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Development Discourse on Language of Instruction and Literacy: Sound Policy and Ubuntu or Lip Service?

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Abstract: Both humanist and quality concerns should have made language of instruction a priority in educational development, yet there has been no clear trajectory. This study explores whether the advantages of L1-based approaches as documented in the scholarly literature have been reflected in the development discourse over time, based on an analysis of all twelve UNESCO Global Monitoring Reports. We investigated three hypotheses using macro-analyses on the frequency of language-in-education mentions and the co-occurrence of these with mentions of early grade reading, and a micro-analysis of content associated with language. While we found no consistent trend in language-in-education terms over time, there has been more mention in reference to early grade reading, challenging support for longer-term use of L1 to support learning. More detailed mentions of language, however, appear to be aligned with sound policies and practices, and simple mentions presume that L1-based approaches are important for effective educational development.

Keywords: L1-based approaches; language-in-education; Global Monitoring Reports

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Introduction

Over 60 years ago, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization issued a now-classic statement that it is “axiomatic” that children should learn in their own languages (UNESCO, 1953). Language of instruction should arguably have been made a priority in educational development at that point, but it was not. Since the 1970s, donors have been known to support individual projects or experiments using learners’ mother tongues, also known as home languages or L1s. However, low-income countries have continued to offer formal education mainly in single official (former colonial or otherwise dominant) languages, excluding large proportions of their populations from access to quality basic education. Meanwhile, development partners have rarely if at all taken a firm stand on the issue, either pedagogically or in terms of the language rights of marginalized groups. It should be as self-evident for speakers of non-dominant languages as it is for speakers of dominant ones that teaching and learning be done in the L1 so that the curriculum in general—and initial literacy in particular—can be accessed. Yet a clear development trajectory regarding language-in-education policy has been sorely lacking. We would like to invoke Ubuntu, or humanism in education, to illuminate and work toward correcting this oversight.

Home languages for EFA

Recent years have seen increasing interest on the part of the donor community in improving educational quality and in reaching the most marginalized. At the same time, evidence has accumulated from research in both high- and low-income contexts that children who learn in “first language first” programs (UNESCO, 2005)—also known as L1-based multilingual education (MLE)—do better in school overall, develop literacy skills that can be transferred to additional languages, practice cognitive skills like critical thinking, construct strong identities, and experience high self-esteem (Cummins, 2009; Heugh, 2011; Thomas & Collier, 2002; Walter, 2013). A greater convergence of donor and researcher discourse seems imminent; for example, both non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and United Nations (UN) agencies have issued policy documents that make clear statements about the need to provide basic education in learners’ own languages (e.g. Pinnock 2009; UNESCO 2013). Further, wider discussions have been promoted by partner countries and organizations, such as the *International Conference on Language, Education and the Millennium Development Goals* in Bangkok in November 2010, which brought together UN agencies, bilateral donors, NGOs, political leaders and scholars to discuss the importance of the learner’s first language (L1) in achieving quality Education for All.³

Assessment of basic literacy skills

In a parallel development, the large-scale US-driven Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) of recent years (e.g. Gove & Wetterberg, 2011) has demonstrated that basic reading skills are not being taught or learned well in low-income countries. While the underlying assumptions of the EGRA tool have been criticized as being monolingual English-based (Benson, 2013; Hoffman, 2012; Schroeder, 2013), implementers of the tool have been forced to recognize the importance of learners’ home languages (L1s) in the multilingual contexts where EGRA has been applied. Recent EGRA findings (e.g. Piper, Schroeder, & Trudell, 2015) suggest that even if a change to the L1 cannot single-handedly improve teaching and learning in these contexts, it can go a long way toward giving learners access to basic literacy skills—and thus to the curriculum. However, as its name

³ For the program and list of presenters, see <http://www.seameo.org/LanguageMDGConference2010/>

implies, both the assessment and any intervention target the first two years of primary schooling, ignoring the importance of building a strong learning foundation using learners' best languages. Despite these limitations, EGRA has been widely applied to the assessment of reading in low-income contexts, where it seems to be calling greater attention to medium-of-instruction issues.

