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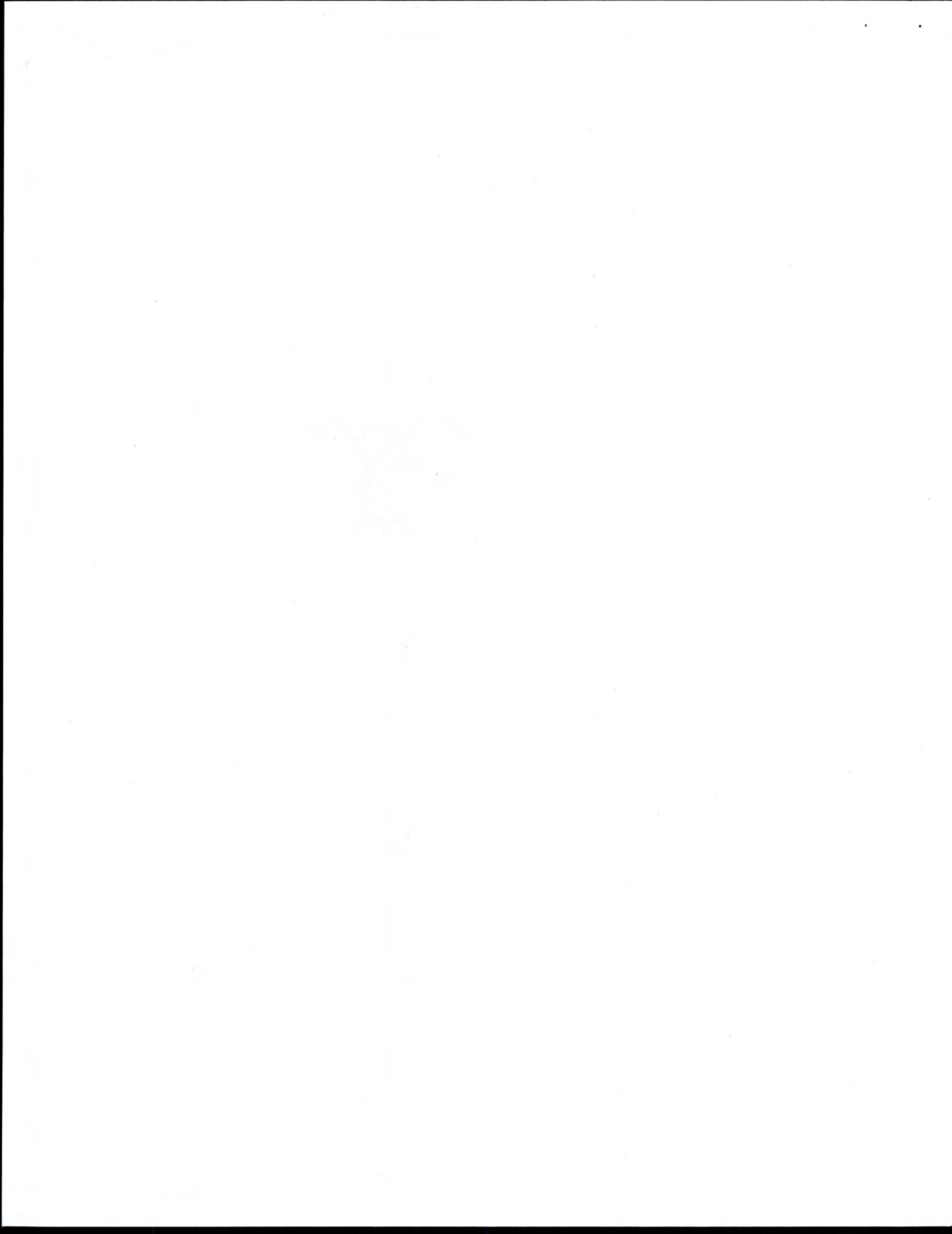
EdData II

Planning for Language Use in Education: Best Practices and Practical Steps for Improving Learning

Briefer

Prepared for
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United States Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20523

EdData II: Education Data for Decision Making

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Children in Malawi learn to read in Chichewa.

Photo credit: RTI International

Results from a variety of recent learning assessments have underscored the need to improve education quality, particularly foundational reading skills. Although many factors contribute to improving learning outcomes—and reading skills in particular—language use in the classroom, including which languages are used and for what purpose is key.

