

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING THE MOTHER TONGUE IN AN ADOPTED COUNTRY

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INTRODUCTION

It is through language that we develop our thoughts, shape our experience, explore our customs, structure our community, construct our laws, articulate our values and give expression to our hopes and ideas. 'Mother Tongue' is a common language that is freely and comfortably spoken by adult generation both at home and outside to their successors in a community and reflect one's culture and ethnic backgrounds¹. It is the means by which different groups within the society maintain their identities.

They do this by using the language in a way which is characteristic of their group and by which they can be identified. Within a multicultural society such as Australia there exist many subgroups that express their distinctiveness by particular forms of language freely and commonly used in their communities.

Encouraging young children to learn their Mother Tongue would help them to develop confidence, self-esteem and their unique identity within a multicultural society. It will also provide answers to many of their questions such as 'Why I have brown skin?' In an increasingly multicultural society, the teaching of migrant languages in schools cannot be isolated from the study of the culture of migrant groups. Culture and traditions essentially go hand in hand with language.

The anthropologists are of opinion that the ethnicity is an identifiable feature wherever people choose to live – may it be the country of origin or a country of adoption. Incidentally language background becomes a visible ingredient of one's cultural heritage and ethnicity.

Australia is one of the largest adopted countries for migrants which consists of about 150 aboriginal languages, a number of Aboriginal-English Creoles and over 75 non-Aboriginal languages which are also known as community or ethnic languages.

The Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) formulated under National Policy of Languages has identified four goals relevant to all sectors of language education. They are:

- All Australian residents should develop and maintain a level of spoken and written English.

- Languages Other Than English (LOTE) should be expanded and improved for educational outcomes and communication with both Australian and the international community.
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages should be maintained and developed where they are still transmitted.
- Language services provided through interpreting and translating, print and electronic media and libraries should be expanded and improved².

Languages Other Than English (LOTE) mentioned above is identified as community languages, which are, called Mother Tongue in this study.

REASONS FOR LEARNING A MOTHER TONGUE

It is important to learn the mother tongue in an adopted country like Australia due to several reasons.

Communication

By participation in activities organised around the use of the mother tongue, learners will acquire communication skills in the language that will enable them to widen their networks of interpersonal relations. It will enable the learners to use their mother tongue to establish and maintain good relationships with family members (especially grandparents) and relatives.

E.g. Eleni – Greek, two years old speaks to her grandparents in Greek and to her parents in English! It will also be very useful when they visit their country of origin to have direct access to information.

Cultural Identity

Learners will develop an understanding of the culture of the mother tongue language and they can use it as base for comparison with other cultures. They will thus develop an appreciation of the validity of different ways of perceiving and encoding experiences and of organising interpersonal relations to reach a deeper appreciation of their own personal identity and values. Through mother tongue children learn the everyday life patterns of their contemporary age-group, cultural traditional social conventions, historical roots, relationships with other cultures, cultural achievements, current events and regional and geographical concepts, historical evidence of civilisation in different countries including their own. The children who have a cultural identity learn to stand the pressure from peer group of different cultures in schools, work places and society.

Cultural Heritage

Languages is a means of transmitting the cultural traditions of ethnic groups to the second and later generations. Therefore, by learning the mother tongue it will prevent total disappearance of certain language and cultures in the world.

The children will gain knowledge and understanding of a range of subject matter related to their needs, interest and aspirations, as well as to other areas of their formal learning.

Benefits to the person

The learning of mother tongue will provide an individual the right to study his/her mother tongue and culture. This will also preserve family bonds and lessening of cultural conflicts between generations. Learning mother tongue may be an avenue for occupation of translator, interpreter, or similar occupational pursuit, as well as useful in trade and commerce. Bilingualism assists the child's general intellectual and conceptual development as well.

Benefits to the Australian Society

Learning mother tongue is a means of increasing appreciation of the multi-cultural nature of the present Australian society, and maintains its linguistic and cultural diversity.

CONCLUSION

The objective of learning mother tongue should be to promote, foster and propagate the cultural heritage, within the framework of multiculturalism with a view to achieve the goal – 'unity in diversity' in a more cohesive, equitable and harmonious Australia. However, there are several issues and drawbacks that need addressing when teaching mother tongue in an adopted country. In conclusion I wish to quote from the speech of Mrs. Natasha Post the Executive Director, Ethnic School Board delivered at the Annual Children's concert 1995 of the Sinhala schools in NSW.

"The great and the most powerful gift a parent can give their child is to pass their language and their culture"

References:

1. *A National Language Policy for Australia. A Report prepared by PLANLangPol Committee January 1983.*
2. *Australia's Language: Policy Information Paper. The Australian Language and Literacy Policy. August 1991.*

This article first appeared in Tamil Sydney on 10 December 2006, at <http://www.tamilsydney.com/content/view/122/37/>