

Language- responsive education

**The British Council's position
on inclusive language policy
and practice**

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Development of our language-responsive position

The development of our language-responsive position emerged through a series of internal collaborative workshops held in 2024, guided by a working group representing British Council colleagues and experts with an interest in multilingual education, and included representatives from South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe and UK-based teams. The concept was strengthened through the valued contributions of the expert external reviewers and steering committee members: Ana Halbach, Anna Kristina Hultgren, John Clegg and Mir Abdullah Miri.

From the British Council, Ann Veitch (Head of Research and Evidence, English and School Education) and Steve Copeland (Research and Insight Lead, English and School Education) led this early phase of

development work, as well as the subsequent global literature review, *Language policy and practice: A review of the literature on English in education*, which provided further insight.

The further development and writing phase for the position paper was led by Vanessa Komiliades (Head of Professional Development, English and School Education), with further research, expert writing and editing from Graham Hall. The drafting, review and finalisation of the paper were undertaken through an extended collaborative process involving all steering committee and working group members, the expert writer, and copy-editor and proofreaders. We recognise and appreciate the contributions of all individuals and teams whose expertise and engagement informed the development of the core messages and the final papers.

Contributors

Writing: Graham Hall

Steering committee and expert reviewers: Ana Halbach (Universidad de Alcalá), Anna Kristina Hultgren (The Open University), John Clegg, Mir Abdullah Miri (University of Bath)

Copyediting, proofreading: Alison Sharpe, Lesley Rhodes

Design and production: EMC design

British Council contributors

Conceptualisation, development of core messages, writing and reviewing: Amy Lightfoot, Ann Veitch, John Simpson, Steve Copeland, Vanessa Komiliades

Contribution to development of core messages, reviewing: Anne Wiseman, Bhogendra Lamichhani, Caroline Grant, Ellen Darling, Ewan Macrae, Fwanshishak Daniel, George Wilson, Julian Parry, Maureen McAlinden, Pilar Aramayo-Prudencio, Radhika Gholkar, Rustom Mody, Tanya Cotter

Abbreviations

BICS	basic interpersonal communication skills
CALP	cognitive academic language proficiency
CLIL	content and language integrated learning
E@S	English as a subject
EAL	English as an additional language
EFL	English as a foreign language
EiE	English in education
ELF	English as a lingua franca
EME	English-medium education
ESL	English as a second language
ESOL	English for speakers of other languages
ESP	English for special purposes
EU	European Union
HIC	high-income country
IC	intercultural competence
L1	first language
LIC	low-income country
LiE	language(s) in education
LMIC	lower-middle-income country
LoLT	language of learning and teaching
LSP	language supportive pedagogy
MoE	ministry of education
MTbBE	mother tongue-based bilingual education
MTB-MLE	mother tongue-based multilingual education
MTI	mother tongue instruction
SES	socio-economic status
UMIC	upper-middle-income country
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Foreword

In 2026 and beyond, most schools, in most places, will cater to children with diverse language backgrounds. This diversity is to be celebrated: the languages we speak shape our identity, create meaning and facilitate deep human-to-human connection. A diversity of languages within a community also prompts important considerations about which languages feature within an education system, how and when. Decisions around language use within education systems are often not straightforward. This is especially the case in contexts that are multilingual, where there are colonial legacies that have impacted on language-in-education policy and/or where there is a fluid population moving in and out of schools.

All of the ministries of education we work with have ambitions to ensure a population that can communicate effectively, within their borders and beyond, in order to realise individual, community and national needs and aspirations. The evidence shows us that the more inclusive a language-in-education policy is, the more likely these ambitions can be achieved – provided there is adequate resourcing. This paper represents a continuation of our shared efforts to explore and understand what inclusive language-in-education policy and practice can look like, recognising the inherent difficulties and complexities that can arise and learning from examples of different approaches from around the world.

Building on two earlier perspectives – *English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries* and *English in higher education – English medium* – this updated (2026) position takes a broader focus and expresses our evolving understanding of the complex realities faced by learners, educators and policymakers navigating English-based education in multilingual and often linguistically complex environments. While at the British Council our core focus is on the teaching and learning of, in and through English, and the interaction of English with other languages, the principles outlined in this paper are broadly applicable to the teaching and learning of any language in multilingual contexts.

Our aim is to advocate for more language-aware, responsive and supportive education systems. As well as foregrounding the complexities inherent in any decision making and practice linked to languages in education, this paper emphasises the need for policies and practices that are inclusive, adaptable and rooted in local realities. It recognises language not solely as a medium

of instruction in education but as a dynamic and deeply embedded element of identity, access and equity. It also acknowledges the nuanced interplay between English and other languages in different contexts globally.

Language lies at the heart of education systems, shaping and enabling all teaching and learning. Our advocacy for greater language responsiveness is rooted in evidence, shared knowledge and a commitment to contextually appropriate, culturally responsive policy and practice. We seek to support policymakers, educators and other stakeholders in addressing the challenges and

opportunities of language in education, with the intention of contributing to more inclusive, equitable and effective education policies and practices.

We hope this paper encourages open, and at times challenging, conversations about language and languages in education and stimulates further reflection, discussion and action towards building more inclusive and equitable education systems worldwide.

Amy Lightfoot

Academic Director
English and School Education
British Council

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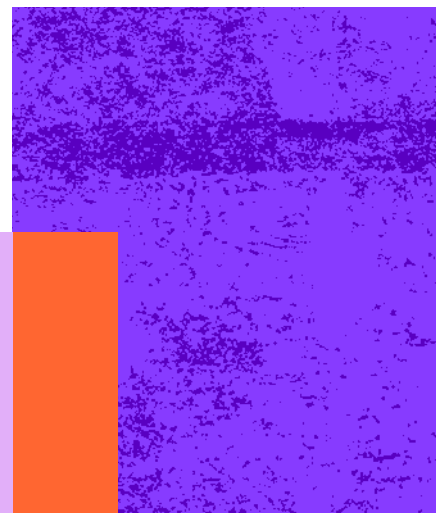


1

Introduction

Language is a fundamental part of any education system, underpinning all teaching and learning in school. Through language, academic content is taught, learned and assessed. Teachers also rely on language to manage classrooms and guide and support students' learning. Understanding and being able to use the language(s) of their education system is thus essential, therefore, for students to fully participate in their school curriculum. Accessing the language of education also plays a major role in how students learn about social norms, expectations and wider national and international issues and opportunities while they are at school (Sayer, 2019). At the British Council, our primary focus is on the teaching and learning of English and the interplay between this and other languages; however, the principles outlined here are applicable to the teaching and learning of any additional, dominant language in contexts where learners come from a range of linguistic backgrounds.

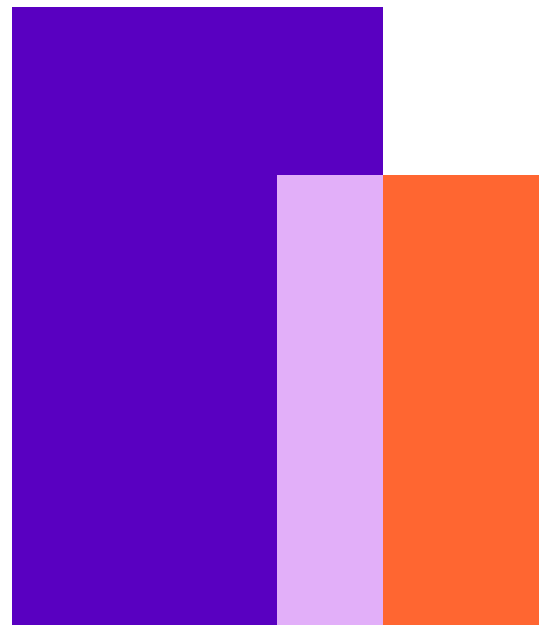
The global spread of English and its expansion as a school subject and, in particular, as the medium of education raises questions for practitioners, educationalists and other stakeholders in countries where English is not the primary language of communication for the majority of the population. Policymakers face challenges in deciding the principal language or languages of the education system. They also need to decide whether and how the primary language(s) might be used alongside other languages – for example, children's home languages and international languages such as English – in principled and mutually supportive ways in the classroom. Such questions are central in the development and implementation of English-medium education (EME; that is, the teaching and study of academic subjects through English) and related content and language integrated learning approaches (CLIL; that is to say, approaches that integrate the teaching of subject content *and* of language) in many parts of the world. These initial understandings of EME and CLIL will be developed further in this paper (see Section 2).



In many contexts, this growing trend towards EME and CLIL draws on the perception – often held by governments and parents – that learning school subjects in or through English supports students’ current and future academic achievements as well as their career prospects, and also contributes to the success of the nation. Students, it is argued, simultaneously acquire both English language proficiency and academic subject knowledge; schools develop an outward-facing or international perspective; and societies and economies are transformed by the competitive advantage and economic security studying and working in English brings. From this viewpoint, English is seen as a ‘modern’ and ‘scientific’ language of opportunity and advancement for individuals and countries, while also potentially providing a means for unifying young states that are linguistically diverse. At the same time, ideas that encourage education in and through the students’ own ‘mother tongue’ or community language, particularly at primary level, are also widely supported. UNESCO, for instance, reasons that mother tongue education can improve educational quality by building upon the existing knowledge and experience of teachers and their students, while multilingual education can promote social and gender equality, particularly within linguistically diverse societies (UNESCO, 2016). (Note that there are several synonyms for a student’s ‘own language’, including ‘mother tongue’, ‘native language’, ‘first language’ or ‘L1’, and “home” or “local” language’. Each has its own particular connotations, which

sometimes blur ideas to do with birth, geography, identity or expertise (Rampton, 1990). Here, the discussion draws on UNESCO’s own terminology to refer to students’ ‘mother tongue’. Elsewhere, this paper will largely refer to students’ ‘home language(s)’. (See British Council (2024) for further discussion.)

In truth, however, there is relatively little evidence that supports the belief that EME necessarily leads to more successful educational outcomes (Curle et al., 2020; Dearden, 2014; Patel et al., 2023). Likewise, while there is some evidence that students who learn in and through their mother tongue or a community language may achieve more educational success, this can be difficult to implement in practice, particularly in contexts where students in a single classroom might speak a variety of home languages (UNESCO, 2025a). As our previous position paper (Simpson, 2019) points out, debates around both EME and mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE), and whether and how they might be implemented in ways that take account of particular local and national circumstances, are ‘complicated’, ‘complex’, ‘challenging’ and ‘multi-faceted’ (pp. 4–6).



