

<b>Institution:</b> University of Cambridge		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 26		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Harnessing multilingualism in Indian primary school classrooms: practice, policy and public understanding		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> May 2016 – December 2020		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Ianthi Tsimpli	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Professor of English and Applied Linguistics	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> July 2015 to present.
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> July 2018 – December 2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>The choice of language of education in the schools of multilingual India is at the forefront of the country's National Education Policy (2020). Through its unique consortium approach involving multiple organisations in the UK and India, the MultiLila project has demonstrated that multilingualism and sociolinguistic diversity enhances children's cognition and that school learning critically depends on the child's proficiency in the medium of instruction. The project has engaged directly with teacher trainers and teachers, who, together with pupils, are the ultimate beneficiaries of the changes in practice resulting from the research. Findings have reached government officials, NGOs, policy makers, and academic institutions, raising awareness of the benefits of multilingualism in education and encouraging a shift away from English medium of instruction for all children and particularly those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Language underlies the ability to learn and develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills. In a multilingual society like India, with 22 official languages and more than 450 languages actively used, the choice of school language(s) has been a central concern of the central and the regional governments for educational, political and identity reasons (National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), 2005). The National Education Policy for India (2020) places language at the forefront of discussions. Nevertheless, several regional governments have already committed to increasing English-medium instruction in government schools with some, e.g. Andhra Pradesh, imposing English on all schools (62,000), and some offering English-medium as an option, e.g. Telangana (5,000), Karnataka (1,000), and Punjab (2,387). These decisions have no evidence base about feasibility and outcomes, and ignore the lack of proper resources to deliver this change. Thus, the current number of English-medium government schools in India is over 110,000 with only Hindi-medium schools outnumbering them (NCERT, All India School Education Survey, 2020). This rapid increase reflects the regional governments' response to societal pressure for English education – often at great cost. At the same time, so-called 'low-cost private' schools promise English-medium instruction in what is often a poorly resourced educational environment uncontrolled by education authorities. Such schools are on the increase around the country with an estimated 50% of primary school children in Delhi attending such schools. For a number of years, surveys conducted by Pratham, the largest Indian-based NGO for education, document a downward trend of already low literacy and numeracy skills for children in India (Annual Status of Education Report, 2017). Against this background, Prof Tsimpli's MultiLila project reveals the contribution of school language on lesson delivery and learning outcomes of socioeconomically disadvantaged children in multilingual India. The findings showing children's very low reading comprehension skills in English and their relatively advanced literacy skills in the regional languages directly impact teacher education, teaching practice and education policies, ultimately benefitting school children with minimal home literacy support. The MultiLila team is formed by UK- and India-based researchers, namely PI Tsimpli (Cambridge) and co-Is Szucs (Cambridge), Treffers-Daller (Reading), Marinis (Reading), Panda (JNU, Delhi), Alladi (NIMHANS, Bangalore) and Mukhopadhyay (EFLU, Hyderabad).</p>		

The research underpinning this impact case study began in May 2016, building on a close, ongoing and successful partnership with British Council India. MultiLila's novel contribution lies in the use of fourteen assessments of school skills, reasoning ability and cognitive abilities to individually study 2,500 children in Delhi, Hyderabad and Patna attending government primary schools [R1]. All children were from disadvantaged backgrounds, half of them living in slums or rural areas. Learner data is further enriched with teacher surveys and classroom observations which document striking discrepancies between the imposed medium-of-instruction and the inevitable mixing of languages in classrooms of multilingual teachers and learners [R3, R4]. Children's better school skills in the regional language compared to English suggest the urgency of the need for multilingual rather than monolingual aspirations in classrooms. The findings demonstrate very low learning outcomes in English compared to regional languages, Hindi or Telugu [R2, R4]. Furthermore, the project revealed cognitive resilience of the urban poor associated with both cognitive and school skills [R2, R4]. Although gender differences and poverty are contributing factors, the medium of instruction is the most influential predictor of learning outcomes. The project additionally identifies multilingualism and linguistic diversity in the child's environment as factors that enhance cognitive abilities, partly compensating for severe socioeconomic deprivation and lack of home literacy support [R2]. These findings contribute to the current debate about the link between multilingualism and cognition with a much needed, large evidence base from a non-western society. They demonstrate why monolingual education is not only a futile but also a damaging educational policy decision for a country where multilingualism is the norm.

