Theoretical assumptions regarding the mind-culture-language relationship underlying MLE models in India and their impact on resulting practices

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Introduction
There is no country in the world where speakers of only one language reside. On the contrary, there are several nations where the number of languages spoken exceeds the total number of countries recognised by the United Nations. Yet surprisingly, it is ‘multilinguality’ and not ‘monolinguality’ which, both as an educational aim as well as an approach, requires determined persuasion and a sustained movement.

In recent times, in addition to concerns for safeguarding linguistic diversity, addressing comprehension problems arising due to language mismatch in schools and the accumulating research evidence supporting the cognitive advantages of multilingual education (MLE) have ensured that MLE programmes have been initiated on a pilot or experimental basis in several countries. This is a juncture that requires that these programmes be critically reviewed so that they can be strengthened and their scope expanded.

The present chapter aims at critically reviewing MLE programmes in India by examining their underlying theoretical assumptions and emerging practices. Only those MLE programmes started with state initiatives were selected for review. The sample therefore comprised one MLE programme each in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Assam plus two MLE programmes in the state of Odisha.

MLE models in India
An attempt to critically review the MLE programmes in India requires a brief discussion of what one considers the desirable goals of an MLE programme to be, against which the programmes can be evaluated. Originally, ‘MLE’ has been understood to mean the use of two or more languages as media of instruction in subjects other than the languages themselves (Andersson and Boyer 1978). However, in 2009, Mohanty and colleagues expanded the definition to include ‘multilingualism and, preferably, multiliteracy, as a goal at the end of formal schooling’ (Mohanty et al. 2009). This broadening of the definition was crucial in order to distinguish between
a) bilingual/multilingual programmes that aimed at using a child’s mother tongue as a bridge towards the acquisition of languages considered ‘mainstream’ and b) multilingual programmes that acknowledged multiplicity of languages both as an academic resource as well as a desirable goal. The difference in definition also opens up space for language to be used as more than just a tool of sensitive transition (as opposed to forced submersion) in the second language.

Additionally, the goals of multiliteracy further create a possibility where – moving beyond restricted transitional goals – a child’s language also offers itself as a potential sociocultural tool that could aid the process of concept formation. Sociocultural learning theorists have investigated the role of cultural tools in the development of cognition. Bruner has argued that:

*How the mind works is itself dependent on the tools at its disposal. ‘How the hand works’ for example, cannot be fully appreciated unless one also takes into account whether it is equipped with a screwdriver, a pair of scissors, or a laser-beam gun.* (Bruner 1996, 2)

Earlier, elaborating on the significance of ‘language’ as a key cultural tool, Cole and Engeström had written:

*Cultural artefacts are both material and symbolic; they regulate interaction with one’s environment and oneself. In this respect, they are ‘tools’ broadly conceived, and the master tool is language.* (Cole and Engeström 1992, 9)

In keeping with this understanding of language as an active cultural agent shaping cognitive development, the MLE programmes of Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Assam and Chhattisgarh are analysed here.

The MLE initiatives by the state in Andhra Pradesh (AP), Odisha and Chhattisgarh – together with the mother-tongue-based MLE programmes (MTB MLE) being implemented by different tribal groups in Assam under the joint guidance of SIL (formerly the Summer Institute of Linguistics) and the Linguistics Department of Gauhati University – show considerable similarities in terms of programme structure and stated goals.