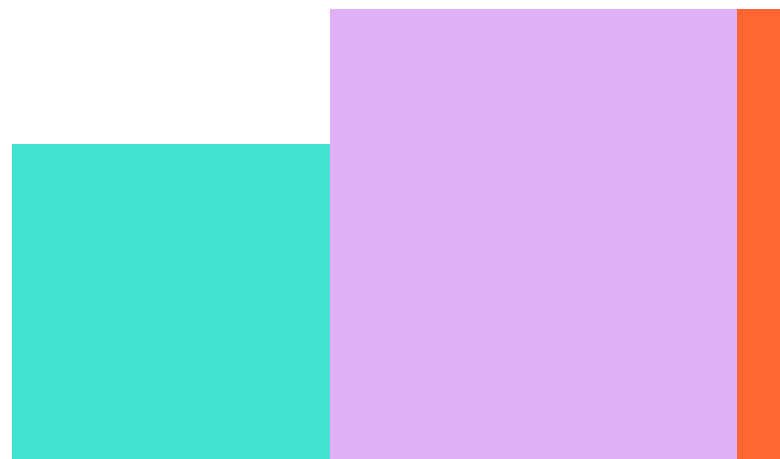
Notwithstanding these complexities, the use of English as a medium for school teaching and learning has increased exponentially over the last 20 years (Curle et al., 2020). Where once teaching in or through English might have been primarily associated with educational systems that were originally developed in colonial or post-colonial contexts with an English language footprint (e.g. Hong Kong, India, Kenya and Malawi; see, for example, McIlwraith, 2013), forms of EME can now be found in countries with little or no history of English (e.g. South Korea, Brazil, Ethiopia and Rwanda); in high-, upper-middle-, lower-middle- and low-income countries (i.e. HICs, UMICs, LMICs and LICs – respectively, for example, Japan, Türkiye, India and South Sudan (World Bank, 2024; 2025)); and in every global region, from Western Europe to Central and South Asia and from Sub-Saharan Africa to Latin America (Patel et al., 2023; Yuksel et al., 2026).

Mirroring this rapid and substantial growth, the British Council has engaged with, researched and regularly reported on the role of English in education systems around the world. While Graddol’s seminal (2006) *English Next* publication provided an early overview of issues and trends, more recent publications have tended to focus on specific geographical contexts and educational environments (e.g. Galloway et al., 2017 on China and Japan; Erling et al., 2017 on Ghana and India) and, in particular, on EME in higher education (e.g. Linn et al., 2021; Veitch, 2021) or in school education in LICs and LMICs (e.g. McIlwraith, 2013; Simpson, 2019).

Throughout this time, the British Council has also reflected upon what its own position on English-based pedagogies might look like (e.g. Simpson, 2019; Veitch, 2021).

Yet, in a fast-changing and increasingly globalised world, there is a need to bring together findings, successes and concerns from the various previous discussions about the role of the English language in education systems around the world, in order to provide an account that:

- acknowledges the varied contextual and societal realities in which English-based education takes place around the world
- recognises and distinguishes between primary-, secondary- and tertiary-level education
- takes account of possible changes in how different local, national and international varieties of English are perceived and valued (Jenkins, 2025; Young et al., 2016)
- recognises the intertwined relationship between English and other languages in each particular educational and societal context
- acknowledges the importance and complexities of multilingualism and multilingual education for individuals and within regional, national and international communities (Erling et al., 2017; Liddicoat, 2013).



Accordingly, this position paper seeks to address these issues and concerns. It aims to clarify and communicate the British Council's approach to the use of English in state education systems around the world, particularly at primary and secondary levels. It seeks to open up and facilitate further discussion of the key issues and challenges concerning English in education, while also providing support for policymakers and practitioners as they make informed choices about the role of English in their own particular teaching and learning environments. The paper is thus intended to support ongoing dynamic discussion, providing a 'work in progress' for stakeholders locally, nationally, regionally and globally to respond to and decide upon in light of their own contextual knowledge and understandings.

To summarise, therefore, the aims and purposes of this position paper are to:

- encourage the open and, at times, challenging discussion of issues concerning language and languages in education among all interested actors and stakeholders
- map out how English in education is implemented around the world, reflecting on both successes and challenges, and on the differences between high- and higher-middle-income and lower-middle- and low-income educational environments, expanding on previous perspectives and reflecting on recent research and associated publications
- examine contextually appropriate pragmatic and realistic ways to support improved learning outcomes for students studying in environments where English is the dominant language of learning and teaching but is not the primary language of communication for most of the population.

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Clarifying key terms and concepts

Any discussion of the place of English in education systems around the world necessarily involves a more general consideration of *language(s) in education* (LiE). A focus on LiE takes in both the teaching and learning of second, foreign or additional languages *and* the language(s) used for teaching and learning other academic subjects in schools, that is, language as the *medium of education*. The medium of education is also often referred to as the *language of learning and teaching* (LoLT) or, sometimes, the *medium of instruction*.

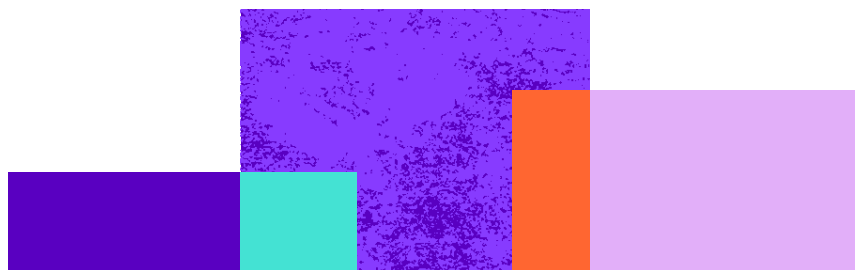
For the British Council, the term *English in education* (EiE) consequently refers to all forms of teaching and learning that in some way involve the English language. It comprises:

- the teaching of English as a school subject, like the teaching of other foreign languages, with language-oriented curricula, teaching materials and assessments
- teaching and learning that takes place *through* or *in* English, in which students gain knowledge of their academic subjects, acquire skills, form attitudes and develop in ways that are not intended to be solely or primarily linguistic (Johnston, 2010).

In the teaching of English, while language teaching methodologies have, until recently, tended to emphasise *English-dominant* classrooms, challenges to *English-only* approaches are now increasingly common. There is widespread recognition that students' home languages, and their use in the classroom, play a fundamental role in second or foreign language learning and development. Likewise, there is a much clearer appreciation within the field that many English language classrooms around the world are (and always have been) *multilingual* spaces (Kerr, 2019; Hall, 2024), albeit to differing degrees in different contexts and institutions, and in ways that are not always officially sanctioned or viewed as compliant with the official policies of the educational system.



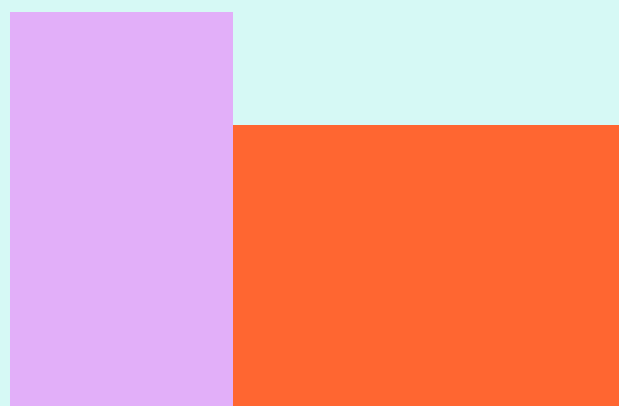
There is widespread recognition that students' home languages, and their use in the classroom, play a fundamental role in second or foreign language learning and development.



Multilingualism is discussed with varied and sometimes overlapping terms and conceptualisations (Patel et al., 2023). This report draws upon Buendgens-Kosten and Elsner's (2018) broad understanding of multilingualism as 'encompassing any co-existence or co-presence of two or more languages, within and without language-learning contexts' (p. xi). Multilingual spaces in educational contexts also acknowledge both that the goal of language teaching is to support students in becoming multilingual language users and that many learners of English already speak several other languages (Cook, 2016). They also recognise that, as part of their everyday lives, most multilingual speakers switch between languages and make use of 'all their language resources to achieve their purposes' (Conteh, 2018, p. 446). In the classroom, therefore, the idea that learners (and their teachers) might similarly draw upon 'all their language resources' to achieve their purpose – that is, to learn the language – is increasingly seen as key. For example, in the British Council's [Continuing Professional Development \(CPD\) Framework for teachers](#), 'using multilingual practices' is highlighted as a prominent aspect of teacher competence (British Council, 2025). We shall return to the practicalities of multiple language use in the classroom, and to ideas of translanguageing (see Section 5.4).

The ways in which academic subjects might be taught *in* or *through* English also vary across different educational contexts and systems and encompass a range of approaches. *English-medium education* (EME) refers to 'the use of the English language to teach and study academic content in places where English is not the primary language of communication of the majority of the population' (Patel et al., 2023, p. 187).

Also termed *English-medium instruction*, EME might be contrasted with *content and language integrated learning* (CLIL), which has the explicit objective of furthering subject content *and* language learning. As Dearden (2014, p. 4) notes, EME 'does not (necessarily) have that objective', with English used as the vehicle for learning but without the targeted language instruction that a CLIL-based approach incorporates. Furthermore, while the term EME makes it clear that the medium of education is English, with all the geopolitical and sociocultural implications that this may entail (Dearden, *ibid.*), the expression *CLIL* does not specify which language is to be 'integrated' with academic content – although in practice this is often English. Likewise, while, in theory, the scope of both EME and CLIL takes in all subjects within the school curriculum, in practice, CLIL is often limited to a few subjects (e.g. maths and/or science; history, geography and/or social sciences) within a school. The decisions as to which subjects are often decentralised to local education authorities, schools and, in some contexts, teachers themselves (de Zarobe, 2013); EME tends to encompass the full curriculum within schools, usually following national or centralised policy directives. Consequently, the generally systematic introduction and implementation of EME often carries higher stakes than the often more localised implementation of CLIL, as EME affects *all* students in *all* subjects within a national or sub-national education system.



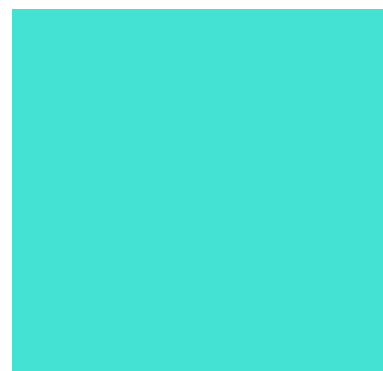
Although it is useful to highlight the differences between EME and CLIL, it is important to recognise that, in practical terms, neither approach is monolithic, each being interpreted and implemented in varying ways in different contexts. There are examples of both EME and CLIL programmes in which limited use of the students' home language(s) is accepted within content classes, and contexts where this is frowned upon (see, for example, Galloway et al., 2017, and Lin, 2015, respectively, concerning EME and CLIL). In some EME and CLIL contexts, students experience little or no English language instruction in support of their studies (e.g. Pérez-Vidal, 2007), perhaps because of the limited linguistic resources available to their teachers, whereas other models of EME and CLIL provision include an explicit in-class focus on English (e.g. Banegas, 2014). To some extent, therefore, it is often difficult, and thus perhaps unnecessary, to be too concerned about whether to classify teaching as either EME or CLIL. As Dalton-Puffer (2011) points out, the label given to a particular programme is often more dependent on cultural, economic and political issues than on any of its actual features. More important are the implications of different ways of teaching and learning through and in English for the education of young people, both in terms of the way in which a country's overall educational system is organised and with regard to in-class practices.

We shall look at these differing possibilities and practices in more detail later in this paper (see Section 5), particularly with regard to *basic education* (ISCED, 2011), which usually comprises primary and secondary schooling (largely in reference to state-sector schooling), but also noting the role of EME within many tertiary-sector institutions around the world (Veitch, 2021). This discussion will not only focus on the possibilities and complexities of English in education at each level but also explore the possible challenges that arise during students' transition between educational stages and, potentially, between different mediums of education.



