 2013; Walter 2013) would say that EGRA is not flexible enough to adequately capture the rich resources of learners in multilingual settings, especially since zero scores are so evident in EGRA results across contexts, showing only what learners cannot do. (In most testing contexts, zero scores would raise serious questions of test validity, meaning that the test should be re-developed to capture a range of competencies.) It is understandably difficult (if not impossible) to develop and implement literacy assessments that offer credible cross-national comparability while attending to local cultural and linguistic validity. However, it could be argued that *local validity* is essential if national education ministries are expected to draw policy implications from EGRA results. In fact, zero results among learners in both MLE and monolingual education programs have already led policy makers in countries like PNG to question MLE—when they should have questioned the validity of the measure, since the benefits of MLE are clearly demonstrated in all other assessments.

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3. Wagner's use of the term 'problems' with reference to linguistic diversity is regrettable, but I believe he is referring to the difficulties associated with valid translation and comparability of assessment instruments, which is indeed one of the problems of EGRA.

Recent critiques of EGRA instruments and approaches call into question both its theoretical bases and its ideological ones. Reading specialist Hoffman (2012) uses the research literature to put EGRA into historical and theoretical perspective, showing how it is modeled after the highly criticised DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment. DIBELS was based on the contested notion that fluency is a key indicator of early reading development. Based on research on monolingual English speakers – incidentally, the same research underlying EGRA – Shelton et al. (2009; see also Altwerger et al. 2007) demonstrate that faster, more accurate readers do not necessarily comprehend better, and that decoding rates are variable among learners with similar comprehension levels. Hoffman feels that the assumptions on which EGRA instruments are based have thus far not been subjected to peer or specialist review, nor have they been demonstrated to measure appropriate skills in multilingual contexts. He calls for 'a broadened view of what counts as literacy, a valuing of local contexts and a commitment to be guided by local expertise' (Hoffman 2012: 340).

Linguistic scholars working in multilingual African contexts (Trudell & Schroeder 2007; Schroeder 2013) provide evidence that not enought to simply translate English-based literacy testing instruments developed for monolinguals into local languages, and that such measures fail to take into consideration the linguistic features of these languages. For example, rather than looking at syllables as distinct reading units, for languages in the Bantu family it is much more appropriate to look at word morphology. Trudell and Schroeder (2007) reveal other monolingual assumptions of EGRA instruments and interpretations, including the questionable idea that words per minute can be an accurate indicator of literacy development when ***different languages have different types of meaning encoded in different types of words***. One alternative, for example, could be to watch where the reader's eyes go during the reading of agglutinated words.

3.3 Education in multilingual settings

Multilingual education is more than teaching and learning in two or more languages; it is a systematic approach to learning that builds on the learner's home language, knowledge and experiences to teach literacies, languages and the rest of the curriculum. The theoretical principle of 'first language first' (UNESCO 2005) is based on the concept of *common underlying proficiency* (Cummins 1981, 2009), which simply stated means that we only

need to read once in life; the literacy skills and knowledge we learn in one language can be applied to any other, providing we have oral proficiency in that other language. *Interlinguistic transfer*, the semi-automatic cognitive process of applying the lessons gained in one language to another, is multi-directional. However, the most efficient direction, particularly for initial literacy, is without doubt from the L1 or home language to an additional language or L2 (Bialystock 1991, 2011).

The importance of the first language and culture of the learner cannot be overestimated, especially if the learner comes from a non-dominant social group, i.e. a group that is disadvantaged in terms of number, prestige or status. As Kosonen (2010) notes, speakers of *non-dominant languages* (NDLs) do not always have access to the *dominant languages* (DLs) used by their societies and schools, so they would benefit greatly from bi- and multilingual approaches based on languages familiar to them.