For instance, the major aim outlined in the MLE guideline document prepared by the Rajiv Vidya Mission¹ in AP is, ‘gradual transition from Mother Language to Regional Language within first five years of schooling’ (RVM 2009; Reddy 2011). The draft MLE Policy submitted to the Government of Chhattisgarh also recommends use of the mother tongue with tribal children in Grades 1 and 2 ‘in order to mainstream them’ in later grades. It further mentions ‘bridging’ as a key strategy to realise this goal (Department of School Education 2009). In Assam, a pilot programme started by a non-governmental organisation called Promotion and Advancement of Justice, Harmony and Rights of Adivasis (PAJHRA) in 2011, under the guidance of SIL and the Linguistic Department of Gauhati University, lays emphasis on ‘learning literacy skills in the mother tongue, transitioning into Assamese with good reading, writing and speaking skills, and learning math concepts well in the mother tongue’ (PAJHRA
Echoing similar concerns, the Odisha Primary Education Programme Authority (OPEPA) guideline document, while elaborating on the need for the MLE programme and its aims, refers both to UNESCO’s General Conference of 2009 (where the term ‘MLE’ was adopted) and to the work of Susan Malone as guiding influences. Citing Malone, the document reasons that ‘strong foundation in the mother tongue provides a good bridge to learning a second language more effectively’ (OPEPA n.d., 4).

A complete transition from the mother tongue or the first language of the students (L1) to the official state language or the second language (L2) – by the time the student reaches Grade 6 (in the cases of AP and Odisha) or earlier (in the cases of Assam and Chhattisgarh) – defines the programme structure of these MLE models. For instance, citing from the MLE guideline document of Odisha:

*Gradual transition of curriculum content to the state language begins in class IV along with graduating the learner to the reading and writing in L3 as well. In class V, all subjects are to be conducted in the state language with a language subject in mother tongue. Thus the state language is introduced from class II onwards and by the time children are in class IV and V the curriculum is transacted in the state language to ensure effective mainstreaming in the upper primary level to ensure that there is a strong foundation laid in mother tongue to facilitate effective bridging to the state language.* (OPEPA n.d., 7-8, emphasis added)

Thus, ‘mainstreaming’ as a goal and transition or ‘bridging’ as effective strategies come across as common features of the aforementioned programmes. Another common thread underlying these programmes is their stated acknowledgement of the ‘SIL framework’ as the guiding structure.

In contrast to these MLE models is the MLE Plus programme which is also being implemented in Odisha. The MLE Plus programme started by Professor A.K. Mohanty and Professor Minati Panda in the year 2008 was a special intervention programme started in eight MLE schools of Odisha in two languages, Saora and Kui. The programme aimed at strengthening existing MLE practice in the state and was guided by the principles of the ‘Cultural Historical Activity Theory’ (CHAT) approach.

Panda and Mohanty had critiqued the existing state programmes for their early exit programmes that, instead of setting the foundation for a strong conceptual foundation in the children, appeared to be geared towards ‘easing minority children’s transition to majority language classrooms’ (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 297).

Elaborating on the approach and theoretical basis of the MLE Plus programme, the authors wrote:

*The MLE+ intervention in this project envisages good MLE practices to be holistic, culturally situated and historically informed of culturally embedded social, mathematical, literacy/oracy and science practices. Taking a Vygotskyan (1978) line, the MLE Plus approach takes off from exhaustive ethnographic survey of the everyday practices and knowledge of the communities with a view to using the cultural practices to evolve a set of classroom as well as community based activities.* (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 296)
The MLE Plus programme aimed to be not just an intervention but also an action research activity that could add value to existing MLE programmes by:

... strengthening [children’s] mother tongue by increasing the cultural inputs into language as well as mathematics, science and environmental studies curricula through the use of ethnographic analysis. (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 301)

Rooted in critical pedagogy and seeking to empower communities and the young learners in them, the MLE Plus approach began with exhaustive ethnographic surveys regarding the everyday practices and the knowledge systems of the communities. These surveys included documentation of the linguistic terms used for concepts and an analysis of how these terms and concepts were embedded in the activities of the community. Theoretically trained community MLE workers (CMWs) formed an important link between the culture and the school. The CMWs were also involved in the ethnographic survey (mapping concepts and also documenting their use and meanings), and were trained to:

... look at everyday activities/practices from the children’s learning perspective and to develop these activities into culturally informed pedagogic tools. (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 306)

The MLE Plus programme thus created a possibility for the MLE approach to go beyond mere ‘transition and mainstreaming’.