Outputs of the research include a journal article [R1] presenting the project and the challenges of adapting assessment materials from research in western societies to the Global South, a journal article on the positive influence of multilingualism and sociolinguistic diversity on the cognitive abilities of children from disadvantaged backgrounds [R2], a journal article on disadvantaged children's reading comprehension challenges [R3], a book chapter on the multilingual language mixing reality of Indian classrooms and our successful teacher training programme for multilingual teaching practices [R5], and a research report on the project [R4].

### 3. References to the research

All five references are peer-reviewed and include results from the MultiLila project funded by ESRC-DfID

- [R1] **Tsimplici** I.M., L. Mukhopadhyay, J. Treffers-Daller, S. Alladi, T. Marinis, M. Panda, A. Balasubramanian & P. Sinha (2019) "Multilingualism and Multiliteracy in Primary Education in India: A discussion of some methodological challenges of an interdisciplinary research project". *Research in Comparative and International Education*, Vol.14 (1): 54-76. [DOI](#)
- [R2] **Tsimplici**, I., M. Vogelzang, A. Balasubramanian, S. Alladi, A. Reddy, M. Panda & T. Marinis (2020). Linguistic diversity, multilingualism and cognitive skills: a study of disadvantaged children in India. *Languages*, 5, 10 [DOI](#)
- [R3] Mukhopadhyay, L., Tamboli, V.S., Das, K., Balasubramanian, A., and **Tsimplici**, I. M., (Accepted version available August 2020. Published January 2021). What guides inference generation? A study of young Hindi learners studying in challenging contexts in India. *Indian Educational Review*, National Council of Educational Research and Training Journals. [DOI](#) [delayed output]
- [R4] **Tsimplici**, I.M., A. Balasubramanian, T. Marinis, M. Panda, L. Mukhopadhyay, S. Alladi & J. Treffers-Daller (2020) Research Report of a four-year study of Multilingualism, Literacy, Numeracy and Cognition in Delhi, Hyderabad and Patna. [Link](#)
- [R5] R. Mathew, A. Lightfoot, L. Mukhopadhyay & I.**Tsimplici** (in press) "Multilingual practices in Indian classrooms: Pedagogical and policy implications for English medium contexts". In L. Adinolfi & Usree Bhattacharya (Eds.) *Global lessons from multilingual education in South Asia: at the intersection of policy and practice*. Routledge series in Language and Content Integrated Teaching and Plurilingual Education. [delayed output]

**Funding:**

\* ESRC-DFID project (Grant Ref: ES/N010345/1) – Multilingualism and Multiliteracy: Raising learning outcomes in challenging contexts in primary schools across India. PI: Prof. Ianthi Maria Tsimpli. May 2016 –April 2020; GBP558,897

\* GCRF Impact Acceleration Account (RG76702): “Harnessing multilingualism in primary school classrooms in India: professional development and training for teachers in government schools”. January-March 2019; GBP12,531

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)**Impact on educational practice through professional training**

It became clear to the MultiLila team that teachers in India need further input and support to plan and deliver lessons which make more purposeful use of children’s language resources and in which their students are more actively engaged for learning. The team delivered a training programme for 20 teachers in Hyderabad (February 2019) on the use of multilingual approaches and effective teaching methods, followed by ongoing mentoring, and produced a series of classroom films demonstrating the use of multilingual approaches in the classroom, for public consumption. The response from the teachers was overwhelmingly positive, with many stating that they had not previously considered the issues discussed, particularly in relation to multilingualism. Some teachers reported that they were particularly interested in adopting some of the teaching methodology they had seen demonstrated both in the workshop sessions and in the video content that was employed during the training [E1]

One teacher commented: *‘I understand now that balancing of both languages helps the learners to understand and it is ok for the students to use L1 to respond. [...] We understood from the workshop that we could have better learning only if their won [sic] languages can be used effectively’* (Teacher 5). The estimated number of learners who are benefitting from improved teaching practices as a result of this training and mentoring process in this school year is 1,750, given that each teacher has at least 35 students in their class. We also have evidence that the teachers are actively sharing their learning with others in their schools, for example: *‘I used to use Hindi or Telugu to explain certain concepts but never thought it could be formally used to enhance learning [...] I never knew that there could be strategies and stages of the lesson that can incorporate L1 in a structured way. I shared the workshop details with all my school colleagues, and they all appreciated the approach and agreed it could be done in their classes too.’* (Teacher 4). [E1].

