

Supporting Parental Involvement in Mother Tongue Based-Multilingual Education: Activities for the Classroom

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Abstract

Parental involvement in home literacy activities has been found to significantly improve children's language and literacy skills, contributing to their school readiness and academic achievement. The quality of the Home Literacy Environment (HLE) and parental involvement are influenced by factors such as Socio-Economic Status (SES) and parental educational levels. The HLE plays an important role in a multilingual ESL/EFL context such as India, where the home language(s) and the school language(s) differ. Understanding the linguistic repertoire and HLE backgrounds of children, as well as creating awareness among parents about home literacy and using the mother tongue as a resource, is necessary to develop effective ways to build a partnership between the home and the school. This article discusses the multilingual context in India and presents classroom activities that teachers can use to provide parents with a better understanding of multilingualism and Mother Tongue Based-Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE).

Keywords: Parental involvement, home literacy environment (HLE), mother tongue as a resource, multilingualism, mother tongue based-multilingual education (MTB-MLE)

Introduction

The Home Literacy Environment (HLE), comprising the literacy input and interactions available to a child at home, shapes their literacy development and makes them 'ready' for school (Curenton, 2010;

Burgess et al., 2002; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Snow et al., 1998). Many factors, including the Socio-Economic Status (SES), parental educational levels, and perspectives on home literacy determine the quantity and quality of the literacy input and interactions at home, which are scaffolded by the more knowledgeable others, mainly parents. Parents may choose storybooks for their children and guide their participation in storybook reading interactions (Fletcher & Reese, 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). Parental involvement has been found to predict children's oral language and literacy skills (Sénéchal et al., 1998). Parents from high SES backgrounds typically have higher reading ability and educational levels and tend to consciously engage their children in literacy practices at home while also providing quality scaffolding. In contrast, parents from lower SES backgrounds may find it difficult to involve themselves in their children's learning due to a lack of proficiency/familiarity with the language(s) and subjects, in addition to other limiting factors such as stress, economic instability, and household chaos. Thus, children enter school with varying levels of school readiness and literacy skills owing to their differential HLE backgrounds.

The Home Literacy Environment and Parental Involvement

Informal home literacy activities such as shared book reading or storytelling, involving parent-child interactions without an explicit focus on teaching literacy skills, have been found to be beneficial for language and literacy development (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Weizman & Snow, 2001). A highly elaborative and topic-extending style of parental interaction involving context-orienting questions (Fivush et al., 2006; McCabe & Peterson, 1991; Peterson & McCabe, 1992) and dialogic reading involving open-ended questions during shared book reading contribute significantly to children's narrative development (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Shared book reading is a common home literacy activity in Western cultures where children enjoy having their favourite stories read to them over and over while internalizing the language embedded in the context of the story (DeBaryshe, 1993; Snow & Goldfield, 1983). However, in India, storytelling is a more common home literacy activity, and children are usually told stories rather than read aloud from a book (Khurana & Rao, 2008; Bhuvanewari & Padakannaya, 2017).

The Indian Context: Many Languages, Not One

In India, children grow up hearing and speaking more than one language. While in some homes, both parents speak the same language, in others they speak two or more languages and share a common language, which may or may not be the local language outside the home. Indian languages are also diglossic; that is, there is a high variety used for formal purposes, including writing, and a low variety that is used for informal purposes, including conversations at home. There is a multiplicity of linguistic identities as the perceived boundaries between languages are fluid. There is also a domain-specific allocation of languages into non-conflicting spheres of activities such as home language, language of the marketplace, language for religious rites, language for formal/official purposes, intergroup communication, and so on (Mohanty, 1994) as illustrated in Durairajan (2019). However, the language barrier between the home and the school can make children and parents feel less connected to the school. 'Particularity,' one of the parameters of Kumaravadivelu's post-method pedagogy (2001), emphasizes the need for classroom pedagogies to be sensitive to the linguistic and sociocultural contexts of the learner.

Mother Tongue Based-Multilingual Education in India

Echoing the research literature, the policy articulations in India have supported Mother Tongue Based-Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). It may be noted that Article 350-A of the Constitution of India (104th amendment) guarantees the provision of "facilities for instruction in the mother-tongue at the primary stage of education to children belonging to linguistic minority groups" (2020, p. 147). In spite of the 'Three Language Formula,' introduced by the Indian government to deal with the many mother tongues, it is often translated into practice as English-Hindi-Sanskrit. The National Policy on Education (1968) recommended "the study of a modern Indian language, preferably one of the southern languages, apart from Hindi and English in the Hindi-speaking States, and of Hindi along with the regional language and English in the non-Hindi-speaking States" (p. 40). However, the mother tongues, including tribal and minority languages, are rarely taught as a subject or used as a medium in school; they remain the language of the home and never become the language of the school or any significant domains of power (Mohanty, 2006). This creates a "double divide", in which learners

from linguistic minority groups face more educational challenges than learners who speak the regional language (Mohanty, 2010).

