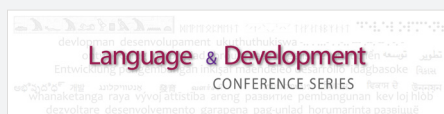# A measuring stick, not *the* measuring stick for MLE: A tool, a Karen case study, and discourse in support of MLE best practices

Greg Tyrosvoutis, Saw Shar Nay Thaw, Naw Mee Lay, Naw Paw Su Klay, Saw Nay Ta Mu, Naw Paw Htoe Ki Wah, Nan Eh Sar Klain, Th'Blay Moo, Naw Nay Yu Paw

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Introduction:
Effective mother tongue-based education programmes

It is estimated that globally over 30 per cent of people (more than 2.3 billion people) lack access to education in their mother-tongue language. This daunting figure is the result of the political will and educational value governments place on establishing a 'national identity'. Analysing a country's Language of Instruction (LoI) policy is a succinct way to identify that country's support for pluralism, decentralisation and the promotion of indigenous culture and heritage. Each country's LOI policy illustrates the perceived linguistic competencies they believe are needed for children to participate in the global economy as they see it. Currently, it is estimated that 79.5 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes, 26 million of whom are refugees, of which 73 per cent live in countries neighbouring their country of origin (UNHCR, 2020). In addition, the WHO (2020) estimates there are 258 million international migrants who have left their country of origin to pursue work opportunities elsewhere.

This substantial population movement has significant implications on educational provision. Indigenous and non-dominant language communities throughout the globe continue to struggle to retain and promote their culture, home languages and heritages in a globalising world. This reality will ultimately impact how the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG4), 'to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' can be achieved, especially in non-dominant language communities. In the words of the Asia Pacific Multilingual Education Working Group (19 May 2017), '…without mother tongue-based multilingual education the other 16 goals will remain unachievable'.

The current global reality is that most children grow up in a setting where more than one of the currently documented 7,097 languages are spoken. Providing all children access to education in a language they understand plays a critical role in each country's overall educational outcomes. There are no quick fixes to the challenges of multilingual education. In her 2016 keynote address at the fifth International Conference on Language and Development in Bangkok, Thailand, Susan Malone shared her essential components of effective Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) programmes: preliminary research; a realistic implementation plan; awareness raising and mobilisation; acceptable alphabets; curriculum and instructional materials; reading and learning materials; teacher recruitment and training; monitoring and evaluation; supportive partnerships; and supportive MTB-MLE policy.

A guiding principle of effective MTB and MLE programmes is that learners will complete their education being multilingual, multiliterate, and understanding both their local and the national culture (Malone, 2016). However, Malone continues to point out the success of MLE programmes is too often measured by the resulting academic ability of students in the national language or English. Comprehensive programmes utilise multiple languages as the language of instruction throughout the course of children's education in addition to languages being taught as subjects for specific literacy development. Depending on learners' age, experience and motivation for learning the national language, research suggests that it could take between five and seven years for minority learners to transition from their mother-tongue language to the national language (Cummins, 2000; Hakuta, Butler and Witt, 2000; Thomas and Collier, 2002).

Supporting teachers in multilingual classrooms

Effectively educating students whose mother-tongue language is different from the language of instruction requires educators to possess a toolbox of competencies. This is especially true in low-resource contexts where classroom resources in multiple languages are unavailable. This is also true for both teachers supporting students to bridge from their L1 to the L2, and for educators teaching a subject using multiple languages. Ndoye (2003) recommends MLE-focused teacher training as an integral part of larger language interventions. Droop and Verhoeven (2003) recommend two specific pedagogical approaches for MTB-MLE classrooms. First, leveraging students' existing L1 language abilities and knowledge to bridge to new concepts and ideas, and, secondly, skill-building oral, written and higher-level thinking skills in students' L1 and then gradually developing those skills in the target school language. What often tends to occur is students merely being expected to recite short choral responses, leaving out higher-level writing (ibid.). Allowing students to speak a language they are comfortable and confident using enables teachers to incorporate higher-level thinking and problem-solving into their lessons. As recommended by USAID (2015), a system for measuring classroom instruction is largely a remaining need in multilingual contexts. The report, reviewing educational policy in Sub-Saharan African countries, highlights the need for competency-based frameworks and structured means of assessment to be included in educational policy reform.

