Reconceptualising Multilingual Education Beyond Monolingual Ideologies

Grace Sangkim[1], Dr. Kabita Kumari[2]

[1] Research Scholar, Department of Education, Mizoram University, Aizawl-796004
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of Education, Mizoram University, Aizawl-796004.

Abstract:

Multilingual education especially mother-tongue-based (L1) is crucial for achieving quality, inclusive education , and empowering individuals, and bridging divides across other goals, to ensure that no one is left behind, improves learning outcomes, and promote cultural understanding. UNESCO and NEP 2020 lead efforts recognising language diversity as vital for human dignity and sustainable development, and integrates language skills with global goals in teaching. The escalating linguistic heterogeneity necessitates a fundamental re-evaluation of educational paradigms, compelling a shift from entrenched monoglossic instructional ideologies to asset-oriented Multilingual Education (MLE). This study lays down three main analytic objectives through a methodical, non-empirical synthesis of the existing literature, i.e., the critical definitions of multilingual education and multilingualism within the academic sphere; to deconstruct the operational dualism of subtractive and additive MLE models; and to analyse interdependence hypothesis (CUP) and threshold hypothesis as the foundational framework for effective multilingual education (MLE). The study argues that the frequent failure of MLE models is not a consequence of theoretical weakness, but a result of systematic policy incoherence and the pervasive influence of subtractive pedagogical practices that undermine the development of strong academic language proficiency in the first language (L1). It further contends that effective MLE is ethically obligatory, as it requires global shift towards linguistic diversity as human capital and moving from mere tolerance to proactive support in terms of the languages. This reconceptualisation foregrounds equity, epistemic justice, and learner agency, positioning schools as sites for sustaining linguistic ecologies while fostering cognitive development, social cohesion, and long-term educational resilience in multilingual societies.

Keywords: Multilingual Education (MLE), Multilingualism, First Language (L1), Interdependence Hypothesis, Threshold Hypothesis

1. Introduction

One of the most significant characteristics of the educational landscape in the 21st century is the linguistic diversity present all over the world, which is a direct consequence of globalisation, migration, and the political recognition of minority rights. Nevertheless, in many countries, educational institutions are still built in a way that they are based on the linguistic homogeneity ideal of the 19th-century nation-state. This norm of monolingualism has a very negative effect on the educational attainment of linguistic minority students, leading, as Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) puts it, to "linguistic genocide" the gradual extinction of a child's L1. This situation has a strong relation to educational inequity, cognition, and access to academic content.

UNESCO highlights that multilingual education supported by mother-tongue instruction is necessary for the realisation of inclusive, equitable learning and sustainable development, and mentions that the absence of such language instruction in a country is the main reason for millions of learners in different parts of the world being unable to attend school where they understand the language and that the instruction in the mother tongue facilitates comprehension, literacy, and transition to other languages (UNESCO, 2025a, 2025b). Along the same lines of these global principles, India's NEP 2020 very clearly states that "wherever possible, the medium of instruction until at least Grade 5, but preferably till Grade 8 and beyond, will be the home language/mother tongue/local language/regional language," and that "high quality textbooks, including in science, will be made available in home languages/mother tongue" (Ministry of Education, 2020, paras. 4.11–4.12). Furthermore, the policy states that the trilingual formula will "promote multilingualism" and guarantee that "no language will be imposed on any State," with language choices being in line with the constitutional provisions and the situation of the learners (Ministry of Education, 2020, para. 4.13). The combined effect of these directives from UNESCO and NEP 2020 is to express a policy that requires to change the educational system from the use of a single language to the use of multiple languages that would support the linguistic rights, improve the learning outcomes, and solve the problems of inequities that exist in linguistically diverse classrooms.