The National Curriculum Frameworks (NCFs) have recognized the language barrier between the home and the school and made a distinction between the mother tongue, the home language, and the local language. NCF-1975 stated that “so far as possible, primary education should be in the mother tongue” (p. 5). It also stated that “primary education must be covered through the home language(s)” and that “at the primary stage, a child’s languages must be accepted as they are, with no attempt to correct them,” emphasizing the need to honour the child’s mother tongue/home languages in school (pp. 37–38). Similarly, the position paper by the National Focus Group on Early Childhood Education (2006) suggested allowing children to express themselves in their home language while also learning the languages of each other, i.e., the regional/school language(s) (p. 31). More recently, the National Education Policy (2020) has stated that “at times in multilingual families, there can be a home language spoken by other family members which may sometimes be different from mother tongue or local language” and that the medium of instruction until at least Grade V should be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language (p. 13). It has also advocated a learner-centred, multilingual approach to language teaching using culture-specific and localized materials, recognizing the mother tongue and other languages of the child as resources (p. 17). The NCF-2022 for the Foundational Stage has gone further and recommended an immersion in multiple oral languages (L2 and L3) while aiming for biliteracy. Defining L1 as the mother tongue/home language/familiar language, NCF-2022 defines R1 as the first language in which the child learns to read and write, which would preferably be the same as L1. It also suggests allowing the mixing of languages and using L1 scaffolding to build a bridge to the other languages being taught (pp. 76-79).

However, for a meaningful implementation of MTB-MLE as envisioned in these policies, parents must be made aware of and included in the process. When it comes to introducing English to children, the ‘earlier the better’ mentality is prevalent among Indian parents due to perceived benefits such as social mobility and to compensate for a lack of English language input in the HLE. They also prefer to educate their children in the English medium of instruction rather than the mother-tongue/regional language medium. The policy-level and practice-level issues

with catering to these parental aspirations have been discussed in the position paper by the National Focus Group on Early Childhood Education (2006, p. 32). The position paper on Early Language and Literacy by CARE India and United States Agency for International Development (USAID, 2016) advocated a partnership between the school and the family to enable parents from marginalized backgrounds to support their children's learning (p. 61). It also suggested involving parents/grandparents in compiling and translating folklore and other oral narratives from their culture as a way to bridge the language gap between the home and the school. NCF-2022 discusses the role of parents and family in the foundational stage of learning and development (p. 219) and states that it is important for parents to understand and support their child's school situation, as well as for teachers to understand the child's home situation. It suggests regular school visits and meetings from the parents' end and home visits from the teachers' end. Parents can also contribute by attending the classes as observers or co-teachers and by helping align school practices to the local context, in addition to helping organize and manage school events.

Strategies and Activities to Support Parental Involvement

Although the policy papers have highlighted the importance of building a partnership between the home and the school, there is a lack of concrete resources that can be readily used by teachers. This article presents some classroom activities to provide parents with a better understanding of multilingualism and MTB-MLE, with the broader aim of supporting parental involvement. These activities are designed for the primary school stage, i.e., for parents and children from ages 6 to 11 (grades I to V), but they can be adapted for younger and older age groups by adjusting the level of the content/material used. The following strategies form the foundation for the activities:

- Understanding children's linguistic repertoire and HLE
- Recognizing the child's mother tongue/home language(s) and culture as a resource
- Assessing and creating parental awareness around home literacy
- Encouraging parents to build and participate in home literacy routines

Activity 1: Languages at Home

Focus: First language, second language, mother tongue/home language, multilingualism

Objectives: To understand the linguistic repertoire and HLE of the learners

Materials: Pen and paper/handouts, ball/stuffed toy (optional)

1. Make the parents and children sit in pairs in a circle so that everybody can see and listen to each other.
2. Introduce yourself with information about where you are from and what languages you know. Speak about how you learnt these languages and how proficient you are in each of them. For instance, you may be able to speak a language but not be able to read or write its script.
3. Ask the parents to introduce themselves in a similar manner and talk about the languages they know and use at home. You can also have them pass around a ball while taking turns to keep the children engaged.
4. Discuss how we use different languages for different purposes and in different contexts and introduce the concepts of first language, second language, and bi-/multilingualism. Avoid jargon and use simple language that can be understood by both parents and children.
5. Have each parent-child pair work together and record their responses on paper. Table 1 shows a sample template. Decide which language to use in this step based on the responses from step 3.

