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## Why Mother Tongue Learning Matters: Global Perspectives –A Study

FARAH DIBA<sup>1</sup> and ANITA PRIYADARSHINI<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, STRIDE, IGNOU, New Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup>Professor, STRIDE, IGNOU, New Delhi, India

### Abstract

**Background:** The importance of teaching–learning in the mother tongue has been emphasized at policy level. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 promotes learning in the mother tongue. This study was conducted with the aim of finding out the perspective of mother tongue learning amongst persons of different nationalities.

**Research Design:** This research was conducted through a survey with the sample being 70 persons belonging to 32 countries. A random sample method was used. The research tool was questionnaire and the results were further explored through an interview schedule.

**Results** The data was collected related to the pursuit of learning in their mother tongue at different educational levels along with the nature of difficulties faced if any. The results showed that 70% of the participants had studied in their mother tongue up to college level (51 participants), grade 12 (6 participants), grade 10 (2 participants) and grade 5 (3 participants) and 8 participants did not respond.

**Conclusion:** The analysis showed that the students felt that teaching-learning in the mother tongue was important as it helped in better understanding of the topics. Such mother tongue learning helped learner in expressing themselves. However learning additional languages was important to perform in the global context.

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals, mother tongue learning, multilingualism

## 1. Introduction

Mother tongue education is the best education given to the learners from the beginning phase of their educational journey as it connects to them to their roots and gives feeling of belonging (Carr & Lee, 2012). The importance of teaching–learning in the mother tongue has been emphasized at policy level both at international and national level. The Sustainable Development Goal 4 which deal with targets of education promotes learning in the mother tongue. There are many studies that support English or other international languages in global perspective. (Ozoemena, Ngwoke & Nwokolo, 2021). They also indicate that mother tongue education alone is not implementable in multilingual classes (Lartec, Belisario, Bendanillo, Binas, Bucang, Cammagay, 2014 & Gupta, 1997).

This study was conducted amongst persons of different of 70 participants from different nationalities to find out their perspective on the issues of mother tongue learning and their opinions about the advantages and challenges that may occur in pursuing mother tongue learning. Participants were surveyed to find out their perception about mother tongue education in their respective countries. The survey included information about their educational levels in their mother tongue along with the nature of difficulties related to studying in the mother tongue. Bamgbose (1976) in his study also mentioned about the difficulties faced in multilingual West African countries in the use of mother tongues and suggested the framework for different situation to set up mother tongue education from the beginning or traditionally already set up.

### 1.2 Literature Review

Mother tongue based learning has been studied by many scholars in different contexts. The findings of the research conducted by Benson (2004) show that mother tongue based multilingual education helps to increase access to education and also has a positive impact upon the quality of education if it is provided in the first language before transiting to other languages.

According to Seid (2019), in a study done in Somalia, it was seen that mother tongue instruction was responsible for ensuring better results in reading comprehension. It showed that learners in grade five were able to understand better when they were taught in their mother tongue first. Their test scores wear higher not just in reading comprehension but even in subjects like mathematics when they were taught in the mother tongue as against English.

The study by Ganoza & Hedgeman (2022) showed that participation in mother tongue instruction impacts the proficiency of young persons who are engaged in a bilingual environment. In their study conducted in Somali in a Swedish school context, it was seen that participation in mother tongue instruction contributed positively to the results of students who were in the reading comprehension in Somali. The study showed

that test results of those students who had obtained high results in Somali also showed higher results in second language Swedish. It was clear that the reading comprehension competencies of learners in mother tongue also had a positive impact upon reading comprehension in other languages.

A number of studies have been done on the issue of mother tongue instruction used across the African continent. A study by Castillo (2021) on the mother tongue learning recommended learning through mother tongue in primary school. This study explored the development of mother tongue as an academic language in the lower primary classes. It showed that even though English was the prescribed language, yet the use of mother tongue in classroom instruction was carried out and this was found to be more useful and having a better impact. The study found that despite the emphasis on English yet classroom instruction required the use of mother tongue while teaching children in school at the younger levels. Therefore the study emphasized that there must be mother tongue instruction in the initial stage as it builds comprehension and proficiency amongst children.