The elements of a strong model of MLE are:

- Use of the L1 to teach beginning reading and writing skills along with academic content. In cases where multiple languages are spoken in the home or locality, schooling may be provided in one of the learner's home languages, in another local language, or in a lingua franca of the area (Ouane & Glanz 2011). The language of initial literacy should be a language that children speak and understand with reasonable proficiency by the time they enter school.

- Systematic teaching of an additional language, known as the L2, beginning with oral communication skills, to promote gradual transfer of literacy skills and knowledge from the known language (L1) to the new one. The term L2 as developed in the West/North refers to a language to which learners may be exposed in the outer community. In multilingual contexts, continued use of the term L2 is misleading, since it usually refers to a language that is foreign to learners and even their teachers. I have proposed making a distinction between $L2_{env}$ for a second language heard in the learner's environment and $L2_{edu}$ for a foreign language heard mainly or only in the school (Benson 2013).

- Introduction of another new language, or L3, in multilingual programs. Multilingual models and practices vary, as do their results, and the L3 may be introduced as early as pre-school or later in primary or secondary. What effective multilingual schools have in common (Cenoz 2009) is their focus on the L1 in the early years (so that students can acquire and develop literacy skills in addition to understanding and participating in content lessons) and throughout schooling (so that learners benefit from multilingualism and multiliteracies).

Bi- and multilingual approaches use languages systematically in the classroom so that language and curricular content are learned. The three largest and most widely cited research studies supporting L1-based bilingual learning were longitudinal studies conducted in North America and reported by Ramirez et al. in 1991 and Thomas and Collier in 1997 and 2002, all showing that the longer and stronger the use of the L1, often in parallel with the L2, the better the school achievement in all subjects. Early studies conducted in low-income countries documented better literacy skills for bilingually educated learners than for children from the same language backgrounds taught only in the L2 (e.g. Nancy Modiano 1973 in Mexico and Eddie Williams 1998 in Malawi and Zambia), as have many studies done since then, with mixed results due to the failure of most programs to develop L1 skills sufficiently for learners to benefit from transfer. The six-year Yoruba-medium experiment in Nigeria (Bamgbose 2007; Fafunwa et al. 1989) provided the first quantitative evidence from a low-income context that long-term educational investment in the L1 had benefits for both languages as well as for content learning, but since then similar quantitative effects have been documented in countries like South Africa and Guatemala (CAL 2001), the latter which has also been the subject of analyses that demonstrate bilingual programs to be cost-effective when balancing costs with savings in higher throughput and improved school success (Patrinos & Velez 2009). Recent studies in Eritrea and Ethiopia, where learners' L1s are used for up to eight years of schooling, reveal higher achievement for longer-term use of the L1 (Walter & Davis 2005; Benson et al. 2012; Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh 2005). These latter studies confirm the North American findings and indicate that short-term transitional models, while providing some support for learning, do not fully exploit the benefits of first language development.

3.4 Gender, language and literacy

Access to languages and literacies tends to be mediated by gender. Put another way, girls and women have different opportunities than boys and men, including access to languages other than the home language(s). Research

reviewed by Dutcher (CAL 2001) and O'Gara & Kendall (1996) shows that unless girls and women work in markets or factories, they are much less likely than their male counterparts to be exposed to the dominant language (DL). Their lives tend to be restricted to the home and family, where local languages are spoken. This means that using a second/foreign/dominant language at school makes it less likely for girls to understand what is going on in the classroom.

Differences in language competence often go unnoticed at school, especially if girls are given fewer opportunities to speak, and if teachers expect them to do less well than boys (O'Gara & Kendall, 1996). Any reticence on the part of girls to speak may be interpreted as lack of academic ability, rather than lack of exposure to the language of instruction.

Researchers in Africa (e.g. Hovens 2002, 2003; Benson 2002) and Latin America (e.g. Sichra 1992) have found that girls who learn in the L1 stay in school longer, are more likely to be identified as good students, do better on achievement tests, and repeat grades less often than their peers who do not learn through a familiar language. This evidence suggests that using the L1 for teaching and learning greatly improves opportunities for educational access and attainment for female students (Benson 2005).