Home languages in focus

The purpose of this study is thus to examine the degree to which the development discourse converges with scholarly findings, i.e., whether or not it reflects research evidence as well as deep understandings of why learners' own languages should be used in education—and perhaps even how. Our findings have implications for assessing whether or not evidence of the benefits of L1-based MLE has an influence on development planning to make quality basic education available for all learners. The hope would be that evidence of pedagogically sound MLE practices is indeed influencing educational policymaking, particularly regarding learners who are linguistically and culturally marginalized. The fear would be that the development discourse lags far behind the research evidence on MLE.

Background of the study

To determine whether or not discourse on educational development is beginning to incorporate deeper understandings of L1-based MLE, we needed to review policy documents over the past decade or more. We began our study with the following research question:

Are the cognitive learning and identity-oriented advantages of L1-based MLE as discussed in the research literature being reflected in education development discourse? Further, has this increased over time?

Faced with the prospect of analyzing the discourse in policy documents from an appropriate range of bilateral donors and international agencies as well as NGOs, we decided to focus on the Global Monitoring Report (GMR), which has been produced by an independent team based on background papers commissioned from a wide range of education specialists, and published by UNESCO Paris annually since 2002. The team is guided by an Advisory Board composed of representatives from UN multilateral agencies, bilateral agencies, non-governmental organizations, civil society groups and networks, individuals from developing countries with an expertise in basic education issues, and directors of UNESCO institutes.⁴ According to UNESCO, the GMR is an “authoritative reference” for “all of those engaged in promoting the right to quality education – teachers, civil society groups, NGOs, researchers and the international community.”⁵ Each edition adopts a theme that is considered important to the EFA process, while reporting on progress, identifying effective policies and practices, attending to challenges, and promoting international cooperation in education. For the purposes of our study, it made sense to use an instrument that attempted to compile policies and practices internationally.

⁴ <http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/advisory-board>

⁵ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/the-report-and-efa/>

Our choice of the GMRs was also driven by a concern that cross-cutting issues like language had traditionally been overlooked by the team that put the reports together. Benson (2004) had written a background paper for the 2005 GMR, whose theme was *quality*, in which she tried to demonstrate how language issues were underlying all aspects of educational access and quality. She argued that language—like gender—should be considered a transversal concept, influencing everything from inclusiveness (access to education for all citizens) to classroom communication, from the sense teachers make of their training to learning achievement and assessment. Despite these arguments, language of instruction was mentioned only a few times and at odd places throughout the 2005 GMR, and the point about mainstreaming language issues was lost. Two years later, a similar disappointment was expressed by Tiessen (2007) about gender; she critiqued superficial views and suggested that gender mainstreaming requires a paradigm shift that goes beyond traditional development discourses. Could it be that language of instruction mainstreaming would also require a paradigm shift of sorts? Was it possible that the recent US-driven focus on reading assessment might call increased attention to the need for education in learners' own languages?

Our question, then, became whether or not subsequent GMRs would demonstrate a clearer understanding of the importance of language of instruction for literacy and learning. To explore how this importance was manifested in development discourse, we examined both the frequency and the depth of language issues mentioned in all of the GMRs from 2002 to present. Given the points made above, that educational development is focused on inclusion and quality education, and that evidence has accumulated regarding the effectiveness of MLE in reaching marginalized groups, we were cautiously optimistic about what we would find in the GMRs, leading to our first hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1:

There will be a gradual increase in the frequency of mention of languages and MLE in the GMRs over time, demonstrating greater attention to language issues, particularly in the past ten years.

Given the fact that the EGRA assessment seems to be influencing development discourse regarding the language of initial literacy, we also checked for any mentions of language co-occurring with mentions of EGRA, leading to our second hypothesis, also optimistic:

Hypothesis 2:

Mention of languages and MLE may co-occur with mention of early grade reading (EGR) in recent years, suggesting that the EGRA assessment has brought about renewed attention to the L1.