Examining underlying assumptions regarding ‘mind-culture-language’ relationships

In the MLE models referred to above, two frameworks were observed to have significantly influenced the shaping of the models. While the MLE Plus programme was informed by the Cultural Historical Activity Theory approach, the remaining models were significantly influenced by SIL’s MLE framework. Here we examine the assumptions which these two frameworks make regarding the relationships between mind, culture and language.

The SIL framework

SIL is a faith-based organisation that:

... facilitates language development within minority language communities through research, translation, training and materials development. (SIL 2015)

Their framework is founded on the following rationale:

Many local language communities are, in reality, multilingual. In addition, some want to communicate in the national language and possibly also in an international language. Multilingual education (MLE) programs promote first language literacy skills, providing the means to meet broader multilingual goals. (SIL 2015, 2)
They go on to describe MLE programmes as ‘strong educational programs that help students bridge to national and international languages’ (SIL 2015, 2). In a paper explaining the process of developing an MTB MLE curriculum, Malone outlines the differences between ‘mainstream’ and ‘MTB MLE’ programmes in terms of the language used and the basis for developing outcomes and indicators. A mainstream programme uses a Language of Wider Communication (LWC) as the medium of instruction, while the outcomes and indicators are based on the ‘mainstream students’ knowledge and experience’ (Malone 2011, 1). MTB MLE, on the other hand, begins with the learners’ first language before ‘mainstreaming’ happens, while the outcomes and indicators are based on ‘knowledge and experience of students of each ethnolinguistic community’ (Malone 2011, 1).

Some papers developed by SIL consultants mention that children’s educational foundation should be based on the sociocultural knowledge and experiences that they bring to the classroom (e.g. Malone 2003, 2011; SIL 2015), the forms for doing so vary. They range from making ‘materials fit local culture’ (SIL 2015, 2) to provisions for incorporating them ‘into “Cultural Time” component of the school curriculum’ in the case of minority language children for whom LWC has become the first language (Malone 2003, 4). The reference to including language learning in a culture component is primarily concerned with the maintenance of cultural heritage.

SIL advocates a bridge model of MLE which is explained as follows:

Successful multilingual education enables mother tongue speakers of non-dominant languages to build a culturally and linguistically appropriate educational foundation in their home language first. Then they can successfully cross over the bridge to one or more additional languages. MLE provides the opportunities for lifelong learning in the local as well as national and international languages. (SIL 2015, 2)

The stages involved include building literacy, ensuring fluency, bridging and ongoing education.

An analysis of the framework above suggests a distinction drawn between knowledge and experiences belonging to ‘mainstream students’ and those that find their existence in ‘ethnolinguistic’ communities. This recognition of only ‘local’ languages as belonging to ‘ethnolinguistic’ communities suggests that the mainstream languages of wider communication are historically and socioculturally non-contextual. This suggests that, in the case of the latter, the mutually constitutive relationship between language and culture does not exist. An assumption of a dynamic and a mutually constitutive relationship between language and culture requires that both be seen as non-static. Further, the understanding that the path towards competencies is shorter, more direct and smoother for students who already speak in the LWC – as compared to the zig-zag and long winding path of students who speak in languages other than the LWC – suggests that mainstream languages are viewed as more suited to academic discourses. The acceptance of such a hierarchical relation between languages and the assigning of ‘culture’ only to those without power echoes the observations of the cultural anthropologist Rosaldo (1993), who said that we give
‘culture’ to those to whom we deny citizenship (power). The culture (and languages) of such half-citizens or denied citizens are then perceived as frozen in time, lacking the dynamicity which otherwise makes cultural artefacts assume a meditative potency.