2. Objectives

1. To provide a critically informed explanation of multilingual education and multilingualism in the context of education.
2. To deconstruct between subtractive and additive bilingualism.
3. To analyse the rationale of the interdependence hypothesis (CUP) and the threshold hypothesis as the cognitive cornerstones for effective MLE.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, non-empirical research design. Analysis was conducted in two stages. First, the constructs of multilingual education (MLE) and multilingualism were examined to distinguish between subtractive and additive MLE models. Second, theoretical synthesis was undertaken to integrate Cummins' interdependence hypothesis and threshold hypothesis into a cohesive framework explaining how L1 maintenance supports the development of L2 academic and cognitive ability.

4. Conceptualisation and Approaches to Multilingual Education (MLE)

Multilingual Education (MLE) is not merely the teaching of multiple languages as separate subjects rather, it represents a comprehensive pedagogical philosophy in which learners' full linguistic repertoires are recognised as valuable cognitive, sociological, and psychological resources (language as resource) than as obstacles to learning (language as problem) (Albaba, 2025; Myklevold & Bjørke 2025). MLE aims to develop and sustain proficiency in learners' first language (L1 or mother tongue) concurrently with the acquisition of additional languages, often the language(s) of schooling (L2 or L3). There is a constant stream of research that points out that the first-language (L1) development, if strong enough, would the main reason for a second or third language learning through the process of cross-linguistic transfer and it could facilitate deeper understanding of concepts in a variety of subjects (Moraleda et al., 2024; Hofer et al., 2025). This multilingualism approach with L1 as the basis is a complete opposite of the subtractive models which led to the replacement of mother tongue with the dominant language and consequently the cognitive and educational disadvantages. Maintaining the first language while building proficiency in other languages is a dual focus of multilingual education (MLE) that not only multiplies linguistic competence but also fosters flexibility, metalinguistic awareness and good thinking skills (Spechtenhauser & Jessner, 2024). Furthermore, the fact that MLE

gives importance to the linguistic and cultural identities of the learners means that it also takes part in the development of their bicultural and multicultural competence and thus it has a positive impact on their self-concept and socio-emotional development (Alhassan et al., 2025). In classrooms, MLE means implementing educational strategies which take students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds into the curriculum, promoting meaningful translanguaging and building cross-linguistic connections, and setting up inclusive learning environments that celebrate linguistic diversity (Bailey et al., 2025).

Table 1: Approaches to Multilingual Education (MLE)

Type of Multilingual Education	Outline	Key Features
Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education(MTB-MLE)	Instruction begins in students' mother tongue (L1) while additional languages (L2, L3) are gradually introduced.	Strong foundation in L1 used to bridge to L2/L3; aims for permanent multilingualism and biliteracy.
Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE)	L1 is used as a temporary bridge until students can function in the dominant L2.	Subtractive model; L1 is phased out once L2 proficiency is reached; goal is assimilation.
Maintenance/ Developmental Bilingual Education	Both L1 and L2 are maintained and developed throughout the entire duration of schooling.	Promotes "additive bilingualism"; values the mother tongue as much as the second language(L2).
Two-Way/Dual-Language Programs	A classroom mix of native speakers and learners of a second language study together in both languages.	Balanced mix of students; goal is high level of proficiency and cultural empathy for all.
Immersion Programs	Students (usually majority language speakers) learn content in a second language.	Enrichment model; can be total or partial; aims for L2 fluency without L1 loss.
Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)	Subjects (e.g., Science, Math) are taught in a foreign language to learn both the subject and the language.	Context-driven; common in secondary education; focus on "the 4 Cs": Content, Communication, Cognition, and Culture.
Heritage Language Programs	Programs designed for students to learn or maintain a language spoken by their family or ancestors.	Focuses on cultural identity and reconnecting with a "lost" or minority home language.
Multilingual Education for Social Inclusion	Flexible programs designed to support marginalised, migrant, or displaced groups.	Recognises multiple local languages; uses translanguaging to ensure no student is excluded due to language.
Sources: Cummins (2000); García (2009); Lambert & Tucker (1972); Lindholm-Leary (2001); Mohanty (2009); Fishman (2001); Coyle et al. (2010).		