... most multilingual speakers switch between languages and make use of 'all their language resources to achieve their purposes'

Conteh, 2018



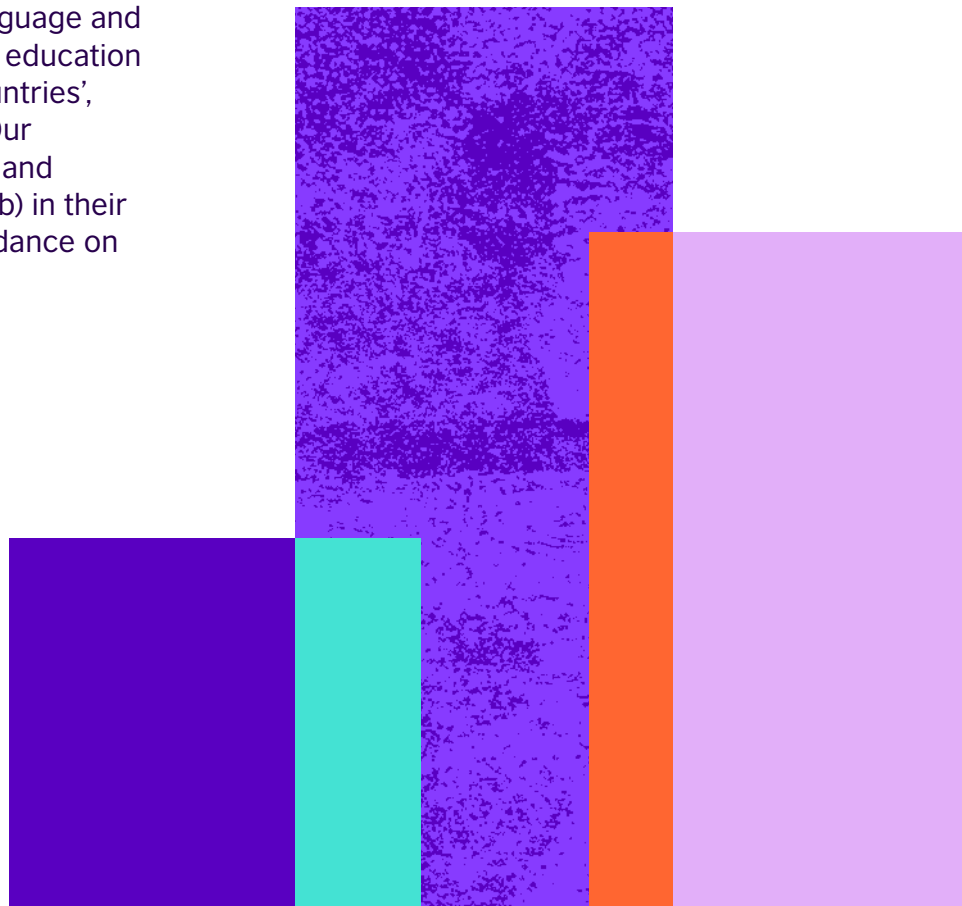
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The British Council's position

The British Council's position concerning English, multilingualism and LiE, including EiE, has developed in parallel to global trends and changes in the linguistic landscape, and to educational innovations and reform programmes. It is informed by our close collaboration with ministries of education (MoEs) globally and our extensive work with education systems in varying contexts. Thus, our position is contextually situated and can be traced through our previous statements and publications, including, for example, the 'Concluding Statement of Principles' from the 2012 Juba Language in Education Conference organised by the British Council with the support of UNICEF and the UK government's Department for International Development (DFID) (see McIlwraith, 2013), as well as our previous perspective paper 'English language and medium of instruction in basic education in low- and middle-income countries', authored by Simpson (2019). Our position is also acknowledged and drawn upon by UNESCO (2025b) in their 'Languages Matter: Global guidance on multilingual education' report.

3.1 English, language and multilingualism

The British Council's position on language and languages is inclusive. We hold that a multilingual perspective on languages and language use can better equip societies and policymakers as they seek to navigate contemporary social, cultural, educational and economic challenges.



16 Consequently, we acknowledge:

- the complex and at times controversial role English plays in societies, in part due to its legacy as a language of colonial power in many contexts, which may also contribute to current social, economic, educational and political inequalities around the world
- the complexities of multilingualism. We recognise and value the range of languages and linguistic styles present in each social and educational context; the linguistic repertoires that individual language users might draw upon flexibly and fluidly in order to navigate different social situations and domains, and through which they create and maintain interpersonal relationships; and the pluralistic, holistic, dynamic, multilayered nature of multilingual environments and communication
- the value of a shared language, including English, within and between communities in order to create and develop opportunities for individuals and nations, broaden understanding and communication, and create greater equity and equality. We recognise, however, that although English can and does play a crucial role in linking and bringing together multilingual communities, its dominance in a world of linguistic inequalities can at times compromise the space needed for other languages to co-exist and thrive

- the value of home languages in forming and maintaining individuals' identity/ies, their confidence and self-esteem, and their sense of cultural belonging. Likewise, we recognise the links home languages can help sustain between a student's school and their home, and the ways in which the recognition of home languages promotes and sustains diversity and multilingualism in societies, thereby creating a more supportive environment for linguistic equity
- the critical role of language in addressing the challenges society faces at the local, national and global scale – from conflict to climate change, and societal cohesion to access to opportunity.

We also acknowledge the problematic realities that surround and are embedded in the relationships between languages and their speakers in many contexts around the world, including:

- perspectives that emphasise the dominance of a single language within a classroom, school or society and consequently devalue other languages and varieties. Termed *monoglossic ideologies*, these standpoints ignore the role of and possibilities for multilingualism in education and society, seeing language simply as an 'autonomous skill' that is, in effect, independent of the context in which it is used (García & Torres-Guevara, 2009, p. 183)

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- the increasing presence, importance and status of English across all levels of education (as well as in many other domains, such as business and scientific research), achieved through a process sometimes referred to as *Englishisation*. Evidenced by the growth of English in education around the world, through EME, CLIL and the teaching of English as a school subject, Englishisation also has significant consequences for staffing, timetabling, materials development and teacher education (Lanvers & Hultgren, 2018)
- the relationship between nation-state-building, education and language policy, in which the language of power in a society may differ at times from that used by students and teachers (Simpson, 2019). The use of these powerful or ‘national’ languages to convey or construct a sense of national loyalty and citizenship within a country may consequently exclude those members of the population who do not speak them as a first or home language, or to a high level of proficiency (McColl Millar, 2005).

The British Council’s perspectives on English, language and the value of multilingualism guide our decision making and behaviour in a world in which languages are often not seen as equal, and the use of some languages and varieties rather than others can lead to social and economic advantage. In other words, using the ‘right’ or ‘powerful’ language in a particular context, whether educational or societal, provides speakers with linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1992).

From this perspective, linguistic hierarchies can be linked to social hierarchies and to cultural and economic inequalities (Bernstein, 1971–1990). Consequently, we conclude this section by re-emphasising the British Council’s view that an inclusive approach to language and languages leaves societies and policymakers better placed to address the social, cultural, educational and economic challenges of today’s world.

3.2 Languages in education, including English in education

The British Council’s position concerning English, language and multilingualism, outlined above, underpins our approach to languages in education, including EiE. At the broadest level, we understand that:

- the role of school education is to develop the potential of children, including fostering their linguistic potential in the required language(s) of learning and teaching (LoLT(s)). In educational systems in which children are taught through or transition to CLIL or EME schooling, children’s linguistic development should therefore be supported both in their local languages and in English. Developing students’ linguistic potential should be an ‘additive’ rather than ‘subtractive’ process – in other words, learning a new language or learning through English *adds to* rather than replaces students’ home language(s) and does not take place at the expense of and to ultimately replace their home language(s) (i.e. Baker & Prys Jones, 1998)



- consequently, as new languages are learned, students also continue to develop cognitively and academically, as well as socially and emotionally, in their home language as well as in the new language(s) (Cummins, 2001; Humphrey, 2013)
- language and the LoLT within education systems have a key role in both lifelong and socio-emotional learning (Adamson et al., 2024).

However, we also recognise that:

- complex interconnected political and geopolitical, economic, historical and cultural factors influence and shape LiE policies around the world, leading to the desire for and adoption of EIE policies, programmes and practices in many contexts, including those where the evidence suggests this may not be the most appropriate choice for teaching and learning. As the Introduction to this paper suggests, these forces include top-down considerations such as the goal of participating successfully in a global economy or the potential role English might play in supporting national unity in linguistically diverse settings where a major indigenous language is not accepted by all communities. They also comprise bottom-up influences such as parental demand for English (due to the perceived economic and social value of English), alongside the ongoing development of (relatively) low-fee, private-sector, English-medium courses
- LiE decisions consequently often focus on developing ‘higher status’ national or international languages, particularly English, at the expense of, rather than alongside, more local languages. This has the effect of reinforcing the prestige of these chosen languages and impacts negatively on societal and individual views of more familiar ones. It can also potentially lead to feelings of shame and fear of making mistakes among learners when faced with learning in and contributing to classes in an unfamiliar national or international language (Adamson, 2022)
- while English-based LiE policies can potentially benefit both individual students and a nation-state’s wider economic development, how this plays out in different contexts can differ significantly. For example, EME and CLIL programmes in European high-income contexts may lead to more successful outcomes than EIE approaches in Sub-Saharan low-income contexts due to, for example, their longer-established educational systems, greater educational resources (including learning/teaching materials and teacher education) and higher levels of home-language student literacy. We shall return to these issues in more detail later in this paper (see Sections 4 and 5)



- furthermore, where EiE is implemented, this may disadvantage some groups in society more than others, particularly, as we discuss later in the paper (see Section 4.1), students from lower socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds who may already have less linguistic capital than those from higher SES backgrounds (Bernstein, 1971–1990), or who have less access to English and to English-learning opportunities outside the classroom. Likewise, other disadvantaged and marginalised groups, including, in many contexts, female students, ethno-religious minorities and those from rural rather than urban contexts, are more likely to be comparatively disadvantaged by EiE.

The British Council therefore acknowledges the ongoing worldwide demand for English and the potential advantages to individuals and nation-states of developing EiE, to some extent at least. However, we also understand the significant challenges this poses to valuing and sustaining societies that are multilingual, and likewise to equality and equity in and through education. The British Council consequently recognises that LiE policies in different educational contexts, including approaches to EiE, navigate these challenges in different ways. Thus, our role is to work with policymakers in the development and implementation of contextually appropriate policy frameworks, in order to support teaching, learning and assessment around the world. That said, our position, and the perspectives that underpin it, leads the British Council to draw attention to a number of key issues that need to be considered as part of the effective design and implementation of LiE and EiE policies and practices.

3.3 Key issues arising

First, it is clear that students who are taught in a language they understand are significantly more likely to learn successfully (Evans & Morrison, 2016; Haidar & Fang, 2019; see also the Introduction to this paper). In settings where English is the LoLT across the wider subject curriculum, students' proficiency in English is central to understanding both their educational outcomes and the support they are likely to need to achieve educational success (Strand & Lindorff, 2020; Strand & Lindorff, 2021). If the intention is to provide an English-medium education, children need to be provided with quality English language learning opportunities so that their proficiency can develop in ways that enable them to access and engage with the school curriculum (Galloway & Ruegg, 2020).