Studies have also been carried out on the issue of implementation of mother tongue based multilingual education. Cabansag (2016) found that there were challenges that required to be addressed. The biggest challenge was that of unavailability or inadequacy of textbooks and learning materials in local languages and mother tongue languages and this affected the delivery of the programme. It was therefore suggested that stakeholders should make provisions for proper materials, including resource materials that could be available in the mother tongue so that the learners could have quality learning resources and could improve their education in the mother tongue.

Benson (2005) in a study conducted on the effect of mother tongue learning upon learning of English found that mother tongue learning had a positive impact upon learning of English, and promoted better learning and comprehension. It was also found that more reading materials as well as instruction done in the mother tongue helped in the learning of English. The situation was adversely affected when the conditions for teacher preparation were of a low standard as also there was issue of poorly designed, inadequate curricula, and a lack of adequate school facilities.

The importance of mother tongue learning has been evaluated by many scholars. Castillo (2021) found that children whose mother tongue is different from the instruction at school face the challenges. In her study, the impact of bilingual education was conducted which helped the learners study both in their mother tongue as well as in transitional bilingual education. It was found that the transitional bilingual component of the learning helps the learners to understand better. Therefore, the importance of mother tongue learning was emphasized whether it was at an early stage and at a higher level also.

## 2. Research Design

This study was conducted with the aim of finding out the perception of learners and teachers with respect to mother tongue learning in their contexts. A survey design was adopted with a total of 70 learners and teachers from different countries forming the sample for this study. The sampling was done through purposive sampling method. The survey research tool was a self-developed questionnaire which contained both closed and open ended questions. The focus was on issues with respect to the challenges concerning mother tongue learning in their respective countries.

## 3. Results and Analysis

The data collected was analyzed and the results revealed the following:

### 3.1 Demographic variables

#### I. Educational Qualifications

The participants were 25-60 years of age group who were graduates and post graduates whose details are in Table 1-

Table 1: Educational Qualification of the participants

Graduate	Post-Graduate
32/70	38/70

The data revealed in Table 1 that out of 70 participants, 32 participants were graduates and enrolled in master programmes and 38 participants had completed their Masters and were enrolled either in Ph.D or adult education fields (Lifelong learning).

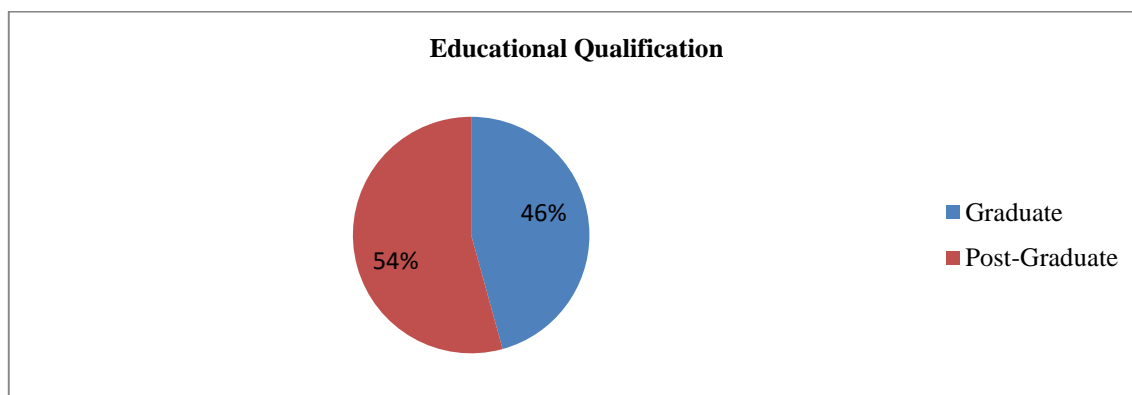


Figure 1: Educational Qualification of the participants

## II Mother tongue of the participants

As regards, the issue of mother tongue, Table 2 indicates about the mother tongues of the participants which are written in the above table. 70 participants from various countries belonged to 19 mother tongues.