Too often, in many non-dominant language communities, teachers are not nationally recognised or certified despite exhibiting the key competencies needed to effectively teach in their unique contexts (Benson, 2005). MLE teachers are often expected to teach bilingual content, bridge home and school language and culture gaps, and advocate for multilingual education despite being 'officially' underqualified and underpaid, lacking a developed career path, and working in severely low-resource and remote contexts (ibid.). This challenge was echoed by Parul Sethi et al. in their panel presentation the Inclusion, Mobility and Multilingual Education Conference, stating that: "While teachers may be multilingual themselves, relatively little support is given to help them work effectively with their diverse student bodies and, in some cases, teachers are actively discouraged from using any language other than the medium of instruction in their classrooms." In her qualitative study interviewing Filipino teachers and educational stakeholders, Dekker (2016) found that teachers perceived students learned more in classes taught using their L1, students participated more when they could use their L1, and that classes taught using students' L1 were more enjoyable.

Evidence of the distinct advantages of using learners' mother-tongue language are vast. Using students' L1 in the classroom allows students to build on and share prior knowledge, creating schemata for leaning new content (Benson, 2000; Bloch, 2014; Collier and Thomas, 2004), increases student participation (Trudell, 2005), improves early grade reading outcomes (Gove and Cvelich, 2011), decreases dropout rates (Laitin, Ramachandran and Walter, 2015), increases parent engagement (Ball, 2010), improves student self-confidence, self-esteem and identity (Cummins, 2009), increases participation of girls and women (Lewis and Lockheed, 2012), and heightens cognitive abilities stemming from comparing and contrasting the two languages (Cummins, 2001).

Discourse on best practices at the Inclusion, Mobility and Multilingual Education Conference

A theme that linked many presentations at the Inclusion, Mobility and Multilingual Education Conference was that there is no 'silver bullet' MLE intervention that will work across diverse contexts. In his keynote address, Professor François Grim shared that "the notion of 'best practice' is a bit illusory", highlighting that an intervention that was good in one case will not necessarily have good results in other contexts. In addition, he warned that a programme or training that has positive results in one place at one point in time might not yield those same results if implemented at a later date. These evidenced recommendations emphasise that any MLE intervention is grounded in a particular context, at a particular point in time with particular stakeholders and that results are not automatically applicable elsewhere. Results from effective MLE interventions provide pointed guidelines, orientation and inspiration, not necessarily a blueprint for success. By attempting to warn practitioners of the folly of trying to scale success through a 'copy and paste' approach, the keynote address also had the effect of supporting the idea that one should be wary of any MLE programme promoting 'best practices'.

Multiple presenters at the conference showcased examples of institutional learning and the contextualisation of best practices from one setting to another, which provided a more well-rounded message that best practices need to be adapted to fit each unique context. A clear example of the need for contextualising MLE interventions was *Turning, not reinventing the wheel: Placing people at the centre of language learning in post-conflict societies* by Chris Sowton (2019). He argued that education programmes can build on the knowledge and skills that are already available in post-conflict

societies in order to maximise the impact of language learning, rather than attempting to start from scratch. To illustrate the potential pitfalls of not contextualising or involving the local community, he gave examples of refugees not being involved in the process of developing the materials for a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) in Lebanon, little appreciation of digital constraints such as data, hardware, connectivity, skills, attitude and the impulse to focus on the technology or platform, rather than the content.

Another strong example of contextualising was the presentation by Yogendra Prasad Yadava (2019), who recently developed an MTB-MLE framework for the Nepalese context. A 2015 amendment the Nepal constitution made it possible for multilingual teaching and therefore a framework was needed to support MLE delivery by teachers. The tailored framework included contextually appropriate pedagogies, curricula and material development, capacity building, supporting system, an advocacy strategy, a plan for sustainability and functional linkages among line agencies: all specifically adapted to the unique context of classrooms in Nepal.

