

POLICY BRIEF: Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

Introduction

The results on the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment, PISA, showed Filipino 15-year-old students scoring the lowest among 79 participating countries in reading comprehension, and second from the bottom in math and science. In 2019, the SEA-PLM Southeast Asian regional assessment showed low performance in reading among Grade 5 students in the Philippines. The World Bank published a report in 2022 painting a severe picture of “learning poverty” in the Philippines, relying on the SEA-PLM results for its determination that 9 out of 10 Grade 5 students in the Philippines struggle with reading. All these findings sparked widespread concern and discussion regarding curriculum, teaching practice, the learning environments of Philippines schools, and in general the quality of education in the Philippines.

The students who took the PISA in 2018 were educated under the Filipino-English bilingual curriculum, an approach that predated the institution of Mother Tongue-Based, Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in the Philippines. Given they were educated under that approach, their low scores are in part explained by the fact that for PISA over 90% of the Filipino students reported that they speak a language at home other than the language of instruction and of the PISA test (English).

90% of Filipino students who took the PISA in 2018 did not speak the language of the assessment, English, at home.

In fact, on PISA four of the six lowest scoring countries, including the Philippines, have 50% or more of students whose home language was not the language of instruction.¹

Data from SEA-PLM showed that over 90% of Filipino learners reported that they did not speak the language of instruction, English, at home. Nevertheless, Filipino students were the only ones tested in English on the SEA-PLM. Those in Laos were tested in Lao, those in Cambodia in Khmer, Those in Vietnam in Vietnamese, those in Myanmar in Myanmar language, and those in Malaysia in Chinese, Malay, and Tamil.

The Philippines is among the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. It is one of 44 nations where no single language group exceeds 50% of the total population. Estimates of the number of native Philippine languages range from 110 to 185.² The adoption of MTB-

¹ OECD, PISA 2018 Database, Table II.B1.9.2

² USAID | Philippines, December 31, 2013 *Strengthening Information for Education, Policy, Planning and Management in the Philippines. Local languages and literacy in the Philippines: Implications for early grade*

MLE in 2009 recognized this diversity, explicitly emphasized the socio-cultural value of children learning in their maternal languages, and put a focus on the importance of language to expanding access to education and improving learning outcomes.³

Implementing MTB-MLE in the Philippines

Nationally representative studies financed by USAID in the Philippines and collaboratively conducted by RTI International and DepEd assessed student performance in English and Filipino reading in Grade 3 in 2013 and 2019.⁴ The data from 2013 show reading ability in English and Filipino for students who were learning under the bilingual curriculum in place before the implementation of MTB-MLE. Those tested in 2019 were learning under MTB-MLE. The data show slight declines in average Filipino and English oral reading fluency. In Filipino, the average declined from 68 correct words per minute to 61. In English it went from 67 to 57.

However, the difference in average oral reading fluency does not account for the reduced number of hours of instruction in both languages in 2019 compared to 2013. Under MTB-MLE students had a third less hours of instruction in Filipino and half as many hours in English compared to the students assessed in 2013. With a third fewer hours in Filipino, students in 2019 had average fluency only 10% lower. And, with half as many hours in English they achieved an average level of reading fluency only 15% lower. This strongly suggests that learning to read fluently in the second and third languages was more efficient under MTB-MLE.

Understanding how student learning has been impacted by the MTB-MLE policy also requires a full appreciation of the extent to which that policy has (or has not) been fully implemented. Implementation of MTB-MLE requires at a minimum that teachers are trained in the practices required to help students learn and acquire literacy in the mother tongue, then transition to Filipino and English. It also requires materials in the mother tongue (e.g., teacher materials, textbooks, reading books, other classroom aides). It requires that the teacher speak the mother tongue being used as the medium of instruction. And it requires sufficient time learning in mother tongue to ensure a sound foundation from which to transition to other languages.

A study supported by USAID and jointly conducted by RTI and DepEd looked at reading performance and classroom practices in schools using four mother tongues (Bahasa Sug, Chavacano, Magindanawn, and Mëranaw) as languages of instruction in Regions IX, V, VII and BARMM. In addition to measuring levels of reading ability, the study examined language usage at the school and classroom level, indicative of how MTB-MLE was in fact being

Grade 3 students in 2019 developed Filipino and English literacy skills more efficiently under MTB-MLE.

reading instruction and assessment, EdData II Technical and Managerial Assistance Task Number 17, prepared by RTI International, Washington DC: USAID

³ Department of Education Order No. 74: Institutionalizing MTB-MLE, 2009

⁴ Pouezevara, S., Pressley, J. & Cummiskey, C. (2019). *2019 National Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA): English and Filipino, Grade 3*. USAID, All Children Reading-Philippines. RTI International.

