

Perspectives on Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Implementation in the Philippines

Jhonas S. Lumanlan^{*1}, Ryan De La Torre², Fevvie Von Asistio³, Lani G. De Guia⁴,
Hoa Do⁵, Eduardo Teodoro Jr. Ramos⁶, Ma. Jhona B. Acuña⁷

^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7}Philippine Normal University, Manila, Philippines

¹National University, Philippines

²Bicol University, Legazpi City, Philippines

³Columban College Inc., Olongapo City, Philippines

⁴Kalayaan National High School, Pasay City, Philippines

⁵Academy of Policy and Development, Hanoi, Viet Nam

⁶Parañaque City College, Parañaque City, Philippines

*Corresponding Author Email: lumanlan.js@stud.pnu.edu.ph

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Abstract. This qualitative content analysis is aimed at analyzing the status and school support programs or activities for MTBMLE implementation in selected schools in the Philippines through the perspectives and experiences of 15 participating teachers and school administrators. A phenomenological research design laid out the theoretical groundwork of this study as it looked into the participants' lived experiences using semi-structured interviews. Transcripts were analyzed for codes, thematized into three discussion headings: (a) status and school support on the implementation of MTBMLE; (b) perspectives on the importance of L1 or Mother Tongue as MOI and learning area; and (c) awareness on the principles of MTBMLE. In summary, the findings showed that regarding the status and school support on implementing MTBMLE, the schools adhered to the provisions of the guidelines set by the Department of Education. In terms of the participants' perspectives on the value of L1 or mother tongue as MOI and a learning area, the benefits of L1 or mother tongue use in pedagogy are recognized; finally, regarding the participants' awareness of the underlying principles of MTBMLE, a few expressed incomplete, if not lacking, awareness at all. However, all of them were deemed knowledgeable, with an implicit willingness to learn more about the concept. Recommendations for further research were indicated. This paper stands unique among others for its method of analysis and its unique look at the implementation status seen through school support and status, perspectives of teachers and school administrators, and awareness of the same on the principles of MTBMLE.

Keywords: Education; K-to-12; Mother tongue; Multilingual education; Policy.

1.0 Introduction

The advent of the K-to-12 Curriculum in the Philippines paved the way for the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program through which learners beginning from Kinder to Grade 3 start their educational journey “in the language they understand best” (DepEd, 2016, p. 2), that is their mother tongue (L1). MTBMLE is the latest and one of the numerous language policies the country has adopted

over the years (Adriano et al., 2021). While it was through the Republic Act 10532, otherwise known as the “Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013” that MTBMLE was articulated and completely integrated into the Philippine basic education system, it was already formally recognized for its benefits and institutionalized for further promotion and use in schools through DepEd Order Number 74, series of 2009, “Institutionalizing Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MLE)” (Bernardo et al., 2018). The same document defines MTBMLE or MLE as “the effective use of more than two languages for literacy and instruction” (DepEd, 2009, p. 1). Findings from various related studies were cited in the Order to back the relevance of MTBMLE, such as that “learners learn to read more quickly when in their L1;” (p. 1) and that “pupils who have learned to read and write in their L1 learn to speak, read, and write in a second language (L2) and third language (L3) more quickly than those who are taught in a L2 or L3 first.”

Dekker and Dekker (2016) claim that the educational value and impact of L1-based MLE is recognized globally. The role of the use of L1 or the mother tongue in teaching fundamental concepts undeniably positively impacts the cognitive development of learners. Gaylo (2020) not only underscore the pedagogical benefits of MTBMLE, but also emphasizes its cultural and social relevance. Other than these underpinnings, empirical studies after empirical studies (Dayon, 2019; Durante, 2021; Gempeso & Mendez, 2021; Pamittan, 2020; Trujillo, 2020) in the most recent times continue to provide evidence on the effectiveness and positive impact of MTBMLE in the academic life of the learners and even to the lives of the teachers.

The implementation of MTBMLE did not come without corresponding challenges. A qualitative take on the issue, for instance, by Lopez et al. (2019), culled from the lived experiences of rural indigenous MTBMLE teachers from schools in the Cordillera Administrative Region, has some interesting findings. Accordingly, the work of Lopez et al. provided a direct counter against what most language scholars underscored as the advantage of MTBMLE, that is, the facility of linguistic and cognitive skills in a two-way means. More specifically, this facility of transfer seemed problematic, if not only unachievable, as the policy is short of “well-established bridging practices,” specifically among grades 3 and 4, which is when the shift to English and Filipino use as media of instruction begins. In addition, the same scholars provided support through their study that L1 does not cater to particular content areas across the elementary-level curriculum.