MTB-MLE in Myanmar: the need for parallel providers

Indigenous ethnic basic education service providers in Myanmar have worked for decades in order to ensure that all children have the right to an education in their mother-tongue language. As articulated in Jolliffe and Speers Mears (2016), ethnic basic education service providers have developed educational programmes with unique MTB-MLE models utilising diverse levels of indigenous language curriculum to support language learning and cultural promotion and safeguarding. Myanmar's rigid singular language of instruction policy continues to be a significant point of contention between Ministry of Education and ethic education service providers. In recent years, there have been some minor compromises or flexible policies, but mostly on the side of ethic education service providers and very much localised to specific states. One of the more positive results has been the promotion of Mon language classes taught at government schools outside of school hours, but even this is a long way from authentic language learning that respects ethnic cultures and indigenous educators that have safeguarded them for decades. It has been estimated that approximately 30 per cent of children do not speak Myanmar upon entry to the formal education system (Aye and Sercombe, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2012; Kosonen, 2017). Children from rural areas with a minority first language are 'submerged' into Myanmar language classrooms and forced to 'sink or swim' as described by Malone, in Trudell and Young (2016).

This study was conducted in collaboration with the Karen Education and Cultural Department (KECD), one of Myanmar's largest basic ethnic education service providers and the education wing of the Karen National Union (KNU). In the 2019 academic year, the KECD supported 162,339 children and 10,611 teachers studying at the 1,471 schools under their administration (KECD, 2019). Teachers at KECD schools are supported and trained by the KECD, the Karen Teachers' Working Group (KTWG) and the Karen Teachers' Colleges that both organisations maintain. Through these pre- and in-service training opportunities and with recent support from the Broad-Based Capacity Development Team for Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (BBCD Team for MTB-MLE), Karen teachers receive training specifically to promote language learning and cultural promotion. Children enrolled in KECD schools learn primarily in S'Gaw Karen or Poe Karen languages and take both English and Myanmar language courses that eventually transition to using English language textbooks for all major subjects at the secondary level. Since the signing of the 2012 national ceasefire agreement, there has been a gradual expansion of Myanmar government schools into KNU-controlled areas with centrally trained teachers deployed through the government's Quick Wins programme. This gradual encroachment continues to undermine local authority by changing the proportions of 'mixed' and government schools within Karen (Kayin) State. World Education (2016) reported that approximately 20 per cent of schools under KECD administration solely use the KECD curriculum, while 36 per cent use both the KED and the Burmese government curricula, and the remaining 44 per cent primarily use the Burmese government curriculum. Since 2012, more community and mixed schools have transitioned their status into registered Myanmar government schools: a critical blow to the promotion of S'Gaw and Poe Karen language learning and Karen cultural promotion.

Methodology
Research instrument

This pilot study utilised the classroom observation tool within the Multilingual Education Teacher Competency Standards Framework developed by TeacherFOCUS[1] The competency standards within the tool refer to the core knowledge, skills and attitudes teachers need in order to effectively engage students in active and authentic learning within a multilingual classroom. Each standard also contains expected *Minimum Requirements* to be considered competent in multilingual contexts. They also contain *Critical Attributes* that give practical examples and describe how and in what ways teachers' knowledge, attitude, skills and actions can support children to advance in their language learning. The framework and associated classroom observation tool are organised into three domains: Domain A: Professional Knowledge and Understanding; Domain B: Professional Skills and Practice; Domain C: Professional Values and Dispositions.

The classroom observation tool contains 14 witnessable teacher competencies aimed to holistically assess a complex combination of knowledge, skills, understanding, values and attitudes, which lead to effective language learning, cultural promotion and critical thinking. The MLE framework is built on a theory of professional learning and contextual understanding designed to clarify and articulate the essential multilingual competencies that would enable a teacher to effectively promote authentic learning in a multilingual environment. The framework provides a core set of competency standards to be used as the point of reference or benchmark for quality multilingual teaching. The tool also asked each participant to self-assess their speaking and listening, and writing and reading in S'Gaw Karen, Burmese and English; the three languages used in KECD classrooms.