If we interpret the SIL understanding of language acquisition on the basis of how it is reflected in the MTB MLE programme of Assam, we can see how – instead of enabling a communicative space for language usage – the model breaks down the language acquisition process into the learning of sounds, then syllables, then words, sentences and finally meaning. This division of language acquisition into stages where structure precedes meaning and meaning precedes communication brings out the contrast between SIL’s framework on the one hand and socioculturally more informed theories of learning on the other. The MLE models that emerge from SIL frameworks resemble most of the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) models in countries like the USA that are described by Razfar et al. (2011) as aiming at ‘English instruction’ and using the learner’s first language only as a means of acquisition; they further argue that such models are based on frameworks that:

... draw on nativist assumptions of linguistic processes including the **language acquisition device** whereby the mind is genetically predisposed to acquire **not** learn grammatical structures (the emphasis being on phonology, morphology, and syntax). (Razfar et al. 2011, 197)

Therefore, given the similarities between SIL-influenced models and SLA models from the USA, it may be inferred that this framework also assumes a nativist position on language acquisition, whereby individuals are predisposed to learning languages as reflected in the material and transition-focused assistance emphasised by these models. An MLE model inspired by this framework is therefore more likely to encourage a ‘transmitive’ use of language, where the language is viewed only as a passive vehicle for content transmission. The language does not become a site of ‘social action’ in the SIL framework, nor is it seen as being interactive, shaping or being shaped by culture.

The references to culture in most of SIL’s documents and papers are in reference to either establishing an initial familiarity or maintaining heritage, allotting the culture a sense of definitiveness without an evolving dynamicity. Thus, in the MLE models inspired by this framework, the embodiment of the sociocultural is considered to be restricted only to ‘overtly’ symbolic forms of culture like stories, songs, festivals, paintings, etc. While these inclusions do play an important role in establishing an early familiarity, they are unable to be effective beyond that. The failure to see the pedagogic potential of cultural resources then gets reflected in articulations like restricting cultural references to ‘Culture Time’ (Malone 2003) or making ‘materials fit local culture’ (SIL 2015), in contrast to exploring culture and finding in it materials or symbols that can be utilised in classroom processes (as reflected in the extensive ethnographic surveys undertaken during the development of the MLE Plus programme). Language, culture and mind in the SIL framework thus remain fragmented.
The MLE Plus framework

As mentioned earlier, the MLE Plus programme was guided by the Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) of Cole and Engeström (2007). The theory evolved from the work of Vygotsky (1978) centred on the concept of ‘tool mediation’ and was further developed by Luria (1928, 1978), Leont’ev (1978, 1981), Engeström (1993, 1995) and Cole and Engeström (1993).

Explaining Vygotsky’s and Luria’s ideas on tool mediation, Panda and Mohanty argued how language was not only a cultural product but, through its mediating potential, was also seen as ‘influencing thought, and therefore culture’ (Panda and Mohanty 2009b, 192). The sociocultural groundings of the CHAT perspective thus reflect one of the fundamental premises of cultural psychology, that ‘mind is both constituted and realised in the use of human culture’ (Bruner 2009, 159). The relationship between language, culture and mind which is assumed, therefore, is mutually constitutive. Elaborating on the premise of this perspective, Cole writes:

The initial premise of the cultural historical school is that human psychological processes emerged simultaneously with a new form of behaviour in which humans modified the material objects as means of regulating their interactions with the world and one another. (Cole 1996, 108)

While CHAT is not a theory of MLE per se, but – by recognising the importance of ‘socioculturally situated’ mediating tools, of which language is an important one – it assumes significance for any educational model that attempts to develop pedagogic understanding around language and learning. The importance of tool-mediated learning in a formal instructional set-up assumes significance as it replaces earlier pre-school learning. Vygotsky (1978) points out that the difference between pre-school learning and learning in a formal school space is more than just a matter of one being less systematic than the other. Pre-school learning is characterised by the child trying to learn by assimilating as much knowledge and as many facts as allowed by the actual developmental level of the child. There is a crucial difference in learning as assimilation of knowledge and learning as acquisition of the fundamentals of scientific knowledge. The latter requires more than just assimilation. It requires a carefully structured and mediated interaction between the everyday and the scientific, distinguishing it from a learning that is incidental or merely observational. Vygotsky (1978) conceptualises such an enabling space where the actual levels of development are transcended and further movement is made possible. He termed it the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ (ZPD). Such a mediated space, where either the teacher or the able peer facilitates the movement between the actual levels of development and the level of potential development, is essentially a social and a dialogic space. The role of speech and language in such a space, for the purposes of interpersonal communication and the organisation of inner thoughts, is crucial. The socially situated learning space thus created, involving language and cultural artefacts as mediating tools, according to Vygotsky (1978), results in mental development that could not have been otherwise reached.
Consequently, the MLE model inspired by this perspective is more likely to strengthen mother tongues (rather than just using them to move to another language) and also to create space for more recursive and bi-directional classrooms.