Table 2: Mother tongue of the participants

Sl. No	Language	N=70
1.	Arabic	4
2.	German	12
3.	Spanish	3
4.	Hungarian	2
5.	Italian	11
6.	Slovenian	3
7.	Hindi	4
8.	Serbian	2
9.	Jamaican	1
10.	Siswati	1
11.	Russian	1
12.	Yoruba	5
13.	Punjabi	2
14.	English	1
15.	Georgian	6
16.	Polish	1
17.	Portuguese	9
18.	Runyakitara	1
19.	Finnish	1

## III Educational level of study of the participants in mother tongue

Table 3: Participants' educational level of study in mother tongue

Grade	N=70	%
Grade 5	3	4
Grade 10	2	3
Grade 12	6	9
College	51	73
No Answer	8	11

The Table 3 showed that 73 % participants had studied in their mother tongue up to college level (51 participants), while 9% had studied up to grade 12 (6 participants) and 3% had studied up to grade 10 (2 participants) while 4% had studied up to grade 5 (3 participants). It was seen that 11% (8 participants) did not respond.

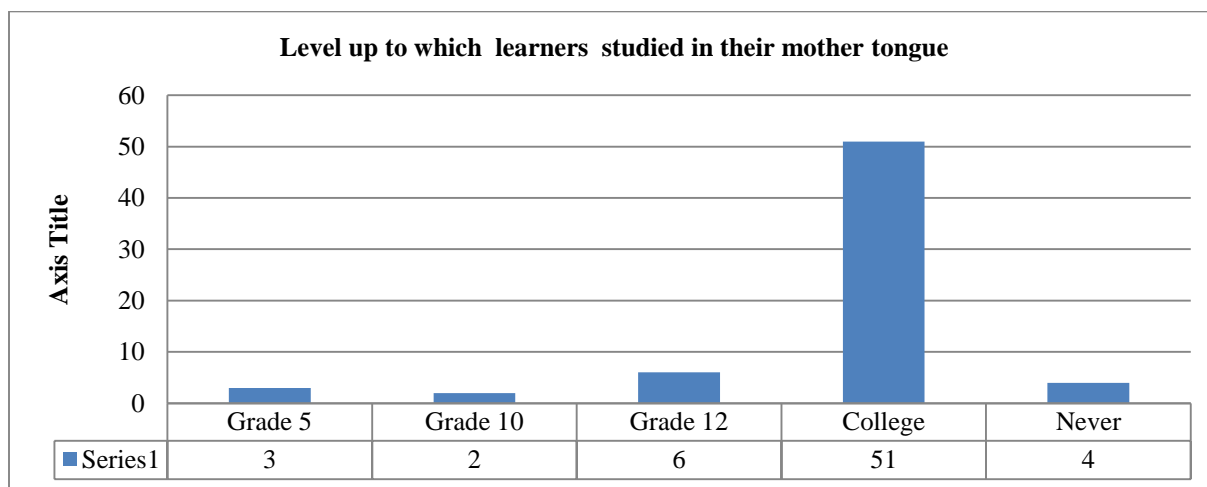


Figure 2: Participants' level of study in mother tongue

#### IV Language proficiency of participants other than their mother tongue

It was seen in the Table 4 that besides their mother, the participants were also able to speak other languages. It was found that speakers of 19 languages participated in this study.

Table 4: Participants speaking, reading and writing competency in language other than mother tongue

Language	Speak		Read		Write	
	Fluent	Not fluent	Fluent	Not Fluent	Fluent	Not Fluent
English	51	15	61	5	45	21
French	2	6	3	5	2	6
Georgian	5		5		5	
Russian	2	2	4		2	2
Finnish	1		1		1	
Swedish	1	1	2		1	2
Spanish	10	6	12	3	7	9
German	13	6	15	4	1	7
Slovenian	3		3		3	
Croatian		1	1			1

Portuguese	5	2	5	2	5	3
Italian	4	1	5		5	1
Turkish		1		1		1
Hindi	4		4		4	
Arabic	3	1	3	1	3	1
Punjabi	1		1		1	
Yoruba	5		5		5	
Siswati	1			1		1
Brazilian		1		1		1
Runyakitara	1		1			1
Patois	1		1			1
Hungarian		2		2		2

Table 4 revealed participants speaking, reading and writing competency in a language other than their mother tongue. Data showed that English, German and Spanish had speakers who could read and write, otherwise most of the participants were fluent in their own mother tongue only.

