

# Mother tongue based - multilingual education in the Philippines: Its challenges and implications in bilingualism

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Received: 6 April 2022

Available Online: 15 April 2022

Revised: 9 April 2022

DOI: 10.5861/ijrse.2022.306

Accepted: 15 April 2022

ISSN: 2243-7703

Online ISSN: 2243-7711

OPEN ACCESS



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## ***Abstract***

This paper aimed to review theoretical/legal perspectives in the implementation of the Mother Tongue- Based Multilingual Education and identify issues raised relative to the implementation of MTB-MLE. Also, this aimed to determine implications in the implementation of MTB-MLE in the field of bilingualism and pedagogy. A literature- based analysis was also employed to answer the purpose of the study. Finally, implications and insights were shared.

***Keywords:*** MTB-MLE implementation, theoretical perspectives, bilingualism, Philippines

## **Mother tongue based - multilingual education in the Philippines: Its challenges and implications in bilingualism**

### **1. Introduction**

Globally, there are 50-75 million ‘marginalized’ children who are not enrolled in school. Children whose primary language is not the language of instruction in school are more likely to drop out of school or fail in early grades. Research has shown that children’s first language is the optimal language for literacy and learning throughout primary school (UNESCO, 2008a). In spite of growing evidence and parent demand, many educational systems around the world insist on exclusive use of one or sometimes several privileged languages. This means excluding other languages and with them the children who speak them (Arnold, Bartlett, Gowani, & Merali, 2006).

Language is a way of communication with other people. This is a way that teacher will impart or add knowledge to their students. At present, teachers are confused to what medium of instruction they will use in teaching. Research both here and abroad proves the positive outcomes of bilingual education programs. In the US the major research finding is that students in bilingual programs outperform their monolingual counterparts in metalinguistic awareness, concept formation tasks and analogical reasoning ability (Cloud Siennesse, & Hamayan, 2000). Students in Bilingual programs also outperform their peers in standardized achievement test in either language (Howard et al., 2005). Moreover, UNESCO has encouraged mother tongue instruction in primary education since 1953 (UNESCO, 1953) and UNESCO highlights the advantages of mother tongue education right from the start: children are more likely to enroll and succeed in school (Kosonen, 2005); parents are more likely to communicate with teachers and participate in their children’s learning (Benson, 2002); girls and rural children with less exposure to a dominant language stay in school longer and repeat grades less often (Hovens, 2002; UNESCO Bangkok, 2005); and children in multilingual education tend to develop better thinking skills compared to their monolingual peers (Bialystok, 2001; Cummins, 2000; King & Mackey, 2007).

In addition, educators argue that only those countries where the student’s first language is the language of instruction are likely to achieve the goals of Education for All. Research also suggests that engaging marginalized children in school through mother-tongue based, multilingual education (MTB-MLE) is a successful model (Benson & Kosonen, 2013; Yiakoumetti, 2012). Many linguistic groups are becoming vocal about the need to ensure that the youngest members of their communities keep their linguistic heritage. Some governments, such as in the Philippines, have recently established language-in-education policies that embrace children’s first languages. A compendium of examples produced by UNESCO (2008) attests to growing interest in promoting mother tongue-based education, and to the wide variety of models, tools, and resources now being developed and piloted to promote learning programs in the mother tongue. However, the shift in language policy is part of a growing trend the world to support mother tongue instruction in the early years of child’s education. In Southeast Asia, this is apparent in a rising number of educational programs that utilize a mother tongue approach. While the use of non-dominant languages in education is allowed in countries such as Cambodia, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand, the Philippines is the single country to institute a national policy requiring their inclusion in the early grades. As a result, the implementation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines is being looked at as an example of the rest of the region.

As envisioned by the Education for all (EFA) program and the Millennium Development Goal (MDG), countries around the world, especially the developing ones like Philippines, are provided with both financial and technical assistance from international agencies. The counties have attempted various policy changes to ensure access, equity quality and relevance of primary education. One of the policy level innovations we can see is the introduction of learner’s mother tongues in schools both as a subject and the medium of instruction. Various studies (Benson, 2002; Dutcher, 2003) have identified that children’s overall educational attainment can be enhanced if they are taught in their mother tongue in early grades. In contrary to this, teaching in a dominant language, which

is different from children's mother tongue, in early grades invites serious challenges in education example, high drop-out rates, low educational attainment and lack of classroom interaction (UNESCO, 2003). Due to these problems, as reported by Dutcher (2003), a large number of indigenous children, who come from different linguistic groups, are still out of school, and even if they have joined the school they are marred with low competence in dominant language which is used as the medium of instruction.

