

# Two Proposed Perspectives on Mother Tongue-Based Education in the Philippines

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To Link this Article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v3-i4/1295>

DOI:10.6007/IJARPED/v3-i4/1295

*Published Online:* 18 December 2014

## Abstract

The instruction of English in the Philippines causes quite some challenges to scholars due to its rich linguistic diversity. With more than 180 languages currently recorded in the country, linguistic power struggle is unavoidable, although it may be silent. To make the situation even more complex, the Philippine Government recently launched a new educational policy that promotes learning in mother tongues in earlier years of the child. While this law is based on sound research, it poses quite some challenges to both linguists and educators due to the various linguistic backgrounds found in almost every classroom around the nation. The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education policy is complex from different perspectives. This paper presents evidence from research and current reality of the Philippines. Then it introduces two models that could potentially yield a positive outcome in the implementation of mother tongue-based education. Both perspectives are prepared primarily based on existing literature and careful critical analysis of the Philippine linguistic context. The author also draws from findings from his previous research on the issue in the Philippines.

## Introduction

In line with the recommendations from the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural organization (UNESCO), the Philippines has embraced mother tongue-based education (MTBE). UNESCO has been persistent in promoting MTBE throughout the decades, starting with the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when it first launched the importance of teaching young learners in their own mother tongue (UNESCO, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2010). From the different UNESCO reports, it has become evident that some countries have been successful while others have not. In East, South, and South-east Asia, the Philippines was found to be one of the least successful ones in MTBE implementation (UNESCO, 2005a). Maybe this finding was one of the reasons why the Philippines took the initiative just a few years later to refocus their effort in introducing mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) as a national language policy.

Although MTBE-MLE is a new policy, the thought of promoting MTBE is not new in the Philippines, as seen in the history of language policy in the Philippines over the past century (Bernardo, 2004). Without careful analysis of the linguistic reality of the Philippines, MTBE-MLE may also face similar challenges and thus have its success jeopardized. Linguistics familiar with the political and linguistic reality of the Philippines must provide professional and technical guidance in the proper implementation of the MTB-MLE policy to give it a chance.

This paper proposes two models that can give a chance for MTBE to become a reality in the Philippines. These perspectives are not exclusive of other possible models for the implementation of MTBE. In fact, more linguistic models need to be proposed from different scholars until the best model is found.

### **Need for Linguistic Models with Better Potential**

A number of studies have been conducted on the topic of MTBE in the Philippines as well as outside. They seem to yield contradictory findings. Some show success while others do not. In outlining a number of countries in East, South, and South-east Asia, UNESCO (2005a) based their observation on SIL International Literacy Office's statistics to conclude on the success of MTBE implementation. The report showed that Brunei, East Timor, and Pakistan were the three least successful countries while North and South Korea, and Japan were the most successful in implementing MTBE. The Philippines came sixth in the category of the least successful countries on the list. In an ongoing study, I have found that the most significant factor in determining the success or failure of the implementation of MTBE is the linguistic diversity of that country. The more linguistically diverse a country is, the more difficult it becomes to implement MTBE.

The MTB-MLE policy poses challenges of instructional materials development, teacher training, and language instruction, just to name a few. In a recent SWOT Analysis study of the current state of affairs of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in the Philippines, results showed that the MTB-MLE policy is also creating quite a number of challenges for English teachers (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b). While the study reported success in English teaching and learning in the Philippines, both academically and from business perspective, MTB-MLE seems to cause some concern to English language experts. Although they are not willing to drop MTB-MLE all together, they are in search of instructional models that can effectively integrate MTB-MLE. This paper suggests two models that may give some hope for the future of English instruction and MTB-MLE.

The two models presented in this paper are the revised and improved ones from those presented in the SWOT Analysis study (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b). Those initial ones needed modification to make them more practical to curriculum planners and language policymakers. While these models are proposed primarily for the Philippines, other scholars from other countries may find them relevant to their respective countries with similar linguistic diversity.