Given our concern about the lack of paradigm shift when it came to the GMRs, especially based on Benson's 2005 experience, we considered it possible that more frequent mention of language issues would not necessarily equate to deeper understandings of the need for L1-based MLE. This led us to a third, more pessimistic hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3:

Many language and MLE mentions will demonstrate superficial understandings and insufficient theoretical basis regarding the potential of L1-based MLE to improve literacy and learning.

Methodology

UNESCO Global Monitoring Reports

As discussed above, the annual UNESCO Global Monitoring Reports (GMRs) were chosen to represent educational development discourse. Our choice could be justified for reasons other than those discussed above. First, the GMRs have gained significant readership in the past decade as they reflect the progress of attaining Education for All on the global agenda. Next, they attract readers internationally and from a variety of fields in education development due to their thematic approach, including themes relevant to development agendas such as gender, quality, literacy, and early childhood. Finally, the GMRs are based on multiple background papers that are written by specialists in their fields, potentially offering a range of perspectives on educational development. Finally, for the purposes of our relatively small-scale research study, the GMRs are a cohesive and finite set of documents that could give us access to the evolving nature of educational development discourse.

Document discourse analysis

Discourse analysis can be performed on conversations, classroom dialogues, or other recorded speech events, or it can be performed on documents. To answer our research questions we opted to do a simple analysis of the terms and discussions occurring in the 12 GMR documents, so as such we did not necessarily need to analyze language as a social practice according to critical discourse theorists (see Fairclough, 2013). We did, however, establish the context and explore the production of the documents, prepare and code the text segments and examine the content, all important steps in micro-level discourse analysis (Rapley, 2007).

Our analysis of the 12 GMR documents was conducted in two phases, beginning with an initial scan of “number of mentions” of key language terms and moving on to an in-depth analysis of what was said. The initial phase involved searching for key terms and coding them for references/meanings, which would address Hypotheses 1 and 2. These coded terms allowed us to pinpoint sections of the GMRs where mention of medium of instruction was clustered, allowing us to scrutinize the content and its potential influence on the GMR audience, which would address Hypothesis 3.

As shown in Table 1 below, to address Hypothesis 1, we searched for all terms related to the language or medium of instruction and to the mother tongue (first language or L1) of the learner. After searching a range of possible terms in two GMRs chosen randomly, we chose these particular terms because they indicated some discussion about or awareness of language issues in educational development. To address Hypothesis 2, we added a search of terms like “early grade” wherever they referred to literacy and/or to the EGRA instrument, and checked to see if they co-occurred with mentions of the importance of language.

Table 1. Terms searched and coded for macro-analysis of the GMRs

	<i>Hypothesis</i>	<i>Terms searched and coded</i>
1	Frequency of mention of language-in-education issues	Medium of instruction/MOI Language of instruction/LOI Language medium Mother tongue
2	Co-occurrence of language-in-education terms and EG or EGR	Early grade/EG Early grade reading/EGR

One limitation of our search to address Hypothesis 1 was that we were not able to find instances where specific languages were referred to by name in case studies. For example, in one section of the 2011 GMR on Conflict, there was a description of how Urdu was adopted in Pakistani schools because of its status as a national language in spite of the fact that this excluded six major linguistic groups and fifty-eight smaller groups (Appendix 1). Fortunately we discovered this particular section and a few others because of their proximity to terms we were searching, but this made us aware that we might have missed a few case studies because our search terms could not accommodate specific language names.

To address Hypothesis 3, we copied the mentions of language in education from Hypothesis 1 with their surrounding text (as contextualized discourse segments) and pasted them into an Excel sheet for each year's GMR, where the segments were then coded. To begin, we each analyzed the text segments from the 2006 Literacy for Life GMR separately, developing our own codes along the way. We then compared our findings and standardized the codes, as shown in Table 2. All codes were based on the meaning of the discourse segments and the degree to which they demonstrated understanding of the importance of language of instruction for literacy, learning, self-esteem and so on. We then divided up the GMRs and coded all of the text segments we had found.

