

# Education in a multilingual world

**\_UNESCO  
Education  
Position  
Paper\_**



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# **Education**

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# Preface

Education for All means a quality education for all. In today's world this means including consideration of the many varied cultural and linguistic contexts that exist in contemporary societies. These pose a challenge for policy-makers, concerned on the one hand with ensuring qualifications of a normative nature for the whole population of a country, while at the same time protecting the right to be different of those who belong to specific linguistic and ethnic populations. Increasingly globalized economies and societies, ever more driven by digital knowledge, make these challenges particularly complex. UNESCO has a strong commitment to the inherent value of cultural diversity and the need to maintain it. Education is both a tool for and a reflection of cultural diversity. In addition, research has shown that learners learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual education approaches.

This document *Education in a Multilingual World* aims to clarify some of the key concepts and issues that surround the debate and presents in a simplified and synthetic form the many declarations and recommendations that have made reference to the issues of languages and education. These are stated as UNESCO guidelines and principles. They are the fruit of dialogue and discussion during many international meetings and United Nations and UNESCO conferences, and of informed expertise in the world of language policy and education. An expert group meeting held in Paris in September 2002\* enriched the original document while serving to explore further UNESCO's role in this field.

We hope that this paper will serve to shape thinking in Member States throughout the world on the question of language and education, and we encourage its translation into as many languages as possible.

\* Financial support to this meeting from the Finnish National Commission for UNESCO is gratefully acknowledged.

# Introduction

UNESCO has an essential role to play in providing international frameworks for education policy and practice on key and complex issues. Language and, in particular, the choice of language of instruction in education is one such concern and often invokes contrasting and deeply felt positions. Questions of identity, nationhood and power are closely linked to the use of specific languages in the classroom. Language itself, moreover, possesses its own dynamics and is constantly undergoing processes of both continuity and change, impacting upon the communication modes of different societies as it evolves. Educational policy makers have difficult decisions to make with regard to languages, schooling and the curriculum in which the technical and the political often overlap. While there are strong educational arguments in favour of mother tongue (or first language) instruction, a careful balance also needs to be made between enabling people to use local languages in learning, and providing access to global languages of communication through education. The purpose of this position paper, therefore, is to consider some of the central issues concerning languages and education and to provide related guidelines and principles. In doing so we are conscious of the need for a clear statement on language policy in relation to education, particularly within the context of Education for All and in terms of the Dakar goals of ensuring that by 2015 all children have access to quality primary education and that there is a 50 per cent increase in adult literacy by the year 2015.

In 1953 UNESCO published the expert report on *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* and this continues to be the most frequently cited UNESCO document on language issues in education. Significant changes have taken place over the past fifty years, however: there have been profound political transformations leading to new language policies especially in post-colonial and newly independent countries; many hundreds of languages have disappeared throughout the world and many more remain endangered; migratory movements on a mass scale have brought new and varied languages to other countries and continents; the internet has dramatically affected the way in which language and languages are used for communication and indeed for learning; and rapidly accelerating globalization increasingly challenges the continued existence of many small, local identities frequently based on

language. The time has come, therefore, for UNESCO to reconsider its position on languages and education.

This position paper is divided into three separate parts. In Part I, we present the key concepts that are used in relation to multilingual education. The aim is to clarify a set of meanings and terms used in relation to languages and education. In Part II, we present a synthesis of the normative framework for languages and education based, firstly, on an analysis of United Nations standard-setting instruments; secondly, on a discussion of specific UNESCO conventions and declarations make reference to issues of language and culture; and, thirdly, on the outcomes and recommendations of international conferences related directly or indirectly to issues of language and education. Part III of the position paper provides a synthesis of the many discussions and agreements on language issues that have been adopted under the auspices of both the United Nations and UNESCO. These are placed within a set of guidelines and principles with the objective of making UNESCO's position clear and giving them a wider distribution in a more accessible format.



Multicultural  
context  
the challenge  
for education  
system

# Multilingual Contexts: Challenge Education Systems

Education in many countries of the world takes place in multilingual contexts. Most plurilingual societies have developed an *ethos* which balances and respects the use of different languages in daily life. From the perspective of these societies and of the language communities themselves, multilingualism is more a way of life than a problem to be solved. The challenge is for education systems to adapt to these complex realities and provide a quality education which takes into consideration learners' needs, whilst balancing these at the same time with social, cultural and political demands. While uniform solutions for plural societies, may be both administratively and managerially simpler, they disregard the risks involved both in terms of learning achievement and loss of linguistic and cultural diversity. In this part of the document we discuss some of the basic issues which surround the provision of education in diverse linguistic situations.