It is useful here to also distinguish between *basic interpersonal communication skills* (BICS), which in general terms refers to conversational fluency, and *cognitive academic language proficiency* (CALP), which refers to students' abilities to understand and express, in both speech and writing, concepts and ideas that are relevant to educational success (Cummins, 1979; 2008). In EiE, students' ability to access the school curriculum requires more than simply their conversational proficiency (i.e. BICS) in English. Rather, it depends on their ability to use formal and academic registers of the language, and to access and use subject-specific English language vocabulary appropriately (i.e. CALP). CALP also requires high levels of student literacy (which conversational proficiency does not).

Furthermore, much research suggests that the multiple languages that individuals might know (or be learning) are either integrated into a single linguistic knowledge-system and/or are interconnected, influencing and interacting with each other in multilingual speakers' minds (Cook, 2016; Cummins, 1981; García & Otheguy, 2014; MacSwan, 2017; Otheguy et al., 2015). Consequently, school students need to be literate and, in fact, *academically* literate both in their home/local language and in English if they are to avoid being significantly disadvantaged within an educational system in which the LoLT is English, or in which there is a transition from their home or local language as the medium of education to EME schooling. In effect, students need to reach a CALP 'threshold level' (Cummins, 1979; 2001) in each LoLT (i.e. their home/local language and English), and develop their CALP in both languages to a degree sufficient to gain the cognitive benefits that come with being proficient in two (or more) languages and that underpin academic success.

The need for students to have a sufficient degree of CALP, in English as well as in the local language, is clearly a challenge to the successful implementation of EiE programmes in many contexts. However, it is important to note that CALP develops over time (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 2002), and, consequently, students do not need to commence primary school with advanced literacy or academic language proficiency. These develop from basic, through intermediate to advanced level over the course of a child's development, contingent on both their schooling and the environment beyond school (Cummins, 2008).

For multilingual language users who use English as a second or additional language, CALP in English might develop either *sequentially* or *simultaneously*. In a sequential process, literacy in the new language (i.e. English in EiE schooling) develops once a child has developed adequate speaking, listening, reading and writing fluency in their familiar or home language(s) and has also gained oral proficiency in the new language (Baker, 2011; Wong-Fillmore & Valadez, 1986). From this perspective, academic literacy develops in stages, with each stage, and each language, providing the foundation for another. However, when circumstances are supportive, literacy in a student's home language(s) and in the new language may develop simultaneously. In this case, cognitive and oral skills they acquire in one language support development in the other (García, 2009; Reyes, 2001). Focusing on literacy in both languages allows important elements of proficiency such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary development and receptive and productive skills to develop at the same time (Fernández-Fernández & Halbach, 2023). Research also suggests that successful (early) bilingual education aligns with children's natural learning processes (Pérez-Cañado, 2021). However, providing support to schools in order to enable this simultaneous learning of two (or more) languages is likely to be challenging and expensive. It requires substantial resources and highly skilled teachers who themselves are proficient in multiple languages.

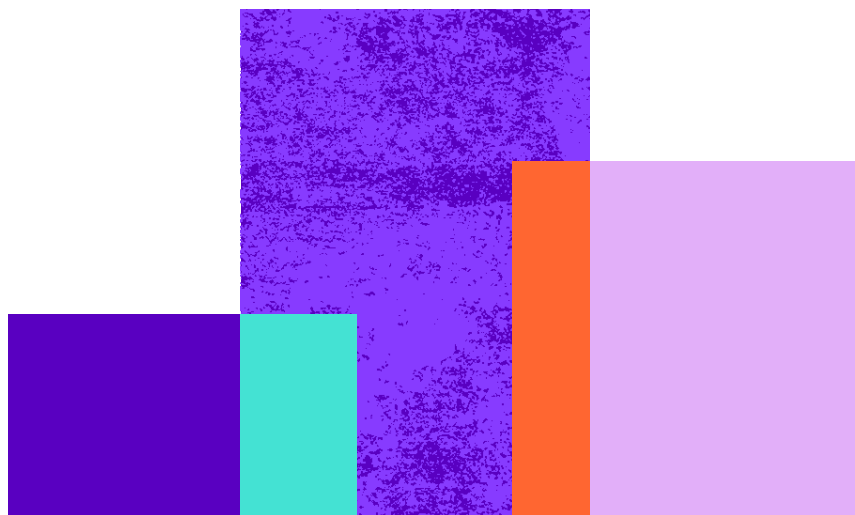
In practical terms, therefore, the development of academic literacy and, ultimately, CALP in English, whether following a sequential or a simultaneous route, clearly requires the maintenance and continued development of students' home languages and literacies. Academic literacy in their home language(s) needs to continue to develop to enable future learning in and through English, a process that is dependent on a range of context- and educational-system-related factors. These include, for example, pursuing a language-responsive classroom pedagogy, and the careful and supportive design of curricula, textbooks and other learning/teaching resources and assessments. Language-responsive approaches to education are further discussed later in this paper (see Section 5).

Students' home languages and English should therefore both be valued and used to mutually support their development, if English is the medium through which students experience and engage with their academic curriculum (Kim & Piper, 2019). Consequently, the British Council recognises that we have a role in discussing with policymakers and other stakeholders the benefits and value of multilingualism – in society at large, for individuals in those wider communities, and in support of student learning, both when students are taught through their own or home languages and when the LoLT is English. In the latter case, we encourage policymakers to consider the positive role the principled and purposeful use of students' home languages plays in support of their English-medium education.

We also recognise the now widespread challenge to the commonly held perspectives that:

- the earlier children start learning English, the better they will learn
- the more there is a proportional decrease in their use of their home language as they learn English, the better their English language proficiency will become.

As Murphy and Evangelou (2016, p. 7) point out, there is no research that 'unequivocally demonstrates' the advantages of early-start language teaching and learning. Meanwhile, the notion that reducing students' home-language use as they learn English is beneficial runs counter to the idea outlined above that multilingual speakers' knowledge of the various languages they speak, and the development of their CALP in different languages, is integrated and interdependent. Rather, children, and indeed all English language learners, need *quality* English language learning opportunities to enable them to access the curriculum in or through English, aligned with the development of their home language (rather than simply a focus on English at a young age to the detriment of their home language).



3.4 Interim summary: The need for a holistic approach to language(s) in education

This section has summarised the British Council's position concerning English and its relationship to other languages, with particular reference to the place of, and the challenges around, English as the language of learning and teaching in educational systems around the world. While arguing strongly for perspectives that support multilingualism, both at a societal level and in support of learning in schools, the discussion has noted the top-down and bottom-up drivers of EiE policies. A consequence of the ongoing move towards EiE is that huge numbers of children and teenagers are required, at some stage of their educational experience, to transition from one LoLT to another, that is, from their home or a familiar language to, in many contexts, English (UNESCO, 2025a). This may be as they enter primary school, transition from primary- to secondary-level education or move from basic to higher education. Even in university programmes in which English is not the medium of education, many students will need English to access subject-specific knowledge and resources. These system-level transitions in the LoLT have significant implications for curricula, textbooks and learning/teaching resources, teaching and teacher education, and assessment, and thus require careful planning, management and support.

LoLT policymaking and planning, therefore, needs to look beyond a single or particular level of schooling – primary, secondary or tertiary – in any context, and instead take a holistic or 'whole-education-system' approach to subject curricula, learning/teaching resources, assessment and teachers' professional development, as well as to the development of students' CALP. Cohesion between educational stages, in pre- and in-service teacher training and in LiE school practices, needs to be a key focus within any programme of educational change or reform, and requires the adoption of longer-term perspectives rather than short-term or quick-wins strategies that can often create an unstable, 'swinging pendulum' environment for practical, in-school interventions and do not allow enough time for effective impact assessment.

Acknowledging these issues, the British Council works within national, regional and institutional LiE policy frameworks to support better learning outcomes for students. However, as the discussion throughout the paper so far has implied, how LiE, in general, and EiE approaches, in particular, play out in different contexts around the world varies. We shall now examine and illustrate this complex global picture in more detail, contrasting possibilities, practicalities and potential outcomes in higher-income contexts with those in lower-income countries, and showing that there can be no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to language(s), and to English, in education.

4

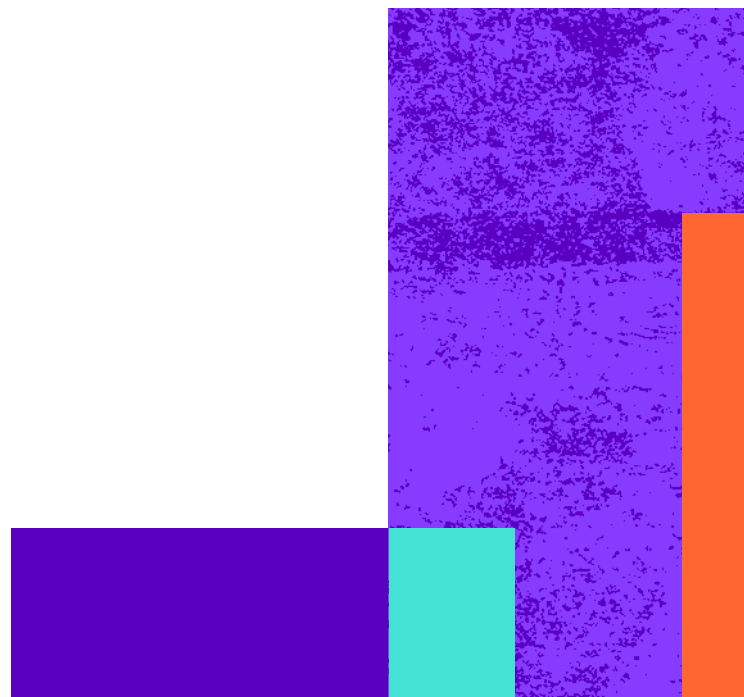
Illustrating complexity and diversity in LiE: Local realities and contrasting contexts

This paper has already noted that different educational systems have differing contextual foundations and starting points for LiE and for EiE, and therefore must address often diverse issues and challenges through a variety of approaches. As the following summaries illustrate, the context for LiE and the ways in which LiE may be realised in practice differ significantly in, for example, low-income and high-income countries.

4.1 Low- and lower-middle-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

Countries classified by the World Bank (2024) as low- and lower-middle-income contexts (LICs and LMICs) are largely grouped in Sub-Saharan Africa and South and South-East Asia, for example Malawi and Myanmar, Sudan and Sri Lanka. (The relatively few LMICs outside this geographical zone include Bolivia, Honduras, Nicaragua and Papua New Guinea.) Typically, such countries have always been linguistically and culturally diverse, although the related processes of contemporary urbanisation and in-country migration have led to increased multilingualism as individuals from different communities come together.

As UNESCO (2025b) reports, over 40 per cent of the world's population lacks access to education in a language they speak or understand fluently, a figure that rises to 90 per cent in some LICs and LMICs. This affects more than 250 million school-age students worldwide, and in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, fewer than 20 per cent of learners are taught in the language they speak at home (UNESCO, 2025b). Such numbers contribute to what the World Bank (2022) has termed a 'learning crisis', in which an estimated 90 per cent of ten-year-olds in Sub-Saharan Africa, and 70 per cent of ten-year-olds in LICs and LMICs more generally, lack age-appropriate literacy skills and are unable to understand simple written texts (United Nations, 2025).