Abrea et al. (2021) related similar findings regarding implementing MTBMLE through a mixed-methods study on the experiences of teachers teaching MTBMLE from selected divisions in Caraga, Philippines. Accordingly, issues of transition or bridging from the mother tongue to the target language or English as a medium of instruction beyond Grade 3 among pupils pose an obstacle to the learning process. In the same work, while Abrea et al. managed to reconfirm the pedagogical advantage of teaching concepts in the L1 on the one hand, it also rather served as a disadvantage on the other hand as concepts that were supposed to be taught in L2 and L2 learning itself were being impeded along the way.

Implemented in the blended learning context, Mantilla (2022) determined the teaching of MTBMLE challenges met by key stage 1 pupils and teachers alike in a public elementary school in Leyte. Findings revealed that these challenges included materials preparation over a distance learning mode, the creation of meaningful and valuable learning experiences despite the setup, and an increase in the number of non-readers and non-numerates in class as brought about by the prior pandemic and the context of a blended learning or distance learning environment.

In a similar context, Orbeta (2023) identified unfamiliarity with the L1, shortage of available relevant materials, and negative attitudes towards the use of L1 as MOI and the teaching of MTBMLE in general as themes to the lived experiences of parents in a home-based remote teaching setup. A qualitative study, particularly phenomenological, Orbeta focused on the experiences of selected parents who homeschooled their children using L1, with teaching MTBMLE as a subject in itself. Along with the problems that emerged, strategies were also sought to be established in such a setup. Notwithstanding these, Orbeta’s work is common with the abovementioned research literature on the pre-existing and existing challenges of implementing MTBMLE in the Philippines. It could be surmised from these that despite the platform or mode of instruction, some difficulties remain almost the same.

All the above mentioned, and even while it has been in operation for over 20 years now at the time of this writing, teachers and learners alike still continuously face almost the same problems from its earlier years of implementation (Alberto et al., 2016; Bernardo et al., 2018; Cabansag, 2016; Hunahunan, 2019; Metila et al., 2016; Tenorio, 2022; Yap-Dequiña & Oliva, 2022). Another commonality among these is the emphasis on such challenges related to pedagogical practices and linguistic competencies of both teachers and students that seem to hinder and problematize the smooth implementation of the program. The literature is still very young, yet it looks into how the policy and program itself might have something to do with either the solution or the problematization itself. This is where the current study comes in. Especially in the advent of the recently lifted pandemic, private and public schools in the Philippines suffered drastic changes in instruction delivery, among others. The pre-existing problems of the education system in the country were only exacerbated by these. Surely, a closer look into the MTBMLE implementation of schools, in particular, could provide critical insights into pedagogy and policymaking.

Numerous quantitative and mixed methods studies such as that of Anudin (2018), Lang-ay and Sanadan (2021), Dagalea et al. (2022), and Natividad et al. (2022) have already been conducted on related issues such as the practical challenges of implementing MTBMLE and use of mother tongue itself to pedagogy and policymaking. However, it seems that a qualitative look at similar issues, which could potentially provide more meaningful and richer data to describe the status and impact of the program and policies surrounding it among schools in the Philippines, is lacking. Ford and Goger (2021) and Apollono and Bero (2017) note the unique role and use of qualitative research in meaningfully and richly informing policymaking and evaluation. Accordingly, “Qualitative research allows the researcher to gather rich contextual insights into people’s lived experiences of policies, programs, and power dynamics” (Ford & Goger, 2021).

The researchers purported to explore and analyze existing MTBMLE implementation policies among selected public and private elementary schools in the Philippines, to add if not only enriching, the available qualitative data that could serve as a more meaningful and in-depth look into the phenomenon towards better policy creation. Furthermore, such a study is interesting in its context as it was written after a more than two-year pandemic. Specifically, this study purported to determine the implementation status and impact of MTBMLE-supporting policies on teaching and learning.