**Reflection of theoretical assumptions in emerging MLE practices**

The two paradigmatically different approaches to MLE identified above necessitate a review of the practices that emerge from them. For the purpose of examining the reflection of theoretical assumptions in MLE practices, one MLE Plus school based on CHAT and one MLE programme based on the SIL framework were selected. In order to ensure economic and sociocultural comparability of the samples, the Odisha state MLE model was chosen from among those based on the SIL framework. One school per model was chosen, both from the same district and both having between 90 and 100 per cent tribal students in their classrooms. In both schools, the mother tongue of the tribal students was Saora and the second language to be acquired was Odia.

One of the initial insights into the practices that emerge in the two models is provided by the way the classrooms are structured and how the teachers in the schools explain their understanding of MLE goals and methods.

**Practices in MLE schools**

Beginning with the MLE classroom, the walls were decorated with a few paintings and printed charts, none of which included use of Saora. The predominant language on the classroom walls was Odia (see Figure 1 for an example), followed by English and Hindi. The students were organised in neat rows facing the blackboard, with the teacher’s location fixed in front of the classroom (as can be seen in Figure 2).

![Figure 1: An MLE classroom with Odia charts on the walls; Odia is not the children’s first language](Photo: Shivani Nag)
The teacher in the MLE school, when asked to explain what he had learnt in MLE training programmes, shared:

*They [the MLE trainers] said how to move from Saora language to Odia language. Like in class I, 70 percent use of ML-language – Saora; in second class 60 percent, third class 50 percent. Like this in fifth class have to teach in Odia. If we teach in Odia from the beginning, children will face lot of difficulties.* (Nag 2014a, 158)

On being asked to talk about the methods he employed in class, he said:

*With younger children we show pictures then say the word in Saora and then in Odia. From book also, after reading one line in Odia, we then explain it in Saora. Here all are tribal children. In the beginning (they) do not understand Odia. They do not know Odia, so (I) translate, explain in Saora.* (Nag 2014a, 156)

This narrative shared by the teacher was found to echo the key concern underlying the SIL framework, i.e. to provide students with a one-way bridge to reach national and international languages. The bridge here is a unidirectional one, since students who know only those languages that are deemed as ‘national’ or international’ are not expected to use the latter as bridges to reach the local languages. The recognition of the second language alone as the ‘school language’ reinforces the understanding that the child’s mother tongue cannot be the language of academic discourse.
In order to understand the practices in the class, a brief description of a language period that was observed during the field research is provided here.

The MLE teacher picked up a picture book to introduce the Odia alphabet to grade I children. Since both Odia and Saora are written in Odia script in state MLE programmes, the letters for writing both languages remain the same. Given that the transition programme of the state requires 100 percent mother tongue in Grade I, the teacher would have been expected to teach the alphabet solely by using familiar Saora words as the base. However, in contrast to the MLE guidelines, the teacher named the object depicted in the picture book first in Saora and then without elaborating on the nature of the object, proceeded to provide the Odia synonym for the same. The new letters were then linked to the Odia word just introduced. For instance, in one of the language classes, where the teacher wanted to introduce a letter of the alphabet with the sound ‘ga’, the teacher did not show a picture of an object for which the Saora term began with the ‘ga’ sound. Instead, the teacher used a picture of an object for which the corresponding Odia term began with the ‘ga’ sound, as in the following example:

