

# Executive Summary

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**HUMAN CAPITAL ACCUMULATION IS LARGEY A LANGUAGE-BASED ENDEAVOR.** It is the basis of wealth in modern societies and is primarily acquired through schooling. Policies that maximize the amount and quality of human capital have a myriad of positive effects. To maximize it, countries must maximize learning in school, and in so doing raise the number of Learning Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS) completed by their population. The World Bank created the Human Capital Project and the Human Capital Index to bring policy attention to the need for countries to invest in their people and for people to invest in themselves. Policies that promote human capital accumulation—such as good language of instruction policies—should be actively championed by the World Bank and central to country dialogues on helping people achieve their full potential.

**SHOCKINGLY LOW LEARNING OUTCOMES MAY BE A REFLECTION OF INADEQUATE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION POLICIES.** The LAYS component of the Human Capital Index and measures of Learning Poverty show shockingly low learning levels. In some countries, children with three years of primary education cannot identify a single written word, and may only know one letter.<sup>1</sup> Without consideration of language of instruction (LoI) issues, one might erroneously conclude that teachers lack the knowledge and skills to teach, or that students are too disadvantaged to learn. An alternative, plausible consideration is that teachers are required to provide instruction in a language that students do not speak or understand. The low test scores in some instances simply reflect this near-total lack of understanding of the language used for teaching and/or testing; they do not indicate any inability to learn under the right learning conditions.

**APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION POLICIES FACILITATE LEARNING AND MORE.** When children are first taught in a language that they speak and understand well they learn more, are better placed to learn other languages, are more likely to stay in school, and enjoy a school experience appropriate to their culture and local circumstances. A diverse and substantial body of research, cited throughout this paper, attests to this fact. Appropriate LoI policies also promote equity in schools and in labor markets, improve the cost-effectiveness of education, and promote inclusiveness. Good LoI policies should be a cornerstone of effective national human capital development strategies, and therefore of acute concern to national policy makers and development partners.

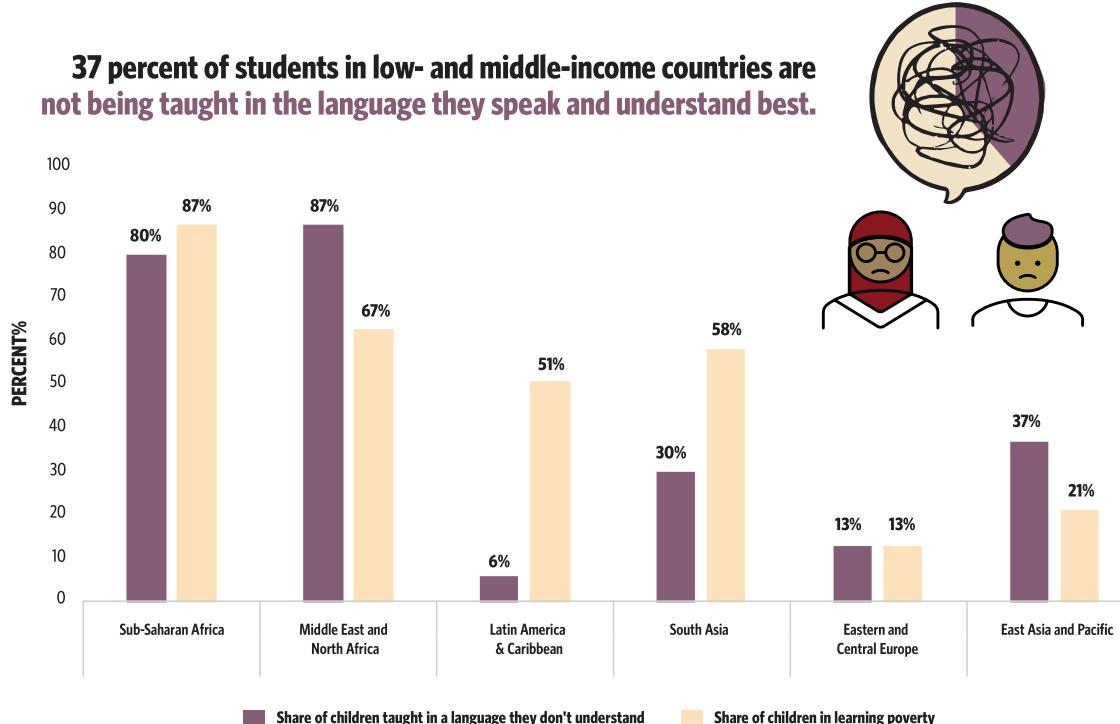
**GOOD LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION POLICIES REMAIN THE EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE.** Despite their many benefits, many education systems do not implement appropriate LoI policies. Instead they often require children to learn in languages they do not know well—and, in far too many cases, in languages they do not know at all. The children who are impacted by these policies are often those who are disadvantaged in other ways, such as socioeconomic status and distance from urban centers, that also make learning and progress at school challenging. Requiring teachers to provide instruction in languages that neither they nor the students speak is a common practice despite the evidence that 90 percent or more of students may fail to acquire foundational skills such as basic literacy and numeracy in schools that implement these policies.<sup>2</sup>