The impact of this activity is further amplified by the development of the series of classroom films made by teachers who participated in the training, and who benefitted so significantly that they agreed to share the new methods and techniques with their colleagues across India via these videos [E2]. These are made freely available via the project’s website and via the University of Cambridge website and the British Council and Language and Learning Foundation networks – both are MultiLila project partners. The classroom films also complement a related publication that is produced by the British Council in conjunction with the University of South Australia, which will enable even greater reach and significance of this initiative.

**Informing NGO multilingual policy and practices**

Through its involvement in the MultiLila project, the British Council has strengthened its internal understanding and therefore external policy and advocacy work around the important area of the promotion of multilingual education, one of British Council’s central aims [E3]. The British Council has worked for 72 years in India, serving education in multiple ways. They have worked with 21 regional governments and trained over 9,000 master trainers, who have gone on to train 1,000,000 teachers of English since 2007. These teachers teach more than 35,000,000 learners each year. Thus, they have currently reached over 450,000,000 young people since 2007. Prof Tsimpli’s project has influenced the British Council’s position paper on EMI in primary education in low- and middle-income countries [E4, E5]. According to the Director East and Northeast India for the British Council, *‘MultiLila project has had significant impact on British Council India’s work in the domains of English language training and teacher education.*

*At a global level, the key findings of the research support our language in education policy and provides a rich base of data-driven evidence for mother tongue based multilingual education at the foundational stages of school.* [E3] The MultiLiLa project findings have contributed to a shift towards promoting multilingual education as part of the British Council's advocacy and external policy rather than promoting English only at all costs. The project's findings and recommendations (see short report) are distributed by the British Council to state governments and to teachers / teacher educators through webinars and opinion pieces [E5, E10]. UNESCO's Learning Portal invited Tsimpli and Lightfoot from British Council to create a blog post on the project's findings and recommendations [E6].

### **Impact on public understanding and government policy**

The project has contributed to government policy changes relating to language of instruction and implementation of the new National Education Policy (NEP) directives which promote home languages as mediums of instruction. At the launch of the NEP in August 2020, in the presence of India's Prime Minister and Education Minister, an invited speaker said, *'the findings of the MultiLiLa project support the data and evidence for the provisions of mother-tongue based multilingual education [...] that National Education Policy has recommended.'* [E3] Prof. Tsimpli was invited to contribute to a policy document for the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) on the language of education [E7] pp. 2-88. The project's evidence base is included in this document to support recommendations against English-medium instruction in primary schools and in favour of multilingual lesson delivery. Public understanding has also been influenced by the project's findings: Prominent Indian thinker and cultural activist, Ganesh Devy, describes the shift proposed by the project as *'a new revolution in Indian schooling'* [E7] p. 90. The director of the Language and Learning Foundation, an NGO partner organisation working alongside government stakeholders throughout India, explains how project findings are already being used by the organisation as evidence and provide a valuable *'basis for a wider discussion on MLE in the country'* [E8]. This change in understanding is being pursued by involving the press and media in project dissemination events, publishing opinion pieces and creating collaterals to share project findings and their implications targeting specific stakeholder groups.

### **Increasing understanding for educators, policy makers and the public**

Two conferences were held to discuss with teachers and policy makers the problems of mis-managed multilingualism in many Indian schools. The first event, *The Languages of Education in Multilingual India: Exploring effects on reading and mathematics* (Delhi, July 2018) attracted 150 delegates including teachers, head teachers, government leaders (officials), and NGO/Foundation representatives. The event explored the need for good practices in multilingual education strategies and policy in India, and aimed to transfer good practices from India to other multilingual societies with a similar colonial past where English-medium instruction is government policy. The event also provided an opportunity for knowledge exchange with stakeholders in India. Representation from the Directorate of Education, New Delhi, the Quality Council of India, NCERT, private and non-profit education organizations (e.g. ArkVentures, Peepul, a.o.), publishers and private and government schools participated. The team explored ways of reaching additional audiences (e.g. parents), via input from the invited audience. The event highlighted better school skills in regional languages as compared to English raising implications for multilingual instead of monolingual aspirations in the classroom. Most feedback providers (88%) agreed or strongly agreed that they acquired new knowledge and skills [E9] p.5. Six media representatives attended the event covering the research's recommendations [E10]. The project's findings have been presented at international conferences focusing on teaching and policy strategies including the Inclusion, mobility and multilingual education conference coordinated by UNESCO and the British Council in Bangkok, Thailand (September 2019).

