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Organización
de las Naciones Unidas
para la Educación,
la Ciencia y la Cultura

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منظمة الأمم المتحدة
للتربية والعلم والثقافة

联合国教育、
科学及文化组织

International Conference on Language: Enhancing Language Ability and Education for the 21st Century

Remarks

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Taihu International Center

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Mr Vice Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China
Madam Director General of UNESCO
Mr Minister of Education of the People's Republic of China
Honourable Ministers,
Excellences,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Good Morning,

Allow me to express personally, and on behalf of all the Members of the Executive Board of the UNESCO, our gratitude to the esteemed organizers, for the kind invitation, that will enable me to exchange views, and thoughts on such an important topic in today's increasingly interconnected world. It is a great pleasure and an honour for me to actively participate in this vital conference on language ability and language education.

I am also particularly honoured to be here in the great and ancient city of Suzhou – which is over 2500 years old – not simply because it is an internationally recognized for its beautiful gardens, temples and canals, but also because it is the home town of the esteemed former Chairperson of the Executive Board, whom I would like to salute here today, for all his dedicated efforts to the Board. Therefore Mr. Vice-Minister Zhang Xinsheng, former Mayor of the City of Suzhou, please accept my respect.

I seize this opportunity to also welcome my dear colleague, Vice Minister Hao Ping, President of the General Conference of UNESCO, who will also be with us throughout this conference.

In fact: the topic of this conference "Enhancing Language Ability and Education for the 21st Century" is not only a pre-requisite for full participations on national, regional, and international level; it is also the manifestation and empowerment tool of nation's culture and identity, and enabling an open window on other cultures and identities, which further enriches the outcome of our civilizations.

In fact, the founders of UNESCO realized the importance of language some 70 years ago when they included "advancing the mutual knowledge and understanding of peoples" in the Constitution of our Organization. Without the ability to use language we would not be able to achieve this noble objective.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

UNESCO's engagement in enhancing languages ability is deeply-rooted in our Constitution, and, for us, it is not only a question to be dealt with from an educational perspective. But it is also all of UNESCO's Sectors, Education, the Natural and the Social Sciences, Culture, and Communication and Information – that deal with this vital issue.

UNESCO offers the added-value of being able to tackle intricate issues, by drawing upon the expertise of professionals from multi-disciplinary networks, which allow the Organization to provide insight into such complex policy matters as the promotion of language ability.

In this regard, the Organization is committed to:

- The promotion of multilingual education based on mother tongue;
- The preservation and safeguarding of languages – especially those considered to be endangered;
- Linguistic diversity in cyberspace – something which is particularly important to the People's Republic of China;

- As well as the development of local indigenous knowledge systems and the promotion of indigenous languages.

UNESCO's mission to promote linguistic diversity and multilingualism is grounded in several important Decisions and Resolutions adopted either by the Organisation's Executive Board or its General Conference.

In this regard, allow me to share with you the forward-looking decisions taken by UNESCO's Governing Bodies through the last two decades:

*The first is the 1999 resolution (30 C/Res.12) of the 30th session of the General Conference, entitled "Implementation of a language policy for the world based on multilingualism". This resolution recognised the importance of safeguarding the linguistic and cultural heritage of people, and called for the promotion of multilingual education to help build linguistic pluralism, as well as the promotion of second-language education from early childhood, with a view to ensuring full participation and democratic access for all citizens.

*Secondly, ten years later, in 2009, during the 181st session of the Executive Board, in decision 181 EX/9, Members called for the implementation of "national language strategies designed to achieve Education for All (EFA) in the context of sustainable development".

This decision recognised the importance of language in the Educational process, and focused on efforts being undertaken, while promoting fairness, particularly for minorities, indigenous peoples and girls.

It also raised the quality of education and learning achievement by emphasising understanding and creativity.

Equally, this decision helped to strengthen the cognitive aspects of learning by using mother tongue language to teach those aspects that are directly relevant to the learner's life. This decision also helped to increase dialogue and interaction between learner and teacher, through genuine communication between both, in a language that each is comfortable with.

*Finally, Ladies and Gentlemen, just last month, in April 2014, during the 194th session of the Executive Board, Members adopted decision 194 EX/29 on "Language Teaching in Education Systems".

This Decision of the Executive Board reinforces the resolve of UNESCO's Member States to:

- Promote the teaching of mother-tongue languages;
- Promote the teaching of at least two languages in addition to the main language of instruction within their respective educational systems;
- To work to improve the quality of language teaching, including by means of training language teachers, developing teaching materials, promoting exchanges between the education systems of different States, and encouraging the use of digital technologies in the training of language teachers and students;
- And finally, it encourages Member States to promote the safeguarding and enhancement of their linguistic heritage by promoting the teaching and the use of indigenous languages, where they exist."

UNESCO dedicates importance to multilingualism in fostering mutual understanding, a spirit of tolerance, respect for identities and cultures among nations, we believe in our Organization's responsibility to promote multilingual education based on mother tongue as one important feature of global citizenship education (GCE).

In fact, the concept of global citizenship education – which is understood to mean an education experience that empowers learners to think, share and act as global citizens, committed to building a more just, peaceful and sustainable world – is reminiscent of the preamble statement of our Constitution, which reads:

“Ignorance of each other’s ways and lives has been a common cause, throughout the history of humanity, of that suspicion and mistrust between the people’s of the world, through which their differences have all too often broken into war.”

Ladies and Gentlemen, in my capacity as Head of the Executive Board of the UNESCO I look forward throughout the coming two days, that an a clear understanding on how to develop mechanisms in order to attain the enhancement of language ability is reached – within the context of 21st century learning – through greater innovation to ensure sustainable social development and increased international exchange and collaboration.

Finally I'd like to thank you very much and wish you the very best in your deliberations.