It is possible to see clear links between such ‘learning poverty’ and the ‘widespread and uncritical adoption’ of English as a LoLT in basic education (Milligan, 2020, p. 928) in which English ‘is a problem that learners need to overcome rather than a resource to support their learning’ (ibid., pp. 929–930). Many teachers are not proficient enough in English to be able to deliver an English-medium curriculum effectively. Educational systems in LICs and LMICs often lack the necessary English language resources and a physical and organisational infrastructure that, for example, trains teachers to work successfully in EME classrooms. Likewise, the majority of students lack the proficiency needed to learn in and through English (Erling et al., 2017). In some contexts, meanwhile, the expansion of private-sector education, particularly low-fee schools marketing an English-medium offer, diverts attention and resources from state educational infrastructure, potentially leading to the separation and segregation of students (and teachers) according to social class and/or family income (Tikly, 2016; see also, for example, Choi & Poudel’s (2024) discussion of LoLT, equity and social justice in Nepal).

However, while LiE policies remain predominantly monolingual and monoglossic in many settings, it is possible to trace changing attitudes towards multilingual education in some low-income and lower-middle-income contexts. In South Africa, for example, the underlying principle of LiE policies is to continue the use of the students’ home language(s) – especially in the early years of learning – while providing access to additional language(s), the explicit goal being additive bilingualism and ‘respect for all others’ languages’ (Republic of South Africa Dept. of Basic

Education, 2010, p. 7). Likewise, in parts of Ethiopia, India and South Sudan, there is growing recognition that early years and primary education should utilise a LoLT that students know alongside the encouragement of multilingual education. It should be noted, however, that in each of these countries, there are both multilingual schools and EME institutions – in other words, there are different LoLT policies and practices within individual countries (Heugh et al., 2007; Tsimpli et al., 2020; Yoasa, 2013).

In practice, of course, implementing multilingual educational policies can be challenging because of a lack of educational resources and materials in relevant languages, teachers’ lack of proficiency in the students’ languages and the medium of education, and the frequent preference for English (and other contextually dominant languages) among students, parents, teachers and other stakeholders. There is often also a lack of alignment between the different stages of an educational system. Despite the best of policy intentions, for example, students who are taught in their home languages during the early years of their education (up to, for instance, Grade 4) may not then be proficient and/or ready to study in a new LoLT – which is often English – when their schooling transitions to that new medium of education.



... over 40 per cent of the world’s population lacks access to education in a language they speak or understand fluently, a figure that rises to 90 per cent in some LICs and LMICs

UNESCO, 2025

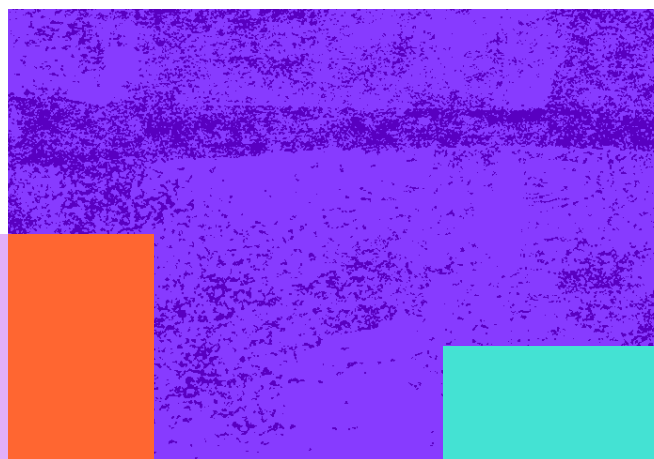
Thus, encouraging and supporting mother tongue education for younger children does not, in and of itself, always offer solutions to subsequent LoLT problems at secondary or, in particular, tertiary level in many LICs and LMICs. This is recognised in South Africa, for example, where the transition from mother tongue to English-medium instruction, which until recently was an immediate change in the LoLT at Grade 4 (Republic of South Africa Dept. of Basic Education, 2010), now takes place more gradually from Grade 4 onwards through a programme of mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE). As a result, the use of the mother tongue is no longer discontinued as soon as students reach Grade 4. Rather, MTbBE provides ‘an intentional focus on using the language resources that children bring from home to school as a basis to learn, while learning other languages’ instead of a focus on using just one language in the classroom (Republic of South Africa Dept. of Basic Education, 2025).

4.2 Upper-middle- and high-income countries

Upper-middle- and high-income countries are more geographically dispersed than low- and lower-middle-income contexts. Alongside HICs such as Canada and the USA, much of Europe, Australia and high-income areas of the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia and Oman, upper-middle-income countries (UMICs) include much of

Central and South America, China and many central and western Asian republics, such as Kazakhstan and Türkiye (World Bank, 2024). Even within this group of UMICs and HICs, there is, therefore, a diverse range of LiE policies and practices. It is, however, useful to draw out some key issues that contrast with most LIC and LMIC settings.

The interweaving of a range of historical, political, economic and societal trends provides a particular context for the development of EME and, in particular, CLIL approaches within basic education in many European countries. In general in Europe, nation-building was accompanied and supported by the development and standardisation of national languages (e.g. Castilian Spanish in Spain, Parisian French in France) alongside the suppression or sidelining of regional languages (Haugen, 1997; Judge, 2007; Milroy & Milroy, 2012) – in the UK, for example, the historical marginalisation of languages such as Welsh, Cornish and Scottish Gaelic, and the labelling of local varieties of English as non-standard ‘dialects’. More recently, however, language revitalisation policies have become relatively widespread, with education and schooling playing a crucial role in the revival of interest in and usage of, for example, Welsh, both Scottish and Irish Gaelic and Euskara (Basque Country) (Linn & Dáyan-Fernández, 2024). Additionally, migration has led to increased multilingualism in many contexts.



Accordingly, there is now an explicit commitment to maintaining linguistic diversity in many European contexts. The EU, for instance, emphasises a strategy for multilingualism that sees a role for languages and multilingualism in support of the European economy, and aims to encourage European citizens to learn more languages in order to foster mutual understanding and to understand and participate fully in the democratic institutions, procedures and legislation of the EU (European Union, 2019). Consequently, an objective of the EU's language policy is that every citizen should be able to speak two languages in addition to their home language (European Union, 2025). Yet within this multilingual strategy, EU institutions themselves generally operate in just three core languages – English, French and German (EPRS, 2022). Meanwhile, the tensions between the EU's multilingual aspirations and the dominance of English as a global language was recognised as long ago as 2002–03 in the European Commission reports 'Plurilingualism, democratic citizenship in Europe and the role of English' (Breidback, 2003) and 'Key aspects in the use of English in Europe' (Truchot, 2002). No other European language has been the focus of such policy discussion, debate and, indeed, concern (Hall & Cook, 2015).

As many European countries attempt to navigate this complex set of linguistic priorities, multilingual education is gaining traction (Yuksel et al., 2026) within schools, particularly through the introduction of CLIL. In practice, however, this can create educational environments in which a country's national language(s) and English are integrated as the languages of education, thereby, at times, creating a veneer of multilingualism within an approach that essentially limits linguistic diversity. English and national languages are used and valued in the classroom, while other languages may consequently be devalued.

Clearly, when implementing CLIL and other bilingual education programmes, European HICs can draw on far greater resources than LICs and LMICs. Educational systems and infrastructures are significantly more developed, and there is far greater state investment per student: spending per school-age child averages US\$53 in LICs, US\$318 in LMICs and US\$7,800 in HICs (World Bank, 2023). The supportive societal infrastructure in most European HICs also creates an environment where CLIL-based approaches have more chance of being successful than in LICs and LMICs. Societies are generally print- and literacy-rich and comparatively technologically advanced, and students' families are often more familiar with educational processes, experiences and expectations as parents, grandparents and older siblings have usually been through the school system themselves. Likewise, teacher training and education is more systematic and well resourced, in relative terms, in European HICs than in LICs and LMICs.

Meanwhile, among other HIC contexts around the world, and away from those largely European contexts that focus on CLIL per se (e.g. Finland, Portugal, Spain), Singapore is often cited as a key example of effective EME. A multilingual sovereign city-state, Singapore pursues a bilingual education policy with English as the medium of education from the start of schooling; the students' 'official mother tongue' is then taught as a school subject. The policy draws upon the assumptions that beginning a second language early leads to higher proficiency and that home language development is *not* academically helpful to the development of English language skills, tenets that were questioned earlier in this paper (see Section 3.3). Yet Singapore ranks highly in many measures of global educational success (e.g. PISA, 2022), leading some to assert that these results can be directly related to EME. However, as Dixon (2005, p. 633) notes, 'it is tantalizing to speculate on whether Singaporean students would demonstrate even better academic results if they all received substantial education in their actual home languages'.

Given the relatively small size of Singapore, its resources and particular approach to education, it is problematic to assume that adoption of similar policies elsewhere will necessarily lead to similar educational successes. Singaporean politicians and officials have also, in hindsight, questioned the introduction of English at primary level, and expressed concern over the implications for truly multilingual perspectives within Singaporean society (Pakir, 1993). Meanwhile, and in contrast to the Singaporean context, research

surrounding immersion programmes in HIC anglophone contexts such as the USA and Canada provides the evidence base for key ideas, outlined earlier in the paper (see Section 3.3), around BICS and CALP and the interdependent development, in EME or bilingual education settings, of students' home and school languages (Cummins, 1979; 2008). We shall return to the ways in which the classroom practices often deployed in anglophone immersion contexts with students who have limited English language proficiency might inform language-responsive education in other settings (see Section 5).

4.3 English-medium education in context: Successes and inconsistencies

It is clear, therefore, that, while EME has taken hold in many settings around the world, the environments in which it has been implemented are extremely varied, with potentially significant implications for student learning and educational success.

Research exploring the effectiveness of English-oriented CLIL in European contexts suggests that, in comparison to the teaching of English as a school subject, a CLIL approach can better build students' oral communication, spoken fluency and social interaction skills (e.g. De Diezmaz, 2016), their writing and reading abilities (e.g. Serra, 2007), vocabulary (Arribas, 2016), pronunciation (Alonso et al., 2008) and motivation and interest in learning (Sylvén & Thompson, 2015). Likewise, this paper has noted the claims made on behalf of EME in Singapore. Even in well-resourced HICs and UMICs, there

are few longitudinal studies that definitively link positive outcomes to learning and teaching through or in English (Bonnet, 2012). For example, some research suggests that success in CLIL largely depends on the selection or self-selection of more able students to such programmes, which might be ‘elitist’ and, consequently, socially divisive (Bruton, 2011). Alonso et al. (2008) also note an increased workload for CLIL teachers and the need for effective teacher education and CPD if CLIL (or, indeed, EME) is to be truly successful.

Meanwhile, as our previous position paper points out, in LICs and LMICs, EME and its introduction in early primary schooling yields ‘too shallow a foundation of English to sustain learning across the curriculum’ as students proceed through the levels of basic education (Simpson, 2019, p. 3), and overlooks the rights of children to access the school curriculum in a familiar language. Furthermore, in the

hyper-diverse linguistic contexts that are common in LICs and LMICs, and in which the status of national languages is less established than in HICs and UMICs, EME risks the development of subtractive rather than additive bilingualism among students, as English has the potential to ‘submerge’ local languages and cultures (Marginson, 2021).

