



# **EKIN SNY JMUN BACKGROUND GUIDE**

**COMMITTEE: UNESCO**

**MULTILINGUAL AND HERITAGE LANGUAGE  
EDUCATION**

# UN Educational, Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO)

## Description of the Committee

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was founded on 16 November 1945.<sup>1</sup> UNESCO offers opinions on issues of cultural, scientific and educational importance, and promotes international cooperation among its Member States in the fields of education, science, culture and communication. UNESCO is “working to create the conditions for genuine dialogue based upon respect for shared values and the dignity of each civilization and culture.” UNESCO’s mission is to contribute to the building of peace, the eradication of poverty, sustainable development and intercultural dialogue through education, the sciences, culture, communication and information.<sup>2</sup>

UNESCO’s main objectives include:

- Attaining quality education for all and lifelong learning
- Mobilizing science knowledge and policy for sustainable development
- Addressing emerging social and ethical challenges
- Fostering cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and a culture of peace
- Building inclusive knowledge societies through information and communication

The General Conference of UNESCO meets every two years and determines the policies and the main lines of work of the Organization.<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

The goal of Education for All is not only about making sure that everyone receives an education, but that everyone receives an education that is accessible and of a high quality. The choice of language of instruction in a classroom is one that greatly affects this quality and accessibility. The use of specific languages in the classroom raises questions of identity, nationalism, and power. When a student who belongs to a minority group goes to school and doesn’t speak the same language as the teacher, despite living in the same place, that student is less able to learn.

When a new immigrant goes to class in their new home, it may be a long time before they are able to communicate effectively in a new language. It is important to consider the power of language in defining who we are, where we come from, and what we know. The presence of many different languages in the world is unchangeable and undeniable. Education systems need to be able to accept this and provide a quality education that takes into consideration both the needs of students and political, cultural, and social realities.

**READ TO DISCOVER:**

1. What is linguistic diversity?
2. How are different linguistic groups affected by education?
3. What is the difference between heritage language instruction and language teaching?

# Background

## *Linguistic Diversity & Multilingualism*

There are between 7000 and 8000 languages spoken in the world,<sup>4</sup> which leads to linguistic diversity. While some countries are linguistically homogenous, like Iceland, where only one language is spoken, other places have a lot of linguistic diversity. Places that have more than one language can be bilingual, which means people speak just two languages, or multilingual, which means they speak many languages. In Indonesia, over 700 languages are spoken, and there are more than 800 languages in Papua New Guinea.<sup>5</sup> This means that linguistic diversity is not spread out evenly around the globe. More than 70% of the world's languages are found in only 20 of the world's countries.<sup>6</sup> However, it is more common to find the presence of many linguistic groups living in the same country than for people in one country to speak only one language. In other words, more countries are linguistically diverse than linguistically homogenous. This diversity can be old or new. In traditionally diverse regions, many languages have been spoken in the same place over a long time. In other places, especially growing cities, new immigrants mean that in some urban schools students may speak up to 30 or 40 different languages.<sup>7</sup>

## Terms & Concepts

**Accessible:** easy to obtain or approach.

**Language of instruction:** the language used to teach basic information to students.

**Identity:** the defining character of a person.

**Nationalism:** loyalty and devotion to a nation.

**Education system:** the wider set of laws, people, and institutions that controls all the schools in a country.

**Linguistic diversity:** the existence of many languages.

**Linguistically homogenous:** having only one language.

**Bilingual:** speaking two languages.

**Multilingual:** speaking many languages.

**Linguistic Group:** a group of people who share a common language.



*Many languages of UNESCO*

**Source:** <http://www.unesco.org/en/>

## *National and Official Languages*

Many governments, in places that are both multilingualistic and monolingualistic, designate an official language. This language is given special rights and is typically the language used in that country's courts, laws, and government offices.<sup>8</sup> More than 20 countries have two or more official languages. Some have more. India has 19 official languages and South Africa has 11.<sup>9</sup> Official status can also be used to give a language a more important role and recognize the rights of speakers, even if that language is not commonly spoken, or to protect it from extinction.