4. The role of language(s) in initial and continuing literacy

There are a number of principles that we know to be true, based on the current state of research in multilingual education. The following are some of the most important:

- Initial literacy is most efficiently learned through a language the learner understands and speaks well, because literacy involves both decoding and meaning-making.
- We only need to learn to read once in life; literacy skills can be transferred to new languages, even if they have different writing systems.
- Pre-literacy and literacy skills should build on learners' knowledge and experiences.
- Reading and writing should be taught and assessed together.

Many of our current understandings in MLE are based on the principle of linguistic transfer. The following are some key understandings about transfer:

- Interlinguistic transfer is semi-automatic and begins when the learner has acquired literacy skills in one language and enough oral proficiency in another to start applying both decoding and meaning-making to that language.
- Transfer can be promoted through systematic instruction of the similarities and differences between languages.
- Transfer is multidirectional.

Despite the fact that the above principles and understandings are widely accepted, there are a number of misconceptions held by teachers as well as the general public. The following are some common misconceptions, presented as myths, along with what we know to be true:

- The myth that 'most or all classroom time should be spent speaking the L2' is false. Good quality L1 development and good quality L2 oral development will promote transfer over a period of a few years, but time spent building a strong foundation in the L1 is time well spent.
- The myth that 'transition from the L1 to the L2 as medium of instruction can happen after 2 or 3 years' is false. The appropriate instructional foundations in literacy and learning need to be built in the L1 and further developed, and transfer of literacy from the L1 to the L2 takes time. A sudden and too-early switch in the medium of instruction will make transfer difficult.
- The myth that 'using the L2 as a medium of instruction will help learners learn the L2' is false. Good quality L2 instruction means focusing on oral language development, which is probably most effectively done through study of the L2 as a subject.
- The myth that 'using the L1 causes interference in the L2' is false. Learners use all of their linguistic understandings from their best language(s) when they are learning a new one. What seems like 'interference' is actually their application of rules they know in one language to the new language; if these rules are different in the new language, the new rules must be explicitly taught.

Cummins (2009) identifies four interrelated dimensions of instruction to promote literacy engagement: activating prior knowledge (beginning with what learners know and can do), scaffolding meaning (building background knowledge to support individual cognitive development), affirming identity (recognising and giving value to learners' intelligence, imagination and talents), and extending language (teaching academic language needed to learn curricular content). The affective domain, involving confidence, self-esteem and identity, is strengthened by use of the L1, increasing motivation and initiative as well as creativity. L1 classrooms allow children to be themselves and develop their personalities as well as their intellects. Enjoyment of school and experiencing success are factors that improve attendance, participation and achievement, as documented by studies of classroom interaction and interviews with students, teachers and families.

I have criticised much of current practice as being based on a monolingual habitus, or set of assumptions about language based on humans speaking only one language (Benson 2013). In Table 1, I list indicators of monolingual versus multilingual approaches, indicating (with *) that most monolingual approaches are not theoretically sound. Please note that the terms DL (dominant language) and NDL (non-dominant language) are used to clarify which learners are being served by each approach.

Table 1. Indicators of monolingual vs. multilingual approaches (adapted from Benson, 2013) *(*= not theoretically sound)*

EDUCATION LEVEL	Monolingual approach	Multilingual approach
ADULT LITERACY	– Reporting literacy data without specifying the language(s)* – Providing literacy classes in a DL without considering learner proficiency ('That is what they want')* – Assessing programs by number of participants or by overly simple standards e.g. 'Can read own name and a simple sentence'	– Specifying the language(s) of literacy – Assessing proficiency – Negotiating language(s) of literacy with participants based on theoretically sound approaches (L1 first) – Developing critical literacy skills and empowerment – Assessing programs by literacy competencies and their usefulness in learners' lives
EARLY CHILDHOOD	– Using mainly/only foreign DL to 'bridge' to primary* – Attempting to build pre-literacy skills in foreign DL* – Engaging in 'The earlier, the better' rhetoric regarding oral DL* – Limiting NDL to songs and 'tokens' of home culture	– Building on child's knowledge and experiences – Developing strong pre-literacy and learning foundation in L1(s) and home culture(s) – Exposing learners to DL at developmentally appropriate levels