Table 2. Terms searched and coded for micro-analysis of the GMRs

<i>Hypothesis 3</i>	<i>Coded terms</i>
Content associated with mentions of language-in-education terms	L1 to foster cultural identity L1 to improve learning outcomes L1 to improve student retention L1 to improve understanding Need to address the home-school language discrepancy Need for L1-based MLE resources Need for MLE teacher training Need for MLE teacher certification Others: MLE seen as costly L1 to promote peace Cross-linguistic transfer in MLE Linguistic/cultural domination without L1 L1 school/parent/teacher support Social exclusion without L1

Once the discourse segments were coded, we could categorize them according to their meanings and depth, and then analyze them and look for patterns by year and theme of the GMR. Our database thus consists of 11 Excel sheets (one for each GMR) with reference back to the actual reports where discourse segments were lengthy and needed to be contextualized.

Findings of the term search and analysis according to each hypothesis

Hypothesis 1

There was no consistent trend of language-in-education mentions in the reports from 2002 to present (Graph 1; Table 3). The highest number of mentions to date were in the 2006 GMR on Literacy (52 mentions) and the 2011 GMR on Conflict (45 mentions). These were

interspersed with low numbers of mentions in the 2009 GMR on Governance (13 mentions) and the 2012 GMR on Youth, Skills and Work (6 mentions). One possible reason for this result could be the thematic nature of the GMRs, where particular themes called for more or less attention to language issues in education. If this is true, one might question whether or not there should be some consistency in reporting year by year, if the GMRs are intended to inform the international development community about progress being made toward achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Graph 1. Frequency of mentions of language-in-education terms over time