Given these complex and potentially contradictory perspectives, the British Council continues to promote further research into EME, particularly in LICs and LMICs, in order to support responsible international development. However, what current accounts of EME, and indeed of EiE more generally, do show is the impossibility of claiming that a single LiE approach will be effective in all contexts; what is needed are LiE policies and practices that are responsive to students’ needs in each particular educational setting.

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... what is needed are LiE policies and practices that are responsive to students’ needs in each particular educational setting.





5

Promoting language-responsive systems and practices

Language responsiveness, inclusion and equity

In order to address the need to provide quality education for children and the problem of weak learning outcomes in many school settings, particularly in those where students' limited proficiency in English as the LoLT restricts their learning, the British Council advocates for *language-responsive* educational systems and practices. A focus on language responsiveness within and across an educational system prioritises language and learning support for all students who need it in order to fulfil their academic potential. It is relevant and appropriate to all levels of education (i.e. primary, secondary, tertiary) and to all core elements of the educational system, that is, curriculum, textbooks and learning/teaching resources, teaching and teacher education, and assessment. Education that is language responsive also enhances inclusion and equity by promoting linguistically and culturally appropriate pedagogies that respect local languages and societal norms and mores (Simpson, 2025).

Language responsiveness to support LoLT

Language responsiveness provides a means to align core elements of the educational system with learners' emergent language skills. It helps address the scale of challenge to students in settings where the majority are obliged or choose to learn and be assessed in or through a language other than their own (often, but not always, English), and where there is also a large gap between the language demands of formal education and students' evolving skills in English. Language responsiveness thus underpins a more equitable and inclusive educational experience for all students. Our conception of language responsiveness across the education system therefore values the possibilities offered by multilingual pedagogies, including MTB-MLE, CLIL and related educational approaches. We propose that, where appropriate, LiE policies should support the teaching *of* the eventual medium of education *as a subject* in addition to learning and teaching *in* and *through* that LoLT in order to ensure that the students' language capabilities develop systematically, thereby further enabling the development of content or subject knowledge.

Language responsiveness and the learner

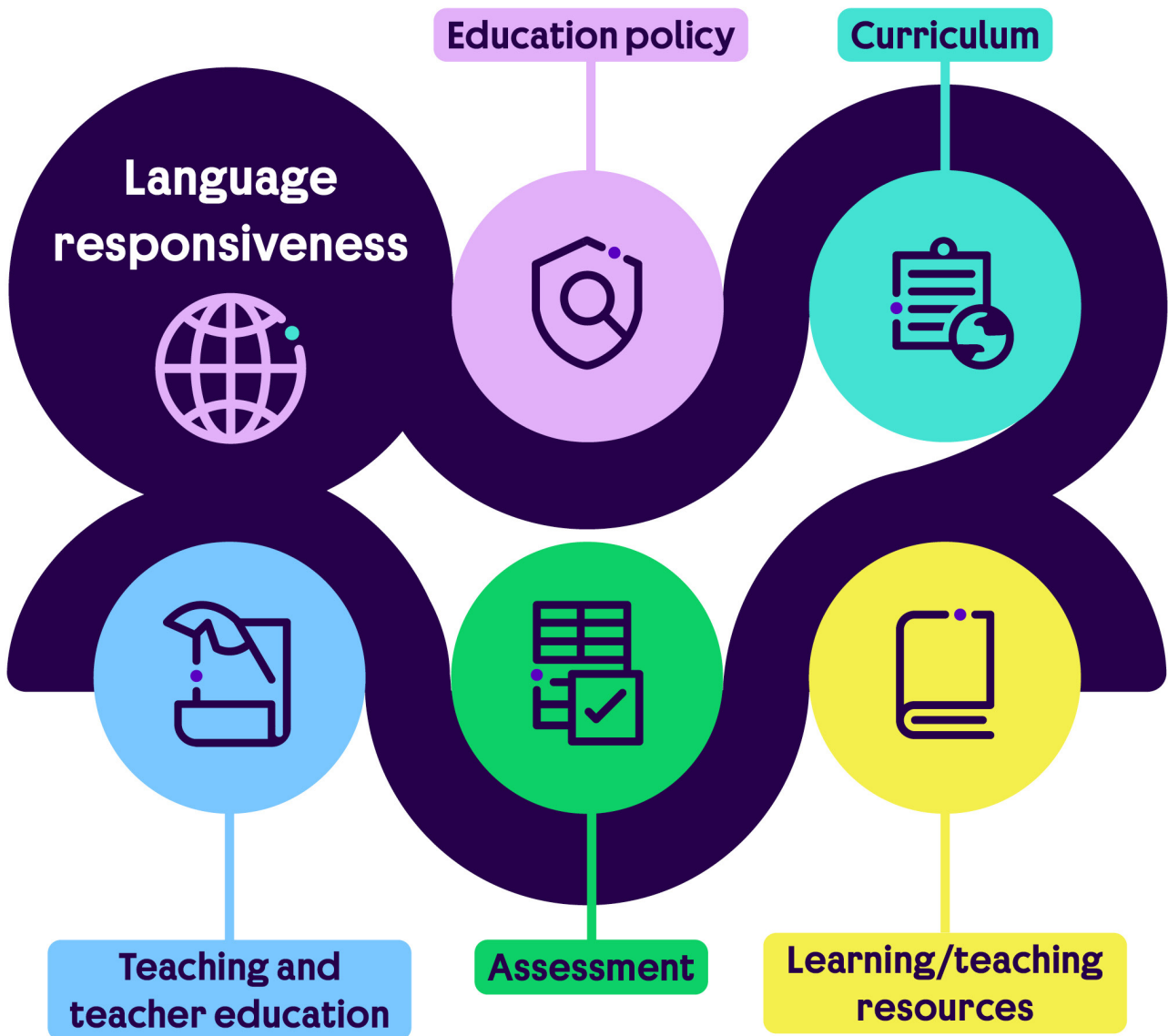
By responding to students' language needs, in support of more inclusive approaches, and consistent with MTB-MLE, CLIL and other approaches, language-responsive education systems acknowledge that ways of thinking and learning differ between peoples and cultures, and value these differences.

Language-responsive education calls for more active student participation in the learning processes, to complement and significantly enhance the teacher-centred classroom practices that are common in many contexts around the world. We also advocate for the development of a greater awareness of and responsiveness to the learners' own knowledge and skills – the knowledge that underpins their ability (or otherwise) to access, understand and learn subject curriculum content. This includes learners' proficiency in English. Education that is language responsive will inevitably be culturally – as well as linguistically – responsive. When teachers use language-supportive strategies that integrate language learning into the teaching of non-language subjects when appropriate, their practice can in some ways align with the ideology and many of the techniques used in CLIL.

Language responsiveness across the education system

The British Council advocates for language responsiveness that spans all major components of an education system, i.e. the curriculum, textbooks and learning/teaching resources, teaching and teacher education, and assessment. We encourage stakeholders to consider whether, how and how well each of these core elements is adapted to and aligned with learners' emergent skills in the LoLT (e.g. English) in order to underpin learning and support academic achievement. Central to the British Council's conceptualisation of language responsiveness is the view that language transitions, whether from one LoLT to another, from single language to multilingual education or to CLIL, should be a *process* rather than simply a point within an educational system, and that the familiar language(s) should continue to be used in the classroom, where necessary, beyond the official juncture of transition in order to support this change. Should teachers continue to use familiar languages in this way, however, care needs to be taken (by policymakers, institutional head teachers, teacher educators, parents and other stakeholders) to ensure that such pedagogical approaches are not accompanied by feelings of guilt, worry or shame (Anderson & Lightfoot, 2018). There is a need in this regard for a focus on the role of the familiar language(s) in LoLT transition in both initial teacher training and ongoing continuing professional development.

A language-responsive education system



Supporting transition to a new LoLT

Within a language-responsive approach, therefore, the introduction of a new LoLT (via a transition from home language to CLIL or EME schooling within an education system) needs to be scaffolded and explicitly supported in subject teaching once students are engaged in English-medium (or any new language-medium) form of education (Barrett et al., 2024). This will support students as they develop CALP and appropriate disciplinary and subject literacies in the LoLT (e.g. science, humanities and/or social studies). This involves the development of both communicative and cognitive or knowledge-forming skills (e.g. analysing, describing, evaluating, explaining and discussing for the former; thinking, understanding and learning for the latter) alongside receptive and productive language skills. Similarly, in contexts where educational infrastructure and access to language-rich environments outside of the classroom can support early-years immersion approaches to language learning, language-responsive approaches that scaffold and support learning by reflecting natural language learning can be successful.

Language responsiveness and whole-child development

From a language-responsive perspective, *languages* are consequently seen as societal and individual assets and as a resource for students in support of their school learning. Home or familiar languages are therefore perceived as having a role in education beyond simply supporting the learning of English (or any other dominant medium of education), with the aspiration that the medium of education *adds* to students' overall linguistic repertoires, rather than

replaces an existing language. In other words, language responsiveness is underpinned by an additive rather than subtractive conception of multilingualism, which also requires the development of students' home-language literacy. Language responsiveness thus aligns with the conception of whole-child development through education that encompasses students' social (interpersonal), emotional (intrapersonal) and cognitive growth (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). This can impact positively on student well-being as well as their learning and can create a sense of belonging in the classroom, thereby countering deficit-based approaches to language and culture that focus on what individuals or communities lack, rather than recognising and valuing their existing qualities and strengths.

Language responsiveness and the role of the British Council

To be successful, however, considering and responding to language across the education system clearly requires buy-in and support from all educational stakeholders, including national and sub-national education authorities, decision makers, school leaders, teachers and teacher educators, parents and the local communities within which schools are located. Consequently, the British Council sees cross-stakeholder advocacy for a language-responsive approach to education to be part of its role as a thought-leader in international education, language education and development. Against this backdrop, we recognise the need to clarify the implications of greater language responsiveness for education policy, curricula and learning/teaching resources, assessment, and teaching, pedagogy and, accordingly, teacher education.

5.1 Language-responsive education policy

The British Council's conception of language-responsive education policy places language at the heart of educational success. From this perspective, there is a need for education policies to more clearly recognise the role of language in learning outcomes, and that 'language is not everything in education, but without language everything is nothing in education' (Wolff, 2011, p. 92). Therefore, it is important that education policies focus on two key aspects of language in education. The first is the role of language(s) and LoLT(s) within the school or classroom – recognising the value to understanding and learning of using students' and teachers' full language repertoires. The second is the critical role of language across the education system and within each of its major components (i.e. curriculum, textbooks and learning/teaching resources, assessment, teaching and teacher education).

In acknowledging these complexities, a language-responsive approach to education also requires LiE policies that conceive of LoLT transitions during students' educational journeys not as a point in time but as an ongoing process to help them achieve the level of CALP necessary to support and sustain their studies in the new language(s). Transitioning students from mother tongue education or learning in a familiar language to learning through a medium of education that is new or in which they have relatively limited proficiency requires planning, staging and ongoing support. It also requires the provision of adequate resources and teachers who are sufficiently trained to support their learners and language proficient themselves. This will involve the explicit teaching of the less familiar

language as well as, eventually, teaching *in and through* it when students transition to the new medium of education. And it will draw on wider LiE policies that affirm and encourage use of local language(s) in education, before, during and, importantly, after students encounter and work within a new medium of education in their schooling.