Table 1. continued

EDUCATION LEVEL	Monolingual approach	Multilingual approach
PRIMARY	– Attempting to teach initial literacy in a foreign DL* – Using DL as medium of instruction without explicitly teaching it* – If NDL/L1 is used, phasing out after 2– 3 years before building strong foundation for literacy and skills transfer* – Testing reading/writing only in DL (or only using DL competencies that are inappropriate for NDLs)* – Expecting unrealistically high levels of DL proficiency* – Focusing on accuracy in DL reading and writing* – Code-switching unsystematically between DL and NDL – Failing to assess NDL/L1 proficiency or literacy – Assessing content knowledge only in DL – Aiming for monolingualism in DL*	– Teaching initial literacy in NDL/ L1 using appropriate methods and materials – Continuing to develop literacy and learning foundation in NDL/L1 and home culture(s) throughout primary – Explicitly teaching similarities/ differences between written L1 and DL to promote literacy transfer – Using NDL/L1 as main medium for teaching academic content, even for new concepts in upper grades – Teaching DL(s) at developmentally appropriate levels with appropriate methods focusing on meaning – Teaching languages, literacies and metalinguistic awareness holistically across the curriculum – Assessing content bilingually – Aiming for NDL/L1-based bi-/ multilingualism and bi-/ multiliteracies

5. Suggested approaches to languages in literacy and education

Over the years and across the world, educational practice with regard to languages has not always been informed by theory, nor has it kept up with theory. Recent research offers us a great deal of evidence concerning practices that would potentially be much more effective than current ones. In this section, I begin with a planning tool that could be used by education ministry planners to more effectively assess current conditions and plan from a realistic basis. Then I suggest a set of different approaches which, based on current knowledge of how languages and literacies are taught and learned most effectively, build on real conditions, particularly in low-income countries.

5.1 Planning tool

Effective planning relies on a realistic assessment of conditions and needs. The tool in Table 2 below represents my own suggestion (Benson 2009) for how to approach the assessment of baseline language skills of learners, teachers and community members so that the aims of formal education can be established and so that the processes of learning can be defined. This tool requires adaptation for each situation, depending on how many and what types of languages are present. The hypothetical example I give in Table 2 is common to situations where learners speak a non-dominant language (NDL) at home but must learn a dominant language at school.

Before discussing the tool, a brief note on terminology is necessary. First, the term **L1** is taken to mean the language (or one of the languages) that the learner speaks best. For purposes of this discussion, the L1 is an NDL, one that may not be prioritised in formal domains like education. It should be noted that in some contexts, the learner's L1 may not be the same variety

Table 2: Analysis of sociolinguistic conditions with reference to aims

	L1$_{fam}$ (mother tongue)		L2$_{sch}$ (foreign language)	
	Listen/ Speak	Read/ Write	Listen/ Speak	Read/ Write
Learners entering school	High	–	–	–
Families and communities	High	–	Low	–
Teachers and school directors	High	Low	Medium	Low
Teacher trainers and support staff	(*Varied*)	(*Varied*)	High	Medium
Aims: Education system **vs**	–	–	High	High
MLE research	High	High	Medium	Medium

of the language used in school; for example, in Madagascar the learner may speak a local variety of Malagasy (which I propose calling **L1$_{fam}$** to represent the language spoken in the family) but be faced with standard Malagasy at school (**L1$_{std}$** for the standard used in teaching and learning materials and the media) (Benson 2013).