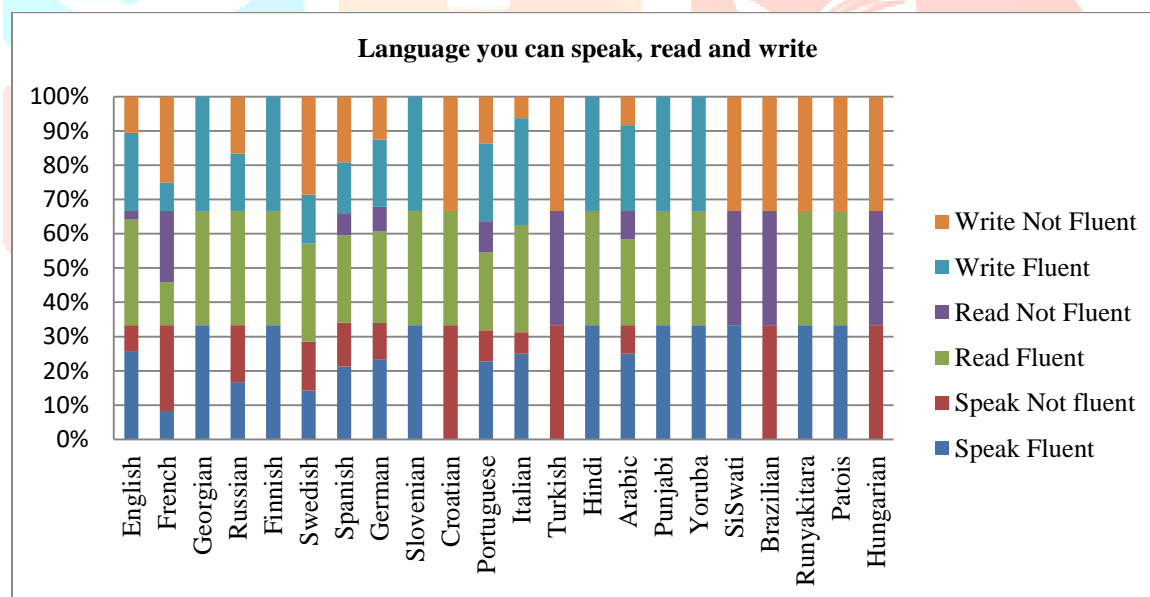


Figure 3: Participants speaking, reading and writing competency in language other than mother tongue

### 3.2 Opinion about the mother tongue education as medium of instruction

On the issue of use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction, the participants were very positively inclined towards the use of mother tongue in the learning process.

Table 5: Response to whether mother tongue should be used as medium of instruction

Yes	No	No Answer
51	16	3

Table 5 revealed that 51 participants agreed on it and only 16 participants were not agreed and 3 participants did not respond.

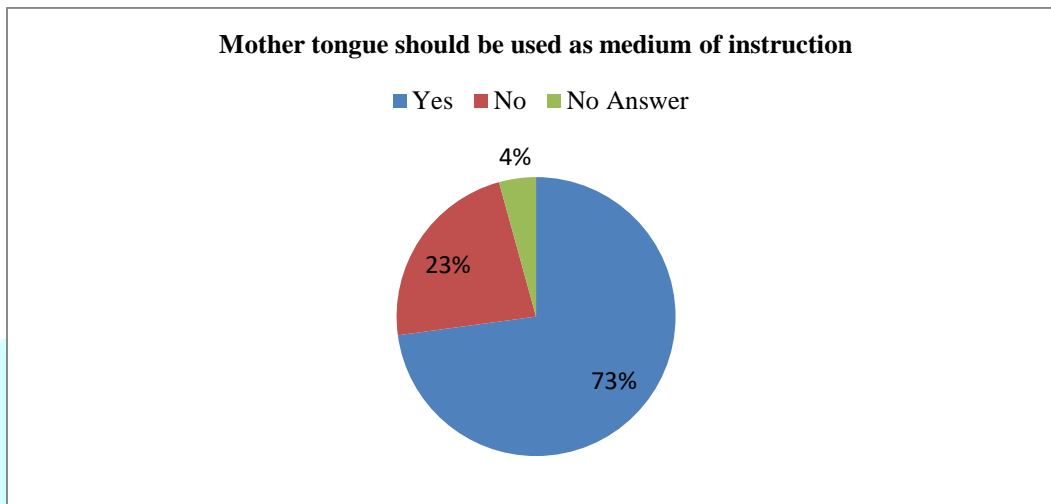


Figure 4: Response to whether mother tongue should be used as medium of instruction