### *1.1 Objectives*

This paper aimed to review theoretical perspectives about the implementation of MTB-MLE; identify the issues raised in the implementation of MTB-MLE; and determine implications in the implementation of MTB-MLE in the field of bilingualism and pedagogy.

### *1.2 Theoretical Perspectives*

The implementation of MTB-MLE is anchored on the mandate of Republic Act No. 10533 signed by President Aquino last May 15, 2013 institutionalizing the mother tongue based-multilingual instruction in our education system. This provided that basic education shall be conducted in the learner's native languages throughout the kindergarten and elementary grades. This mandate is based on our country's "one nation, one language" mindset which recognizes our linguistic and cultural pluralism which is adhered by the Department of Education's standards and principles in developing the Enhanced Basic Education Curriculum. One of the standards is principles and framework of mother tongue based-multilingual education (MTB-MLE) which starts from where the learners are and from what they already knew proceeding from the known to the unknown.

The realization of the efforts on this vision of using to connect with the world, the national language to connect with our country, and the native languages to connect with our heritage calls for the need of capable teachers equipped with the competencies to implement the MTB-MLE curriculum. Moreover, Cummins (1979) propose the interdependence theory to explain the positive transfer of literacy skills from L1 to L2. He argues that the level of literacy competence in L2 that a child attains is partially a function of the level of competence the child has in L1 at the time L2 teaching begins intensively.

## **2. Related Literature and Studies**

### *2.1 The Teaching and Policy of the MTB-MLE*

As stipulated in Section 4 of RA 10533, basic education shall be delivered in languages understood by the learners as the language plays a strategic role in shaping the formative years of learners. For kindergarten and the first three years of elementary education, instruction, teaching materials for assessment shall be in the regional or native language of the learners. The Department of Education shall formulate a mother tongue language transition program from Grade 4 to 6 so that Filipino and English shall be gradually introduced as languages of instruction until such time when these two (2) languages can become the primary languages of instruction at the secondary level (Lapena, 2013). MTB-MLE and the K-12 program provided a door to help improve the quality of education in the country. There might be some disagreeable provisions in the law but it provides an adequate space to explore new options in education. There are a sincere and passionate efforts that the trailblazers made to honor our languages and cultures, and provide quality and relevant education to Filipino learners (DepEd Order Nos. 33 and 61, s. 2012).

Yoneno-Reyes (2015) said that one strong message in MTB-MLE training sessions is not to resort to rote learning. When asked why they resort to such methods, teachers would usually point to the language of learning as the culprit. Because they and learners are not adept in the prescribed languages of instruction, real dialogue with pupils could not take place. In the MTB-MLE program, some would use existing popularly spoken words which might include borrowed words from other languages. Others would look into for the original words used by their

ethnic group. Some teachers believe that borrowed words do not sound like their own. They feel that part of their task in MTB-MLE is to save their own language. This requires them to constantly rebuild the vocabulary in their own language. Language and education are such intertwined entities that no education practices and activities can take place without the former. The prohibition and the use of mother tongue have come and gone throughout history. However, Ah-Vee and Collen (2009), the language -in-use policy is failing children and results in schools are disappointing for substantial proportion of learners who do not succeed to learn. They indicate that the current educational system.

## *2.2 Issues on L1 and L2*

For purpose of the MTB-MLE implementation, mother tongue or first language (L1) refers to language or languages first learned by a child, which he/she identifies with, is identified as a native language or user of by others, which he/she knows best, or uses most languages first learned by a child. The regional or native language refers to the traditional speech or variety of Filipino. On the contrary, contemporary patterns of global communication and immigration have made multilingual education programs a way of allowing children to experience their rich multilingual backgrounds as an advantage and as a means of thriving in a multilingual world. Giving children proficiency in the language spoken in their homes (L1) as well as the language spoken by the larger community (L2, L3, L4, etc) increasing cognitive skills, humanistic understanding, achievement, economic benefits, linguistic ability, social skills and political cooperation between groups (Malone, 2007).