It is also important to re-examine the term **L2**, which in MLE has been taken to mean the new or dominant language (DL), the language learned at school. There is a great need to differentiate between an L2 that is widely heard and spoken in the learners' community or region versus an L2 that is foreign for most learners, meaning that it is not used for normal communicative purposes. This distinction should be part of every educational decision, from curriculum standards (e.g. realistic expectations for each language, and the most appropriate language**s** on which to base initial literacy) to methodological approaches (e.g. communicative *vs.* special purposes strategies, along with the types of scaffolding[4] and contextual support required if a language other than an L1 is used for teaching academic content), including teacher education (e.g. how teachers'

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4. Scaffolding refers to providing contextual cues, gestures, hints, or terms that help learners bridge the gap between what they know and what they are trying to accomplish.

own linguistic repertoires are built upon, in which language**s** they will be trained, and which methods they will learn to apply). As mentioned above, I have proposed **L2$_{env}$** for a language to which learners are exposed in the environment outside school, *vs.* **L2$_{sch}$** for a language to which learners are exposed only or mainly in school.

Language assessments for incoming learners should be a rule of thumb, since exposure to dominant languages varies by region, by community and even by individual. One model is an individual progressive oral language assessment like one I developed and used in Guinea-Bissau (see Annex B). (See table over.)

In the example used here, children enter school with high oral skills in L1$_{fam}$ but little or no prior exposure to L2$_{sch}$. The aim of national education policy is for learners to reach high levels of oral and written proficiency in L2$_{sch}$, and (assuming there is no MLE yet) there are no stated aims for the L1.

In this case, learners are exposed completely or mostly to **L1** outside school, since their families and community are L1 speakers, so this is their strongest language and the one that should be used to build a strong literacy and learning foundation in primary that continues throughout secondary schooling. If this is done through MLE, the aim would be for learners to reach high levels of L1 literacy that can be transferred over time to L2 literacy. Teachers and school directors may need to improve their own L1 literacy levels, but since their oral skills are high, a short course and/ or practice with a local intellectual will probably suffice. They would also benefit from inservice workshops on L1 reading and writing methodologies, depending on their prior knowledge and experience.

In this case, neither learners nor their families are exposed to **L2** input outside the school, and even teachers and school directors have limited proficiency. Therefore it is not possible at this time for learners to gain the high levels of proficiency demanded by education policy, since there are no language models around them. Moderate levels of proficiency can be reached through MLE if learners are taught to read and write in the L1 and taught other subjects in the L1 while learning the L2 as a language (subject).

This example illustrates how educational planning in a multilingual context can benefit from a realistic approach to language and learning. Careful examination of learners' existing language skills and those of available human resources reveals that the aims of this school system are currently unattainable. High proficiency in an L2 that is not widely spoken is simply not realistic and cannot be mandated.

This example also illustrates why one model cannot be recommended or applied in all situations. However, coupled with an understanding of language and learning principles, use of this tool provides insights into designing a system that builds on existing human and linguistic resources in more pedagogically effective ways.

5.2 Approaches to early and developing literacy and learning

The first three approaches in this section are most theoretically sound but are not yet widely practiced, despite the fact that they could be expected to be the most effective. The fourth approach is designed to make early-exit transitional, programmes slightly better, beginning with initial literacy and learning and continuing through to the end of primary (which usually consists of 6 to 8 years). For purposes of discussion, the focus is on only two languages; however, the examples in Approaches A and C (Ethiopia and the Spanish Basque Country, respectively) involve three or more.