### 3.3 Availability of course materials, reference book, resources in mother tongue

Table 6: Availability of course materials, reference book, resources in mother tongue

Available	Not available	Somewhat available	No Answer
45	16	2	7

According to the Table 6, 45 participants said that course materials, reference book, resources in mother tongue were available, 2 said somewhat available, 16 participants denied it and 7 participants did not responded.



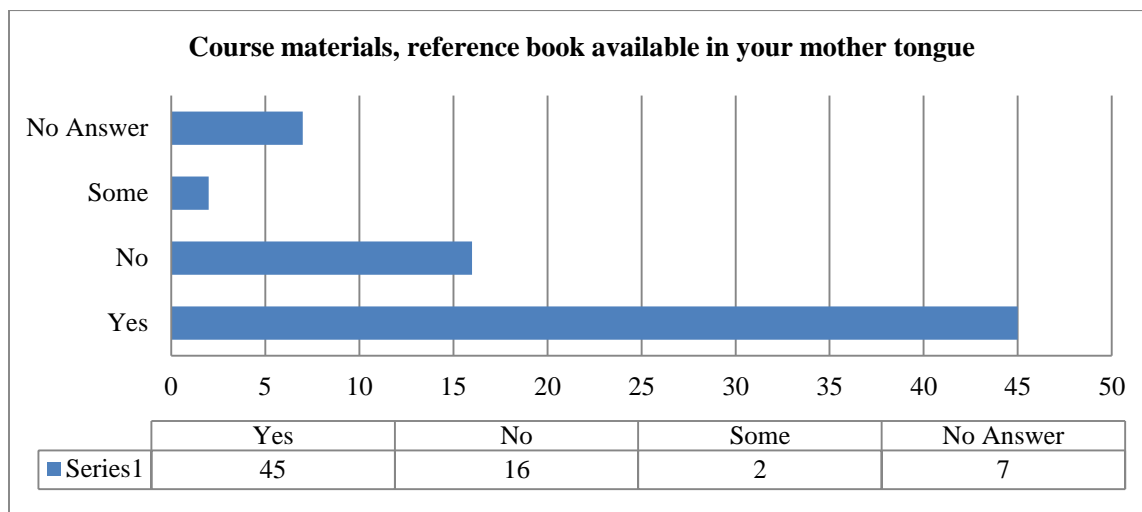


Figure 5: Availability of course materials, reference book, resources in mother tongue

### 3.4 Institutional support for terminal evaluation in mother tongue

The study also took up the issue of institutional evaluation in mother tongue.

Table 7: Institutional support for terminal evaluation in mother tongue

Yes	No	No Answer
46	16	8

According to the Table 7, 46 participants agreed that they found institutional support for terminal evaluation in mother tongue but 16 participants did not find institutional support for terminal evaluation in mother tongue. 8 participants did not respond.