In contrast, a national language is one that does not necessarily have legal status, but is associated with a national or cultural identity. In many countries that were under colonial rule, the official language is the language of the former colonizers. For example, in Ghana, the official language is English. However, most people in Ghana don't speak English at home, but use the tribal languages that were present in the country before the British colonized the area. In many former colonies, this highlights the complicated reality of trying to find a new, independent national identity while recognizing history. These languages, though not the first language of many children, are often compulsory in education. The use of a language in the educational system gives that language power and a sense of importance. This is not only a symbolic aspect of status and visibility, but it also conveys the values and worldview of the educational system through and in that language.<sup>10</sup>

## *Minorities and Marginalized Groups*

In many countries, people who speak languages that are not used in schools belong to minorities or marginalized groups. A minority is a group that is too small to control the politics and social institutions of a country. A marginalized group is a set of people who are given a lower standing in society for social, cultural, racial, religious or ethnic reasons. Most people in minorities and marginalized groups speak minority languages. A minority language is one that is not spoken by most of the people in a country. Though a language is usually considered to be a minority because of the number of people who speak it, sometimes languages are considered minority languages because they are spoken by marginalized groups, even if those groups are not a numerical minority. A majority language is a language that is spoken by most of the population.

## **Terms & Concepts**

**Monolingualistic:** speaking only one language.

**Official language:** the legal language of a country.

**National language:** a language associated with a national identity.

**Colonial rule:** a period in history when powerful countries controlled other places.

**Compulsory:** required.

**Minority:** a group of people who make up less than half of the population.

**Marginalized group:** a group of people made separate from the rest of society.

**Minority language:** a language spoken by a minority of people in a country.

**Majority language:** a language spoke by most people in a country.

### **CRITICAL THINKING**

What are some of the benefits of giving a language official status? What are some reasons countries might not want to have more than one official language?



Sometimes languages can be both minority and majority languages. For example, Mandarin is a majority language in China, but a minority language in the United States. Most languages are minority languages no matter where they are spoken.<sup>11</sup> Whether a language is a minority or majority language matters when we look at whether it is part of an education system.

The way that minority and majority languages are incorporated into schools is different around the world. In the United States, the majority language is English, but there are many minority languages.

In some places, there are large groups of minorities who speak other languages, and often those languages will be part of the education system in that region. <sup>12</sup> In other places, like France, where the same is true, minority languages are not included as easily in the school system, and until recently this sort of incorporation was discouraged.<sup>13</sup> Many governments try to influence culture and population groups through the power of language. They may try to discourage certain behaviors, beliefs, and attitudes through choices about which languages to incorporate into the educational system.

Sometimes one minority language will be included while another is excluded. In Morocco, the majority and official language is Arabic, but French and Berber are common minority languages.<sup>14</sup> French is taught in all schools and used in government, but few schools teach Berber, despite estimates that roughly a third of Moroccans speak a Berber dialect.<sup>15</sup>

Whether a language is given status and visibility in schools seriously impacts the success, political power, and rights of the people who speak it.

## ***Immigration and Integration***

Flows of people around the globe – from rural areas to cities, from less developed to more developed countries, from war-torn to more peaceful areas – are simply enormous. Because of the incredible number of languages spoken around the world, large numbers of these migrants move to places where their native language is not spoken. Many immigrants arrive in new countries and move to communities where they can speak their mother tongue among themselves, but when they try to integrate into the job market or school system, they can be very disadvantaged by the language barrier. Language is very important to integrating immigrant populations. Because language carries with it layers of social and cultural meaning, learning a new language not only allows students to be able to communicate with the people around them but also to gain a better understanding of the culture they may not know much about.

## **Terms & Concepts**

**Immigrants:** people who move to a country permanently.

**Mother tongue:** the first language a person speaks, or the language they know best.

**Integration:** bringing different groups of people together as equals.

### **CRITICAL THINKING**

Why might a country want to keep certain languages out of its schools?

What effects does continuing to use a colonial language have on a country after independence?



*Children in a classroom in Chile*  
Source: <http://www.unesco.org/en/lefal>

Many countries provide special support to immigrants when they first arrive, especially language training, but after a certain period they are considered able to fit into the general education system.<sup>16</sup> In many cases, these programs are not enough to fully bring new immigrants to a comfortable level with the language, and they tend to focus more on adult education than on preparing children to enter schools.

Many bright students can find themselves falling behind in school simply because the language barrier is so great.

Education systems in many places need to learn to adapt to the realities of an immigrant population, and accept that in many communities, mother tongue languages may be more of a majority than the local or official language. Schools and education systems need to develop strategies to more effectively integrate these populations into the general system, and language is one of the best and most efficient ways to do this.