implemented in the included regions. Classroom observations revealed that mother tongue textbooks were only used in 14 percent of Grade 2 classrooms and 25 percent of Grade 3 classrooms. In addition, on average, students spent less than 30 percent of class time practicing reading and writing in their mother tongues. Teachers spoke in the mother tongues during 60% of all class time in three of the languages, and less than 40% of the time for Magindanaw. During the mother tongue class, each language was used much more regularly, 85% of the time or greater, but still less (67%) in Magindanaw. Student performance in reading in that language unsurprisingly was well below the performance of those in the other languages.⁵

Research on Mother Tongue Instruction

DepEd's MTB-MLE policy is consistent with research showing mother tongue-based education benefits learners in several ways.

- Children's social and emotional development is enhanced when their mother tongue is valued in school. Children who retain their mother tongue have higher self-esteem and civic engagement.⁶
- When mother tongue is used in school, parents are more likely to enroll their children, communicate with teachers, and support education at home. An analysis of data from 22 developing countries and 160 language groups revealed that children taught in their mother tongue were significantly more likely to be enrolled and attending school, while a lack of education in a first language was a significant reason for children dropping out.⁷
- Use of mother tongue can narrow achievement gaps between rich and poor, urban and rural, and male and female learners. Educational systems are more inclusive and equitable if mother tongue is used in the early school years.
- Children learn best when the first language of instruction is in their mother tongue.⁸ This is especially true during preschool and the first cycle of primary schooling.

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⁵ Betts, K. et al (2019). 2019 Regional Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA): Bahasa Sug, Chavacano, Magindanaw, and Meranaw. USAID, All Children Reading-Philippines. RTI International.

⁶ UNESCO, 2016 *If you don't understand, how can you learn?* Policy paper 24 of Global Education Monitoring Report, Paris: UNESCO

⁷ Smits, J.J., et al (2008) *Home Language and Education in the Developing World*, Paris:UNESCO

⁸ For example, Benson, C. (2004) *The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality*, background paper for the Global Education Monitoring Report 2005, Paris:UNESCO; Bühmann, D. and Trudell, B. (2007) *Mother tongue matters: Local language as a key to effective learning*, Paris:UNESCO; Pinnock, H. (2009a) *Language and education: The missing link. How the language used in schools threatens the achievement of Education for All*, London: Save the Children UK; Pinnock, H. (2009b) *Steps toward learning: A guide to overcoming language barriers in children's education*, London: Save the Children UK; cited in [Language of instruction | Unesco IIEP Learning Portal](#) last updated 23 Sep 2021

Learning outcomes are lower when home language is different from language of instruction.⁹

- Becoming literate and fluent in one's first language is important for overall language and cognitive development, as well as academic achievement¹⁰. Children learn to read faster if they speak the language of instruction, because they already have a repository of vocabulary, knowledge of the linguistic construction of the language, and the ability to pronounce the sounds of the language. This prior knowledge facilitates learning to read, as well as comprehending text.
- Children who are educated in their mother tongue for an adequate amount of time are more efficient and effective at acquiring national language(s), thereby creating citizens who have the advantage of contributing to national interests without sacrificing the benefits of their own language and culture. Neuroscience has shown that in the preschool years, children who speak multiple languages have a cognitive advantage compared to monolingual children.¹¹

The bottom line is that children learn to read well in a new language only if they have a strong foundation of literacy in their first language.¹² If the first language is weak, then the foundation to learn other languages is weak. The best and fastest way to learn a new language is through the one you already understand. If the transition from mother tongue to second language is too early or too fast, the risk is that students will not attain mastery of either language which serves neither the child nor society.

Benefits of MTB Education: Examples from Other Countries

The Patani Malay-Thai Multilingual Education Program (PMT-MLE).¹³ The PMT-MLE program launched in 2006 targets linguistic minorities in the “deep south” of Thailand. PMT-MLE begins with the development of strong listening and speaking skills in the mother tongue, Patani Malay, then moves on to mother tongue reading and writing. Thai is introduced in the second semester of Kindergarten. Learners develop Thai listening skills before they work on Thai speaking. In subsequent grades, they transfer their Patani Malay reading skills to Thai reading and writing through a transitional primer. Thai scholars who assessed the program over the past 8 years found that PMT-MLE yields:

- **Better Thai faster:** Grade 1 PMT-MLE students were 271% more likely to score perfectly on a Thai letter dictation test, and 207% more likely to pass a Thai sentence writing test.

⁹ [Language of instruction | Unesco IIEP Learning Portal](#) updated 23 Sep 2021

¹⁰ Ball, J. (2011) [Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years - UNESCO Digital Library](#) Paris: UNESCO

¹¹ Bialystok, E, Apr 2001 *Bilingualism in Development. Language, Literacy and Cognition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

¹² Nakamura, P., November 2015 *FRAME-India Final Report*, Arlington, VA: American Institutes of Research. Others include: August & Shanahan, 2006; Cummins, 1981; Koda, 2008.