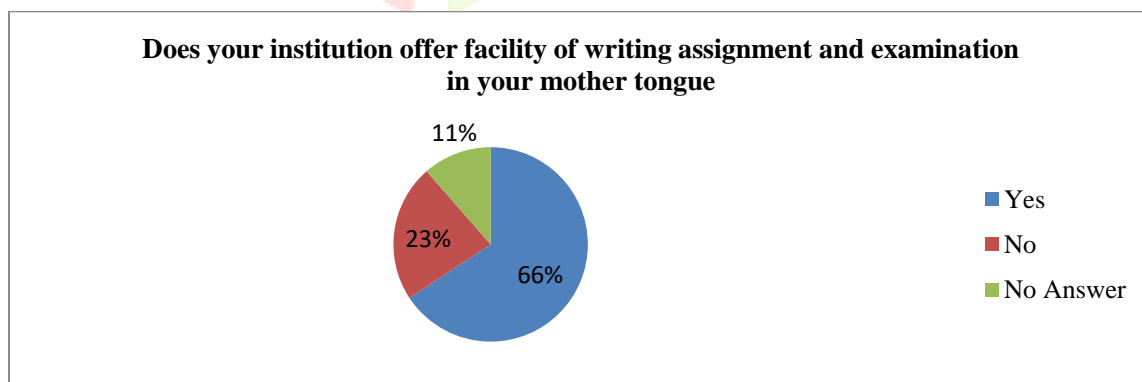


Figure 6: Institutional support for terminal evaluation in mother tongue

### 3.5 Availability of professional education programs in mother tongue

Table 8: Availability of professional education programs in mother tongue

Available	Not available	No Answer
55	12	3

Table 8 showed the availability of professional education programs in mother tongue. 55 Participants agreed and 12 participants did not agree and 3 participants did not answer this question.

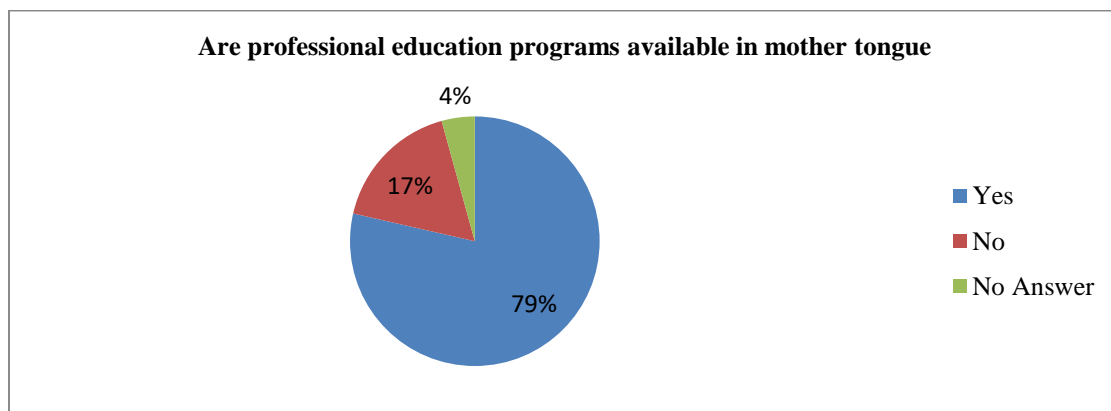


Figure 7: Availability of professional education programs in mother tongue

### 3.6 Commonality between language of business (Employment) and mother tongue

The issue of employment and the relevance of mother tongue was also studied.

Table: 9 Commonality between language of business(Employment) and mother tongue

Yes	No	No Answer
54	15	1

Table 9 indicate the language used by the participants for business/employment and their education to find out the commonality between the language used in employment and education. . 54 participants said ‘yes’ and 5 participants said ‘no’ indicating that their mother tongue was not the same as the language used in their employment field. Only one participant did not reply.

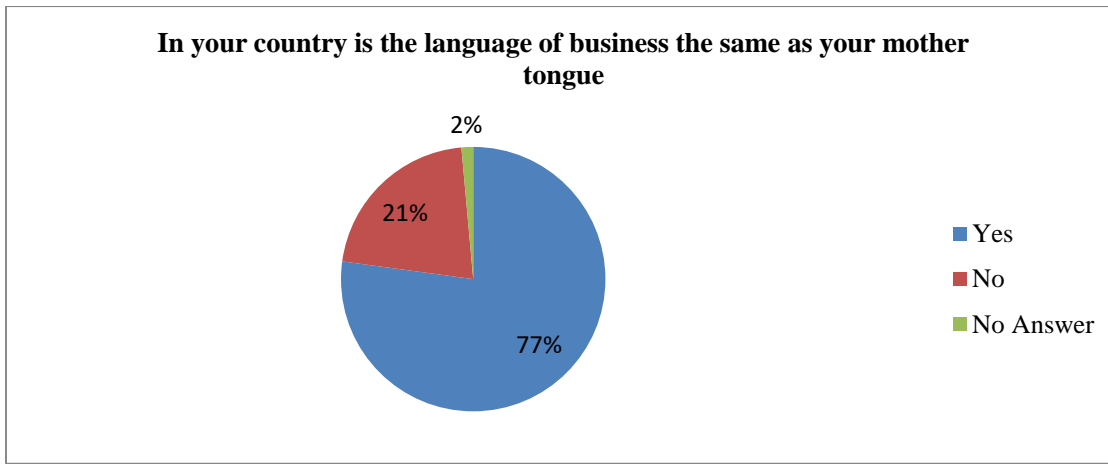


Figure 8: Commonality between language of business (Employment) and mother tongue