## → Linguistic diversity and multilingualism

**Linguistic diversity** reflects the existence of the multitude of languages spoken in the world which is variously estimated at between 6 000 and 7 000 languages. Safeguarding this diversity today is one of the most urgent challenges facing our world. Estimates suggest that at least half of them are in danger of disappearing in the coming years.<sup>1</sup> While some countries are linguistically homogeneous, such as Iceland, many countries and regions display a wealth of linguistic diversity, for example, Indonesia, with over 700 languages, and Papua New Guinea with over 800 languages.<sup>2</sup> The actual distribution of linguistic diversity is uneven. Over 70 per cent of all languages in the world are found in just 20 nation states, among them some of the poorest countries in the world. In general, however, bilingual and multilingual contexts, that is, the presence of different linguistic groups living in the same country, are the norm rather than the exception throughout the world, both in the North and the South. **Bilingualism** and **multilingualism**, that is, the use of more than one language in daily life, will be normal practice in these contexts.

Linguistically diverse contexts cover a range of scenarios. Broadly speaking, however, these correspond either to more traditionally diverse situations where several, or even up to many hundreds of languages have been spoken in a region over a long period of time, or to more recent developments (particularly in urban concentrations), the result of migratory phenomena, where in some city schools there may be as many as 30 or 40 different mother tongues among students. In all cases, there is a need to take into consideration the specific learning needs of children in relation to the language or languages of the home and those of the school.

## → **Minority and majority languages**

The concept of linguistic diversity itself is relative, however, and is usually measured in terms of national boundaries, giving some languages the status of majority language and others that of minority language according to specific national contexts. Mandarin, for example, one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, which is spoken by almost 900 million people, is a **majority language** in China, but in other countries where only part of the population is of Chinese language and culture, it has the status of a **minority language** in the face of other national or majority languages of those countries. Similarly, a minority language in a large country may, be regarded as a majority language in a smaller country. However, most of the world's languages, including sign languages for the deaf and braille for the blind, are minority languages in any national context. Nevertheless, the term 'minority' is often ambiguous and may be interpreted differently in distinct contexts because it may have both numerical and social or political dimensions. In some cases it may be simply used as a euphemism for non-elite or subordinate groups, whether they constitute a numerical majority or minority in relation to some other group that is politically and socially dominant.

## → **Official and national languages**

Although there are more than 20 States with more than one **official language** (India alone, for example, has 19 official languages while South Africa has 11),

the majority of countries in the world are monolingual nation states in the sense of recognizing, *de jure* or *de facto*, only one official language for government and legal purposes. That is not to say that they are not bilingual or multilingual societies, but rather that while there may be many languages widely used in a country these do not necessarily have the legal authority of an official language. In many countries that were previously under colonial regimes, the official language tends to be the language of the former colonizers. In addition to official languages, several countries recognize national languages, which may be compulsory in education. The choice of language in the educational system confers a power and prestige through its use in formal instruction. Not only is there a symbolic aspect, referring to status and visibility, but also a conceptual aspect referring to shared values and worldview expressed through and in that language.

## → Language(s) of instruction

**The language of instruction** in or out of school refers to the language used for teaching the basic curriculum of the educational system. The choice of the language or indeed the languages of instruction (educational policy might recommend the use of several languages of instruction) is a recurrent challenge in the development of quality education. While some countries opt for one language of instruction, often the official or majority language, others have chosen to use educational strategies that give national or local languages an important place in schooling. Speakers of mother tongues, which are not the same as the national or local language, are often at a considerable disadvantage in the educational system similar to the disadvantage in receiving instruction in a foreign official language.

## → Mother tongue instruction

**Mother tongue** instruction generally refers to the use of the learners' mother tongue as the medium of instruction. Additionally, it can refer to the mother tongue as a subject of instruction. It is considered to be an important component of quality education, particularly in the early years. The expert view is that mother tongue instruction should cover both the teaching *of* and the teaching *through* this language.