## POOR LOI POLICIES HARM LEARNING, ACCESS, EQUITY, COST-EFFECTIVENESS, AND INCLUSION.

A substantial and growing body of research shows that children learn better in their first language (L1) than in a second language (L2). When taught in their L1 first, they are more likely over time to become proficient in an L2 and comfortably absorb academic content. They are also more likely to remain in school. Children from households in the bottom 40 percent of the socioeconomic distribution are more likely to endure instruction in a language they do not understand, and lack the family resources to mitigate the effects of inappropriate LoI policies in the schools they attend.<sup>3</sup> Countries pursuing LoI policies that promote the use of languages neither spoken nor understood by teachers and students see a disappointing return on their investment in education. These policies contribute to higher dropout rates, repetition rates, and lower learning overall. In this sense, countries would gain financially if, by adopting better LoI policies, they were to lower the cost of each graduate produced and each unit of learning mastered. That would also make learning relevant to and inclusive of students in many ways, not least through the inherent value and validation a language receives when it is used as an official medium of instruction.

## INAPPROPRIATE LOI POLICIES AFFECT AN ESTIMATED 37 PERCENT OF STUDENTS IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES.

UNESCO (2016) estimates that globally four in every ten students are taught in languages they do not know. Evidence from original analyses undertaken for this paper largely confirm the figure and attest to the enormity of the problem: 37 percent of students in low- and middle-income countries are not being taught in the language they speak and understand best. In some countries, more than 90 percent of students are not taught in a language they speak and understand. More than a quarter of a billion students are affected. Based on data from Ethnologue,<sup>4</sup> 12 of the 20 countries with the highest rates of learning poverty use instructional languages that few of their students understand when they come to school. The 53 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries (LMIC) who fail to read with understanding by age ten<sup>5</sup> almost certainly includes a large share of students who are not taught in their L1.<sup>6,7</sup>



### **MASSIVE PROGRESS IS FEASIBLE BY TEACHING IN A SMALL NUMBER OF ADDITIONAL LANGUAGES.**

The prospect of offering instruction in each of the world's more than 7,000 languages<sup>8</sup> is daunting, but that sentiment is misguided. Policy dialogue often labors under the assumption that embracing mother-tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is expensive and onerous. In fact, MTB-MLE is cost-effective and simpler to organize than usually thought. Indeed, the vast majority of students currently learning in an L2 would benefit from a rather modest global expansion of the number of languages used for instruction. Three-quarters (75 percent) of the problem could be attenuated by offering instruction in an additional 220 languages worldwide—on average about one new language per country. To reach 84 percent of all language minority students in all countries requires teaching in only about 559 languages—fewer than three additional languages per country on average. In both scenarios, the would-be additional languages are already “written languages.” They have established orthographies, and each is spoken by at least 1.5 million people. The remaining roughly 6,200 languages of the world are spoken by fewer than 10 percent of the world's people. Five-sixths of the problem can be solved with concentrated and focused effort; solving the final one-sixth is then likely to require exponentially increasing time and resources.

### **LOI POLICIES ARE INFLUENCED BY LARGER POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS.**

In light of this evidence, why are so many countries still choosing a LoI that results in significantly worse learning outcomes and social exclusion? One reason may be lack of knowledge of the benefits of teaching the language that students best speak and understand. Other factors are arguably less tractable. Language choices for education are often the result of political considerations beyond the education sector. Language is closely tied to national identity and political identity. Nation-building sometimes involves the promotion of one group's language at the expense of the languages of other groups. Language proficiency has labor market value. Parents often view competence in metropolitan or international languages as central to their children's career success. The ends—the goals—such as proficiency in an international L2, can dictate the means in a manifestly counterproductive manner when all instruction is in that L2 regardless of teachers' or students' levels of proficiency. Consideration of the broader political context is essential to effective policy engagement on LoI issues.

**POLICY SOLUTIONS EXIST BUT ARE NOT BEING SYSTEMATICALLY IMPLEMENTED.** Advocacy for good LoI policies has been ongoing for decades but has seldom held the attention of key decision makers and development partners. A trend toward more and better research is thankfully emerging in some regions.<sup>9</sup> Experience has been summarized and analyses have distilled sound policy advice for the issue as a whole and for virtually all relevant sub-issues. Sound advice is available for country-level situation analyses and for planning for language use in education. Guidelines for and examples of good scopes and sequences for L1 instruction have proliferated. Methods for the development of teaching and learning materials, including software to create textbooks and storybooks for children, are freely available and being used more frequently than in the past. Policy options with respect to a range of issues affecting teachers, teaching, and training are growing. Knowledge about and concern for language of assessment issues is increasing. Empirical evidence on the effectiveness of “late-exit” (see below) and other effective curricular and pedagogical strategies is available. However, progress is too slow and available tools are not sufficiently known or understood.

