Language Transitioning in Multilingual Contexts

2015 Global Education Summit
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Complex Multilingual Contexts

- Most of the world is multilingual
- Most out-of-school children do not have access to schools in their own language (*UNESCO, 2012*)
- In some countries, the mother tongue languages of up to 95% of the population is not used in instruction (*Kosonen, 2005*)
- Complex multilingualism in urban "slum" communities (1/6th of the world's entire population, *UN-Habitat, 2007*)

Multilingual Literacy Outcomes

- Cannot learn to read a language you do not understand and speak
- Increasing demand for national and post-colonial language
- Documented link between the post-colonial language and socioeconomic mobility and higher wages (e.g. *Azam et al., 2011*)
- So, how do we nurture multilingual learners?

Choosing the first language

- A language the child understands and speaks well
- Mother tongue or regional language

Teaching the First Language

- Does it have an orthography?
- What is the sound structure (phonology)?

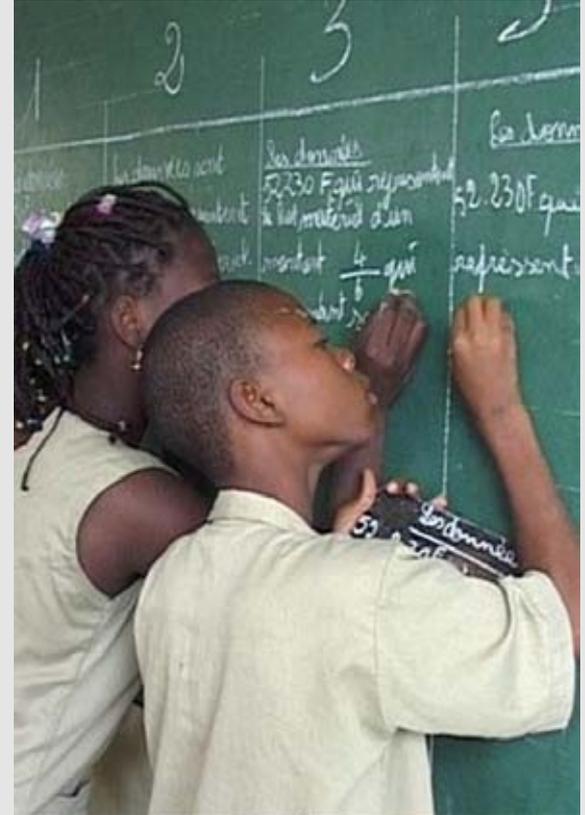| cat niña אבא	たこ	ಕ ಕ ಕ ಗ ಗ ಗ	海 橋

- Do all the letters have one only sound?

  "zikomo" /z/ /i/ /k/ /o/ /m/ /o/ vs. "enough" /i/ /n/ /u/ /f/

- How many symbols does a child have to learn?

   26 in English vs. 400+ in Kannada

- Is it visually complex?

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Teaching the second (later) language

- L1 *transfers* and *facilitates* the L2/Lx
- L1 proficiency is a pre-requisite for L2/Lx reading success
- In all language pairs
- But, how much? Do we know when there is enough?

Results from India

- There is a transfer threshold point
- About 60% on a specifically designed test
- Applicable to most of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa
- Need L1 for success in *both* L1 and L2/Lx
- Help structure more effective multilingual curricula and policies

Results from India (continued)

Percentage of students above threshold

Preliminary Implications

- Earlier does not equal better
- Introducing L2/Lx after L1 threshold significantly increases probability of success in both/all languages
- Skill-based grouping
- Harness rich linguistic resources of multilingual children to improve literacy worldwide

End of Presentation