The term 'mother tongue', though widely used, may refer to several different situations. Definitions often include the following elements: the language(s) that one has learnt first; the language(s) one identifies with or is identified as a native speaker of by others; the language(s) one knows best and the language(s) one uses most. 'Mother tongue' may also be referred to as 'primary' or 'first language'. The term 'mother tongue' is commonly used in policy statements and in the general discourse on educational issues. It is retained in this document for that reason, although it is to be noted that the use of the term 'mother tongue' often fails to discriminate between all the variants of a language used by a native speaker, ranging from hinterland varieties to urban-based standard languages used as *school* mother tongue. A child's earliest first-hand experiences in native speech do not necessarily correspond to the formal school version of the so-called mother tongue.

It is an obvious yet not generally recognized truism that learning in a language which is not one's own provides a double set of challenges, not only is there the challenge of learning a new language but also that of learning new knowledge contained in that language. These challenges may be further exacerbated in the case of certain groups already in situations of educational risk or stress such as illiterates, minorities and refugees. Gender considerations cross cut these situations of educational risk, for girls and women may be in a particularly disadvantaged position. In most traditional societies, it is the girls and women who tend to be monolingual, being less exposed either through schooling, salaried labour, or migration to the national language, than their sons, brothers or husbands.

Studies have shown that, in many cases, instruction in the mother tongue is beneficial to language competencies in the first language, achievement in other subject areas, and second language learning.<sup>3</sup> The application of the principle of **mother tongue instruction** nevertheless is far from being the rule. Some of the difficulties encountered by the use of mother tongues as languages of instruction may include the following:

- \_ sometimes the mother tongue may be an unwritten language;
- \_ sometimes the language may not even be generally recognized as constituting a legitimate language;

- \_ the appropriate terminology for education purposes may still have to be developed;
- \_ there may be a shortage of educational materials in the language;
- \_ the multiplicity of languages may exacerbate the difficulty of providing schooling in each mother tongue;
- \_ there may be a lack of appropriately trained teachers;
- \_ there may be resistance to schooling in the mother tongue by students, parents and teachers.

## → Linguistic rights

Language is not only a tool for communication and knowledge but also a fundamental attribute of cultural identity and empowerment, both for the individual and the group. Respect for the languages of persons belonging to different linguistic communities therefore is essential to peaceful cohabitation. This applies both to majority groups, to minorities (whether traditionally resident in a country or more recent migrants) and to indigenous peoples.

Claims for language are among the first rights that minorities have voiced when there have been situations of political change and evolution. Such claims for linguistic rights range from the official and legal status of the minority and indigenous language, to language teaching and use in schools and other institutions, as well as in the media. In regard to education, the **linguistic rights** that have been framed in international agreements<sup>4</sup> for minority and indigenous groups include the following:

- \_ schooling in their languages, if so desired;
- \_ access to the language of the larger community and to that of national education systems;
- \_ inter-cultural education that promotes positive attitudes to minority and indigenous languages and the cultures they express;
- \_ access to international languages.

The educational rights that have been formulated in international agreements for migrant workers and members of their families<sup>5</sup> provide:

- \_ that the integration of their children should be facilitated by teaching the language in use in the school system;
- \_ that opportunities should be created for teaching children their own language and culture.

## → Language teaching

The language of instruction in school is the medium of communication for the transmission of knowledge. This is different from **language teaching** itself where the grammar, vocabulary, and the written and the oral forms of a language constitute a specific curriculum for the acquisition of a second language other than the mother tongue. Learning another language opens up access to other value systems and ways of interpreting the world, encouraging inter-cultural understanding and helping reduce xenophobia. This applies equally to minority and majority language speakers.

The way languages are taught is constantly changing, and may vary considerably from one country to another or even within the same country. Much depends on the prevailing concept of language and language teaching paradigms, as well as on the role that is assigned to the language that is taught.

## → Bilingual and multilingual education

**Bilingual and multilingual education** refer to the use of two or more languages as mediums of instruction. In much of the specialized literature, the two types are subsumed under the term bilingual education. However, UNESCO adopted the term 'multilingual education' in 1999 in the General Conference Resolution 12 to refer to the use of at least three languages, the mother tongue, a regional or national language and an international language in education.<sup>6</sup> The resolution supported the view that the requirements of global and national participation, and the specific needs of particular, culturally and linguistically distinct communities can only be addressed by multilingual education. In regions where the language of the learner is not the official or national language of the country, bilingual and multilingual

education can make mother tongue instruction possible while providing at the same time the acquisition of languages used in larger areas of the country and the world. This additive approach to bilingualism is different from the so called subtractive bilingualism which aims to move children on to a second language as a language of instruction.