Approach A	
L1 is used for both initial and continuing literacy.	
L1 is medium of instruction for all subjects throughout primary.	
L2 is taught systematically as a subject by a specialist teacher, beginning with oral vocabulary and functions and advancing to higher levels.	
Justification:	This approach builds on the strongest linguistic resources of learners, teachers, families and communities. It assumes that at least one teacher in each school has L2 skills that can be further developed.
Conditions:	Teachers and trainers need to develop L1 literacy.
	Teachers and trainers need to learn effective L1 literacy methodology.
	L2 specialist teachers need to be trained, assessed and certified.
Known cases:	In Ethiopia and Eritrea, current national policy allows for 8 full years of primary education in the $L1_{(std\ and/or\ fam)}$. The major L1s are currently being taught in this way, while other L1s are still being developed. In Ethiopia, Amharic ($L2_{env\ and/or\ sch}$) and English ($L3_{sch}$) are taught as subjects by regular classroom teachers, representing a challenge due to limited proficiency; the positive exception is where individual school directors have wisely designated specialist L2 and L3 teachers.

Approach B	
L1 is used for initial literacy and continuing literacy.	
L1 is major medium of instruction for most subjects in the first 3–4 years.	
L2 is taught as a subject throughout primary.	
L2 is medium of instruction for some subjects (e.g. physical education and other subjects where the context is clear) in the first 3–4 years.	
L1 and L2 are used as parallel languages of instruction in upper primary.	
Assessment of content area subjects is done bilingually.	
Justification:	(Same as above)
	This approach builds a solid foundation in the L1 and never removes it.
	It allows for L2 use beyond language learning when there are contextual cues (e.g. teacher demonstrating physical activities).
	Bilingual assessment offers learners the greatest potential to demonstrate their new knowledge.
Conditions:	Same as above, except that there is no specialist L2 teacher.
	Teachers must be bilingual/biliterate in L1 and L2 and be trained in bilingual methodologies (e.g. alternate day, preview-review).
	Bilingual examinations must be accepted by local and national assessment agencies.
Known cases:	The bilingual pilot project in Vietnam is attempting to follow this approach in $L1_{std}$ in Hmong, J'rai and Khmer (Benson & Kosonen 2012). Otherwise, the closest cases would be dual-medium programs in South Africa, which use team teaching (two teachers, each of whom is a specialist in one of the languages).

Approach C

Language competencies are listed holistically in the curriculum.

Educators plan which competencies are taught in which language(s) at which times, based on learner proficiency and receptivity.

Both/all languages are used and practiced throughout the curriculum in a purposeful way that teaches both language competencies and content knowledge.

Assessment is done in both/all languages, depending on the aim.

Justification:	The teaching of both/all languages simultaneously and systematically encourages cross-linguistic transfer and metalinguistic awareness as part of the learning process.
Conditions:	Teachers must be part of the planning process and must be well trained in multilingual methodologies. Written materials including story books and textbooks must be available in both/all languages.
Known cases:	Certain schools in the Spanish Basque Country are implementing a multilingual curriculum in Basque, Spanish, English and/or French to maximise cross-linguistic literacy transfer (Elorza & Muñoa 2008). (This may not be a useful approach in low-income countries unless there is a commitment to stronger capacity development in multilingual education methodologies.)

Approach D

(What can be done inn the case of an early-exit transitional program, where the L1 is used for initial literacy and instruction, but the L2 is phased in over 2–4 years and is used as language of instruction from 3rd or 4th year on.)

Teach the L1 as a subject throughout primary.

Develop L1 glossaries and bilingual vocabulary resources for the content areas (mathematics and sciences in particular) to scaffold learning.

Justification:	Continued development of L1 reading and writing will support L2 literacy. However, a great deal of scaffolding and vocabulary in both L1 and L2 is needed for learners to comprehend and participate in content area instruction.
Conditions:	Bilingual glossaries and other resources must be made available to teachers and learners from a central source (national and/or provincial). Inservice training is needed regarding how and why to develop L1 reading and writing skills.
Known cases:	In Mozambique, the model used for experimentation in the 1990s and implementation since 2002 in 16 different languages is an early-exit bilingual transitional model where the medium of instruction shifts to $L2_{sch}$ Portuguese by the 4th year, but where possible learners continue to study the $L1_{std}$ as a subject through the end of the 6th year.