The teacher held a picture of donkey – called **gaddha** in Odia and **pekud** in Saora – in front of Grade II students. Pointing to the picture he asked in Saora, ‘What is this?’ There was no response from the students. He then went on, ‘**Gaddha** ... **pekud**. From ‘ga’ **gaddha**.’ (Nag 2014a, 154)

Hence, as can be seen, the pattern followed was:

- show a picture
- say the Odia term for it
- provide the Saora translation of the word
- link the sound of a new letter with the Odia word also newly introduced.

In an interaction with the MLE teacher following this particular lesson, the teacher admitted that, since in his understanding the aim of the MLE was to enable children to learn Odia using Saora, he did not wish to delay the transition process. Additionally, the realisation that he would have to teach the same students completely in Odia by the time they reached Grade VI, only increased his anxiety to facilitate the shift as early as possible.

Thus the use of the children’s linguistic resources – as seen in the classroom and explained by the teacher – was not for scaffolding new concepts (in this case, the sounds of the letters of the alphabet) but to transit to another language in which the alphabet could be taught. This restricted (as opposed to elaborative) use of the Saora language in the class was also found to reflect the limited aim of the SIL model, which stopped at developing literacy skills in the mother tongue, without acknowledging its importance in acquiring academic concepts (SIL 2015).

Another interesting insight emerging from the description of the classroom transaction above has significance for the nature of classroom space that is
enabled by such restricted transitional MLE practices. The tribal students in this MLE classroom were less likely to experience forced submersion in the second language than are tribal students studying in Non-MLE schools (Manocha 2010). Nevertheless, since the use of the Saora language was translational instead of dialogic, the classroom space enabled was far from collaborative. The immediate shift to Odia did not allow the children space to use Saora to bring in their everyday experiences and to use them as entry points to enter the academic discourse of the classroom. It is also interesting to note that, in a separate research study focusing on teachers’ experiences in Non-MLE and MLE classrooms in tribal blocks of Odisha, even the teachers in the Non-MLE schools reported that they used Saora for the purposes of translation and smoothing children’s transition to Odia, since immediate imposition of Odia made the children fearful of school (Nag 2014b).

In keeping with the SIL model that recognised a very minimal use of the sociocultural context in pedagogy, the practices in the classroom also failed to include the children’s sociocultural context as a pedagogic resource. In MLE schools, the children’s cultural context was reduced to its symbolic forms like paintings, songs, rhymes and stories which, though brought inside the classroom, were rarely integrated meaningfully with academic concepts. They were either pointed at as passing references or included as abstract and insulated entities whose only role was to enable the children have a cultural experience, an experience insulated from academic engagement.

Elaborating on this non-transformative and contextually alienated approach of the SIL framework, Panda writes:

... [the] transition plan of SIL was introduced by a group of European SIL experts without sufficient dialogue with the state administration and the academics. This highlights the fact that MLE paradigm and practice in both the states are not the products of their own social, political and academic discourse. In a top down structure, since the changes are not the product of peoples’ restlessness and discomfort with the existing paradigm of general education in a dominant language, there is relatively less scope to experience transformations than when such changes evolve out of local struggles and tensions. (Panda 2012, 247)

Considering that the SIL framework is based on an acknowledgement of some languages as ‘mainstream’ and also desirable for carrying out academic discourse, an asymmetry of power between teachers and students is created at the very onset as the two are viewed as located on a vertical ladder with one knowing a language of ‘importance’ and the other ‘trying to acquire it’. Therefore, there was an absence of the ‘transformation experience’ as elaborated in the excerpt above. Practices in the MLE classroom remained ‘transmitive and controlled by the teacher’ and the power distribution in the classroom between teachers and students remained asymmetrical.