The new  
framework  
for language  
and education



Normative  
Framework  
Languages  
Education

The status and role of languages internationally have been the subject of numerous declarations, recommendations and agreements. There are some that are particularly relevant to the discussion on language and education. We begin by placing the discussion on language within the framework of United Nations agreements and standard-setting instruments, and follow on with more references to the mandate of UNESCO's mission at an international level. Declarations and Recommendations emanating from inter-governmental conferences are then considered. For the purposes of this position paper only those agreements of an international nature are considered.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of presenting the framework in this way is to illustrate the broad international agreement on the issue of language and its importance in the education system, before moving on to present in Part III, UNESCO Guidelines on Language and Education.

## A. United Nations standard-setting instruments

As one of the fundamental standard-setting instruments, the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, proclaimed in 1948, lays down the basic principle against discrimination on the grounds of language: 'Article 2.: Everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as... language'.

The rights of persons belonging to minorities are furthermore established by the 1966 **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights** and the 1992 **Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities**. Whereas Article 27 of the International

Covenant refers more generally to the right of persons belonging to minorities 'to use their own language ... in community with the other members of their group', the Declaration is of explicit relevance to the language issue in the field of education as it formulates in Article 4 that persons belonging to minorities should have adequate opportunities 'to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue' and that measures should be taken 'in order to encourage knowledge of the ... language and culture of the minorities'.

The educational rights of indigenous peoples are addressed by the 1989 ILO **Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries**. Article 28 requires that 'children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong' and that 'adequate measures shall be taken to ensure that these peoples have the opportunity to attain fluency in the national language or in one of the official languages of the country'. The Article provides at the same time that 'measures shall be taken to preserve and promote the development and practice of the indigenous languages of the peoples concerned'.

As far as non-nationals are concerned, the 1985 **Declaration on the Human Rights of Individuals who are not Nationals of the Country in which they live** provides in its Article 5 that 'Aliens shall enjoy ... the right to retain their own language, culture and tradition.' The 1990 **International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families** puts forth that 'States of employment shall pursue a policy ... aimed at facilitating the integration of children of migrant workers in the local school system, particularly in respect of teaching them the local language', and 'the teaching of their mother tongue and culture'; they may furthermore 'provide special schemes of education in the mother tongue of children of migrant workers' ([Article 45](#)).

The 1989 **Convention on the Rights of the Child** sheds light on another aspect of the language issue in education. It emphasizes that language also has to be considered as an educational value. Article 29 sets up that 'the education of the child shall be directed to... the development of respect for the child's... cultural identity, language and values'.

# B. UNESCO declarations and conventions

UNESCO's mandate charges it to deal with language issues. In this sense, Article 1 of the **UNESCO Constitution** sets forth the fundamental principle that language should not induce any kind of discrimination: 'the human rights and fundamental freedoms... are affirmed for the peoples of the world, without distinction of race, sex, language or religion'.

More specifically relating to education, the 1960 **Convention against Discrimination in Education** lays down the educational rights of persons belonging to minorities. Article 5 has a particular relevance to the language issue as the respective roles of the mother tongue and of the majority language are defined: 'the members of national minorities [have the right] to carry on their own educational activities, including... the use or the teaching of their own language, provided... that this right is not exercised in a manner which prevents the members of these minorities from understanding the culture and language of the community as a whole and from participating in its activities'.

The 1976 **Recommendation on the Development of Adult Education** reinforces the role of the mother tongue as it explicitly recommends mother tongue instruction and it adopts a broader perspective on language learning: 'Article 22.: With regard to ethnic minorities, adult education activities should enable them to... educate themselves and their children in their mother tongues, develop their own cultures and learn languages other than their mother tongues.'

The role of the mother tongue in education was also referred to in the 1978 **Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice** that recommends in Article 9 that 'steps should be taken to make it possible for [the] children [of population groups of foreign origin] to be taught their mother tongue.'