5. The Definition of Multilingualism and the Educational Context

5.1. What is Multilingualism?

Essentially, multilingualism, on the one hand, is the ability of a person (or a group) to communicate fluently in more than two languages. Nonetheless, for educational purposes, it is a more refined and elaborate definition that goes beyond the simple language counting approach.

• **Individual Multilingualism (Psycholinguistic):** Concentrates on the proficiency and the patterns of the learner's usage. It acknowledges that the skills in different languages are sometimes specific like, strong L1 for home/social use and strong L2 for academic/professional use.

• **Societal Multilingualism (Sociolinguistic):** This implies that there are several language groups in a given area. Education should be in line with this situation, recognising that some languages have higher status and more power than others.

5. 2. The Educational Context

In the educational context, multilingualism signifies the whole complex, non-linear interaction and application of the learner's linguistic resources for the purposes of communication, cognitive development, and academic success (Otheguy et al., 2019). It indicates a change in the teaching approach where the boundary between languages is opened up, allowing for translanguaging through the use of languages than separating it. Besides, multilingualism still needs to be considered in education as a social and political issue (Tannenbaum & Sohamy, 2023). Each language in this world is not just a tool, it's a part of the power relations that determine who gets what knowledge, who is considered academically successful, and who gets to move up the social ladder. The most spoken languages, which are sometimes colonial , are usually the ones that are employed for teaching and testing, leaving the students' native languages out at the very least, not fully involved. Such a situation can lead to the creation of subtractive educational models where the learning of additional languages is done at the cost of the learner's first language(s), thereby affecting their identity, motivation, and learning outcomes negatively (Russell et al., 2024; Schvarcz & Warren, 2025). Moreover, speaking multiple languages in education is a process of development and depends on the situation. The proficiency levels in different languages change according to the amount of exposure, the purpose, and the area where they are used. Consequently, educational systems should not think in terms of "native-like" competence as a single standard and should set flexible thresholds that recognise the functional and strategic use of languages.

6. Cognitive Science of MLE

6. 1. Interdependence Hypothesis (Common Underlying Proficiency – CUP)

The interdependence hypothesis , articulated by Jim Cummins, is the ideal and the most significant principle in bilingual/multilingual education and it actually, legitimates the Multilingual Education (MLE) method. The theory states that the acquisition of academic and cognitive skills in one language fosters the acquisition of those same skills in another language. Cummins reveals this connection by reference to the concept of Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP), implying a common cognitive system that pre-exists and goes beyond the surface features of different languages. Despite the differences among languages in terms of vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, they rely on the same underlying mental processes for understanding, reasoning and learning (Cummins 1971, 1981, 2000, 2021).

More importantly, the hypothesis posits that the academic and conceptual knowledge is stored in the CUP and not in any particular language. The concepts of mathematical reasoning, scientific principles, and even abstract ideas like democracy are learned once and can be immediately accessed through different languages (Granados et al.,2023; Fegher 2023). A learner acquiring these concepts in their first language (L1) will not need to relearn them in a second language (L2) instead they simply assign new linguistic labels to already acquired ideas. This process, referred to as cognitive transfer

enables the learner to utilise the benefits of the existing knowledge and skills from L1 in L2, thereby making the additional language learning easier and more connected (Hofer & Jessner, 2025; Šifrar Kalan et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024; Zhang, 2024).

6.2. Threshold Hypothesis

The threshold hypothesis can be interpreted as the idea in second language acquisition (SLA) that a certain level of proficiency (threshold) is required in a language (or languages) for a person to attain cognitive advantages and to prevent negative consequences. The implication here is that the cognitive and educational advantages of multilingualism depends on the proficiency levels achieved by the learner in each language. It supports the continuous development of students' first language (L1) concurrently with the second language (L2). A strong base in L1 paves the way for the acquisition of L2 through the notion of Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP), which indicates that academic skills and knowledge are transferred between languages once a certain level of L2 proficiency is obtained. The L1 must be maintained long enough to establish a strong foundation (crossing the first threshold), which then acts as the powerhouse for developing L2 (crossing the second threshold).