6. Conclusion

The integration of theoretical and practical understandings from L1-based bi-/multilingual education (MLE) and from Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) is important if speakers of non-dominant languages are to be given improved opportunities in basic education and literacy(ies) development. Effective practices in educational development should be well informed by theory but should also be well adapted to the social, cultural and linguistic contexts in which they are applied. Monolingual approaches are not theoretically sound, nor are they well adapted to multilingual contexts, where they continue to disadvantage speakers of non-dominant languages (NDLs). Multilingual approaches better address the literacy and learning needs of both children and adults.

This paper includes a number of tools that may be adapted to suit the needs of languages and literacies projects, including a framework for discussing effective practices (Annex A), a set of key terms and principles in MLE, a set of indicators of monolingual *vs.* multilingual approaches (Table 1), an oral language assessment instrument (Annex B), an instrument for analysing the sociolinguistic context (Table 2), and a set of multilingual approaches with examples of where they are being applied. It is hoped that readers will find here both guidance and inspiration in working to improve basic educational opportunities for all learners.

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Annex A: Framework for discussing effective practices

TITLE: Mother tongue-based multilingual education (MLE)
Description:
Period:
Themes:

COUNTRY:
Region and conditions:
Locale and conditions:
ISSUE(S) ADDRESSED:

STAKEHOLDERS AND BENEFICIARIES:

THEORETICAL SUPPORT/BASIS FOR INTERVENTION:

OVERALL SUSTAINABILITY:

OVERALL STRENGTHS:
OVERALL WEAKNESSES:

REASONS CONSIDERED SUCCESSFUL:
Success expressed qualitatively:
Success expressed quantitatively:
Output:
Process:
Legitimacy:

CONDITIONS FOR REPLICATION:
The following conditions increase the chances of success:
Main obstacles:

CONTACT PERSONS:
REFERENCES:

Adapted from Boven & Morohashi (2002)

Annex B: Progressive oral language assessment

PORTUGUESE TEST
developed for Guinea-Bissau

[English translation]　　　　　　Nome **[Name]**: _____

ORAL PORTUGUESE **[PORTUGUESE]**

- The tester should be a highly proficient speaker of the language being tested. Each student is tested individually.

- The test is progressive, meaning that the tester continues until the student can no longer respond. The easier skills are tested first, so the test goes from receptive (easier) to productive (more challenging). STOP BEFORE THE STUDENT BECOMES FRUSTRATED.

- It takes 2 to 5 minutes for the tester to get enough information to determine the level (0–4) of the student's oral skills. (See criteria attached.)

- The tester makes notes on this form. This test must be adapted to the language/ culture being tested. (These particular questions were appropriate for rural Guinea-Bissau.)

I. Comprehension

A. [Normal conversations, note responses]

1. Como estás? **[How are you?]** _____
2. Como é o teu nome? **[What is your name?]** _____
3. Onde é que tu nasceste? **[Where were you born?]** _____
4. Onde é que tu moras? **[Where do you live?]** _____
5. Com quem que tu moras? **[With whom do you live?]** _____
6. Como é o nome do teu pai? **[What is the name of your father?]** _____
7. Como é o nome da tua mae? **[What is the name of your mother?]** _____
8. Na qual classe é que tu estudas? **[In what class do you study?]** _____

B. Põe o teu dedo na coisa ou mostra-me a coisa que eu disse.
[Put your finger on the thing or show me the thing that I name.] _____

1. A cabeça　　**[The head]** _____ _____
2. O braço　　**[The arm]** _____ _____
3. A boca　**[The mouth]** _____ _____
4. A perna **[The leg]** _____ _____