**Practices in MLE Plus schools**

The MLE Plus classroom appeared vibrant and reflective of children’s cultural resources (including linguistic). There were several handmade materials in Saora
and the teaching learning materials were kept in open racks accessible to students (Figure 3). The children were usually found to be seated in a circle working on group activities or engaged in discussions with the teacher seated among them in the same circle. (See Figure 4.)

![Figure 3: An MLE Plus classroom with colourful handmade materials in Saora, the children’s first language (Photo: Shivani Nag)](image)

A teacher from the MLE Plus school, when asked about his understanding of MLE practices, responded by saying:

*By using their story and song, then talking about their home ... Also if we are teaching EVS, then we might ask them about what their father do? So the child will say he works in the field, so then we will ask ‘how he works in the field’ ... when children will be able to tell ... we will explain to the children how these things are made, then what kind of crops are grown, we discuss and explain.*

(Nag 2014a, 198)

The teacher in the MLE Plus school appeared more interested in using the children’s mother tongue to allow them to bring their everyday context into the classroom and thereby facilitate their entry into academic discourse. The shift aimed in this case was not from one language to another but from everyday concepts to more abstract and scientific concepts.
The difference in practices emerging from viewing children’s language as a ‘sensitive tool for transition’ vis-à-vis acknowledging their language as a ‘culturally situated pedagogic resource’ could also be seen in classroom transactions. Firstly, teachers in MLE Plus programme appeared to be less gripped by the anxiety to effect an early transition. Secondly, instead of a ‘restricted transitional’ use of the children’s mother tongue, they instead used this language to encourage students to bring in their everyday experiences in classrooms. A description of an EVS lesson on ‘body parts’ with Grade III students follows:

The teacher did not use the textbook at the outset. He began by first calling out body parts using the corresponding Saora terms and asking students to point towards them and thereafter facilitated a discussion among children regarding the appearance of the body parts, their use and the differences between different parts. The language of interaction remained Saora and the students used it to share their narratives and even debate with each other if they felt that their classmate was erring. The teacher did provide them with corresponding Odia terms during the interaction, however, the interventions involving introduction of Odia terms for body parts was only one component of the classroom discussion. The teacher focussed more on encouraging students to speak up and thereafter elaborating on the concepts involved. The use of everyday experiences was therefore to create entry points for children to be able to participate in the dialogue. Thereafter, the teacher
mediated their movement towards an academic discourse around the body parts. This movement was enabled through carefully alternated processes like ‘interweaving’ and ‘replacement’. (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 305)

The researchers define interweaving as ‘maintenance of and interaction between the everyday and the scientific concepts’ and ‘replacement’ as ‘the substitution for an “everyday” understanding of a more sophisticated conventionalised academic understanding’ (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 305). They then identify implications of their observations:

As interweaving enables the students to start participating in an everyday discourse, a gradual process of replacement at appropriate junctures helps enter the realm of academic discourse, no longer needing to hold on to the concrete and gradually developing comfort with the abstract. In fact, in several papers and reports on the MLE Plus programme, the Project Directors have discussed in depth how various local activities like games, local artefacts like wall paintings, design patterns and local knowledge systems, such as the local number system or measuring system, can be used to help the students make a transition from the spontaneous to the theoretical. (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 2011)

Pedagogic practices in MLE Plus schools were also found to differ from those of MLE school in terms of a qualitatively different use of sociocultural resources of the children. In MLE Plus schools, the use of cultural resources went beyond symbolic inclusion of songs and dances, to create space for ‘dialectical exchange between epistemic knowledge and practices in the community and in the classroom processes’ (Panda and Mohanty 2009a, 306). A more pronounced evidence of this exchange could be witnessed during the regular fests that were organised around different academic domains. One such fest that was organised during the period of the field visit was Ganit Panchayat\textsuperscript{10} (Mathematics Council), where the resource person used cultural artefacts such as locally made hats to initiate a discussion around the process of making hats and gradually shifting the discourse to more abstract geometric principles involved in the process.