• **First Threshold:** The minimum level of L1 proficiency required to avoid the negative cognitive effects (e.g., confusion, academic delay) associated with subtractive bilingualism. Failure to cross this threshold results in educational vulnerability.

• **Second Threshold:** A high level of proficiency in both L1 and L2, leading to "balanced bilingualism" and the realisation of the additive cognitive benefits (superior executive function, metalinguistic awareness, etc.).

6.3. Deconstructing Subtractive vs. Additive Dichotomy

The most critical variable determining MLE outcomes is whether it operates under a subtractive or additive philosophy. This distinction is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Critical Deconstruction of MLE Models

Model	Impact on Interdependence Hypothesis (CUP)	Impact onThreshold Hypothesis	Long- Term Academic Outcome
Transitional (Subtractive)	Undermine CUP: L1 CALP is not fully developed before its withdrawal, thus limiting the shared conceptual foundation available for L2 transfer.	Violates the First Threshold: Students often fail to reach the minimum proficiency necessary to avoid cognitive deficits, leading to academic vulnerability.	Low L1 lietercay, weak L2 CALP, limited acdemic opportunity, and high risk of semilingualism..
Maintenance (Additive)	Validate CUP: L1 CALP is robustly developed and utilised as the primary engine for L2 acquisition, maximising conceptual transfer.	Aims for the Second Threshold: Students are supported in achieving high proficiency in both L1 and L2, leading to advanced cognitive benefits.	High literacy, enhanced executive function, strong content knowledge acquisition , and higher long- term achievement.

Note: CALP = Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency

7. Failure of Transitional Models

Transitional models connects closely to multilingual education because students in multilingual settings often experience significant changes as they navigate multiple languages and cultural contexts. In educational approaches, transition models involves learners initially receiving limited instruction in their first language (L1) before being rapidly moved into the dominant language of schooling. The primary objective of these models is not sustained bilingualism but the eventual replacement of the home language with the dominant language. For this reason, transitional models are often mischaracterised as multilingual education, despite their fundamentally assimilationist and subtractive orientation. "Transition can be understood as the internal process in the mind that occurs when students experience change and move from the familiar to the unknown, responding to cultural, social, and cognitive challenges"(Perry & Allard, 2003, p. 75; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005, p. 76).

Analytically, transitional models fail because it contradict key principles of bilingual development, particularly Cummins' Threshold Hypothesis. This hypothesis asserts that learners must attain a sufficient level of proficiency in their L1 before its cognitive and academic skills can effectively transfer to a second language (L2). In transitional models, the first language (L1) instruction, which is the most important source of support for learners, is withdrawn before they reach the critical proficiency level. Consequently, the students lose their most effective cognitive and linguistic resource at the exact time when it is most required for academic learning. The removal of L1 disrupts the learners' processing of complex academic content through the weakly developed second language (L2), reducing comprehension and limiting the thinking skills required for higher-order processes. Instead of fostering bilingualism, transitional programs are often seen as causing a decline in proficiency in both languages, because the students cannot acquire advanced academic language skills in either of the languages. "They would have the time needed (6–7 years) to develop their L1 literacy skills and without being expected to transition in a specific period, develop their L2/L3 literacy skills to the degree that allows them to gain knowledge and express themselves with their complete linguistic repertoires" (Iwasaki & Benson, 2025, p. 65). This result leads to continuous academic underperformance and has a greater effect on the students who are linguistically minoritised. To a large extent, transitional models are the means through which linguistic and cultural loss happens. It in fact, strengthen the hierarchy favouring the dominant language and do not allow the learners' home languages to be used. The first language is still considered a temporary support, not a long-lasting educational resource; hence, the inequality is embedded in policy and practice. Therefore, educational achievements are impeded and the values of equity and inclusion intended by multilingual education are undermined.