## ***Mother Tongue Instruction and Language Teaching***

The language of instruction at a school is the language used for teaching the basic curriculum of the education system.<sup>17</sup> Choosing the language or languages of instruction is one of the hardest parts of developing quality education for all. Some countries choose one language of instruction for the whole country, usually the majority or official language. Other countries choose to use national and local languages either alongside or sometimes instead of the official language. This is more common in countries where the majority language varies by region.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes this is done to include heritage language, or home language, in the education system. Heritage language is the language that a person speaks in their home with their family. It is usually the same as the mother tongue language. People who speak in mother tongues, often immigrants who speak a non-regional language, are often at a very serious disadvantage, similar to receiving education in a foreign official language. Mother tongue instruction usually means using the student's mother tongue as the language of instruction. This is considered to be very important to a quality education, especially in the first years of school. Most experts argue that mother tongue instruction should involve both the teaching of the language, as a subject of instruction, and through the language, as the medium of instruction.<sup>19</sup>

## **Terms & Concepts**

**Curriculum:** the content offered in classes at a school.

**Heritage language:** the language a person speaks at home.

Mother tongue can have many definitions. It can mean the language one learns first, the language of which one identifies his or herself as a speaker or of which others identify them as a native speaker, the language one knows best, or the language someone uses most often. For many people, these are all the same language. For others, they can be different.

These languages are included in schools in primarily two ways. The first is by using the mother tongue as the language of instruction, where basic subject matter is taught through the student's first language. Many people worry that spending time teaching students in another language will slow them down and delay development in the official school language, but evidence suggests that instead, students are able to translate the ideas they learn in one language to another once they have the words to describe what they learned before.<sup>20</sup> Literacy and numeracy skills are developed in the mother tongue and easily transferred to the main school language as the student learns.

The second way mother tongue is incorporated into school systems is by teaching it as a separate subject, where students learn to speak, read, and write in the second language alongside the main language of instruction, but the second language is not used to teach other subjects. While this may give mother tongue students a chance to excel in one area of the classroom, it does not necessarily allow them better access to the rest of the curriculum. However, this does give students who are heritage language speakers of the official language the chance to learn a second language and to understand the values and cultures of others, to promote intercultural understanding.

Bilingual and multilingual education include two or more separate languages of instruction. In places where the national language or mother tongue is not the same as the official language, this can make it possible for students to learn in their heritage language while also learning languages used other parts of the country, the formal sector, or the rest of the world. Rather than aiming to start by teaching children in their mother tongue and eventually change to the official language as the language of instruction, this method aims to use both languages equally in the educational system.



*Children in Indonesia, where over 700 different languages are spoken.*

*Source: <http://www.unesco.org/en/languages-in-education/multilingual-education>*

## Terms & Concepts

**Bilingual education:**  
education using two languages equally.

**Multilingual education:**  
education using more than two languages equally.

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The greatest challenge associated with learning in a language that is not one's mother tongue is that not only does one have to learn a new language, but also new information through that language at the same time. This can be made worse for groups that are at educational risk, such as minorities or refugees. This can also be a problem for girls in traditional societies, who are usually less exposed to the national or official language because they are less likely to go to school or work than boys.<sup>21</sup> There are also problems and difficulties with mother tongue instruction. In many places, languages spoken at home or in informal settings are unwritten or not recognized as a real language, making it nearly impossible to teach them effectively. There can also be technical problems, like not having enough qualified teachers or school supplies and books available in the language. In some places, a huge number of different mother tongues can make it almost impossible to provide support for each individual language. Finally, other students, teachers, and parents may not want to use the second language.

School systems must develop ways to overcome both sets of these problems to be able to effectively reach all their students.

## *Linguistic Rights*

"The mother language, in which the first words are uttered and individual thought expressed, is the foundation for the history and culture of each individual."

-Irena Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO

Source: Message on the Occasion of International Mother Language Day, 21 February 2010.

Language is an important part of a person's identity, as well as their most useful tool for connecting with the world around them. In order for people of different language groups to live together, respect for language rights is necessary, not only for majority language speakers but also for minorities.

Language rights often include official legal status of a language, use of the language in schools, and government information and media available in the language.

Linguistic rights in education are usually recognized in international agreements as including schooling in the desired language, access to the language of the larger community and system, intercultural education to promote positive attitudes towards linguistic groups, and access to international languages.<sup>22</sup>

## **Terms & Concepts**

**Educational risk:** the state of being likely to lose the chance to be educated for any reason.

**Refugees:** a person who leaves their country for fear of being hurt or discriminated against.

**Informal language:** language used in everyday life, rather than in official situations.

**Unwritten language:** a language that does not have a formal written alphabet or grammar system.

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# INTERNATIONAL ACTION

Both the United Nations as a whole and UNESCO specifically have issued several declarations, recommendations, and agreements that address the status and role of language and education.

The 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 2 that “Everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as... language.”