The second event, *Multilingualism in education: evidence in practice and policy*, (Hyderabad, February 2020) was attended by 206 participants including teachers, head teachers, government officials and education council representatives. The first two days addressed teachers and teacher educators/trainers. Participants were informed of the project's findings

and policy recommendations, which served as discussion points during workshop-based activities. Feedback showed that 93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they acquired new knowledge and skills [E9] p.5. Day three was dedicated to policy and was attended by the Vice Chancellor of EFLU, the British Council Country Director, consultants and head teachers.

A joint press release was agreed between the University of Cambridge, EFLU and the British Council to announce the event and the main findings of the research in English, Hindi and Telugu. On day three, the EFLU PR office contacted the Press Information Bureau in Hyderabad (PIB) to disseminate information to the print, electronic and new media [E10]. The Director of the British Council in East and Northeast India co-authored the publication of an opinion piece in an English language newspaper [E10] p.19-20. Following the event, the PI met with the Minister of Education of Telangana state to share the project's findings and policy recommendations. The Minister has agreed to support further work by the project team on government schools for teacher training and interventions at a large scale, subject to funding availability [E7]. An interview with Prof. Ajit Mohanty, one of the project's consultants and a world-renowned expert on multilingual education, on the national television channel of the NCERT referred to the findings of the project focusing on the benefits of mother-tongue education for cognitive development [E10]. Following publication of the new NEP (2020), the VC of EFL University spoke of the MultiLiLa project findings at the Conclave on Transformational Reforms on Higher Education under NEP [E7].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] Teacher feedback: from follow-on telephone calls after the training in Hyderabad, Feb 2019 and recorded discussions after teaching observations (quotes p7 & p9).

[E2] Descriptions and screenshots showing viewing figures of three classroom films found on these websites: [University of Cambridge, Multilingualism and Multiliteracy](#), [British Council](#)

[E3] Testimonial from Director India, British Council 28.01.2020 and email from Director East and Northeast India 16.12.2020

[E4] British Council publications: *British Council India Report 2020*; Anderson and Lightfoot, (2019) pp. 2-16; *The school education system in India: An overview*. British Council pp. 17-76 especially p. 49; Simpson, (2019) *English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries: a British Council perspective* pp. 77-112.

[E5] British Council webinar invite 16.10.2020 and MultiLiLa Project report 2020

[E6] NGO blogs: Southwell, *Multiple perspectives on multilingualism*, British Council, 12.08.2016 [link](#); Tsimpli & Lightfoot, *India: investigating multilingual classrooms*, UNESCO 25.11.2020 [link](#).

[E7] Policy and public understanding: NCERT Working Paper on Language Education November 2020 pp. 2-88; Letter from Founder of the Bhasha Research Centre & Chairman of The People's Linguistic Survey of India pp.89-91; Letter approved by Minister of Education, State Government Telangana p. 92; Educational Conclave poster and programme pp.93-99

[E8] Testimonial from Director, Language and Learning Foundation, India

[E9] Feedback from events: Conference in Delhi, July 2018; Teacher Training, Hyderabad February 2019; Teaching and policy event Hyderabad February 2020.

[E10] Press coverage: *The Hindu Businessline*, 12.07.2018, 'Delhi govt hopes to gain key insights from British Council's multilingualism project'; *The Indian express*, 02.08.2018, 'English important, but not at cost of mother tongue: British Council'; *The Indian Express*, 25.11.2018 'English medium schools may not benefit India's poorest students: study'; *Businessworld*, 02.12.2018, 'Language Matters In Science And Maths In Primary Schools' (opinion piece by Tsimpli); NCERT Interview *Language Education: Other tongue? Mother Tongue?* 20.02.2020; Hindi Milap, 13.02.2020; Prajapaksham, 13.02.2020; Telangana Today, Education Telangana, 17.02.2020; *The Economic Times*, 17.10.2020, 'Honing multilingualism is smart: Using wealth of India's languages in the classroom'; *US News*, 28.09.2020, 'India's Schools Aren't Speaking in 1 Voice' [link](#); *India Today*, 'Medium of Instruction and Learning: finding balance with multilingualism' (opinion piece by Tsimpli), 24.12.2020 [link](#).