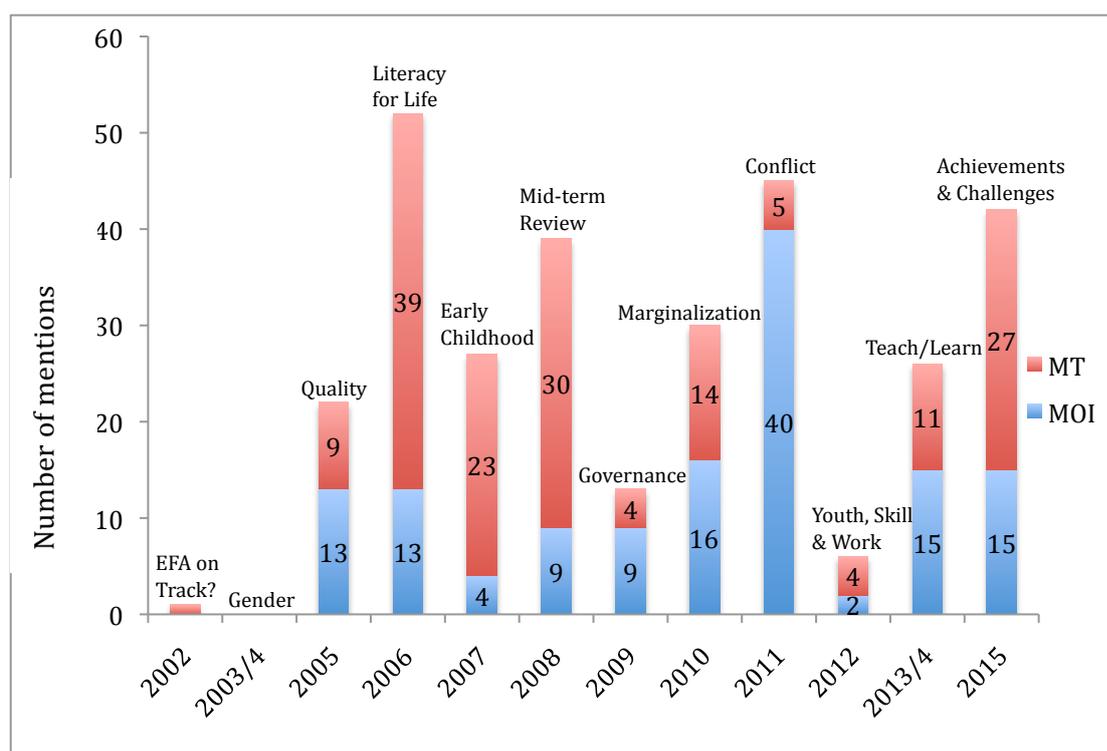


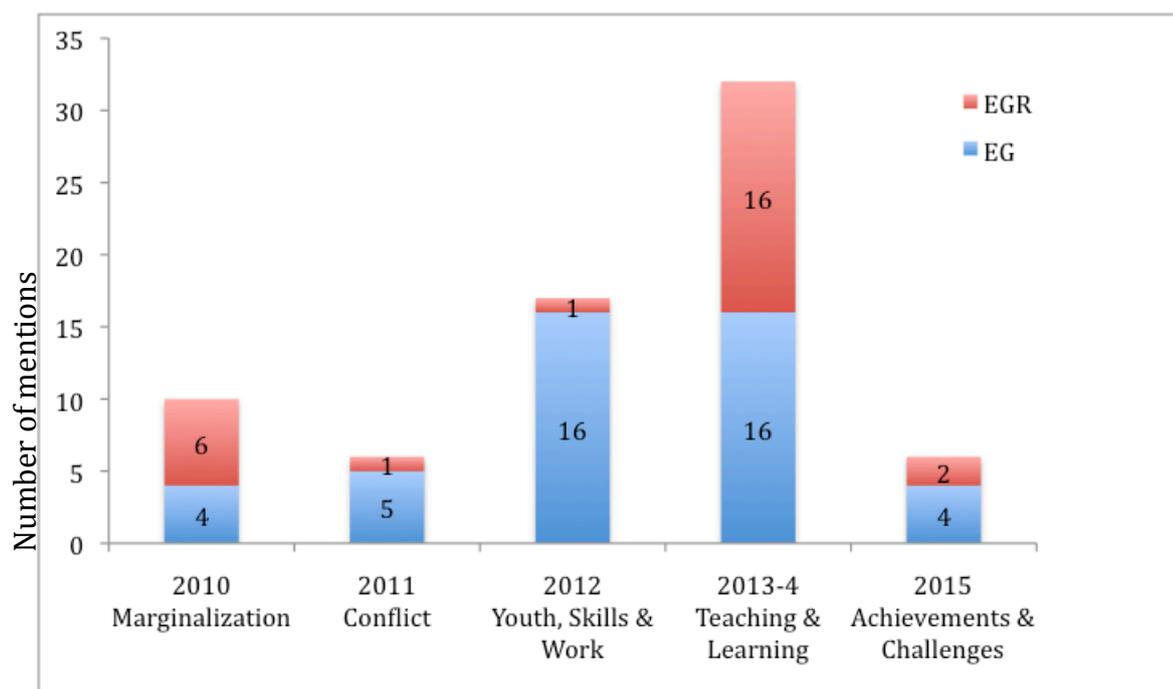
Table 3. Frequency of co-occurrences of language-in-education terms with ‘early grade’ or ‘early grade reading’

Year	GMR Theme	Language in education	EG/EGR
2002	Education for All	1	-
2003/4	Gender	0	-
2005	Quality	22	-
2006	Literacy	52	-
2007	Early Childhood	27	-
2008	Mid-term Review	39	-
2009	Governance	13	-
2010	Marginalization	30	10
2011	Conflict	45	6
2012	Youth, Skills & Work	6	17
2013/4	Teaching & Learning	26	32
2015	Achievements & Challenges	42	6