Despite the important role that language plays in education provision, planning for its use at the system, school, and classroom levels is seldom incorporated into education improvement initiatives. The purpose of this brief is to summarize key findings and recommendations on language use in education presented in *Planning for Language Use in Education: Best Practices and Practical Steps for Improving Learning* (referred to in this brief as *the Guide* and available at https://www.eddataglobal.org). USAID developed this document to serve as a comprehensive resource for education stakeholders to help them with incorporating evidence and lessons learned on language use into education programming, particularly with respect to current efforts to improve children's reading skills in the early grades (for more information, see the *USAID Education Strategy 2011–2015* that outlines a goal to improve reading skills for 100 million children by 2015).

To assist in education planning, *the Guide* explores **key factors to consider when planning for language use in education**, such as research regarding language and literacy acquisition; goals of the education system; the sociolinguistic and educational contexts; and stakeholder considerations. Country- and project-specific experiences and evaluations from sub-Saharan Africa highlight successful practices. *The Guide* then provides detailed **recommendations and steps to take** to effectively plan for language use in education. Accompanying this guidance is set of **tools and resources** to assist stakeholders in the planning process. Summaries of the content and recommendations covered in *the Guide* are presented below.

Key Factors to Consider When Planning for Language Use in Education

Developing a holistic, effective plan for language use in the classroom to ensure quality education requires understanding and planning for several key issues, including the following:

Research regarding language and literacy acquisition. Knowing how language affects learning is key to planning for language use in classrooms. Research demonstrates that children learn better when instruction is in first languages (L1) or familiar languages. A strong foundation in a familiar language facilitates children's acquisition of and proficiency in a second or other language (L2/Lx). Moreover, many factors influence the time needed to acquire language proficiency for academic learning.

Goals of the education system. The language or languages used to educate learners should be linked to—and help a country to achieve—its education goals, including goals related to access and equity, learning outcomes, and language proficiency.

Sociolinguistic context. The language environment will affect the use of language in education. Key issues to consider include the types of language communities (i.e., monolingual, bilingual, and multilingual), the proficiency of speakers in different languages, and the number of languages and their degree of development (i.e., existence of a standardized writing system, or orthography).

Why should instruction be provided in familiar languages?

Evidence supports the benefits of using children's first languages (L1) or familiar languages for instruction. Benefits include the following:

- Improving access to education, particularly for girls and marginalized groups

- Supporting language acquisition, reading development, and learning across the curriculum

- Facilitating more effective and child-centered teaching

- Increasing parental and community involvement in education

- Providing various cultural and psychological benefits

- Improving education efficiency, through a reduction in dropouts and an increase in learning.

This information and details from the guide, can help engage stakeholders about the feasibility, cost, and advantages of using familiar languages for instruction.

Educational context. Language use planning involves careful consideration of the characteristics of a country's current education system vis-à-vis the requirements for successful instruction. These characteristics, including instructional time available, curriculum and materials available, teacher language proficiency and training, and teacher placement, must be considered as part of the process of identifying how to use different languages for instruction in the near and long terms.

Stakeholder roles, knowledge, and beliefs. Language use in schools is highly dependent on various stakeholders within the system, and their roles, knowledge, and beliefs about language use in education. Understanding and addressing them is vital to the language use planning and implementation process.

Recommendations and Steps to Take

Effective language use in education remains a challenge in many countries, often due to a lack of planning and sustained support. Comprehensive language planning requires multiple steps and requires the involvement of a diverse range of stakeholders. Key recommendations from the guide include the following:

- **Engage a wide range of stakeholders and conduct advocacy.** Successful planning and implementation require the involvement, support, and resources of a wide range of stakeholders. These stakeholders include Ministry of Education officials, teachers and teachers' unions, teacher training colleges, curriculum and subject experts, language specialists and language associations and institutions, textbook developers, and nongovernmental organizations that support education, parents, and school management associations.

- **Conduct situation analysis.** A necessary initial step to laying the groundwork for planning is to conduct a situation analysis of the sociolinguistic and educational contexts. This analysis may

include identifying and gathering information about policies, practices, and programs with respect to language use; obtaining instructional resources available in different languages; consolidating reports about learning and reading outcomes in different languages; and understanding stakeholders' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about language use in education. Obtaining an up-to-date language map or conducting a mapping exercise is needed to gather reliable and up-to-date information about languages spoken, in what geographic areas, and at what proficiency level.