The 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child considers language an educational value, and asserts that “the education of the child shall be directed to... the development of respect for the child’s... cultural identity, language and values” in Article 29.

The 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of their Families puts forward in Article 45 that “States of employment shall pursue a policy... aimed at facilitating the integration of children of migrant workers in the local school system, particularly in respect of teaching them the local language” and “the teaching of their mother tongue and culture,” and they may also “provide special schemes of education in the mother tongue of children of migrant workers.”

The 1992 Declaration on the Rights of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities gives people belonging to minorities sufficient opportunities “to learn their mother tongue or have instruction in their mother tongue” and also says that states should take action “in order to encourage knowledge of the... language and culture of minorities” in Article 4.

At the 1993 Education for All summit, the Delhi Declaration and Framework for Action was adopted, and gives official support for “initial instruction in the mother tongue, even if it may in some cases be necessary for the students to subsequently master a national language or other language of wider usage if they are to participate effectively in the broader society of which they are part.”

UNESCO documents deal with these issues as well. Article 1 of the UNESCO Constitution establishes that language should not lead to any form of discrimination. This is laid out more specifically in the 1960 Convention against Discrimination in Education which states in Article 5 that “the members of national minorities [have the right] to carry out their own educational activities, including... the use or teaching of their own language.”

The 1978 Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice recommends in Article 9 that countries should help make it possible for immigrant students “to be taught in their mother tongue.” This same principle is reaffirmed most recently in the 2001 Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, where Article 6 calls for respect of the mother tongue and linguistic diversity in education, and the promotion of multilingualism.

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# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CREATING A RESOLUTION

When drafting resolutions, delegates should focus on addressing the challenges in multilingual and heritage language education, while providing guidelines and suggestions for implementation. Every member of the UNESCO General Conference has an educational system, and even the most linguistically homogenous countries need to consider how to best incorporate immigrant and minority concerns when it comes to language in education.

## **A resolution should address the following issues:**

- Not only incorporating mother tongues into initial instruction, but also stretching it as far into education as possible
- Standards and development for classroom resources, including reading materials.
- Strategies for training sufficient numbers of fully qualified teachers of mother tongue languages
- Development of bilingual and multilingual education strategies
- Use of technology to facilitate language teaching and international exchange
- Ways in which language can be used to promote intercultural understanding and help eliminate discrimination.

Delegates should not only address implementation of these programs, but also introduce new and innovative ways to bring multilingualism into the classroom. Keep in mind that legal status of a language, how widely it is spoken, and the nature of spoken languages and dialects all play a role in addressing these challenges, as well as wider issues of marginalization in education due to gender, poverty, and ethnicity. UNESCO works to improve education around the world already, and it is now time to address the problem with innovative and unique ideas, while keeping your country's policies in mind.

“Social inequality affects a child’s opportunity to learn. And clearly, no country – rich or poor – is immune to these disparities.”  
Hendrik van der Pol, Director of the UNESCO Institute for Statistics  
Source: *A View Inside Primary Schools*, March 1, 2010.

When considering ideas, delegates should take into account the situation of the nations who need to make the most progress in multilingual and heritage language education. Also, the UNESCO General Conference has limits in terms of what it can and cannot do. As delegates, you have flexibility in suggesting solutions to the committee for increasing access to mother tongue education and you are encouraged to look at problems and issues not discussed in this background guide.



## Questions to Consider:

When researching your country's policy, keep the following questions in mind to better understand your country's position and possible solutions on the topic:

1. How many countries are spoken in your country? Are there other languages spoken by large immigrant populations?
2. Which of these languages are minority languages? Which are majority languages? How does this vary across regions?
3. What do you think is your country's biggest challenge when it comes to language in education?
4. Are there any programs in your country that use heritage language or are multilingual?
5. How can these national programs be adapted to the international community?
6. What non-traditional means can be used to expand heritage language and multilingual education?

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## RESEARCH AID

The UNESCO website has a lot of information about multilingualism, and mother tongue education.

- **UNESCO Education:** <http://www.unesco.org/en/education>

The UN Children's Fund also offers information on the work of UN agencies in promoting education in general.

- **UNICEF Education:** <http://www.unicef.org/girlseducation/index.php>

The World Factbook by the United States Central Intelligence Agency will provide you will basic information about your country and hundreds of other countries around the world.

- **CIA World Factbook:** <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/>

Similar to the CIA World Factbook, the British Broadcasting Company Country Profiles will also give you a historical, political, and economic background on your country and other UN member states:

- **BBC Country Profiles:** [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country\\_profiles/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/country_profiles/default.stm)

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