

Mother Tongue Based - Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

Information Sheet



Disclaimer

For the terms used in this article, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) refers to the country and Burmese refers to the language.

[Creating Visible Impact: Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education](#)

MTB-MLE refers to an educational approach, whether formal or informal, that integrates the mother tongue (including language and culture) along with additional languages in the classroom setting. Students commence their educational journey in the language they comprehend most effectively—their mother tongue—and establish a solid groundwork in this language before advancing to learn other languages. Quality education is often restricted or made unavailable to ethnic minority groups. MTB-MLE is one way to enhance sustainable education and respect indigenous rights by preserving ethnic languages. The Ministry of Education in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) permits minorities to have only one hour



per week dedicated to 'Mother Tongue Based Multilingual Education'. The central Myanmar language policy foresees the predominant use of the Burmese language. However, until recently, this approach was not part of kindergarten and preschool education because staff members were unfamiliar with the methodology.



WEAVE trainer Tharamu Hsar Shee explaining the foundations of MTBMLE

The MTB-MLE teaching approach applied in WEAVE's Early Childhood Education aims to uphold the diversity of languages spoken by children while strategically reorganizing the process and sequence of language acquisition. In our approach to teaching children, we emphasize a holistic method that considers language acquisition and the strategic organization of the learning process. Teaching a mother tongue encompasses far more than memorizing vocabulary; it entails fostering a deep understanding of language in context. For young learners, this means associating the name of an object with its function and context. Essentially, children are encouraged to weave new words into narratives, engaging in dialogues with their peers to express ideas and experiences. This approach aims to cultivate critical thinking and evaluative skills from the outset.



During the foundational year of preschool (ages 4-5), the curriculum strongly emphasizes the development of the mother tongue. Subsequently, in the second year (age 5-6), we introduce a second language, such as Burmese, to further enrich the linguistic repertoire of the children. Concurrently, we gradually integrate English into the curriculum, recognizing its importance in a global context.

Culturally relevant stories, songs, poems, and 'busy-pictures' are central to the teaching methodology. These tools serve as dynamic aids in language acquisition, offering rich contexts for learning. In particular, 'busy-pictures' depict cultural traditions, environments, and activities, allowing children to engage with and describe scenes using newly acquired vocabulary. Through this multi-faceted approach, we aim to create an immersive and stimulating learning environment that nurtures linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding in young learners. Recent assessments indicate that the implementation of MTB-MLE fosters an interactive learning environment, leading to increased engagement and participation among children. Additionally, teachers have reported a noticeable boost in their confidence levels in delivering instruction over the past few years.



Learning with a 'busy picture'



Learning with **Bloom's Taxonomy**: remember, understand, apply, analyze, evaluate, create

The journey toward integrating MTB-MLE initially presented challenges, particularly as some parents questioned the value of teaching the mother tongue, given its prominence in daily household communication. Remarkably, many parents have since revised their perspectives on this matter. The active promotion of Kayah (*Karenni Site 1*) or Karen (*Karenni Site 2*) languages in schools not only serves to revitalize these languages but also bolsters their security within the community. Furthermore, MTB-MLE is increasingly recognized as a valuable tool for addressing the accumulation of trauma resulting from the protracted conflict in Myanmar. Recently introduced initiatives in partnership with WEAVE, such as Ethno-Arts, offer a proactive strategy for confronting intergenerational trauma.





Q “The children have enlightened us their parents and the education service providers, especially their teachers and the leaders of the Karenni Education Department, that the best way for them to start learning is to first speak and understand their mother tongue which is being used as the language of teaching and learning instruction.” – **Saya Bu Reh, Director KNED**



Finding recognition: The process behind the implementation of MTB-MLE

Before 2022, there was no 'language policy' for education and no uniform curriculum for mother tongue education. In the educational institutions (preschool, kindergarten, and school), the 1st (Karenni) and 2nd (Burmese) languages were mixed and taught without a language concept. WEAVE's hypothesis that MTB-MLE is revolutionary and should be integrated into the learning and education system by the Karenni Education Department was based on the consistent results of pre-tests (baseline) conducted at the start of the school year in June 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 and corresponding post-tests (assessment) in 2022.