Data collection and analysis

The study sought to identify and validate the approaches and best practices for multilingual teaching and learning cited in international literature by utilising classroom observations conducted in collaboration with the KECD to assess the MLE competencies of 12 Karen teachers working in multilingual classrooms. In order to do this, eight observers, fluent in English, S'Gaw Karen and Burmese, were trained to use the classroom observation tool during a one-day workshop. Assessors were introduced to the MLE competency framework and watched recorded classroom footage of teachers demonstrating the competencies. Once the assessors were familiar with the observation tool and assessment scale, the team assessed teachers using pre-recorded footage of Karen teachers. To ensure inter-rater reliability, the assessors needed to score each competency within one level (or ten per cent) of each other. In total, three hours of footage was used with in-depth discussion between video clips.

Following the training, teams of trained observers travelled to two high schools administered by the KECD: Taw Naw Mu Htaw High School in They Baw Bo, Karen (Kayin) State and Hpa-An District High School in Maw Per Hko, Karen (Kayin) State. School administrators and teachers were informed in advance by phone and sent an overview of the research, which included consent forms. S'Gaw Karen, Burmese or English Teachers were selected at random by the school administrators. In total, one class of 12 Karen teachers was observed and video recorded. Each teacher was observed by two assessors equipped with a video recorder and clip microphone. Results for each teacher were averaged and stored on a password-protected computer. Once all observations were completed, data was compiled and assessors shared their findings and recommendations for future support during a one-day data analysis and reflection workshop. Video footage of best practices identified during the observations was shared and used to develop videos to train other language teachers[2]. Field work for this study was conducted during August 2019.

[2] Best practice videos captured during this study are available at https://www.teacherfocusmyanmar.org/mle-resources

Results

When asked to self-assess their own S'Gaw Karen, Burmese and English Language Proficiency, overall, teachers were more confident to speak and listen to S'Gaw Karen and Burmese, compared to English, which they were slightly more confident to write and read (Table 1). S'Gaw Karen was the language teachers felt most confident to use, followed by Burmese and then English.

	Confidence (Per cent of Maximum Possible POMP Score)	Corresponding Likert Value
Speaking and Listening S'Gaw Karen	93.25%	Completely Confident
Writing and Reading S'Gaw Karen	68.75%	Fairly Confident
Speaking and Listening English	58.25%	Somewhat Confident
Writing and Reading English	62.50%	Fairly Confident
Speaking and Listening Burmese	68.75%	Fairly Confident
Writing and Reading Burmese	68.75%	Fairly Confident

Table 1: Karen teacher language self-assessment results

Observed teachers displayed a wealth of MLE competencies, which they employed to promote either S'Gaw Karen, Burmese or English language learning in their classrooms. Teachers scored highest in the Professional Knowledge and Understanding and Professional Skills and Practices Domains (Table 2). Teachers were witnessed routinely checking for accuracy within students written work and oral responses and providing correct examples of spelling and grammar. They used a variety of participatory activities to engage students in language learning including poetry discussions, competitions and groupwork. Language scaffolding was observed to assist students in building a strong foundation in their L1 (S'Gaw Karen) and use it to teach the L2 (English) and L3 (Burmese). Many teachers promoted the use of S'Gaw Karen to express their opinions on higher-level questions when they were not fully confident to express in their responses in Burmese or English. Examples of confidence building was observed as teachers gradually challenged students to answer questions in their L2 or L3, with some assistance from other students if needed. Despite the low-resource context, many of the observed teachers used prepared materials to enhance their teaching such as coloured pictures and flashcards and writing key texts in large font on chart paper.

Areas for improvement included using structured assessments to check for understanding, asking higher-level questions and engaging students in independent writing. Teachers were observed asking closed questions, such as 'do you understand?' or 'is he/she right?' when an open question with a higher degree of challenge could have been used to have students practice or apply what they had learned. While allowing students to use their L1 when needed was used to build confidence, few examples were observed of teachers then challenging students to try responding orally or to write using their L2 afterwards. There were few observed opportunities for students to independently write or practise using new vocabulary and grammar. Teachers used a variety of writing and reading activities, but few listening activities were included in the observed lessons. Due to an overall emphasis on accuracy by the teachers, there few opportunities for students to critically think with the result that there was potential for errors. Teachers sought set-piece answers that rarely allowed students to make mistakes, which could be used as teachable moments.