### 3.7 Opinion about the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction for better comprehension

The response of the participants to the issue of mother tongue and its effect on comprehension was studied.

Table 10: Opinion about the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction for better comprehension

Improves comprehension	No major effect on comprehension
63	7

Table 10 revealed the opinion about the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction for better comprehension on which 63 participants were agreed and only 7 participants did not agree on it.

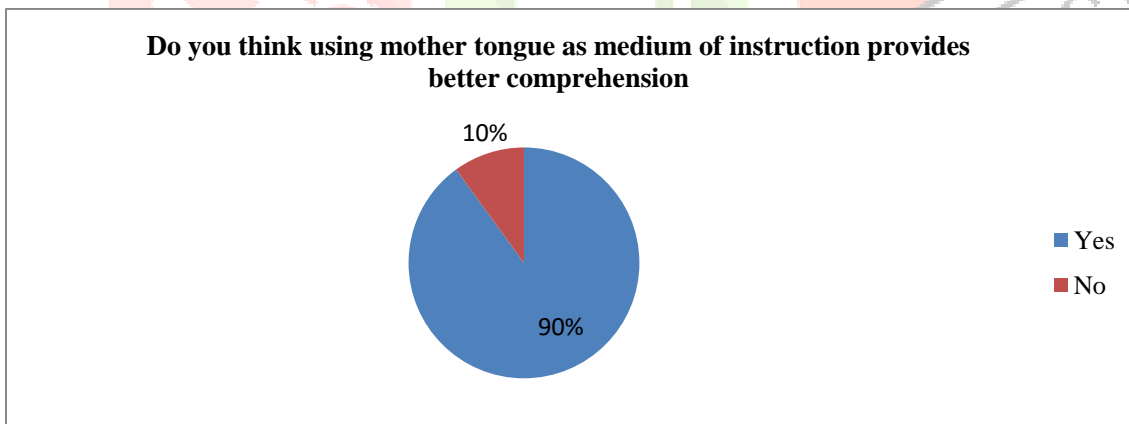


Figure 9: Opinion about the use of mother tongue as medium of instruction for better comprehension

### 3.8 Opinion about the enhanced confidence level due to mother tongue instruction

Mother tongue has an impact on the confidence level of learners. An effort was made to study this aspect.

Table 11: Confidence level of students who are studying in their mother tongue

High Confidence	Low confidence	No response
54	9	7

According to Table 11, 54 participants high confidence level who are studying through mother tongue but 9 participants felt low confidence level who are studying through mother tongue. 7 participants did not reply.

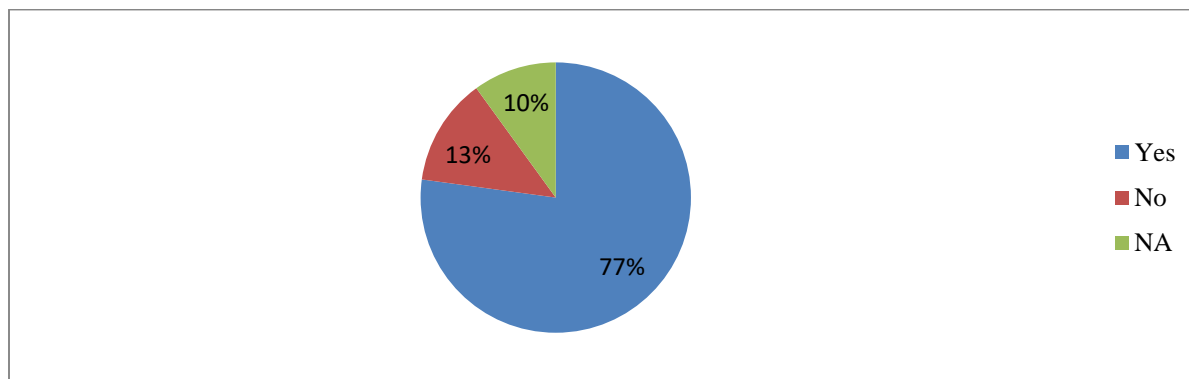


Figure 10: Confidence level of students who are studying in their mother tongue

### 3.9 Problems faced due to education in other than mother tongue

Issues related to problems of studying in languages that are not the mother tongue were shown in below Table.