The project WEAVE II in cooperation with the German donor BMZ, implemented a comprehensive approach by applying 100% MTB-MLE techniques. This involved training 77 Karenni and Karen teachers who taught in 13 preschools/kindergartens for children aged 3-6 years, as well as providing instruction to 16 trainers and coordinators stationed across 3 refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border. The pre-test results of all children admitted in preschools (Class B) at the beginning of the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years concluded an average of 32.22% mother tongue language proficiency. By the conclusion of the school year in March 2023, the post-test assessment revealed an impressive 82% mastery and fluency in the Kayah and Karen mother tongues.

Furthermore, 100% of the preschool children who completed their classroom Instruction during the March 2023 school year have been successfully admitted to formal education at the primary school level during the June 2023 school enrolment. During the Advocacy meeting with Karenni Education authorities in November 2023, Khu Bu Reh, the Director of the Karenni Education Department, noted a high level of performance among children attending KG1 and Grade 1, particularly those who had previously participated in pre-schools with MTBMLE.



Navigating Change: Karenni Education Department Embraces Innovative Language Policy



During the series of monitoring visits of the WEAVE MTBMLE team in 2023, they found that all 12 Karenni schools continued to utilize the standard MTB-MLE curriculum which was approved by the Karenni Education Department in 2022. The Karenni Ministry of Education has officially approved adopting a full MTB-MLE implementation in early learning – pre-school in 2022. In 2023, the following languages will be officially used in the teaching and learning instructions in the Karenni schools:

1. **KSite1** – Kayah 1st language, Burmese 2nd language, English 3rd language
2. **KSite2** – Karen 1st language, Burmese 2nd language, English 3rd language, and Kayah 4th language.

The proposal was forwarded in May 2022 to the Karenni Ministry of Education through the Karenni Education Department. In 2023, the language policy was adopted as follows:



Language 1 (L1)

Pre-school: Kayah in KSite1 and Karen in KSite2

Language 2 (L2) - Introduction

Kindergarten 1 (transition) – Burmese in KSite1 and KSite2

In summary, progress has been made accordingly. The Karenni Education Department has approved an enhanced Early Childhood Development-MTBMLE curriculum and teacher's guide, that is currently used as the foundational alignment for the Basic Education Curriculum. Moreover, the Karenni Education Department has adopted MTB-MLE and included it in the Grade 1-3 teaching instruction. The impact of the ECD-MTB-MLE inspired the adoption of MTB-MLE in the Karenni Education system.



Q“In 2023, I found that children admitted in Kindergarten and Grade 1 Class who attended the WEAVE-managed pre-schools utilizing MTBMLE curriculum are performing exceptionally well in school than those who did not. Noticeable are their high level of positive and active classroom participation. They also demonstrate very good social interaction with their peers. At home (I also have a grandson who attended MTBMLE in pre-school), I observed my grandson to have acquired good and positive discipline and become diligent in doing his homework. He really enjoyed learning MTBMLE and was even teaching us at home about the MTBMLE lessons he learns from school. This teaching and learning technique/approach should be continued in Primary School (at least up to Grade 6) to ensure that children’s positive and high learning outcomes are sustained”.

- November 2023, Khu Bu Reh, the Director of the Karenni Education Department



Creative Learning: Physical and Emotional Advancement through MTB-MLE

By 2023, approximately 80% of the 2,000 preschool and kindergarten children have demonstrated fluency in their mother tongue, as evidenced by pre and post-test results. Moreover, they have achieved age-appropriate developmental milestones, facilitating a smooth transition to formal education. During monitoring of the Early Childhood Development- MTB-MLE project, it was found that more than 80% of the MTB-MLE children enrolled in the 2023 school year have been observed to have met their developmental milestones, especially in their native language – Kayah and Karen. The teachers found out that the preschool and KG1 children who attended MTB-MLE had a significantly easier transition to formal education than those children who did not attend MTB-MLE during preschool and kindergarten.

In the wake of the successful WEAVE II MTB-MLE advocacy to the Karenni Ministry of Education in 2022, a policy statement was issued by the Ministry to adopt and implement MTB-MLE as an educational system and approach across all Karenni regions. This includes implementation in refugee camps, internally displaced persons (IDP) areas, and in Kayah State, Myanmar. This development is a milestone for educational creativity and the facilitation of ethnic language preservation. MTB-MLE is by no means a new invention as many ethnic groups around the world use it. The ongoing advocacy and institutionalization are therefore a vital next step to sustain purposeful language learning in ethnic minority communities even amid protracted conflict.