Standard	Competency	Average (%)
A1	Knows how students effectively learn new languages	54.17%
A2	Knows how to teach for accuracy and correctness	54.17%
A3	Knows how to teach for meaning and communication	50.83%
A4	Knows how to identify the learning needs of the students and design learning experiences that are appropriate to those needs	43.33%
B1	Demonstrates capacity to promote active learning (participatory learning, learner/ student cantered approach)	43.33%
B2	Promotes Higher Order Thinking Skills through progression from L1 to L2	44.17%
B3	Demonstrates capacity to assess and monitor students' language learning	42.50%
B4	Utilises or creates activities and resources that enable students to use what they know to learn new concepts	51.67%
B5	Demonstrates capacity to scaffold to ensure students understand first in L1 then progress to L2	53.33%
B6	Effectively utilises or creates reading materials for students	53.33%
B7	Promotes listening comprehension activities involving responses to prompts in both L1 and L2	35.00%
B8	Facilitates students to write creatively in both L1 and L2	25.00%
C1	Creates a supportive learning environment for students that values the home language and culture	25.00%
C2	Promotes a classroom culture where errors are accepted	42.50%
Overall Average		44.17%

Table 2: Classroom observation results

Discussion and recommendations

As the scope of the study was to identify what existing MLE competencies Karen teachers possessed, the participants were not allowed to review the classroom observation tool before their lesson was observed. This approach sought to witness 'organic teaching' without teachers preparing elaborate lesson plans tailored to the outcomes assessors were looking for. Teachers did not know what competencies the observers were assessing and therefore had little opportunity to prepare. Overall, the observed teachers exhibited the requisite knowledge to appropriately teach students with varying L1, L2, and L3 language abilities. Teachers supported language learning by using two languages to explain, expand on or break down new material. Teachers ensured students' language usage (grammar, pronunciation and spelling) was accurate and correct by frequently and consistently correcting errors as they arose. As KECD teachers, with ongoing support by the Karen Teachers' Working Group (KTWG) and the Broad-Based Capacity Development Team, these local teachers are involved and engaged the wider school community and are able to use familiar examples from the local culture and heritage in their teaching. They localised the curriculum by asking students questions about their cultural backgrounds, life experiences and interests.

The observed teachers possessed a strong foundation of MLE competencies that can be built on without needing expensive resources or technical solutions. Small, intentional changes to practice will have substantial results. For example, teachers need to understand the value of providing their students with opportunities to read independently and asking each other questions and sharing their own ideas. This simple pedagogical shift will help students gain confidence in communicating their own thoughts and ideas as well as giving them dedicated time to write (or emergent writing in the case of younger children). The participants were also observed allowing students to use S'Gaw Karen, their L1, to express

meaning when they did not yet possess the confidence to explain their opinions in L2. The teachers intentionally incorporated L1 time to focus on learning new concepts, but did not have sufficient L2 time for students to focus specifically on learning the new language. Again, this relatively simple pedagogical pivot would allow for deeper learning. All that is needed are clear standards to promote and cement this best practice in the minds of teachers.

This case study demonstrated that indigenous teachers in Karen (Kayin) State possessed a collection of the MLE teacher competencies highlighted and recommended throughout international literature as best practices of teaching and learning. Either as a product of their training or realised by working in multilingual environments, this sample of Karen teachers possessed a solid foundation of MLE competencies. Teachers as not empty vessels to be filled, but MLE change agents, that, with contextualised support and examples from other multilingual settings, can be empowered as local leaders of language learning. This study serves as a reminder to, in the words of Chris Sowton (2019), 'Turn, not reinvent the wheel,' by placing people at the centre of language learning. Future MLE interventions that involve teachers should begin by assessing what capacity already exists and closely consulting about what is needed. New MLE interventions in Karen (Kayin) state need not start from scratch; Karen teachers have been successfully teaching in multilingual environments for decades and possess a wealth of expertise. Diverse multilingual classrooms require teachers who: understand, speak, read and write the students' L1 and the official school language(s); share students' heritage and culture; are respected by parents and the wider school community; and are accepted by local government and administrative bodies. Only local teachers can fulfil these needs. Indigenous teachers need to be involved in every step of MLE interventions and recognised for the critical role they play in safeguarding ethnic minority cultures and heritage.

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