This differential use of children’s language and cultural resources enabled creation of a collaborative space in MLE Plus classrooms, where the power was more symmetrically distributed between active students and a mediating teacher. Students were often found to access teaching-learning materials during their free time and to work collaboratively with them. The strengthening of children’s mother tongue in the MLE Plus programme also enabled them to use their mother tongue for creative and reflexive thinking as witnessed during frequent storytelling and debating sessions that would begin spontaneously whenever the teacher was busy with some administration-related work of the school. Socioculturally informed pedagogic processes like scaffolding and spiralling were more noticeable in MLE Plus classrooms.

The classroom transactions thus reflected the CHAT perspective, as evidenced in the creation of symmetrical teacher-student relationships, and more elaborate
and extensive use of children’s language and sociocultural contexts as compared to the MLE classrooms. It may be noted here that since the MLE Plus programme was a special intervention in existing state MLE schools, the limitations posed by the ‘early-exit’ nature of the state MLE model were also experienced. However, the paradigmatically different approach towards children’s language and culture enabled emergence of practices that, while facilitating acquisition of second language, did not restrict their scope to that.

Conclusion
This examination of the MLE models and their resulting practices suggest that, for MLE models to move beyond their scope as programmes for ‘minority language students’ or ‘ethnic minorities’, there is a need to revisit their underlying assumptions. A model or a teacher training programme, which is based on a framework that does not acknowledge learning as a socioculturally situated process and which continues to operate on a premise that privileges some languages and cultures over others, cannot make the inclusion pedagogically effective. A sensitive ‘mainstreaming’ into dominant languages cannot be a replacement for a socioculturally informed pedagogy that views all cultural and linguistic resources as pedagogically useful. The potency of language as ‘social action’ (a concept widely used by social theorists such as Bourdieu and Foucault) makes it a site for the negotiation and creation of meaning. Therefore, a division between ‘mainstream’ and ‘ethnolinguistic’ that aims at facilitating a shift from ‘ethnolinguistic’ to ‘mainstream’ throws away the pedagogic advantages that inclusion of ‘language as a cultural tool’ allows. While it is important to acknowledge that some languages have enjoyed a privileged location vis-à-vis others, the acknowledgement of the same should motivate practitioners to work towards strengthening and empowering of what till now was ‘non-dominant’. Carol Benson has made a powerful argument in favour of ‘empowering non-dominant languages’ and it is useful to note that she also draws from a sociocultural positioning of languages to further argue that the same can be done by developing culturally sensitive multilingual curriculums (Benson 2017). The strengthening of non-dominant language, as attempted in the MLE Plus programme and as argued by Benson, would not only lead to a more equitable multilingualism but would also allow a more effective use of non-dominant languages as languages of academic discourse. The significance of this is more than pedagogic, as the opportunity to engage in academic discourse in one’s own language is more likely to create a positive identity with the language than its mere use as a bridge to reach more ‘in demand’ languages. A socioculturally informed MLE model involving a more extensive and elaborative use of non-dominant mother tongues also has greater likelihood to alter perceptions about dominant languages from ‘killer languages’ to ‘healer languages’, as proposed by Ajit Mohanty (2017), while critically analysing the roles of and demand for English in multilingual societies like India.

The research findings have significant implications for strengthening existing MLE programmes and advocating ‘MLE for All’.

Notes
1 The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) (Education for All) department of the administration of Andhra Pradesh is known as Rajiv Vidya Mission (RVM).
Susan Malone is an education consultant with SIL.

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ZPD is defined as the distance between the actual development level as determined through independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky 1978, 86).

Hardman (2008) used the terms ‘restricted’ and ‘elaborative’ to explain the varying nature of tool usage in classrooms, based on third generation cultural historical activity theory.

Block refers to an administrative subdivision of a district in a rural area.

Referring to Andhra Pradesh and Odisha.

EVS = Environmental Studies

The term Panchayat refers to a democratic village council that often gathers to discuss various issues.

References