This philosophy applies to all levels of education, irrespective of the policies adopted for language use within the education system, and therefore is not limited to contexts where English is used as a LoLT. Our perspective is that policy decisions should consider educational linguistic environment, societal linguistic environment and national/international linguistic environment (including which languages allow access to knowledge and power).

The British Council's approach

We encourage implementation of more language-responsive education policies to support learning and teaching of, in and through English. We do this while respecting that policy decisions should be made by local stakeholders and will be influenced by a complex range of factors unique to each country.

We partner with MoEs in ways that meet the needs and aspirations of parents and children from all groups in society, looking beyond the teaching and learning of foundational learning skills to also support the delivery of the full school curriculum and the transitions within this.

5.2 Language-responsive curricula and learning/teaching resources

Underpinning the British Council's language-responsive approach to curricula and learning/teaching resources is our concern that many school curricula tend to be overambitious, potentially overloading students and their teachers with subject material that is excessive and unmanageable in both range and level. Delivering such curricula in the context of EME or CLIL (or in any language of education), in which students' and teachers' language ability may not be sufficiently developed, creates further significant difficulties that often remain unaddressed within LiE policies and practices.

Within EME, many curricula and learning/teaching resources draw upon monolingual and monoglossic perspectives to present students with content that they cannot access, understand or fully engage with, and in which the use of other languages is often penalised. Educational curricula that do not attend to the English language needs of students and do not recognise the value of students' wider linguistic repertoires exacerbate disadvantage for many already-marginalised groups of children.

Language-responsive curricula therefore need to navigate the tension between the inherent requirement for school syllabuses to be standardised and stable at a national level on the one hand, while being flexible, dynamic and responsive to students' needs on the other. Similarly, language-responsive curriculum development, and the associated learning/teaching materials that are developed through this process, need to acknowledge and align with societal and linguistic changes driven by urbanisation and/or migration both within and between countries – particularly in contexts with significant and expanding refugee populations (e.g. Uganda (a LIC), Pakistan (a LMIC), Germany and Poland (both HICs) (United Nations OHCR, 2025)).

Consequently, the British Council supports curriculum development processes that are participatory and that draw on and bring together the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including teachers, educational leaders, those with local knowledge and those who represent the different linguistic backgrounds of the learner population (groups that are, of course, not mutually exclusive). We believe that engaging and giving agency to stakeholders from across the educational system in a process of curricula co-creation will provide a greater sense of ownership over curriculum content and, as a result, over the teaching and learning that happens in the classroom.

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Language-responsive reviews of curricula and learning/teaching resources therefore take account of the degree to which the subject content aligns with students' current stages of cognitive development and their evolving English language knowledge and skills, closing the language gap in subject syllabuses by adapting and scaffolding cognitive and academic language where possible, and integrating language learning with content learning in accessible ways. For example, making explicit the connections between language and content in the curriculum, as intended through CLIL, draws attention to the importance of each for comprehension and develops students' knowledge and abilities in these two important dimensions of education. Relevant CLIL techniques and strategies for aligning language and content in the curriculum include:

- identifying key learning goals related to the content or subject
- highlighting the main language features related to a task or outcome
- identifying key vocabulary related to a topic
- helping pupils learn and use the required (academic) forms of English across a range of subjects
- agreeing and sharing assessment criteria between language and subject-content teachers.

Such curriculum design suggests that language experts should work closely with teams developing and elaborating subject syllabuses to help achieve the degree of content and language integration that supports learning and development of both (Coyle et al., 2009; Clegg & Simpson, 2016). This will involve

developing and trialling the syllabus to check it aligns with students' language needs *before* rolling it out across a whole education system.

We thus envisage the development of language-responsive curricula as an iterative process that involves hypothesising about, investigating and revisiting subject material and the language and languages needed for its accessibility, comprehensibility and successful delivery. Central to this process is the need to validate, embrace and incorporate students' own linguistic repertoires, authentically integrating home or familiar language(s) and English, and acknowledging and supporting the use of these familiar languages to scaffold learning when appropriate, in order that children can fully engage with the curriculum.

As teaching and learning materials are central to the successful implementation of school curricula, a similarly inclusive and iterative approach to materials development and adaptation is crucial for greater language responsiveness in educational systems. The use of teaching and learning materials in English in which the language level is above the students' emerging English language proficiency raises the salient issue of textbook readability and presents a major challenge to learning in English in many contexts. Although course materials designed to be accessible to students who are new to or have relatively limited proficiency in English are available in some countries, for example in CLIL contexts in Europe (e.g. Zarzuelo et al., 2006) and English as a second language contexts in the USA (e.g. Chamot et al., 2003), textbooks can often be too difficult for learners to read (Clegg & Simpson, 2016) and/or include activities that are too cognitively

demanding, particularly those at primary level. In such circumstances, many teachers tend to ignore, omit or simply summarise or translate key texts and reading activities, teaching them orally from the front of the class (Barrett, 2014). This can lead to curricular fragmentation and an inconsistent approach to classroom pedagogy, creating a lack of language development opportunities for students.

The British Council thus encourages the development of classroom materials, and, where appropriate, teacher guides, that are, in themselves, multilingual or facilitate multilingual learning activities. These may include, for example, glossaries, visuals, scaffolded texts and activities, and linguistically simplified tasks (Tsimpli et al., 2019; Clegg & Simpson, 2016). The language and content choices that inform these language-responsive materials should be inclusive and accessible for all students within the education system across all language abilities and linguistic backgrounds and also be gender-aware and gender-sensitive. Ideally, such resources might be made open-access, both for sharing between institutions and to support out-of-school learning and the validation of multilingual approaches to education.

The British Council's approach

We work within curriculum frameworks to support the development of language-responsive curricula and learning/teaching resources that scaffold learners' language(s) development and also develop their understanding of the subject content.

5.3 Language-responsive assessment

A key principle of assessment design in any subject is that assessments should align with the curricula they support (Martone & Sireci, 2009) and that assessment itself is an act of learning, i.e. 'assessment as learning' (Dann, 2014). In the context of LiE, therefore, the language(s) of assessment needs to reflect the language(s) of the curriculum. Consequently, in education systems in which learning and teaching transition from being in a local LoLT to English as the medium of education, the language of assessment also needs to align with students' developing, though likely limited, ability in English. Such an alignment is important as it underpins fair and equitable assessment processes that ultimately lead to accurate measures of students' *subject* knowledge rather than, in effect, their ability in the (new) LoLT (Clegg & Simpson, 2016). However, there has been a surprising lack of attention given to the complexities of assessment in these contexts (Hultgren et al., 2022). The fact that the LoLT is not the students', nor often the teachers', home language, or that students are supposedly learning both subject content and language at the same time, has seemingly not influenced most assessments' design, for example where EME has been adopted (Wilkinson & Zegers, 2006).

Most EME assessments are designed around monolingual and monoglossic constructs in which testing is conducted in a single language (i.e. English), and the use of other languages during the assessment process is often penalised. In other words, learners who understand a concept in, for example, biology or physics may not be able to demonstrate that knowledge in an assessment that is not designed to accommodate their linguistic repertoire nor what they can and cannot actually do in each of the different languages they speak. Consequently, monolingual subject assessments can disadvantage those students whose language proficiency in the medium of education is relatively limited. Furthermore, the resultant test scores are likely to provide an inaccurate record of what these learners might actually know, raising significant questions around the validity of assessing non-language subjects in a language that is not the learners' home or a familiar language (i.e. to what extent is students' language proficiency, rather than their content knowledge, being tested?).

From a language-responsive perspective, it may be helpful to reflect on the assessment support practices often provided for speakers of English as an additional language (EAL) in high-income anglophone, English-immersion contexts (such as the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), which include using other available languages as deemed appropriate. Just as there are long-established school practices in many of these educational systems to assist students for whom English is not an own or home language in engaging with the curriculum, so there is well-documented support available as they take part in subject-based assessment. To ensure

the language of assessment is accessible and equitable to all such students, responsiveness can include providing test instructions or rubrics in the students' local, home or own languages; and, for an agreed period during their LoLT transition, providing students with the choice of answering questions either in English (the new LoLT) or in their own or a familiar language, or in their previous LoLT. As the students' proficiency in English increases over time, assessment accommodations can be adapted to reflect this developing ability, with language-appropriate forms of support or scaffolding adjusted as students progress through the various grade levels.

Additionally, reviewing the language used in English-medium test questions or high-stakes exam papers for issues of clarity/ambiguity and less-than-optimal word choice can provide an important means of ensuring students whose home language is not the LoLT are not disadvantaged by the language of assessment, especially where rubrics and questions are drafted by education professionals for whom English is also an additional language (Simpson, 2025). However, given that the backwash effects of testing often mean that 'what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught' (McEwen, 1995, p. 42), language-responsive test designers and reviewers need also to consider the implications of such reviews for tolerance of language, languages and linguistic diversity within education and across society more widely, and decide what norms are most contextually appropriate.

A language-responsive approach to assessment recognises that responses to these issues need to be straightforward and low-cost. While monolingual approaches have been assumed to be critical to summative assessment reliability and validity, the British Council believes that there are opportunities for summative assessment design to respond more effectively to multilingualism and to linguistic diversity when assessing developing linguistic repertoires. This may be through addressing the language of assessment rubrics or providing more flexibility for students to respond in different languages. Policymakers may also consider whether it is possible to conduct and accept responses to institution- and nation-wide examinations, and other forms of formal and/or summative assessment, via multiple languages. Recent developments in educational technologies and artificial intelligence may facilitate these developments.

Occurring continuously during and over the course of lessons, formative assessment likewise needs to be adaptable to multilingual environments. As teachers and learners develop ways of establishing what has been learned, techniques such as questioning, quizzes and the provision of feedback – undertaken by both teachers and learners – will be more effective if they draw upon all relevant elements of the learners’ linguistic repertoires, enabling them to more accurately convey, and teachers to more clearly understand, how their learning is progressing.

The British Council thus seeks to elevate the status of formative assessment, which can be more language responsive, and support teachers to do this in more linguistically inclusive ways. However, we acknowledge that this will also require teachers, teacher educators, school leaders and decision makers to develop their own assessment literacy, and thus to be supported in the process of developing their formative assessment knowledge and skills in and for EiE contexts.

The British Council’s approach

We support subject teachers working in EME, CLIL and MTB-MLE contexts in designing and applying formative assessment techniques for the classroom rather than seeking, ourselves, to develop a battery of formative tests. We incorporate formative assessment skills training into our support to teachers.

We believe summative assessments for subject content that is taught in a LoLT that is new or challenging for students can be designed to be language responsive and adaptive to linguistic diversity. We support the provision of technical assistance to MoEs seeking to develop assessment systems.



... there are opportunities for summative assessment design to respond more effectively to multilingualism and to linguistic diversity ... formative assessment likewise needs to be adaptable to multilingual environments.

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5.4 Language-responsive teaching practices and teacher education

Teachers and teacher educators play a critical role in school-based learning and in the successful implementation of subject curricula that are created and presented in a LoLT that is new or challenging for students. This paper has already noted that greater language responsiveness in an education system is likely to lead to an enhanced role for teachers and teacher educators as they become key agents in the process of facilitating student engagement with the curriculum through language-adapted subject syllabuses and language-supportive learning/teaching resources. We have also recognised the need for

teachers, and in many cases teacher educators, to be supported as they develop their language-responsive skills and knowledge in relation to assessment, including formative assessment.