In learning to learn in a Second Language, an assumption was made that bilinguals have advantages over monolinguals in terms of cognitive development: “greater capacity for lateral thinking and problem solving”. Such theoretical assertion leads to argue in favor of the establishment of bilingual education programs which help children acquire a second language without replacing their mother tongue (Gibbons, 2016). Moreover, the level of development of children’s mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. Children who come to school with a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in the school language. When parents and other caregivers are able to spend time with their children and tell stories or discuss issues with them in a way that develops their mother tongue vocabulary and concepts, children come to school well-prepared to learn the school language and succeed educationally. Children’s knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue they have learned in the home to the school language (Cummins, 1979). Further, Cummins (2016) stressed that bilingual children’s mother tongue has greater access, as the world ventures on globalization, to multilingual and multicultural resources is advantaged in its ability to play an important social and economic role on the world stage. At a time when cross-cultural contact is at an all-time high in human history, the identities of all societies are evolving.

## *2.3 Delivery of Instruction and learning outcomes*

The continued development of oral and written in L1 and L2 in primary school, children will gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. They will process, compare and contrast the ways in which the two languages develop into their lives (Cummins, 2001). Most developing countries are characterized by multilingual societies yet foreign languages of instruction pervade a majority of education systems. A system where instruction is carried out in a language children do not speak is referred to as submersion, as it is comparable to forcibly holding a child under water. However, research has shown that mother tongue - based schooling significantly improves learning.

## **3. Conclusion**

### *3.1 Insights and Implication*

Much of the readings largely dwell on the positive aspects in the implementation of the mother tongue based multilingual education. There have been contentions as to the implementation of this language policy in education.

It impacts teaching and even among learners who are recipients in this program.

In our world today where a common language has been encouraged, it is very evident that English has been our target language. In any aspects of human endeavor, may it be in school, commerce and among others utilize English as the medium. This however brought different perspectives in such way that the use of mother tongue can eventually help learners acquire the second language. But the way it appears, sounded like different in what is the reality. Many teachers complain about the different problems that they faced specifically in the use of mother tongue. There are teachers who are assigned in areas where there are many dialects are used. Further, this has brought problems as to what language or dialect to be used in the instruction. Even students have difficulty in terms of their own native language. It could be noted that Philippine language is very much complex that even our native tongue is not purely native in its sense because there are influences of different dialects which are observable in our communication.

In addition, there have been several problems raised such as having no textbooks or dictionaries in the mother tongue that are needed to accommodate the needs of the learners having different mother tongues. Although one of the strategies in implementing MTB-MLE is the improvisation of instructional materials written in mother tongue, still teachers need books that are accurate and reliable. Another problem that is being seen as the lack of vocabulary. This is considered to be dearth of words to use when delivering a message or information. Difficulties are experienced specifically finding the right word that is exactly the equivalent of the source language, putting them in a situation that will bring confusion among students.

With the implementation of the MTB-MLE, this would urge the linguists or the indigenous group of the region to reexamine the dialect used in the classrooms for the modification of the language if needed. Analysis of linguistic variation particularly with the semantics of the language must be reviewed. The dialect used in teaching MTB-MLE and other subjects using mother tongue is undeniably consisting a difference from the Binisaya that we are used to in the province. This would signify a well-understood language leaving confusions behind in teaching this dialect in the classrooms. This may also encourage for the reproduction of reading or reference in the mother tongue. Schools are assumed to be social and learning centers where students learn, cooperate, interact and collaborate with learners of same age group coming from different social and cultural backgrounds. However, not everyone is able to adapt himself/herself to a standard learning system. Students have different needs and they function in totally different manners. In formal education settings, it is not rare to find learners having limited cognitive skills, limited communicative skills and limited literacy skills.

Language and education are closely related. It can be a bridge for social and educational advancement as well as exacerbates social inequality and language learning. So, the choice of language to be implemented for learning is of utmost importance and impacts largely the performance of the learners. Education experts have confirmed through their worldwide research that young learners who start their schooling in the mother tongue throughout their primary education are more apt to develop their educational, linguistic and thinking skills. Fluency and literacy in the first language establishes a strong foundation for second language acquisition, for improved learning and reading aptitudes. However, there are still ambiguities linked to the use of mother tongue in formal education. Questions are often raised on the pedagogical appropriateness of the mother tongue and doubts often arise if teaching and learning might not endanger or jeopardize learning English.

Academic success of students depends on various factors such as language planning and policy, curriculum contents and types of pedagogy. In the same way, the language of instruction in schools largely determines the academic performance of learners. Finally, there are advantages in the use of mother tongue-based instruction as reflected on the different readings. But this has to be explored more if language competence in the target language is not jeopardized given the fact that Philippines has been identified as English speaking country.

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