Table 1: *Sample template to record language use at home*

<i>Languages</i>	<i>Understand</i>	<i>Speak</i>	<i>Read</i>	<i>Write</i>	<i>Where do you read/hear this language?</i>	<i>Where do you write/speak this language?</i>

Activity 2: Understanding Home Literacy

Focus: Home literacy

Objectives: To create parental awareness around home literacy

Materials: Pen and paper/handouts

1. Discuss how children can benefit from literacy engagement at home and introduce the concept of home literacy. This can be done in the local language using simple terms that they can understand. For example, instead of using terms such as “home literacy practices” or “home literacy materials,” explain what home literacy would look like, i.e., storytelling, book reading, playing word games, etc.
Two questions to guide the discussion: How familiar are they with home literacy? What are their attitudes and perceptions of home literacy?
2. Elicit examples of home literacy practices and create a list on the blackboard. This can be prepared into a handout (in the local language) for them to use as a checklist.
3. Have each parent-child pair record their responses on paper. Table 2 shows a sample KWL chart. The responses can be used to assess their understanding and guide the discussion henceforth.

Table 2: Sample template to record parental understanding of home literacy

K <i>What I know about home literacy</i>	W <i>What I want to know about home literacy</i>	L <i>What I learnt about home literacy</i>

Activity 3: Stories from My Mother Tongue

Focus: Folktales, traditional stories

Objectives: To encourage and provide a model for storytelling

Materials: Pen and paper, props (as necessary)

1. Narrate a folktale from the local language. While doing so, highlight different techniques to make the storytelling engaging, such as the use of varied pitch and intonation, facial expressions and body language, props and puppets.

2. Elicit folktale titles from their mother tongue/home language(s) and create a list on the blackboard.
3. If there are folktales that not every parent in the group is familiar with, make them take turns narrating them. This can also be used as an opportunity for them to practise the techniques learnt in step 1.
4. Discuss how children benefit from exposure to narratives and ask the parents to tell their children folktales and traditional stories from their mother tongue/home language(s) every day. The list created in step 2 can be prepared into a handout (in the local language) for them to use as a checklist.

As a follow-up activity, parents and teachers can coordinate a storytelling day where children narrate stories from their mother tongue/home language(s). This can be done in their mother tongue/home language(s) or in English or the local language that is common to all.

Activity 4: My Child's Favourite Story

Focus: Folktales, traditional stories

Objectives: To encourage parents to regularly engage their children in shared storytelling/reading and prepare book reports to discuss their reading experiences

Materials: Pen and paper/handouts

1. Arrange a book corner for the class by bringing books from the school library or by printing downloadable books available for free from open-access digital repositories.¹ These can be in their mother tongue/home language(s), local language(s) and English. Select books that contain folktales, traditional stories or stories set in the local context.
2. Let the children choose a book to take home and read with their parents. Give them a book report template as shown in Table 3 to be filled in by their parents.
3. In the next parental meeting, ask the parents to discuss their filled-in book reports. Encourage the parents to talk about their shared book reading experience and their thoughts about the book. *Two questions to guide the discussion: Which themes, topics, or language components can a child learn from this book? What questions, activities, or games can supplement this book?*

Table 3: Sample parental book report template

<i>Title of the book</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Topic(s)</i>	<i>Activity</i>
<i>Model questions</i>		<i>Model answers</i>	

Conclusion

The linguistic and cultural gap between the home and the school, along with other factors, limits parental involvement in their children's learning at home and school. Inviting parents to the school and training them to participate in literacy activities that use their mother tongue/home language(s) and folktales/traditional storytelling can help bridge this gap and begin a virtuous cycle of literacy engagement and parental involvement. Teachers can use the activities in this article as well as develop more context-specific resources for their classrooms using these as a model.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Mahananda Pathak, and Prof. Anand Mahanand, from the School of English Language Education at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, for their valuable feedback on earlier drafts of this work.

Notes

1. Open-access digital repositories for children's books in English and Indian languages: Pratham Books' StoryWeaver (<https://storyweaver.org.in/>), Eklavya (<https://www.eklavya.in/books/eklavya-books-pdf>), National Book Trust, India (<https://nbtindia.gov.in/e-books/>), National Multilingual Education Resource Consortium (NMRC-JNU) (<https://nmrcjnu.wordpress.com/pre-primary-education/>), International Children's Digital Library (<http://www.childrenslibrary.org/>)

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