C. Faz o que eu disse. [Do what I say.] _____

1. Mostra-me a janela. **[Show me the window.]** _____
2. Senta-te no patio. **[Sit on the patio.]** _____

---

3. Bate palmas e volta na cadeira. **[Clap your hands and return to your chair.]** _____

4. Levante-te, toca tu pe, e da uma volta.
[Stand up, touch your toes, and spin around once.] _____

II. Production

A. O que são estas coisas? Disse-me a palavra. [Indicate the objects]
[What are these things? Tell me the word.]

1. [cadeira]**[chair]** _____ _____ _____
2. [chao] **[ground]**
3. [arvre] **[tree]** _____ _____ _____
4. [livro] **[book]** _____ _____ _____

B. O que é que as pessoas estão a fazer em cada desenho?
[What are the people doing in each picture?]

1. [O homem está a trabalhar …] **[The man is working …]** _____
_____ _____

2. [Os alunos estäo a estudar …] **[The students are studying …]** _____
_____ _____

3. [A menina está a comer uma laranja …] **[The girl is eating an orange …]** _____
_____ _____

4. [O rapaz está a trabalhar …] **[The youth is working …]** _____
_____ _____

C. [Questions, note responses]

1. O que é que tu fazes quando sais da escola? _____
[What do you do when you leave school?]
2. O que é que tu vais fazer hoje depois da aula? _____
[What are you going to do today after class?]
3. Disse-me uma coisa que tu fizeste ontem. _____
[Tell me something that you did yesterday.]

D. Conta-me uma história que tu conheces. [Tell me a story that you know.]

_____ _____

_____ _____

_____ _____

5 LEVELS OF ORAL PROFICIENCY

Criteria related to student control of basic syntactic structures

Level 1: Little/no language skills

Students at level 1 are just beginning the process of learning the language. Apart from an occasional word, they comprehend little or nothing of the language, and they can not yet speak the language. This category does not apply to students who do not speak because of shyness or illness, or who have other difficulties which are not directly related to language acquisition.

Level 2: Receptive language

Students at level 2 can understand variable amounts of daily language. They can produce some verbal routines in the language, and they can repeat short phrases or questions. However, they still can not use the language to communicate their thoughts and opinions. When students at level 2 know that the person to whom they are speaking understands their dominant language (probably the mother tongue), they may respond in that language. This is likely to happen when students are anxious to communicate but do not have the skills to express the message in the language of the test.

Level 3: Survival language

Students at level 3 normally can make themselves understood by using a combination of simple conversation, gestures, and an occasional word from the mother tongue. When they speak the test language, these students at times omit 'important' words such as nouns and verbs, and substitute gestures or words in the mother tongue. Often students of level 3 omit or incorrectly form short parts of speech (such as articles) and the endings of verbs and nouns. While they use some pronouns, they do not yet know when to use them appropriately. In sum, students at level 3 speak barely enough of the language to survive in daily communication. They can communicate in the language, but they do so with difficulty.

Level 4: Intermediate language skills

Students at level 4 have less difficulty communicating their ideas in the language. They do not have to rely on gestures or on the first language to supplement conversation. They control a great deal of basic grammatical structures, including some word endings. Students at level 4 also control many pronoun forms, and they are beginning to use an extension of verb endings.

There is more variability in proficiency within level 4 than within the other levels. Students who have just entered level 4 regularly make more grammatical errors than those who are more advanced; however, the majority of those advanced students of level 4 still do not completely control some basic grammatical structures. These structures can be used correctly at times, but not always.

Level 5: Proficient language skills

Students of level 5 demonstrate native or near-native proficiency in the language. They control most of the basic grammatical structure of the language, and their conversation can be compared with that of peers who speak the language as their first language.

Adapted by Carol Benson from various oral tests of first and second language proficiency. Used for dissertation entitled, 'Teaching beginning literacy in the "mother tongue": A study of the experimental Crioulo/ Portuguese primary project in Guinea-Bissau.' University of California, Los Angeles, June 1994.