### **THIS PAPER DESCRIBES THE NEW WORLD BANK POLICY APPROACH ON LOI, AS PART OF THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF THE LITERACY POLICY PACKAGE IN SUPPORT OF THE BANK'S NEW LEARNING TARGET.**

This new approach aims to support progress on LoI policies and interventions, as LoI-based challenges are identified and addressed in light of each country's context. Under the new approach, the World Bank considers it critical to observe the following principles to enhance learning in low- and middle-income countries:

**The new World Bank policy approach on LoI, as part of the operationalization of the Literacy Policy Package in support of the Bank's new Learning Target, is based around 5 principles:**

PRINCIPLE 1	PRINCIPLE 2	PRINCIPLE 3	PRINCIPLE 4	PRINCIPLE 5
 <p>Teach children in a language they understand starting with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services through at least the first six years of primary schooling. It is critical that instruction be in the language most students speak and understand best.</p>	 <p>Use a language children understand for instruction in academic subjects beyond reading and writing. Students need to master reading and writing in a broad range of disciplines and in all school subjects.</p>	 <p>Introduce an additional language (if desired) as a foreign language with a focus on oral language skills. Students can master two languages in basic education if instruction and sequencing are optimized.</p>	 <p>Continue using the language children understand for instruction even after a foreign language becomes the principal LoI. L1 instruction continues to improve L2 performance in important ways even after the L2 becomes the LoI.</p>	 <p>Continuously plan, develop, adapt, and improve the implementation of LoI policies, in line with country contexts and goals.</p>

To promote and operationalize this approach, the World Bank proposes three strands of work to ensure the principles are routinely integrated within World Bank operations. Strand 1 focuses on analyzing and assessing the LoI situation in each client country as well as the main policy options available. Strand 2 involves more proactive engagement with LoI issues through enhanced dialogue and planning to help countries address priority issues. As part of Strand 3, the Bank's Education Global Practice would work with other partners to advocate for appropriate attention to LoI issues and in creating, collecting, and disseminating the full range of cutting-edge knowledge and policy solutions and promoting long-term solutions for language issues in education.

**THE PURPOSE, AUDIENCE, SCOPE, AND STRUCTURE OF THIS PAPER.** Its purpose is to ensure that the WB Education Global Practice can help clients mitigate or eliminate the serious problems that inappropriate LoI policies impose on learning and schooling. The paper is intentionally short; it is not an exhaustive academic paper. Sufficient detail is presented to begin to explain issues in light of current policy decisions, not to treat the subject in its entirety. The paper is selective and does not look at LoI in all aspects of education policy. It does not consider the role of LoI in tertiary education, technical and vocational education and training, adult education, or lifelong learning. The paper recommends endorsement of the new approach by WBG management. Embracing its recommendations involves commitment to a range of actions that will support WBG client countries, including more in-depth analyses, development and dissemination of global public goods, improved education staff knowledge and capacity and more effective dialogue, especially in basic education. Readers should bear in mind that:

- ***We do not yet have all the answers.*** As we move forward, key knowledge gaps will need to be addressed and closed. We will need, for example, to better understand and develop recommendations to improve second-best situations, such as those that involve the use of one-way L2 immersion. Likewise, the compounding effects of poor teacher proficiency in the target language in combination with low student proficiency need to be disentangled. The effects of time-on-task,

the quality of teaching and learning materials, and teacher support and other issues constitute a future agenda which warrants urgent attention if policy advice is to be optimized.

- ***Leadership requires sustained commitment.*** LoI issues can be managed but never fully solved. Policy efforts by countries should be a routine part of overall education policy. Sustained commitment on the part of development partners, with the Bank seeking to set an example as a key partner, should likewise be part of overall efforts to improve learning.

Part 1 addresses why we should care about LoI issues and the major challenges involved. Its four sections are entitled: (i) why should we care? (ii) how big is the problem? (iii) the role of political economy; and (iv) diverse LoI contexts. Part 2 presents existing solutions (in section 5) and proposes a detailed way forward for the WB Education Global Practice (section 6). It should be noted that the paper does not claim to possess or propose a complete set of technical solutions for the myriad of difficult policy issues involved. By enhancing engagement and devoting adequate resources to the problem, existing solutions will be deployed, and new solutions devised. Increased partnership and knowledge sharing will be part of this, as will be the testing of innovative approaches. The new approach will involve learning at the individual and institutional level, with an intensity of engagement commensurate with the urgency of the issue.