Hypothesis 2

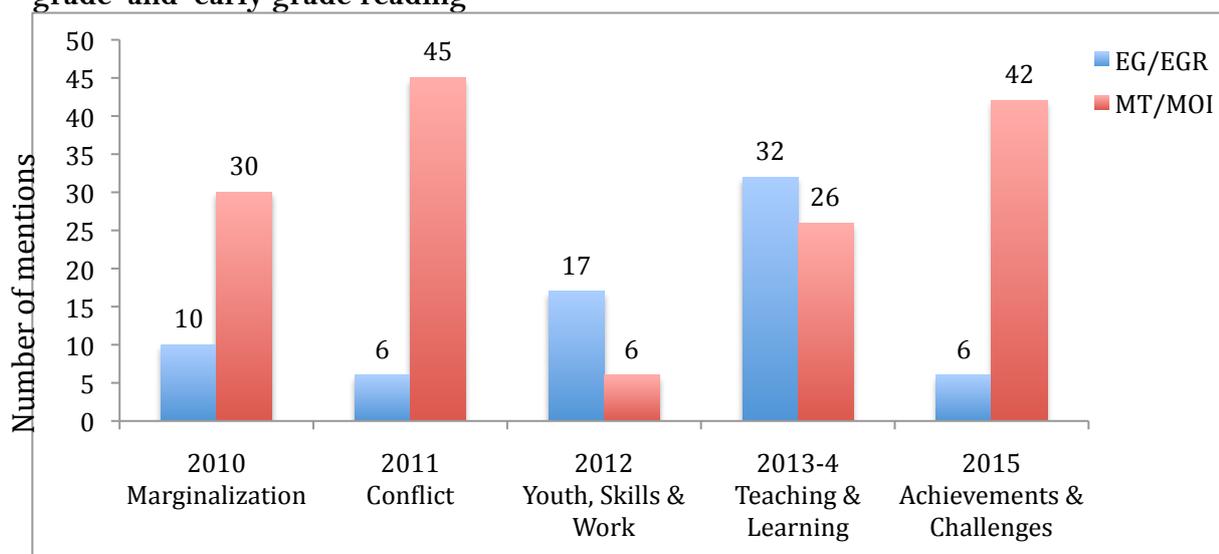
While the development and use of the Early Grade Reading Assessment began quite a few years earlier, the terms “early grade” and “early grade reading” did not enter the development discourse of the GMRs until 2010⁶. Looking at the years since 2010, mentions of EGR have increased over time, with one dip in the 2011 GMR on Conflict (Graph 2). Interestingly, 2011 was the year that language-in-education mentions were extremely high, but clearly not because of EGRA (Graph 3). Looking at the co-occurrence of terms, EGR pervaded the discourse on language and literacy between 2012 and 2014.⁷ To determine why this was, we will need more in-depth analysis of the discourse in the co-occurrences as well as the contributions made by specialists contributing background papers. Meanwhile, our coded data surrounding the co-occurrences do *not* appear to confirm the optimistic hypothesis that EGRA has brought about greater attention to language-in-education issues. Rather, they support the pessimistic hypothesis that “early grade” is entering the discourse about L1-based multilingual education, potentially working against efforts to implement more long-term, pedagogically sound approaches to MLE that build a strong foundation in the home language while using bilingual methods to help learners transfer literacy and content to additional languages.

Graph 2. Frequency of mentions of ‘early grade’ and ‘early grade reading’



⁶ USAID has been investing heavily in the assessment in the late 2000s; see e.g. http://www.ineesite.org/uploads/files/resources/EGRA_Toolkit_Mar09.pdf