The 1995 **Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy** promotes foreign language learning (Article 19) and the 'respect for the educational rights of persons belonging to ... minorities, as well as indigenous peoples' in order to foster understanding between communities and nations (Article 29).

The **Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity**, adopted in 2001, likewise touches upon the importance of languages for the promotion of cultural diversity. Article 6 of the Action Plan for the implementation of the Declaration defines the role that languages should play in the field of education including respect for the mother tongue, linguistic diversity at all levels of education and the promotion of multilingualism from an early age.

## C. Outcomes from international conferences

Many of the world summits held in recent years under the auspices of the United Nations and following an inter-governmental logic have noted the core importance of languages. A case in point is **The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**, adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women affirms the principle of equal access to education which has to be achieved through the elimination of 'discrimination in education at all levels on the basis of ... language.'

Mother tongue instruction appears to be a recurrent issue. The **Delhi Declaration and Framework for Action**, adopted in 1993 at the Education for All Summit, takes an explicit stand on the issue of mother tongue instruction by supporting 'initial instruction in the mother tongue, even if it may in some cases be necessary for the students to subsequently master a national language or other language of wider usage if they are to participate effectively in the broader society of which they are part.' The need to acknowledge 'the



essential role of the mother tongue for initial instruction' is also formulated in the 1996 **Amman Affirmation**, the final communiqué of the Mid-Decade Meeting of the International Consultative Forum on Education for All.

The 1997 **Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning**, adopted at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, states the importance of the issue for minority groups and indigenous peoples and proposes that 'the right to learn in the mother tongue should be respected and implemented' ([Article 15](#)). The **Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action** adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights (1993) provides more generally in section I, paragraph 19 that the 'persons belonging to minorities have the right... to use their own language in private and in public, freely and without interference or any form of discrimination'.

The 1998 **World Declaration on Higher Education for the Twenty-first Century: Vision and Action** puts forth the importance of multilingualism in higher education: in order to encourage international understanding, 'the practice of multilingualism, faculty and student exchange programmes... should be an integral part of all higher education systems' ([Article 15](#)).

In the field of language and education, the recent reports and recommendations of the International Conference on Education (ICE) have emphasized the importance of:

- \_mother tongue instruction at the beginning of formal education for pedagogical, social and cultural considerations;<sup>8</sup>
- \_multilingual education with a view to the preservation of cultural identities and the promotion of mobility and dialogue;<sup>9</sup>
- \_foreign language learning as part of an intercultural education aiming at the promotion of understanding between communities and between nations.<sup>10</sup>

UNESCO  
guidelines  
on language  
and education

# UNESCO Guidelines on Language Education

There are certain basic guiding principles which have been common to all the documents, agreements and recommendations produced throughout the years of UNESCO's mandate for action in this field. These have led us to produce a set of guidelines which represent the organization's current approach to language and education in the twenty-first century, and which should serve to state the position of the international community in its various member states. These guidelines are entirely based on a review of previous declarations and recommendations, and represent the diversity of thinking on this complex and challenging issue.

**They are divided into three basic 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 *inter-cultural education* in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.

A series of more specific orientations corresponds to each of these basic principles.

# Principle I

**UNESCO supports mother tongue instruction<sup>11</sup> as a means of improving educational quality by building upon the knowledge and experience of the learners and teachers.**

**(I) Mother tongue instruction is essential for initial instruction<sup>12</sup> and literacy<sup>13</sup> and should 'be extended to as late a stage in education as possible':<sup>14</sup>**

\_ 'every pupil should begin his [or her] formal education in his [or her] mother tongue';<sup>15</sup>

\_ 'adult illiterates should make their first steps to literacy through their mother tongue, passing on to a second language if they desire and are able';<sup>16</sup>

\_ if a given locality has a variety of languages, ways and means should be sought 'to arrange instruction groups by mother tongue';<sup>17</sup>

\_ 'if mixed groups are unavoidable, instruction should be in the language which gives the least hardship to the bulk of the pupils, and special help should be given those who do not speak the language of instruction'.<sup>18</sup>

**(II) 'Literacy can only be maintained if there is an adequate supply of reading material, for adolescents and adults as well as for school children, and for entertainment as well as for study':<sup>19</sup>**

\_ The production and distribution of teaching materials and learning resources and any other reading materials in mother tongues should be promoted.<sup>20</sup>