8. Policy Critique and Its Pedagogical Implications

8.1. Policy-Practice Disconnect

The biggest hindrance to the successful MLE implementation is the disconnect between policy and practice. Governments may often endorse MLE but at the same time enforce tests that are standardised and monolingual, putting pressure on the schools to abandon L1 instruction in order to "teach to the test." Teachers have to juggle between policy and best practices and sometimes students' cognitive and linguistic growth suffer. Multilingual learning needs coherent policies which can really support it.

8.2. The Apex of Multilingual Pedagogy

Translanguaging unites the CUP theory and classroom practice. It empowers learners to employ their entire language repertoires that is, reading in L2, discussing in L1, and writing in L2 which not only improves comprehension but also supports the interdependence hypothesis.

Furthermore, it promotes multilingualism, cooperation, and lessens L2 difficulties beyond the instructional part. It is the top point of the multilingual teaching approach.

8.3. Linchpin of MLE Fidelity

MLE effectiveness depends on teachers' capacity, requiring them to be: (a) translanguaging-competent, (b) flexible, and (c) able to scaffold learning in real-time. Current training often treats MLE as elective, leaving teachers unprepared and undermining program fidelity. Investing in teacher development is essential to realise MLE's benefits.

8.4. Moving Beyond Linguistic Tolerance

The utmost refinement of MLE policy should be viewed as an ethical and human rights necessity. The right to education is fundamentally associated with linguistic rights. Policies that promote L1 are not just cultural charity but educational justice that guarantee cognitive access and prevent the systematic devaluation of a student's home identity and intellectual resources.

9. Conclusion

Multilingual Education (MLE) is a vital tool that enhances the personal, professional and cognitive growth bridging the interconnected society. It is important to protect a learner's language to ensure they become balance instead of replacing or displacing the first language (L1) and culture . It calls for collaborative action to build equitable, diverse learning environments for a connected future. All educational policies in linguistically diverse settings must mandate strong, sustained maintenance models (e.g., dual-language or content-based L1 instruction). High-stakes assessments must be reformed to be language-sensitive, either by offering L1 options or by testing core conceptual knowledge independent of L2 linguistic complexity in the early grades. Furthermore**,** translanguaging pedagogy must be made a mandatory, core component of all pre-service and in-service teacher education, moving the locus of control from linguistic inhibition to strategic linguistic utilisation.

References

1. Albaba, M. B. (2025). Proposing a linguistic repertoires perspective in multilingual higher education contexts. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, (36). https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi36.1542
2. Alhassan, A. M., Christensen, M. H., Solheim, K., & Mellemsether, B. (2025). Empowering minority voices: How inclusive teaching and support foster multicultural learning. Frontiers in Education, 10, Article 1595106. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2025.1595106
3. Bailey, A. L., Abraham, M., Dong, J. Y., Torres, I. M., Wang, Y. P., Zamora, E., & Zhang, X. (2025). Translanguaging: Conceptual underpinnings of equity-oriented instructional and assessment practices with adolescent multilingual learners. Linguistics and Education, 87, 101418. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2025.101418
4. Coyle, D., Hood, P., & Marsh, D. (2010). Content and language integrated learning. Cambridge University Press.
5. Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. Review of Educational Research, 49(2), 222–251. https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543049002222

6. Cummins, J. (1981). The role of primary language development in promoting educational success for language minority students. In California State Department of Education (Ed.), Schooling and language minority students: A theoretical framework (pp. 3–49). Los Angeles, CA: Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center, California State University.