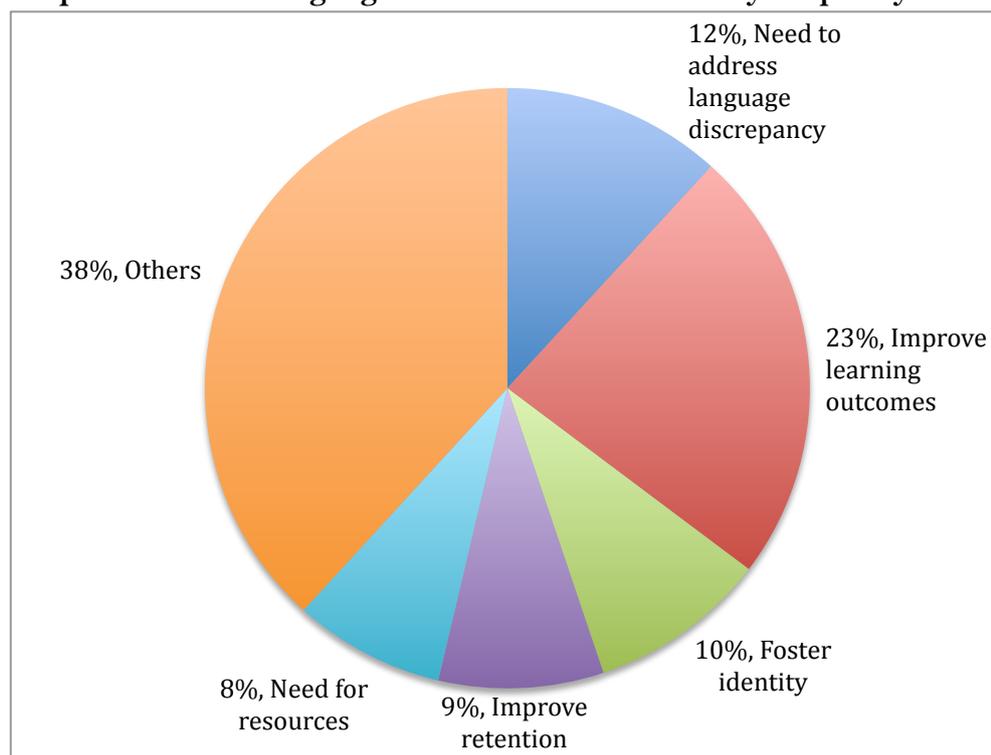
⁷ The 2015 results do not necessarily confirm the discussion in this paragraph, as there are very few mentions of EGR/EGRA. We believe this may be partially due to the limited (US-based) origins of EGRA and partially due to the fact that as a final GMR the 2015 edition covers a wide range of topics.

Graph 3. Frequency of co-occurrences of language-in-education terms with ‘early grade’ and ‘early grade reading’*Hypothesis 3*

All language-in-education mentions were categorized by code, yielding 47% simple mentions and 53% detailed mentions over all GMRs to date. Simple mentions included brief statements that acknowledged the need for learner’s own languages to enhance educational quality or for other positive effects (see Appendix 2 for an example). Detailed mentions included multiple sentences, paragraphs, or sections that discussed or corroborated the pedagogical importance of L1-based MLE (see Appendix 3). The four most frequent detailed mentions (according to the codes in Table 2 above) were *L1 to improve learning outcomes* (23%), *Need to address the home-school language discrepancy* (12%), *L1 to foster cultural identity* (10%), and *L1 to improve student retention* (9%). Others included *Need for L1-based MLE resources*, as shown in Table 4. The distribution of detailed mentions is depicted in Graph 4.

Table 4. Most frequent categories of detailed mentions ($\geq 3\%$)

<i>Coded categories for detailed mentions</i>	<i>Frequency (%)</i>
L1 to improve learning outcomes	24
Need to address the home-school language discrepancy	12
L1 to foster cultural identity	10
L1 to improve student retention	9
Need for L1-based MLE resources	8
Teacher training (need for)	6
Teacher certification (need for)	4
Improving understanding	3

Graph 4. Detailed language-in-education mentions by frequency

Our findings regarding Hypothesis 3 reveal that in fact, according to the detailed mentions, the language-in-education discourse in the GMRs is aligned with theoretically sound policies and practices, including using the L1 to improve learning outcomes (Heugh, 2011; Walter, 2013), bridging the home-school language gap (Alidou, 2011), fostering cultural identity (López, 2006), and improving retention (Vawda & Patrinos, 1999). In addition, simple mentions in the development discourse, particularly in recent years, indicate that there is an assumption that L1-based MLE is needed to improve educational quality for learners from non-dominant language communities. Since it represents quite a change since 2002, this is an intriguing aspect of the development discourse that we hope to explore in future studies.