¹³ UNICEF 2018, *Bridge to a Brighter Tomorrow: The Patani Malay-Thai Multilingual Education Programme*. UNICEF and Mahidol University

- **Improved learning of all subjects:** From Grades 1 to 6, 72.5% of PMT-MLE students met basic criteria in Thai language, math, science, and reading comprehension, compared to only 44.5% of comparison students.
- **Improved exam scores:** PMT-MLE students scored above the Deep South average in Thai, math, and science on the nationwide grade 6 O-NET exam.
- **Strong community support:** Parents and teachers strongly supported PMT-MLE. Most cited “better Thai reading and writing abilities” and “improved self-confidence” as key benefits.

Multilingual Education (MLE) for Tribal Children of Odisha, India. The MLE program in Orissa teaches tribal children in their first language in the early grades and gradually includes Oriya as a second language and English as a third language. A 2012 study showed that MLE had a positive impact on achievement in language and mathematics conducted in tribal languages. The use of mother tongue as medium of instruction in the classroom led to children being more engaged in the teaching and learning. Overall schools saw an increase in the attendance and retention of tribal students since the MLE approach was introduced.¹⁴

Mother Tongue Education in Cameroon. An evaluation of a mother tongue education program in Cameroon showed that children who were taught in their mother tongue, Kom, performed significantly better—125% on average—in multiple subjects (including math and English) than a control group of peers who attended schools where English was the medium of instruction.¹⁵

MTB-MLE in Uganda. The USAID SHRP and LARA programs in Uganda supported implementation of mother-tongue based education in 12 languages, some of which had not been fully codified in written form. Instruction in early grades began in the mother tongues, with English introduced beginning in Grade 2, and transitioning to English as the medium of instruction in Grade 4. Data comparing schools where mother-tongue instruction was implemented under the USAID programs (teachers trained and supported, structured teachers’ guides and student materials in the language of instruction) showed that for some language groups the performance of students in English in Grade 4 was more than double that of students in schools where implementation was not supported.¹⁶

Education in Minority Languages in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan constitutionally mandates that children from linguistic minority groups should have access to education in their home languages. Instruction is therefore offered in six languages in addition to the national language, Uzbek. A national early grade reading assessment in grades 3 and 5 in Uzbekistan (2021)¹⁷ was conducted in all seven languages of instruction. Children who learned Uzbek as a second language performed lower in Uzbek in grade 3 but by grade 5, children tested in

¹⁴ National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2012, *Promoting Multilingual Education in Odisha’s Adivasi belt*

¹⁵ Chuo and Walter, 2011

¹⁶ USAID/Uganda, LARA project monitoring and evaluation data.

¹⁷ USAID, June 2022 *All Children Reading – Asia. Report on the 2021 Uzbekistan National Early Grade Reading and Mathematics Assessments*, Research Triangle Park, USA: RTI International.

five out of six minority languages scored the same or higher as those tested in Uzbek-medium schools on oral reading fluency (ORF). This is consistent with the time frame generally recommended for transitioning from mother tongue to a national language.

Heritage Mother-Tongue Based Bilingual Programs. In countries such as Canada, USA, Australia, and New Zealand heritage language (mother tongue) programs entail educating indigenous children living in a majority language environment in a way that preserves their heritage language and cultural identity. For example, in a Mohawk immersion program in Canada students gained proficiency in Mohawk and by grade 4, after one year of formal instruction in English, they performed comparably to their non-immersion Mohawk peers on standardized tests of English.¹⁸ Similarly, a review of Indigenous language programs across the United States reports that children developed proficiency in both their indigenous language (Navajo) and English. One study concluded that heritage mother-tongue based schooling can fulfill both proficiency in English and in working towards heritage language recovery.¹⁹

Another study in an Arctic community in Canada found that skills gained in the early years in indigenous language are transferable to skills in a majority language. The greater the students' proficiency in Inuktitut in the early years of schooling, the greater their proficiency in French or English and Inuktitut in subsequent years. In a longitudinal study, Wright, Taylor, and Macarthur (2000) found that students who were not educated in their indigenous language were weak both in Inuktitut *and* the majority language. Similar findings were found for students in Mi'kmaq immersion programs across Cape Breton, Nova Scotia.²⁰

Moving Forward: Facing the Real Challenges

To date, the biggest question regarding MTB-MLE in the Philippines is not whether the policy is justified. A linguistically diverse country like the Philippines, with a majority of students neither speaking English nor Filipino at home, requires a multilingual approach to the initial years of schools if the education system is to be equitable and inclusive.

