



## The importance of Mother Tongue literacy in your child's education

It's hard to tell who is more nervous on the first day of school—the children or the parents. But when neither parent nor child speaks the language of the school, the anxiety level reaches a new high. Imagine the difference for a child who is met on that first day by their mother tongue teacher who helps them settle in, then continues with first language literacy throughout the child's education in the school.

Supporting mother tongue language literacy goes beyond preserving cultural connections and providing a soft landing. Research over the past three decades increasingly demonstrates that continuing language and literacy in the first language alongside the development of the new language is in the child's best academic interests. A study in the US looked at the results of over 700,000 'language minority students' (students whose home language was not English) and the results were powerful and unequivocal:

*"...the message from our findings is overwhelmingly clear that all language minority groups benefit enormously in the long-term from on-grade level academic work in the LI [Mother Tongue]. The more children develop LI academically and cognitively at an age-appropriate level, the more successful they will be in academic achievement in L2 [second language]...."*

Thomas, W.P. & Collier, *School Effectiveness for Language Minority Students*

This and other research shows that continuing language and literacy in a child's mother tongue or first language is important not only for subsequent language development, but also for their overall personal and educational development. For this reason, it would be very helpful if Global Mobility professionals would provide, whenever possible, the benefit of mother tongue tuition or tutoring to support international children during their time in the foreign linguistic environment.

### WHAT ARE THE FUNDAMENTALS OF LANGUAGE TEACHING?

#### TRANSFER VERSUS TRANSITION:

Transfer is the learning concept which explains how we learn languages and transition is the shift of teaching from one language to another. At first it seems counter-intuitive that continuing with the mother tongue actually increases the efficiency and development of the second language, but research and practice in bilingual education has found that the stronger the literacy and knowledge of the first language, the faster the transfer and transition into the second. Teaching of the mother tongue alongside the second language, allows the sounds and structures of the language to be transferred more easily. The child builds on what is already known and understood. Even if the written

structure of the languages is different, if the child already knows how to read in the first language, the processes of learning to read, understanding how language structure works, as well as literacy strategies, sensorimotor skills and coordination are more easily transferred. In other words, they don't need to learn the entire process of reading and writing all over again, but transfer already established skills into the new language.

As the language development progresses, concepts already understood in the first language are more easily transferred into the second language. The transition, however, is a process whereby a student shifts from reliance on the mother tongue to his or her second language. It should begin on the first day of school when the mother tongue teacher may be using key cards with important words. With a young child, this can be done with pictures to help them in the first few weeks. Objects may be labelled with both words. The mother tongue teacher would actively point out the differences and similarities between the languages. The classroom teacher may bring in the new child's first language by sharing a vocabulary word each day with the rest of the class, so the child's new friends also begin to understand something of the newcomer's home language and culture. The important thing to remember is that

*“That nervous child at the school gate today may be tomorrow’s employee with those ‘soft skills’ employers value: multilingual, flexible in thinking, and with an ability to view situations from different perspectives...”*

the best transitions are gradual. The programmes that try to transition too quickly have been proven ineffective.

## LANGUAGE RESEARCH OVER THE PAST 35 YEARS:

What else has the research shown? From birth to age three, language is acquired, naturally picked up, rather than learned. With language learning after this time, the process of transfer begins. But in either case, in addition to vocabulary skills, the child develops linguistic awareness. The student learns that objects can be called by different names, concepts explained in different ways, from different perspectives and with variations in meaning. Research is beginning to show that this change of thinking has positive benefits on overall academic performance. Other major findings include:

- Simultaneous first and second language learners have enhanced linguistic and educational development. They develop a deeper understanding and are able to compare, contrast and use multiple linguistic systems, giving greater depth of understanding. Some feel this also leads to greater flexibility in their thinking as they filter through different languages.
- Success and ability in the first language is a strong predictor of success in the second language. Increasingly, studies are finding students who have a strong first language foundation perform better in second language exams and education, although long-term research at this point is still preliminary.
- Bi and multi-language learners have a greater breadth in their additional language learning. Through transition, the two languages become inter-dependent. Going back to the concept of transfer; building on the foundation of the mother tongue provides greater access to other viewpoints and sources of knowledge. Bi and multilingual students are able to access different sources of learning—from newspapers, grandparents and other sources in the home country which expand on their learning in the new one.
- First language skills can be easily lost within 2-3 years of starting school. Without language and literacy support in the mother tongue, a child’s home language begins to degrade. The student

may still be able to speak and respond, but they will feel uncomfortable reading or writing in the home language, alienating the child from the home culture, relatives, family and society.

## UNESCO PRINCIPLES FOR OPTIMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING AND COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT:

A recent UNESCO Conference and subsequent publication brought together educators from around the world to capture experiences and research on language learning. Their principles represent the results of evidence and cognitive development based research on language learning. Based on this research and experience, their key principles for language learning include:

- It takes about 12 years to fully develop first language competence. As many students begin studying in a new language before reaching age 12, they need to continue with mother tongue literacy, building their second language on the foundation of their first language. So if, for instance, a child moves to the UK from Turkey, Turkish language and literacy development should continue alongside the acquisition of English as an additional language.
- Children normally require 5-7 years of learning a second language before they can learn academic subjects in this language. Continuing with the example of the Turkish child, the burden placed on a child studying only in English means the child must first understand an abstract concept, the vocabulary and the language before proceeding, but once a child understands a concept in his or her first language, or Turkish in our example, the child doesn’t need to re-learn the concept in English, only the vocabulary.
- Building a strong foundation in the first language helps second language learning much more than early or prolonged exposure to the additional language.

Studies have shown it is more efficient to develop the first language because the skills and concepts can then easily be transferred to the second.

- The most effective language programmes continue with mother tongue thinking and learning throughout the school career. Increasingly, international schools are developing first language/mother tongue programmes that work alongside the second language academic programme. The best of these offer the mother tongue lessons within the class day with native language speakers where the students can be supported with the vocabulary, concepts and learning which is proceeding in the classroom. This is supported additionally by intensive second language study, which again works both within the classroom and in small groups. Whilst no programme can match the literacy of a child taught only in the mother tongue, a balanced bilingualism, as opposed to subtractive bilingualism, offers so much more.

At home, parents are encouraged to continue the use of the mother tongue through reading stories and writing emails, listening to radio and television and doing internet research in this language. In addition to building language, it helps the child maintain social-emotional ties with the home culture and society. More families are seeking mother tongue learning as an embedded part of their child’s curriculum. That nervous child at the school gate today may be tomorrow’s employee with those ‘soft skills’ employers value: multilingual, flexible in thinking, and with an ability to view situations from different perspectives and operate easily in multi-cultural environments.

### References:

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