

International Mother Language Day

There are about 7,000 languages in the world, but did you know that a language disappears and dies every two weeks? International Mother Language Day, on 21 February, is a day to celebrate and protect all the languages of the world.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Complete the sentences (1–8) with the words (a–h).

Sentences

1. When we ___ mother languages, we encourage or support them.
2. When we ___ of languages, we educate people about them.
3. When we ___ a special day, we recognise its importance and celebrate it.
4. If you ___ a competition or event, you organise it and make it happen.
5. If you ___ a project, you start it, often in an official way.
6. When someone ___ a book, they make it available to the public for the first time.
7. If you ___ education, you can learn things that help you in life and work.
8. If we ___ speak our mother language, we are allowed to do it.

Words

- a) set up
- b) have the right to
- c) promote
- d) hold
- e) have access to
- f) mark
- g) releases
- h) raise awareness

International Mother Language Day

A language is much more than just a way of communicating. Language, and particularly our mother tongue, is an important part of our culture. Some people even think that our language can change how we see the world.

A special day

In 1999, a special day to promote mother languages was created: International Mother Language Day. The day was also intended to raise awareness of just how many languages we have on this planet (around 7,000) and to protect them. The idea for this special day came from the country of Bangladesh, and 21 February is also the day when Bangladeshis mark the day that the Bangla language was officially accepted. Bangladeshis celebrate both days by holding literary competitions and singing songs.

Different themes each year

Every year, UNESCO chooses a different theme and holds different events at its headquarters in Paris, France. For example, one year there was a focus on Braille and sign languages, and another year a focus on how multilingual education could help the world to have a better future.

Other countries have also set up special projects to mark this day. For example, in 2014, the Indian government released digital learning materials for schools and colleges in the 22 most widely spoken Indian languages. It is estimated that there are around 750 languages or dialects in India, and, sadly, that around 250 more languages have been lost in the last 50 years.

The importance of the mother tongue in education

The Director General of UNESCO, Audrey Azoulay, pointed out in a recent speech on International Mother Language Day that mother languages ‘shape millions of developing young minds’. She believes that children learn best in their mother tongue, and that it is important that children should have this opportunity. Around the world, 40 per cent of the population does not have access to education in a language they can understand or speak. Using certain languages can make it easier, or much harder, to do well in life.

Language goes to the heart

Nelson Mandela once said, ‘If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart.’ At least 43 per cent of all languages are endangered, and fewer than a hundred of the world’s languages are used in the digital world. Most internet communication is in one of the following languages: English, Chinese Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic, Portuguese, Indonesian, Malayan, Japanese, Russian or German. But everyone has the right to use their own mother language, and to keep the memories, traditions and ways of thinking that their language represents. And this is what International Mother Language Day is all about.

Tasks

Task 1

Are the sentences true or false?

1. The Bangladeshis do not celebrate Mother Language Day.
2. There are more than 22 languages spoken in India.
3. Around a quarter of the languages in India have been lost in the last 50 years.
4. Audrey Azoulay believes that children learn best in English.
5. Only 43 per cent of the world's languages are used online.
6. Portuguese is widely used online.

Task 2

Match the numbers (1–5) with the subjects (a–e).

Numbers

1. 7,000
2. 21
3. 40
4. 43
5. 1999

Subjects

- a) The year International Mother Language Day began
- b) The approximate number of languages in the world
- c) The percentage of languages at risk
- d) The date of International Mother Language Day
- e) The percentage of people who are unable to learn using their first language

Discussion

How many people speak your mother tongue? How many languages do you speak?

Answers

Preparation task

1. c
2. h
3. f
4. d
5. a
6. g
7. e
8. b

Task 1

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. False
5. False
6. True

Task 2

1. b
2. d
3. e
4. c
5. a