7. Cummins, J. (2000). Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire. Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853596773

8. Cummins, J. (2021). Rethinking the education of multilingual learners: A critical analysis of theoretical concepts. Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/CUMMIN3580

9. Fegher, M. (2023). Analysis of Common Underlying Proficiency Theory. SSRN Electronic Journal. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4426296

10. Fishman, J. A. (2001). Can threatened languages be saved? Reversing language shift, revisited (2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110863888

11. García, O. (2009). Bilingual education in the 21st century: A global perspective. Wiley-Blackwell. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781444308204

12. Granados Navarro, A., Lorenzo Espejo, A., & Lorenzo, F. (2023). Evidence for the interdependence hypothesis: A longitudinal study of biliteracy development in a CLIL/bilingual setting. International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism. https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2021.2001428

13. Hofer, B., Jessner, U., & Traxl, C. (2025). Metalinguistic awareness in primary schoolers in multilingual partial immersion education. Frontiers in Language Sciences, 4, Article 1547151. https://doi.org/10.3389/flang.2025.1547151

14. Iwasaki, E., & Benson, C. (2025). Framing matters: Transfer vs. transition in language policy and planning. Educational Role of Language Journal, 2024(2(12)), 63–67. https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2024.02.07

15. Ministry of Education. (2020). National Education Policy 2020. Government of India. https://education.gov.in/sites/upload_files/mhrd/files/NEP_Final_English_0.pdf

16. Mohanty, A. K. (2009). Multilingual education: A bridge too far? In T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty, & M. Panda (Eds.), Social justice through multilingual education (pp. 106–129). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781847691910-004

17. Moraleda, E., Pulido, N., Santos, N., & López, P. (2024). Development of reading in multilingual environments in 2nd grade children. Journal of Education and Learning, 13(3), 39–51. https://doi.org/10.5539/jel.v13n3p39

18. Myklevold, G. A., & Bjørke, C. (2025). Multilingualism in the languages classroom. The Language Learning Journal, 53(5), 565–573. https://doi.org/10.1080/09571736.2025.2549120

19. Otheguy, R., García, O., & Reid, W. (2019). A translanguaging view of the linguistic system of bilinguals. Applied Linguistics Review, 10(4), 625–651. https://doi.org/10.1515/applirev-2018-0020

20. Perry, J. A., & Allard, A. C. (2003). Making the connections: Transition experiences of international students. International Education Journal, 4(4), 1–14.

21. Prescott, A., & Hellstén, M. (2005). Transitions: Listening to international students' voices. Australian Journal of Teacher Education, 30(2), 75–90. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3784-8_5

22. Russell, S. G., Fabo, C., Jones, V., & Colic, A. (2024). Language policies and ideologies for socialization and identity-building in U.S. schools: The case of newcomer and refugee students in Arizona and New York. Social Sciences, 13(11), 601. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci13110601

23. Schvarcz, B. R., & Warren, A. N. (2025). Creating multilingual schoolscapes in restrictive ELT contexts. ELT Journal, 79(3), 395–403. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccaf028

24. Šifrar Kalan, M., Muñoz-Basols, J., Robles-García, P., Strawbridge, T., & Sánchez-Gutiérrez, C. (2025). The impact of multilingualism and proficiency on L2 vocabulary knowledge: Contrasting high and low multilinguals. International Journal of Multilingualism, 22(2), 433–456. https://doi.org/10.1080/14790718.2024.2314626

25. Spechtenhauser, B., & Jessner, U. (2024). Complex interactions in the multilingual mind: Assessing metalinguistic abilities and their effects on decoding a new language system in trilingual learners. Lingua, 301, 103678. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2024.103678

26. Tannenbaum, M., & Shohamy, E. (Eds.). (2023). Developing multilingual education policies: Theory, research, practice. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003107415

27. UNESCO. (2025a). Languages matter: Global guidance on multilingual education.

28. https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/languages-matter-global-guidance-multilingual-education

29. UNESCO. (2025b). What you need to know about multilingual education.

30. https://www.unesco.org/en/languages-education/need-know

31. Xu, Z., Mamat, R., & Zin, Z. M. (2024). Conceptual transfer studies in the context of second language acquisition: A scoping review. Akademika, 94(2), 110–128. https://doi.org/10.17576/akad-2024-9402-07

32. Zhang, Y. (2024). Conceptual transfer of L1's effects on learning grammatical gender in L2. Lecture Notes on Language and Literature, 7, 1–6. https://doi.org/10.23977/langl.2024.070801