2.0 Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach in addressing its objectives, specifically utilizing a phenomenological research design, following the related tenets of executing such research by Creswell (2013). A total of 15 participants selected through purposive sampling were enjoined. Criteria of selection or qualifications required the participant to be presently a teacher of MTBMLE at the elementary level, particularly in grades 1, 2, and/or 3, and a school administrator of an institution offering MTBMLE, all employed at either a private or a public school in the Philippines. Of these 15 participants, 7 were school administrators, while 8 were classroom teachers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted among the participants via online means (i.e., Google Meet) or in-person engagements. An interview protocol was used to guide the interviewer-researcher, and the participants were informed that they could share as much as they wanted per the questions being asked during the interview. After the interviews, the transcripts were analyzed by means of qualitative content analysis. Meaningful units were extracted from the transcribed lines and then were coded to be eventually categorized into themes. The study participants were thoroughly informed of the nature of their participation and the study, and their consent was expressly obtained. All other appropriate ethical considerations were observed before, during, and after the data gathering and analysis procedures.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Status and School Support on the Implementation of MTBMLE

When asked about existing in-school policies supporting the implementation of MTBMLE in their institutions, the participants mostly referred to the implementing guidelines of DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2009. Further, the participants explained that, in compliance with the said guidelines, they are religious about propagating each of their localities’ L1 as a medium of instruction (MOI) in grades 1-3.

Regarding school support on implementing MTBMLE, the participants shared that their schools and local DepEd division offices provide relevant training and resources to assist teachers and students. Teachers of MTBMLE receive particular support in terms of materials and training to better implement the program. These trainings are sometimes particularly funded through the school MOOE (Maintenance and Other Operating Expenses), as explained by one of the participants. Moreover, school events or programs such as a dedicated month for celebrating their L1 and the cultural background of which. One of the participants shared that hosting school events celebrating the culture of their region or province with emphasis on its linguistic background was one of the most concrete ways their institution valued and supported the MTBMLE program.

One of the objectives of implementing MTBMLE stipulated in DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2012, to develop “socio-cultural awareness which enhances the pride of the learner’s heritage, language and culture” (p. 2). What the participants shared about how the school supported the implementation of MTBMLE in their institution aligns with the abovementioned stipulation; school events highlighting through a dedicated monthly celebration the L1 or mother tongue further its cultural significance, along with its linguistic relevance among the learners and other viewers or consumers of such activities. Meanwhile, another one of the stipulations in the same document is being fulfilled by providing training and equipment for sufficient learning experiences and materials among MTBMLE teachers and administrators of schools and by their local divisions. The Order was clear, “a team of trainers for each region composed of education supervisors from different divisions has been organized.” Teachers’ training and development are also components of the MTBMLE implementation guidelines by the DepEd. From among the participants’ responses, such practice is still ongoing and relevant in light of the said guidelines. In other words, schools adhere to the provisions of DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2012.

DepEd Order No. 16 s. 2012 is divided into five (5) components: (a) objectives; (b) areas of focus; (c) teaching and learning process; (d) teachers’ training and development; and (e) preparation of learning resources. The objectives subsection enumerated the specific aims of the MTBMLE, which revolved around language development, cognitive development, academic development, and socio-cultural awareness development. The focus areas specified MTBMLE as a learning area and MOI in grades 1-3. The subsection on teaching and learning process, as well as the teachers’ training and development, specified how L1 or the mother tongue specific to the locality must be used and taught as a learning area and an MOI, respectively, and other options of modifications to the model process of teaching and learning, depending on contextual factors such as the nature of the L1 in a particular division or school. Meanwhile, the subsection on teachers’ training and development assured that a team of trainers and experts are available to provide relevant help to the teachers; and finally, the subsection on preparation of learning resources assured continuous materials development relevant to the pedagogical context, needs and nature of MTBMLE program in schools nationwide.

As gleaned from the interviews, it can be surmised that MTBMLE is being implemented well, following the provisions of DepEd in schools with elementary education offerings. However, it can also be noted that the participants did not specify the contextualization of the guidelines set forth by DepEd. In other words, it seemed that the schools and the teachers did not contextualize well according to their locality or division and other factors related to the institution’s identification guidelines. The responses did not specify or go on more deeply into how, for instance, they address issues of bridging from L1 to L2, materials that may be found to be out-of-context for the learners, or linguistic issues such as lack of formal grammar or even orthography of a certain L1. Finally, other than school events held to celebrate or promote the sociocultural background of an L1 or mother tongue, there seemed to be no concrete and more meaningful ways to do this. These may be points for further research and inquiry.