**(III) With regard to teacher training and mother tongue instruction: 'All educational planning should include at each stage early provision for the training, and further training, of sufficient numbers of fully competent and qualified teachers of the country concerned who are familiar with the life of their people and able to teach in the mother tongue.'<sup>21</sup>**

# Principle II

**UNESCO supports *bilingual and/or multilingual education* at all levels of education<sup>22</sup> as a means of promoting both social and gender equality and as a key element of linguistically diverse societies.**

**(I)** ‘Communication, expression and the capacity to listen and dialogue [should be encouraged], first of all in the mother tongue, then, [if the mother tongue is different from the official or national language,] in the official [or national] language in the country, as well as in one or more foreign languages’<sup>23</sup> through:

‘the early acquisition... of a second language in addition to the mother tongue’;<sup>24</sup>

‘the introduction of ‘the second language... as a subject of instruction’<sup>25</sup> the amount of which ‘should be increased gradually’<sup>26</sup> and which should not become the medium of instruction ‘until the pupils are sufficiently familiar with it’.<sup>27</sup>

‘further education in this second language at primary-school level based on its use as a medium of instruction, thus using two languages for the acquisition of knowledge throughout the school course up to university level;

‘intensive and trans-disciplinary learning of at least a third... language in secondary school, so that when pupils leave school they have a working knowledge of three languages – which should represent the normal range of practical linguistic skills in the twenty-first century’.<sup>28</sup>

**(II)** ‘International exchanges of primary- and secondary-school teachers [should be promoted] for teaching their subjects in schools in other countries, using their own languages and thus enabling their pupils to acquire both knowledge and linguistic skills’.<sup>29</sup>

**(III)** Emphasis should be given to the formulation of ‘strong national policies designed to promote... language teaching in cyberspace [and the strengthening and extension of] international support and assistance to developing countries to facilitate the development of freely accessible materials on language education in the electronic form and to the enhancement of human capital skills in this area’.<sup>30</sup>



# Principle III

**UNESCO supports language as an essential component of *inter-cultural education* in order to encourage understanding between different population groups and ensure respect for fundamental rights.**

**(I)** Measures should be taken 'to eliminate discrimination in education at all levels on the basis of gender, race, language, religion, national origin, age or disability or any other form of discrimination'.<sup>31</sup>

**(II)** The 'educational rights of persons belonging to ... minorities, as well as indigenous peoples'<sup>32</sup> should be fully respected, through:

\_ the implementation of 'the right to learn in the mother tongue'<sup>33</sup> and the 'full use of culturally appropriate teaching methods of communication and transmission of knowledge';<sup>34</sup>

\_ the teaching of and through, not only the mother tongue, but also the national or official languages, as well as global languages of communication, so that minority and indigenous peoples have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the larger community.<sup>35</sup>

**(III)** Education should raise 'awareness of the positive value of cultural [and linguistic] diversity',<sup>36</sup> and to this end:

\_ 'curriculum [should be reformed] to promote a realistic and positive inclusion of the minority [or indigenous] history, culture, language and identity'.<sup>37</sup>

\_ the cultural component of language teaching and learning should be strengthened in order to gain a deeper understanding of other cultures;<sup>38</sup> 'languages should not be simple linguistic exercises, but opportunities to reflect on other ways of life, other literatures, other customs'.<sup>39</sup>