Table 12: Problems faced due to education in other than mother tongue

Sl. No		Yes	No	No Answer
1	Difficulty in comprehension	26	9	35
2	Lack of communication	12	19	39
3	Low confidence	21	13	36
4	Difficulty in expression	27	6	37
5	Difficulty in use of ICT	9	21	40

Table 12 indicated about the problems faced due to education in other than mother tongue. 26 participants faced difficulty in comprehension but 9 participants did not agree on it. 12 participants felt lack of communication due to language barrier but 19 participants did not feel it. 21 participants felt low confidence but 13 participants did not agree on it. 27 participants found difficulty in expression in other language but 6 participants did not say this. 9 participants faced difficulty in use of ICT in other language

but 21 participants did not face that difficulty in using ICT. Many participants were neutral and did not answer these questions.

#### 4. Qualitative Responses

In order to ascertain the responses provided in the survey, certain open-ended questions were asked to identify the role of mother tongue and the importance of other languages ie to promote multilingualism. Some responses as follows:

- Education should be in one's mother tongue at least till college, because this is the language that one thinks in and helps you think more precisely
- Mother tongue should be accepted in every country as it necessary for effective communication in all spheres of life.
- In Portugal all education is in the mother tongue but all children learn another language at school.
- Language is a part of policy and it depends on the political situation. In multi-lingual countries, the majority language is often the accepted mother tongue.
- Sometimes translation of contents is not understandable which can be a barrier towards learning.
- Studying in a second language helps you understand the world better
- It is better to learn both in national, native, mother tongue and international languages.
- Students must learn and know everything about their own language besides at least one or two international language to be able to understand and communicate with others globally.
- People should also be given the opportunity to learn through other languages as this opens doors for them.
- It is good to be able to learn through the first language but this should not prevent a person from learning other languages.
- Bilingualism must be additive not subtractive.
- All persons must foster an appreciation of both mother tongue and other languages.
- Due to globalization of structures and institutions, being educated in one's mother tongue might not do one service in the long run. Hence other languages should be learnt.

#### 5 Discussions

The study reveals that in many countries, mother tongue education is being used. In some countries, it is studied up to primary classes, while in other countries, it is up to 12 grade and in some countries it is provided till college level. Most of the participants felt that mother tongue education is the best way to give the education but there must be inclusion of international languages as well for competing on global front.

## 6 Suggestions and Recommendations

In keeping with the results of this study, it is suggested that on policy level, mother tongue education should be definitely emphasized and encouraged in schools, colleges and universities. In countries that have many languages, there must be respect for linguistic diversity and all people must be encouraged to speak, read and write more than one language. It was seen that many participants could speak more than one language and perform well in international context. Therefore internationally spoken languages should be taught as a language at school level as a subject, so that the learners would not feel isolated in global contexts. This is

necessary as the world has become closer and the connectivity amongst nations is of a high order. Moreover the use of language for communication through text and digital means has grown and therefore in order to enhance employment and business, the knowledge of more than one language is important.

UNESCO (2022) has been paving the path and promoting multilingual education based on the mother tongue. Mother tongue education is essential for inclusivity and high-quality learning. It also enhances learning outcomes and academic achievement. To eliminate knowledge gaps and quicken learning and comprehension, this is especially important in primary education. Most importantly, mother tongue-based multilingual education gives all students the ability to participate fully in society. It promotes respect and understanding amongst people and aids in the preservation of the rich cultural and historic legacy that is present in every language spoken today.

This study concludes that the mother tongue remains central for learning at all stages and hence mother tongue learning matters and additional knowledge of language is beneficial as a 21<sup>st</sup> century skill.

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