Of concern are the challenges to thoroughly implementing mother tongue-based, multilingual education. Language diversity in the Philippines presents a challenge to appropriately affording each child the right to be taught in his/her mother tongue, but also offers a great opportunity to have more children succeed in school and preserve the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of the country.

An analysis of the 2022-23 beginning of school year data by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) shows how much diversity exists. Only about 1 out of 5 schools in the Philippines is monolingual. About half of all schools have learners speaking 2 or 3

¹⁸ Ball, Jessica (2011) [Enhancing learning of children from diverse language backgrounds: mother tongue-based bilingual or multilingual education in the early years - UNESCO Digital Library](#) Paris: UNESCO

¹⁹ McCarty, 2002 cited in J. Ball (2011)

²⁰ Osborne, E.; Caouette, J.; Qumaluk, Q.; and Taylor, D.M. (Nov 2009) *Bilingual Education in an Aboriginal Context: Examining the Transfer of Language Skills from Inuktitut to English or French*, in *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, v12, no 6, p667-684, Routledge U.K. Also Smith, Peck, Osborne, & Taylor, 2008 cited in Ball, J. (2011)

different languages. Another 25% have four, five, or even six different languages. In addition, a detailed language mapping exercise carried out in Regions V and VI by the USAID-funded ABC+ project showed how many learners have mother tongues that are not the official language of instruction in each schools division. For example, in Masbate, 61% of learners speak a language other than the language of instruction; 76% in Catanduanes and 90% in Iriga City. According to PIDS's analysis, more than half a million learners have mother tongues that are not officially recognized as languages of instruction.

Going forward, successful MTB-MLE implementation will require determining effective strategies for teaching in multilingual environments and for dealing with languages that are not currently recognized as official mediums of instruction. Given that it may not be cost-effective to develop all languages as mediums of instruction, DepEd will need to devise other, appropriate accommodations for learners in those languages in order to assure them of an equal opportunity to learn.

Matching teachers with the necessary language skills to the mother tongue languages in which they will need to teach is another implementation challenge. The regional language study mentioned above also looked at this issue and found that in the four regions included in the study almost 100% of teachers in schools using Meranaw spoke that language. Only about 60% to 65% of teachers in Bahasa Sug and Chavacano schools spoke those languages. In Magindanaw schools, only 55% did. Other countries have addressed this challenge by relying on local identification of teachers with the requisite language skills, and then recruiting and managing the teaching force locally.

Affording adequate time in the curriculum for students to build oral and then literacy competency in one language before switching to others is imperative. Available research²¹ indicates that students need to learn in their mother tongues for longer periods than the MTB-MLE policy currently allocates. Studies indicate that the appropriate point at which to switch languages of instruction is after 5-6 years of primary schooling. A study by the American Institute of Research²² on multilingual reading acquisition in India identified a 'tipping point' at which there is enough language ability in mother tongue to support acquisition of biliteracy. If children scored more than 60% correct on a local language reading test, they had higher gains in English reading. Children who scored below 60% had almost no gains in English. Achieving 60% or higher usually took place in grade 5, at which point children more effectively and efficiently learned English.

There is more than two decades of evidence documenting that MTB-MLE better responds to the needs of learners in diverse language contexts, and in fact puts them on a path to more

Successful implementation will require more effective teacher training, provision of appropriate materials, and ongoing support to teachers, students, and families.

²¹ Both UNESCO referring to Ball, J. (2011); Benson, C. (2004); Pinnock, H. (2009a and b) and Nakamura, P. (2015)

²² Nakamura, P. (November 2015) *FRAME-India Final Report*, Arlington, VA: American Institutes of Research.

effective acquisition of language and literacy skills in national languages. What it takes to successfully implement mother tongue-based education is also known – with countries as diverse as Thailand, India, and Uganda effectively implementing such programs with the right support. Assuring teacher training and support, the development of appropriate curricular and supplemental materials, and promoting greater school-home connections are all necessary for successful implementation. Also needed is attention to teacher policy – preservice education, recruitment, deployment, continuous professional development, and career progression. For example, DepEd needs to avoid what has been done in the past, where teachers trained on MTB-MLE implementation in the early grades were subsequently promoted to teaching in later grades, leaving those not versed in mother tongue instruction to take over the crucial initial grades of primary school.

Perhaps the Philippines has not yet achieved the full return on investment it made when it decided to adopt MTB MLE, but the potential to do so is critical for ensuring equity and inclusion given the linguistic diversity of the country. Having done so much in furthering MTB-MLE in a highly complex context, the Philippines can become an example for others if it invests in improving the quality of MTB-MLE implementation while more systematically evaluating implementation progress and outcomes.

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