In the classroom, therefore, central elements of language-responsive teaching are language-supportive pedagogy and, as part of this pedagogical approach, translanguaging. Language-supportive pedagogy draws on the extensive practice of subject teaching and learning both in the education of minority-language-speaking students in English-immersive contexts (e.g. the UK, the USA, Canada and Australia) and in CLIL classrooms located mainly in Europe (Ball et al., 2015). In both kinds of settings, language-supportive pedagogy is

recognised as a key ingredient for effective student learning when the LoLT is their second or an additional language. Specifically, it addresses students' limited current ability to understand, talk and write in English by providing support for their developing English skills, by amplifying meanings and by licensing targeted use of the local language(s). Language-supportive pedagogy in the classroom is thus visible in the nature of teacher-talk, in the range of task types that teachers use, in the use of visuals and in forms of classroom interaction (Clegg & Simpson, 2016).

To bridge the (often large) language gap between students and aspects of the LoLT that are unfamiliar to them, teachers pursuing a language-supportive pedagogy make their talk as comprehensible as possible. Choosing words carefully and avoiding complex sentence patterns, they repeat, paraphrase, exemplify and signal lesson discourse much more than would be the case in teaching that is not language responsive. Language-responsive teachers also adapt conventional exchange structures, such as call and response or choral drilling by eliciting, prompting and expanding on student responses (Setati, 2005). They support their talk with visuals, check student comprehension and scaffold learner initiatives more than is typical in non-language-supportive pedagogy.

Teachers also use the students' own/ local language(s) strategically in their own talk (e.g. to give explanations of challenging concepts), and endorse students' own appropriate local-language use in classroom interaction and activities, for example during initial group work or brainstorming ideas prior to making a short presentation in English (see Clegg & Simpson, 2016; Heugh et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, the range of tasks deployed by teachers using language-supportive pedagogy in order to scaffold and support students' use and learning of the LoLT also differs from what might be expected with students fluent in the medium of education (Dale & Tanner, 2012; Ball et al., 2015). Learners receive help for talk in English, and learners whose ability in English limits their reading and writing of subject matter are given tasks that develop these skills. Other tasks include those that support learners' acquisition of new vocabulary, especially low-frequency, subject-specific words, with, for example, multilingual word glossaries and the use of visuals to convey meaning. Without these language-supportive pedagogical strategies, few students with limited proficiency in the LoLT, especially in the initial years of English-medium

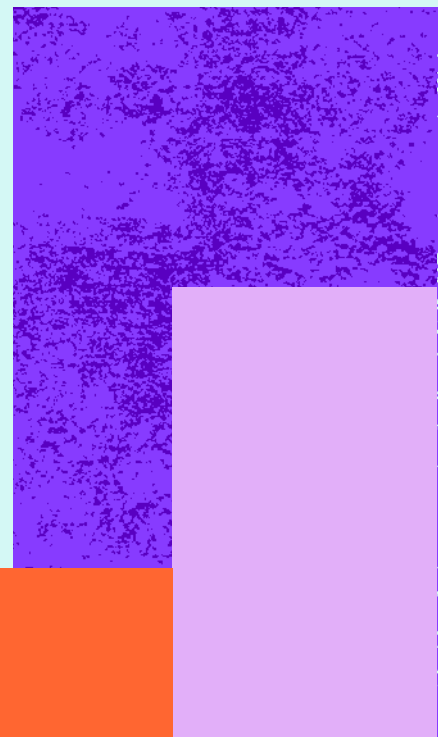
education, can engage effectively with the content of the school curriculum. With them, however, they begin to acquire subject knowledge satisfactorily (Gibbons, 2006) and at a level that can gradually approximate to grade- or year-group-appropriate standards (Clegg & Simpson, 2016).

Underpinning much of this activity are the ideas around, and practices that support, translanguageing.

Translanguageing is an approach or process in which teachers and learners in multilingual classrooms may use all the languages they have at their disposal in order that learners can make sense of the subject matter they encounter and develop their understandings of new concepts (García & Wei, 2014). The practice of translanguageing thus includes drawing upon the students' own language(s) in the classroom, which supports learning if students' lack of proficiency in the medium of education limits their access to the curriculum. Students' home or familiar language(s) can support and scaffold English-language-based activities and learning through, for example, grammar, vocabulary or subject-content explanations, or clarifying when the meaning of texts or interactions is not clear (British Council, 2024; Hall & Cook, 2013). The use of the students' own or home languages can also support their English language development, mapping out essential

classroom language and/or sentence-building, supporting the development of their oral fluency, and encouraging risk-taking and error-making. Such own/home language use should, whenever possible, be strategic and purposeful, however, rather than an unplanned and compensatory 'crutch' (Kerr, 2019).

For language-responsive education to be effective, therefore, teachers, and the teacher educators who support them in initial teacher training and continuing professional development, need the pedagogic knowledge, skills and strategies that underpin context-appropriate language-responsive teaching. Such competences and know-how will enable teachers to use pedagogies and techniques that recognise and utilise the languages that are present in their classrooms, drawing upon the students' own linguistic resources in support of teaching and learning. In language-responsive classrooms, teachers thus need to be aware of learners' language(s) and culture(s) and be able to implement pedagogic approaches and strategies that develop learners' cognitive skills, linguistic repertoires and their plurilinguistic competence (British Council, 2024).

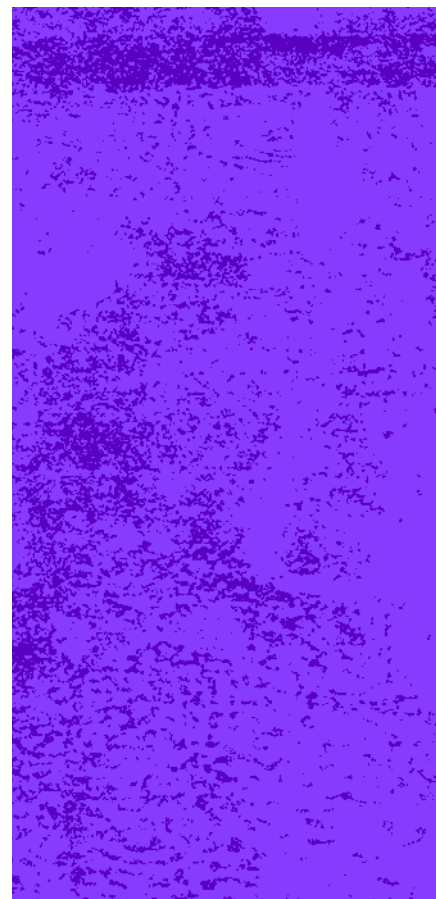


However, many teachers and teacher educators, particularly those who studied in monolingual education systems and those whose initial or continuing training has focused primarily on ‘English-only’ approaches, may require support to develop their beliefs about language-responsive teaching, language-supportive pedagogy and translanguaging. They may also require assistance in developing the pedagogical skills needed to successfully implement these approaches in the classroom and to support other teachers to do so. Furthermore, given the range of educational contexts around the world, and the impossibility of a universal, ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach to basic education, teachers and teacher educators need to be both empowered and skilled in order that they can innovate and develop classroom pedagogies that are appropriate to and effective in their own particular context and school setting. Critically, this requires other stakeholders in basic education, from MoEs to school leaders, to parents within the local community, to support this enhanced role for teachers and teacher educators. The British Council seeks to provide such support across the sector. We also acknowledge the challenging circumstances many teachers experience in their working lives, and the significant extra support and improvements in their working conditions that are necessary if teachers are to be able to innovate and engage in language-responsive pedagogy fully and effectively.

The British Council’s approach

Within the context of local and national education policies, we support the development of teachers’ beliefs and knowledge about the potential role of students’ languages in education.

We recognise the need to align pre-service and in-service teacher training and education with the LiE policies and realities that shape teachers’ classroom practices in support of student learning, acknowledging also the importance of reflecting on the language(s) used as a medium for teacher education as well as the languages used as the medium for teaching children.



6

Summary of the British Council's position and recommendations

This paper has outlined the British Council's position concerning the need for inclusive language policies and practices, and in support of language responsiveness across education systems. The paper serves as a basis for further discussion of the key issues and challenges that surround the position of English in education (EiE), particularly in relation to the use of English and other languages within educational systems around the world. It provides support for policymakers and practitioners as they make informed choices about the role of English (and other languages) in their own particular teaching and learning environments.

The British Council's position is that an inclusive approach to language, languages and multilingualism, rather than a monoglossic or monolingual perspective, can better equip societies and policymakers as they seek to navigate contemporary social, cultural, educational and economic challenges. Our position explicitly rejects perspectives that present English-medium education (EME) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL) in opposition to mother tongue-based bi- or multilingual education (MTbBE; MTB-MLE) in an 'either/or' relationship, or in which one approach might be seen as 'good' and the other as 'bad'. Being responsive to language both encompasses and links together English-medium and multilingual education, as a language-responsive approach enables stakeholders to look at the challenges of languages in education (LiE) policy and implementation in their context, irrespective of the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) in the classroom. This inclusive and responsive approach to LiE also seeks context-relevant opportunities to develop (and celebrate) all languages within an educational system.

We see our advocacy for greater language responsiveness in education as building upon existing ideas in the field, and as being not necessarily ground-breaking but, rather, grounded in language-oriented, contextually appropriate and culturally responsive approaches. This may appear a simple process, but we acknowledge and aim to raise awareness of the complexity of this. Whether an education system, or a particular educational level within a system, implements an EME, CLIL, MTbBE or MTB-MLE (or any other) approach to LiE, the context in which teaching and learning takes place will shape what is possible within the classroom, and teaching and learning will only be successful if language issues and challenges are recognised and responded to effectively in policy and in implementation.

The British Council thus advocates for a pragmatic approach that recognises the complex and diverse nature of linguistic contexts around the world. Consequently, we do not – in this position paper nor, more generally, in our discussions and activities with stakeholders around the

world – make recommendations as to whether EME should be used in a specific country, nor suggest – for contexts that do pursue EME – an ideal age at which students’ transition to EME might occur. These decisions are made by local stakeholders and will be influenced by a complex range of factors unique to each country.

Instead, the British Council recommends that policymakers consider, through the prioritisation of language responsiveness, what needs to be in place across the educational system to support learning of, in and through English. In contexts where English is the LoLT for some or all stages of the education system (i.e. primary, secondary and/or tertiary), we advocate for the high-quality teaching, and associated learning, of English as a *subject* to effectively support learning across the curriculum. It is also vital to consider how the education system as a whole can be more responsive to language in order to support student learning in whichever language is chosen as the medium of instruction.

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As this position paper has made clear, the successful implementation of greater language responsiveness in education is likely to lead to an enhanced role for teachers as they become key agents in the process of curriculum, materials, assessment-oriented and pedagogic change. Yet most teachers will need meaningful support if they are to engage fully in these processes, with significant implications for teacher training and education. Effectively prioritising language responsiveness will, therefore, require *all* stakeholders in the educational system, from ministries of education to parents and from teacher educators to school and local

community leaders, to recognise the value of language-responsive education in meeting individual students' educational needs and aspirations and facilitating wider social, cultural, educational and economic goals. The British Council is committed to supporting the sector in developing language-responsive thinking and practice and sees this position as a starting point for shaping a framework that can inform language-responsive education across diverse contexts.

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