3.2 Perspectives on the Importance of L1 or Mother Tongue as MOI and a Learning Area

From the participants’ responses, the use of L1 as MOI is valuable, especially to the learners. While varied, the perspectives of the participants related to each other as common to their responses were that the learners benefit from the use of L1 as MOI because it helps them understand the lessons better and grasp new concepts faster, fosters a sense of cultural identity and self-confidence, and assists in better learning of a second (L2) and a third language (L3) respectively.

A sense of familiarity and, therefore, comfort among the learners is seen to be developed from the use of L1 as MOI because “when students learn in their mother tongue,” so goes one of the participants, “they are more receptive to new concepts and show improved learning outcomes.” One of the participants shared that using L1 as MOI and teaching MTBMLE in general is valuable because it “contributes to the positive self-concept of the learners.” Another participant explained that “the first language should be used in teaching early-grade learners because they can express their feelings, thoughts, and experiences without fear. Learning to read in the first language could be a bridge in learning 2nd and 3rd language.” Accordingly, “it helps the learner value the rudimental significance of literacy and the value of his/her own culture and heritage. It provides the building blocks of literacy much more comfortably since it is the primary language used in the community where the learner grows.”

In addition to these, another participant shared, “The first language is crucial in instruction because it serves as the foundation for learning. When students are taught in their mother tongue, it enhances their understanding, cognitive development, and overall academic performance. It fosters a sense of identity and cultural pride as well.” This particular insight from one of the participants aligns with the foci of the objectives of MTBMLE as indicated by DepEd in its guidelines of implementation: It is the goal of the program or policy to develop among the learners their linguistic, cognitive, academic, and socio-cultural skills.

These findings corroborate the work of Cabansag (2016), who enumerated four primary advantages of MTBMLE and L1 as MOI: improved idea expression among learners, self-confidence boosting, greater retention, and promotion of a pleasant and comfortable environment. Navarro et al. (2016) also observed the same in a similar study and confirmed that MTBMLE encourages stronger classroom participation. In Bernardo et al. (2018), a positive perception and attitude towards MTBMLE anchored on its theoretical link with L2 learning were also found in a similar study. The work of Santiago and Dagdag (2021) confirms these findings, and they concluded that “MTB-MLE could help pupils achieve significant improvement and metacognitive learning orientations” (p. 54).

On the contrary, some studies are contradictory to the claims of benefit of the MTBMLE program. One such is the work of Andrino and Arsenal (2022), who indicated through their study that “teachers disagree that the MTBMLE policy is in good principle as they believe that it will not make the lessons interesting to students and that it will not enable them to understand their lessons easily” (p. 138). Problems concerning linguistic competence and resources, as well as competent and available training and resources for teaching, were observed to hinder or to make MTBMLE fail to reach its objectives in Cruz’s study (2015). Arispe et al. (2019), in a more recent study, revealed the negative sentiments and attitudes of some Bicol-based elementary teachers who attribute lack of materials or resources and training, and linguistic issues in both teachers and students, among others, as hindrances to the supposed benefits of MTBMLE. In a much more updated work on a similar topic, Dagalea et al. (2022) recommended a “reconfiguration of the MTBMLE” program to suit the contextual factors of linguistic, economic, and cultural backgrounds of Filipino learners as these drove the supposed failure of the same program to deliver well.

Noticeably, perspectives vary in terms of the value and benefits of using L1 or the mother tongue as not only an MOI but also a learning area in itself. While this is so, it is interesting to think about whether these perceptions vary because of certain factors, such as the difficulties faced or experienced by the teachers and students, as well as the parents or guardians of these learners and the school administration. This calls for further investigation.

3.3 Awareness of Teachers and School Administrators on the Principles of MTBMLE

A few participants stated that they were not completely aware of the principles supporting MTBMLE, but the rest expressed confidence in their knowledge about the program. Participants mentioned L1 being helpful in developing the learners’ cognitive skills, especially in L2 learning. It was also mentioned that MTBMLE promotes cultural literacy and linguistic development among the learners.

One participant had to share this regarding their understanding of the supporting principles of MTBMLE: “Developing learners appropriate cognitive and reasoning skills for them to understand other languages similarly. Children can easily understand text in 2nd and 3rd language if they fully develop the skills in their 1st language.”