# Notes

1. cf. Wurm, S. (Ed.) (2001): **Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing**, Paris, UNESCO Publishing.
2. cf. Grimes, B. (Ed.) (2000): **Ethnologue: Languages of the World**, 14th Edition, Dallas, Texas, SIL International.
3. cf. the findings of a comprehensive research review carried out for the World Bank: Dutcher, N. in collaboration with Tucker, G.R. (1997): **The Use of First and Second Languages in Education: A Review of Educational Experience**, Washington D.C., World Bank, Country Department III: 'The most important conclusion from the research and experience reviewed in this paper is that when learning is the goal, including that of learning a second language, the child's first language (i.e. his or her mother tongue) should be used as the medium of instruction in the early years of schooling. ... The first language is essential for the initial teaching of reading, and for comprehension of subject matter. It is the necessary foundation for the cognitive development upon which acquisition of the second language is based'; cf. also Mehrotra, S. (1998): **Education for All: Policy Lessons From High-Achieving Countries: UNICEF Staff Working Papers**, New York, Unicef: 'In a situation where the parents are illiterate..., if the medium of instruction in school is a language that is not spoken at home the problems of learning in an environment characterized by poverty are compounded, and the chances of drop-out increase correspondingly. In this context, the experience of the high-achievers has been unequivocal: the mother tongue was used as the medium of instruction at the primary level in all cases. ... There is much research which shows that students learn to read more quickly when taught in their mother tongue. Second, students who have learned to read in their mother tongue learn to read in a second language more quickly than do those who are first taught to read in the second language. Third, in terms of academic learning skills as well, students taught to read in their mother tongue acquire such skills more quickly'; cf. also Dutcher, N: **Expanding Educational Opportunity in Linguistically Diverse Societies**, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington DC.(2001)
4. cf. **Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning** UNESCO (1997); **The Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities** (1992); **Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education** (1960); 18 C/Resolution 1.41: **Co-operation with international non-governmental organizations active in the field of education** (1974); cf. also Chapter III: UNESCO Guidelines on Language and Education, Principle III.
5. cf. **International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families** (1990).
6. 30 C/Resolution 12.: **Implementation of a Language Policy for the World Based on Multilingualism** (1999). UNESCO.
7. In addition, there are many regional agreements and declarations which make reference to languages and education [cf. **the Durban Statement of Commitment**, Seventh Conference of Ministers of Education of African Member States 1998; **Harare Declaration**, Intergovernmental Conference of Ministers on Language Policy in Africa 1997; Final Report Seventh Conference of Ministers of Education of Latin America and the Caribbean, Kingston, 1996].
8. cf. **International Conference on Education 46th Session 2001**: Final Report, p.11: 'It is increasingly obvious that the language of instruction at the beginning of one's education, at such a crucial moment for future learning, should be the mother tongue.'



9. cf. **International Conference on Education 46th Session 2001**: Final Report, p.17: Educational content needs to reflect 'the growing importance of communication, expression and the capacity to listen and dialogue, first of all in the mother tongue, then in the official language in the country as well as in one or more foreign languages'; **International Conference on Education 43rd Session 1992**: Final Report, p.20: 'When choosing the language of instruction, in particular at the level of basic education, account should be taken both of the efficiency of the educational process and the right of individuals and various ethnic groups to preserve their cultural identity, of which their language is one of the most important vehicles'.

10. cf. **International Conference on Education 46th Session 2001**: Final Report, p.11: 'Language learning is a key element for living together'; **International Conference on Education 44th Session 1994**: Final Report, p.26: 'learning foreign languages offers a means of gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures, which can serve as a basis for building better understanding between communities and between nations'.

11. cf. **International Conference on Education 46th Session 2001**: Final Report; **World Education Forum 2000**: Final Report; **The Delhi Declaration and Framework for Action, Education for All Summit 1993**; **The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education**, UNESCO, Paris, 1953.

12. cf. **Amman Affirmation** (1996): 'the essential role of the mother tongue for initial instruction' must be acknowledged; **The Delhi Declaration and Framework for Action, Education for All Summit (1993)**: 'Where the language of instruction is other than the mother tongue of the learner, it is likely that initial learning will be slower and achievement lower. For this reason, educators have long advocated the benefits of offering, wherever possible, initial instruction in the mother tongue'.

13. cf. **International Conference on Education 42nd Session 1990**: Final Report: 'In multilingual situations, the policy regarding the language of literacy should be carefully formulated, especially where the national or official language is different from local languages. Use of the mother tongue is desirable.'

14. **The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education**, p.35 UNESCO, Paris, (1953).

15. idem, p.68.

16. idem, p.69.

17. idem, p.51.

18. idem, p.51.

19. idem, p.69.

20. cf. **International Conference on Education 1992**: 'the preparation of teaching materials in the mother tongue should be encouraged'. Final Report, p.21

21. **Recommendation concerning the Status of Teachers** adopted by the Special Intergovernmental Conference on the Status of Teachers 1966.

22. 30 C/Resolution 42.: **Towards a culture of peace** (1999); cf. also: 30 C/Resolution 12.: **Implementation of a language policy for the world based on multilingualism** (1999). UNESCO.

23. **International Conference on Education 2001**, Proposals for Action. (para 18)

24. 30 C/Resolution 12.: **Implementation of a Language Policy for the World Based on Multilingualism** (1999), UNESCO.