Summary and future directions

Overall, the findings of this study do not support our more pessimistic hypothesis, though there are indications that the EGRA-related discourse may focus L1-based efforts mainly or solely on “early grades,” i.e., grades 1 and 2, at the expense of longer-term and more theoretically sound MLE approaches. Our findings are rather encouraging with regard to the positive mentions of MLE even when the surrounding discourse does not go into great detail; they are indications of an underlying assumption that L1-based MLE is desirable, and this was not necessarily the case when UNESCO began producing the GMRs in 2002.

Moving forward, we plan to scrutinize the background papers written to support the GMRs to determine the degree to which their points regarding language-in-education issues are being picked up in the final compiled GMRs. This will allow us to better understand the language and literacy discourse in educational development as represented by scholars invited to write background papers, and we will be able to make judgments about how representative the GMRs are according to the proportion and perspective of mentions in

the background papers. Part of contextualizing that study would be to look into the backgrounds of the GMR compilers to determine how objective their approaches are and how influential they may be in creating the overall development discourse.

Another possible study could be to analyze policy documents from a range of development actors like UN agencies, bilateral agencies, and NGOs to see if their thinking is in parallel with our findings on the GMRs. It may be that development professionals are aligning internationally on L1-based MLE, just as they seem to have aligned on gender issues, with the remaining concern that lip service does not generate action. The implication of our findings is that deep understandings of cross-cutting issues like language of instruction are important for educational development to be effective.

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Appendix 1. Example of individual language mentions not highlighted in our search for Hypothesis 1

“Other cases from history illustrate the interplay between language and politics. In Pakistan, the post-independence government adopted Urdu as the national language and the language of instruction in schools. This became a source of alienation in a country that was home to six major linguistic groups and fifty-eight smaller ones (Winthrop and Graff, 2010). The failure to recognize Bengali, spoken by the vast majority of the population in East Pakistan, was ‘one of the first sources of conflict within the new country, leading to student riots’ (Winthrop and Graff, 2010, p. 30). The riots gave birth to the Bengali Language Movement, a precursor to the movement that fought for the secession of East Pakistan and the creation of a new country, Bangladesh. Both countries have continued to face language-related political challenges. In Bangladesh, where Bengali is the national language, non-Bengali tribal groups in the Chittagong Hill Tracts have cited a perceived injustice over language as a factor justifying secessionist demands (Mohsin, 2003). In Pakistan, the continued use of Urdu as the language of instruction in government schools, even though it is spoken at home by less than 8% of the population, has also contributed to political tensions (Ayres, 2003; Rahman, 1997; Winthrop and Graff, 2010).”

Excerpt from 2011 Conflict GMR, pg. 183

Appendix 2. Example of language-in-education simple mention

“In ethnically diverse societies, where local language instruction plays a crucial role in securing foundation skills, teachers should learn to teach in more than one language. Teacher education programmes should also prepare teachers to teach multiple grades and ages in one classroom, and to understand how teachers’ attitudes to gender differences can affect learning outcomes.”

Excerpt from 2013/4 Teaching & Learning GMR, pg. 283

Appendix 3. Example of language-in-education detailed mention

“Teaching children in their home language offers wider advantages. Children learn best in their mother tongue, especially in the early years, and the introduction of new languages in upper primary and lower secondary school does not diminish learning achievement (Bender et al., 2005; UNESCO, 2010a). In a post-conflict context, mother tongue instruction can serve the dual purpose of tackling old grievances and creating new opportunities for effective learning.”

Excerpt from 2011 Conflict GMR, pg. 242