Another participant enumerated the following as part of the principles supporting MTBMLE: “ (1) Native language is a part of the child’s identity, MTB MLE connects them to their culture; (2) MTBMLE ensures better cognitive development; and (3) MTBMLE develops a strong foundation in a language they understand best after which they are more prepared to learn the national language or any second language.” A participant related MTBMLE principles to concepts of peace education, sustainable development goals, gender equity, and human rights advocacy. Meanwhile, another participant shared that they understand MTBMLE as contextualizing learning as “the process of translating the Bicol-Naga term into Bicol-Bulan for the learners to understand and familiarize the terms.”

On the one hand, at least a couple of the participants shared that they did not know of any of the principles underlying MTBMLE; on the other hand, a few participants shared that they only knew a little bit about it, relating: “but the importance of having this subject is to teach to the learners effectively language learning and cognitive development. it is expected to bridge the two languages to improve learning.” Along the same vein, a participant shared similarly, stating, “I am not that fully aware about the principles, but I believe that using MTBMLE will surely help in making understand the topics easily if they used their first language as the medium of instructions, but it will have some disadvantage if they do not understand the language of other places hence the pupils will have difficulty in communicating others.” This response also highlighted the disadvantage of using the L1 as MOI and as a subject.

The MTBMLE is conceptually defined as the use of the mother tongue or L1 of the learner both as a bridge to learning effectively the L2 and other concepts at the elementary level or earlier schooling years and as an avenue or a window to one’s sociocultural identity and background. As mentioned earlier in this paper, even before the roll out of K-to-12, DepEd has already institutionalized the promotion of mother tongue use in the class and instruction, citing empirical evidence supporting its benefits to student learning and performance. Awareness of the principles underlying MTBMLE is critical so teachers can effectively use the opportunity for better pedagogy. In other words, while MTBMLE may have disadvantages and advantages, a well-prepared or equipped teacher should be able to navigate and come through it all for the learners’ most optimal learning experience.

However, awareness is only one thing. As mentioned earlier in this paper, challenges beyond awareness or knowledge of the concept abide. Problems with resources, for instance, in Arispe et al. (2019) or Andrino and Arsenal (2022), continue to hamper the maximum potential of MTBMLE towards sociolinguistic development of the learner, hand-in-hand with academic and otherwise development. Meanwhile, the findings above are promising as the interviewees also showed basic understanding and willingness to learn and understand it better. Most of the difficulties learners and teachers encounter are more systemic than pedagogic.

4.0 Conclusion

At the time of writing, MTBMLE has been in implementation for over 20 years. The literature is rich in its arguably positive and beneficial effects on teaching and learning processes. However, as one gap is addressed in this paper, studies on its implementation status and impact seem to be an interesting source of insight—research in which area allegedly needs further update, especially in the Philippine setting. From the findings of the present work, it could be concluded that the implementation of MTBMLE is still in its early stages despite its supposed maturity. Institutions and educators alike show little to no contextualization of the implementing guidelines of DepEd on MTBMLE.

Meanwhile, teachers of MTBMLE are shown through this study to receive training in the form of seminars at the various levels of DepEd hierarchy. These trainings are then re-echoed or cascaded until the benefits reach the target students in the classroom through the pedagogical process that ensues afterward. In addition, teachers seem to have a good grasp of the concepts of MTBMLE, not to mention an understanding of L1 and L2 learning and acquisition, as well as the cognitive development of learners at various ages and environments. Teachers specifically understand how using L1 as MOI benefits the learners’ better comprehension of lessons and the development of both L1 and L2 in the classroom.

In sum, as far as the status and school support of the implementation of the MTBMLE in schools, findings showed that schools are adherent to the guidelines set forth by the DepEd but in need of further look into local

contextualization, especially on the school support programs towards MTBMLE. Responses varied based on the perspectives of the teachers and school administrators towards L1 as a learning area and an MOI, but the findings lean towards the favorable advantages of MTBMLE or the use and teaching of the mother tongue in elementary school. Finally, as awareness seems to be better measured quantitatively, a quantitative approach could be suggested from here to describe teachers' awareness, knowledge, and competence in teaching and through MTBMLE. Finally, in terms of the participants' awareness of the principles of MTBMLE, it is revealed that a few of them are not yet completely knowledgeable. However, at the very least, these participants, including those who indicated their awareness, showed promise as they were not uninformed about the concept. In addition, further research, especially through other data collection and analysis methods, is recommended.

5.0 Contribution of Authors

All the authors indicated in this study contributed to the conception, design, and data-gathering procedures, the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered and its writing and revisions.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest inherent in the publication of this work.

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