- **Identify pedagogical approaches and languages for instruction.** As part of identifying the pedagogical approach to language use, a country should prioritize languages to be used and for what purpose. Languages selected for education provision should be based on the situation analysis, the education system goals, the research, and readiness of the languages to be used for instruction (i.e., existence of a standardized orthography).

- **Develop curriculum, materials and assessments for languages used.** Children and their teachers must have appropriate and quality teaching and learning resources for the languages used for learning. Thus, materials development is a key aspect of language use planning. Recent experiences with developing materials across multiple grades and subjects, as well as new technology, provide ideas and support for doing so.

A girl in Northern Nigeria learns to read in Hausa from materials designed to support the implementation of the language of instruction policy.

Photo credit: RTI International

- **Align teacher training and placement with languages and instructional approach.** Teacher training, recruitment, and placement must align with the approach to using language in education for it to be successful. For example, teachers may need training regarding how to teach specific subjects in a target language, and they may need to be deployed to schools where their language proficiency aligns with that of their pupils.

- **Develop and implement a language policy and plan.** An approach to language use in education may be codified into official policy. However, the existence of a language use policy alone is inadequate for implementation, and it is not necessarily a prerequisite for the development of a plan for language use in education in some circumstances. Objectives, a time line, and a budget should accompany a plan for language use.

- **Monitor and evaluate outcomes and refine the approach as needed.** Any plan for language use in education should be monitored and evaluated to identify what works from an implementation perspective and what is actually improving student outcomes. More research may be needed to determine context- and language-specific approaches. Modifications to the approach should be made as needed.

Planning Tools and Resources

The Guide contains many resources to aid in the language use planning and implementation process. These resources include the following:

- ✓ A summary of research regarding language learning and acquisition
- ✓ A review of worldwide evidence and best practices regarding multilingual instruction
- ✓ A summary of activities and tasks to conduct during the planning process
- ✓ A situation analysis planning worksheet
- ✓ A checklist of conditions for effective language plan development and implementation.

An example of guiding questions and an excerpt from a planning worksheet are shown as follows.

Box 1. Questions to explore *language and educational context*

Instructional time

1. How much time is currently available for teaching *curricular subject material*?
2. How much time is currently available for teaching *reading and writing in the L1/familiar languages*?
3. How much time is currently available for *teaching the L2/Lx as a subject*?
4. Have any studies been conducted to measure instructional time available in schools? How does the amount and quality of instructional time available potentially facilitate or hinder children's ability to learn both academic content and languages?

Curriculum and materials

5. Does the curriculum differentiate when and how to use specific languages for LOI versus teaching these languages as subjects?
6. Does the curriculum differentiate providing literacy instruction for L1 versus L2/Lx learners?
7. In what languages are teaching and learning resources currently available for teachers and learners? Does this match policy and practice with regard to language of instruction?
8. What resources need to be developed to effectively provide instruction in target L1 languages? What individuals or institutions can contribute to resource development? What would be the process for doing so?
9. What resources exist outside the classroom that could be used and/or adapted for the formal education system?

Country situation analysis worksheet for planning for language use in education

Country: _____

This worksheet can be used to conduct a situational analysis and consolidate information needed to guide planning. It should be adapted as appropriate for the geographic distinctions and languages in the country. Information gaps in the worksheet can be used to identify areas for which information needs to be gathered to make informed decisions.

Part 1: General Information	Notes/Data Source						
Existence of policies related to language use in the country	Specify details and obtain copies; may include national policies, constitutional references, or other documentation						
Existence of guidelines or other working documents for language use in schools							
Previous experience within the country providing L1-based instruction (formal/nonformal)							

Part 2: Language and education context	Notes/Data Source	Lang 1	Lang 2	Lang 3	Lang 4	Lang 5	Lang 6	Lang 7
A. Learning outcomes data	Report outcomes by language and/or region	Lang 1	Lang 2	Lang 3	Lang 4	Lang 5	Lang 6	Lang 7
National								
Region 1								
Region 2								
Region 3, Etc.								
B. % of population using language as L1	Consult updated language maps. Indicate languages/regions with large out-of-school populations.	Lang 1	Lang 2	Lang 3	Lang 4	Lang 5	Lang 6	Lang 7
National								
Region 1								
Region 2								
Region 3, Etc.								
Region 3, Etc.								
C. % of population using language as L2/Lx	Consult updated language maps	Lang 1	Lang 2	Lang 3	Lang 4	Lang 5	Lang 6	Lang 7
National								
Region 1								
Region 2								
Region 3, Etc.								