25. **The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education**, UNESCO, Paris, (1953).
26. idem, p.69.
27. idem, p.69.
28. **30 C/Resolution 12.: Implementation of a Language Policy for the World Based on Multilingualism (1999)**.
29. **30 C/Resolution 12.: Implementation of a Language Policy for the World Based on Multilingualism (1999)**.
30. **Draft Recommendation concerning the Promotion and Use of Multilingualism and Universal Access to Cyberspace**, Paragraph 1 [NOTE: as requested by the 2001 General Conference 31 C/Resolution 33, this Draft recommendation will be submitted to the executive Board at its 165th session].
31. **Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action**, (1995); see also: **-Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education (1960)**, Article 1: 'the term 'discrimination' includes any distinction, exclusion, limitation or preference which, being based on race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, economic condition or birth, has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing equality of treatment in education'.
32. **28 C/Resolution 5.4: Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy (1995)**. UNESCO.
33. **Hamburg Declaration on Adult Learning**, Fifth International Conference on Adult Education 1997, Article 15; the **ILO Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1989)** provides that 'children belonging to the peoples concerned shall, wherever practicable, be taught to read and write in their own indigenous language or in the language most commonly used by the group to which they belong' (Article 28.1); the **Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities (1992)** requires States to 'take measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue' (Article 4.3).
34. **UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)**, Action Plan, paragraph 8.
35. cf. **Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education (1960)**, Article 5: 'the members of ... minorities [should not be prevented] from understanding the culture and language of the community as a whole'; **18 C/Resolution 1.41: Co-operation with international non-governmental organizations active in the field of education, 1974**: UNESCO 'everyone is entitled to have a thorough knowledge of his own language and a good knowledge of another language, preferably a language of international communication which enables him, in conjunction with the grounding which he receives in his national culture, to have full access to world culture and to the universal exchange of ideas'; **ILO Convention 169 concerning Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (1989)**: 'Adequate measures shall be taken to ensure that these peoples have the opportunity to attain fluency in the national language or in one of the official languages of the country' (Article 28.2); **Our Creative Diversity : Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development (1995)** UNESCO : 'Schools should teach several languages, in particular both the local [or minority] and majority language', p.59.



36. **UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity** (2001), Action Plan, paragraph 7.

37. **Fifth International Conference of Adult Education 1997**: Workshop Report: Minorities and Adult Learning; cf. also: **The Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities** (1992): Article 4.4: 'take measures in the field of education, in order to encourage knowledge of the... language and culture of the minorities'; and: **Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development** (1995), p.60, UNESCO: 'Minority [or indigenous] cultures [should have] a better place not only in the educational system but also in the image of the 'national culture' each country seeks to adopt and project.'

38. cf. 28 C/Resolution 5.4: **Declaration and Integrated Framework of Action on Education for Peace, Human Rights and Democracy** (1995), UNESCO, Article 19: 'Learning foreign languages offers a means of gaining a deeper understanding of other cultures, which can serve as a basis or building better understanding between communities and between nations.'

39. **Our Creative Diversity: Report of the World Commission on Culture and Development** (1995), UNESCO, p.168.

UNESCO has an essential role to play in providing international frameworks for education policy and practice on key and complex issues. Language and in particular the choice of language of instruction in education is one such concern and often invokes contrasting and deeply felt positions. Questions of identity, nationhood and power are closely linked to the use of specific languages in the classroom. Language itself, moreover, possesses its own dynamics and is constantly undergoing processes of both continuity and change, impacting upon the communication modes of different societies as it evolves. Educational policy makers have difficult decisions to make with regard to languages, schooling and the curriculum in which the technical and the political often overlap.

While there are strong educational arguments in favour of mother tongue (or first language) instruction, a careful balance also needs to be made between enabling people to use local languages in learning, and providing access to global languages of communication through education. The purpose of this position paper, therefore, is to consider some of the central issues concerning languages and education and to provide related guidelines and principles. In doing so we are conscious of the need for a clear statement on language policy in relation to education, particularly within the context of Education for All and in terms of the Dakar goals of ensuring that by 2015 all children have access to quality primary education and that there is a 50 per cent increase in adult literacy by the year 2015.

> **Education in  
a multilingual  
world**



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