



United Nations
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Guidance Note 1 In the local context — using digital technologies to develop local content

From the Report: Education for the
most marginalised post-COVID-19:
Guidance for governments on the use
of digital technologies in education
ACT THREE (OF THREE): GUIDANCE NOTES

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Context

This Report has stressed throughout the importance of providing learning opportunities that are relevant to the local context, especially for the poorest and most marginalised. There is, though, a very considerable debate about the pros and cons of delivering education in international languages or in learners' mother tongues.² Different countries have adopted varying stances towards this contentious issue, with many trying to combine both mother-tongue and international languages at different stages in the curriculum. Language of education is not only a remnant of colonial pasts, and a vehicle for continuing neo-imperialism, but it is also highly politically sensitive in the context of contemporary nation building, especially in countries that have multiple languages.³ The practicalities and costs are also immensely challenging in providing educational content in multiple languages. This is especially so in countries such as Ethiopia which has some 86 languages, let alone Papua New Guinea with 840 or so living languages. Using digital technologies to provide online content translated into multiple languages, or videos that can be listened to in the mother-tongue or using sub-titles, can nevertheless be of considerable help in overcoming such challenges in cost effective ways, especially when developed as Open Educational Resources (see [Guidance Note on OER](#)).

Nevertheless, learning effectively in a local context goes far beyond just translating the languages in which text is written, and much remains to be done in ensuring that online content is truly context specific. Learning videos of completely alien worlds that are merely voiced-over in local languages can thus remain of little real meaning to a child who has no experience or understanding of the things depicted. Likewise, using an illustrated wall chart or online alphabet to describe letters in English can be challenging for a child living in a semi-arid area far from any lakes or the sea, when, for example, the letter Y is depicted by a yacht. It is therefore essential that governments build into their educational policies clear requirements for all online content developed for, and used in, schools to be produced in locally context specific ways. Furthermore, language and culture are also means through which people from certain communities are marginalised by dominant cultures, and therefore particular care and attention needs to be taken

1 Lead authors Azra Naseem, Waleed Al Ali, and Tim Unwin.

2 See for example, Rutu Foundation, <https://www.rutufoundation.org/>; UNESCO (2016) *If you don't understand how can you learn? GEM Report Policy Paper 24*, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243713>; UNESCO (2018) UNESCO celebrates the power of mother languages to build peace and sustainability, <https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-celebrates-power-mother-languages-build-peace-and-sustainability>.

3 At the time of writing, the very popular Khan Academy materials, for example, are only available in 16 localised platforms, most of which are in European languages, <https://support.khanacademy.org/hc/en-us/articles/226457308-Is-Khan-Academy-available-in-other-languages->.

to ensure that the development of digital learning content does not actually further marginalise people from these communities.

At least five key context-related issues need to be considered by governments committed to delivering a vision of equity when using digital technologies in their education systems:

- It is important that the use of literacies such as reading and writing (and even digital literacy) that are valued by certain dominant cultures, do not undermine other literacies, such as speaking and listening, that are valued in local contexts, especially by already marginalised communities.
- Using inappropriate images and concepts in textbooks and online resources that children find it difficult to relate to can negatively influence their motivation to learn. Teachers will also struggle to teach a curriculum that is neither meaningful to them or their pupils.
- Using only culturally alien digital content will mean that children will grow up without understanding their own cultural heritage and the issues that are of most importance to their own context.
- Learners may well develop identity problems and poor self-image, when comparing their own lives with those represented in alien content that is borrowed (or imposed) from a non-local context and curriculum.
- Increased dominance of a few main ‘global’ or ‘international’ languages used in digital content is leading to the loss of the cultural heritage embedded in dying local languages.⁴

4 See for example, UNESCO (2010) *Atlas of the world's languages in danger*, Paris: UNESCO, 3rd edition, <http://www.unesco.org/languages-atlas/>.

Guidance

The guidance below highlights the main areas where governments and education regulators can act to enhance usage of locally and contextually relevant digital content:

1. Governments should ensure that mechanisms are in place to check that all digital content used to deliver the national curriculum in schools (public and private) is culturally and locally contextually appropriate. This is especially so when existing material from outside the country is translated into local languages.
2. All government funded digital learning content should include culturally appropriate visual material and examples, that fully represent the diversity of local culture, and should be made available in formats that teachers and children can access on locally available devices.
3. Teachers should be encouraged throughout their professional training to develop and share locally developed content (see also *Guidance Note on OER*), and where relevant should also include learners in such content development (see also *Guidance Note on involving learners*).
4. Where relevant, curriculum developers and teachers should be encouraged to use project- and portfolio-based learning and assessment, which contextualise the teaching and learning process and can also be used to help solve local problems within their communities.
5. Digital content that has been locally developed by teachers and learners should be made available through regional repositories established by governments. Not only will this build a critical mass of pertinent contextual content, but it will also increase teacher and student motivation.

Examples

The following examples highlight the importance of locally contextual content:

- Free Linguistics Conference Group (FLC Group), providing a range of services to support and empower indigenous and minority languages and communities worldwide, <http://www.flcgroup.net/>.
- Let's Read, by the Asia Foundation: <https://asiafoundation.org/what-we-do/books-for-asia/lets-read/>. Providing digital books for children in Asia in their own languages.
- Madrasa.org: <https://madrasa.org/>. E-Learning platform providing 5,000 free Arabised educational videos in science, math, biology, chemistry, physics and Arabic language subjects that cater to students from kindergarten to grade 12.⁵
- Onebillion: <https://onebillion.org> — provides mother tongue literacy and numeracy education. Its Onecourse numeracy material is provided in 50 languages.
- ToffeeTV — songs, stories and activities for children in Urdu, <https://toffeetv.com/category/songs/>.

5 FCSA (2020) *Policy in action. Madrasa: UAE's global classroom initiative*, UAE: FCSA, https://fcsa.gov.ae/en-us/Lists/D_Reports/Attachments/25/En%20Madrasa%20New2020.pdf.

Suggested further reading

- Benson, C. (2004) *The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality*, UNESCO Background paper prepared for the education for all global monitoring report 2005, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000146632>.
- Brown, J. S., Collins, A., Duguid, P. (1989) Situated cognition and the culture of learning, *Educational Researcher*, 18: 32–42.
- Daniel, J. (2003) The mother tongue dilemma, *Education Today*, UNESCO, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000130800>.
- Malone, S. (2018) *MTB MLE Resource kit: Including the excluded: Promoting multilingual education*, Paris: UNESCO, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246278>.
- Wolfenden, F. and Adinolfi, L. (2019) An exploration of agency in the localisation of Open Educational Resources for teacher development, *Learning, Media and Technology*, 44(3): 327–344, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17439884.2019.1628046?casa_token=pk3IVWoGJQ8AAAAA%3AFVTyLxi3cr4Qt nksLaAw3HYhPYDxmgYArchLGJY2XBuOAnCDjoThteN8wVG5km24O3f9QJDCww.



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