Despite the many challenges that may come with the implementation of MTBE in any country (Besa, 2013; Burton, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b), the positive side of MTBE can no longer be denied (Burton, 2013; Kirkpatrick, 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2011a, 2011b; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014a, 2014b). On another side, the importance given to English in the Philippine society cannot be overemphasized (Dawe, 2014). English proficiency in the Philippines and other surrounding countries gives more chance for prestige, employability, and other opportunities (Cho, 2012; Dawe, 2014; Kirkpatrick, 2011a, 2011b; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b). In these countries, even when MTBE is implemented, parents who can afford it would prefer to send their children to English-on schools. To some extent, MTBE-MLE becomes optional.

### **Assumptions Behind MTBE-MLE in the Philippines**

The issue of whether or not to implement MTB-MLE then seems to be based on two possible assumptions. The first assumption, which seems to be reflected in the perspective of UNESCO, is more for (a) democratization and (b) accessibility of education. According to the many UNESCO reports, to make education more accessible to minority students, it should be

presented in their respective indigenous languages. This option gives minority students a chance to learn in their own language, thus increasing their chance of better understanding and more enjoyable learning (Espada, 2012). Such an assumption gives some challenges, however, when a country has a significantly large linguistic diversity. Studies have reached this conclusion in Kenya, Nepal, and Philippines (Gacheche, 2010; Ghimire, 2012; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b) among many others. MTBE is seen here as a tool to preserve indigenous languages and stop the growing number of endangered languages.

As of 2014, the Philippines had a record of about 185 languages. Only between 12 and 15 languages were officially promoted to be used for MTB-MLE. If MTBE is about democratizing education, making it accessible to all citizens using their respective their mother tongues, it means that focusing on less than 15 languages in a country of 185 languages is not the ideal. There is nothing democratic about education that utilizes a minority of languages. Of course it is clear that the language policymakers are struggling to open education to Philippine learners in all the 185 languages. They know that this is an almost impossible mission.

Another fact that is currently observed in Philippine classrooms where MTB-MLE is implemented is something that should be obvious to sociolinguists and applied linguistics. With so much transportation all around the world today, people can no longer be bound to stay within their own linguistic region. Due to different reasons, many people move around, thus crossing even linguistic borders. So, it is quite common to have students from several linguistics backgrounds in the same classroom. At times, a teacher may be teaching in a classroom where he or she does not speak the local language. This fact is especially true in the Philippines due to the great linguistic diversity. Thus, the idea of true MTB-MLE becomes simply a dream that can hardly ever successfully materialize.

The second perspective is what is proposed in this paper. When an MTBE policy is launched in a country, it is a political ideology to preserve the uniqueness, the heritage, and the pride of a specific nation. This is quite simple and ideal for developed countries that feel quite self-sufficient or powerful enough to influence other socio-political neighbors. On the other side, those countries that are still developing depend heavily on the world outside. They easily rely on English to promote competitiveness and access the market on the global arena.

The Philippines seems to have been successful with the use of English to develop and compete on the global level. With its English-proficient human resources, the Philippines has sent out workers in different socio-economic sectors all around the world. English has given the Filipino an edge that many other people in South-east Asia do not have. English has literally helped put the Philippines on the socio-economic and socio-political map of the world.

Therefore, the argument in this paper is that, the discussion around MTB-MLE in the Philippines is about the nationalistic view as opposed to the internationalization view of the language policy. In one camp, there are policymakers who want to promote the Philippine heritage, patriotism, and the values of the Philippine culture. In the other, some prefer to open the Philippines to the world outside to give the country a chance to compete internationally. This camp is most likely interested in the success of the Philippines in the global market.

### **Theoretical and Contextual Considerations**

This paper takes into consideration a number of theoretical and contextual factors in the development of the two proposed models. These include a number of language learning

theories and the current context of the Philippines. These are important to understand as they make the rationale behind the two proposed models.

### **Theoretical Considerations**

A number of theories need to be considered when discussing MTBE in a country where English has already been used for instruction. Being part of what Kachru calls Outer Circle of speakers of English (Kachru, 1985, 1990; Kachru et al., 2009), the Philippines has been using English as a medium of instruction for a long period of time. English is part of the Philippine identity, even if it is a European language. One of the typical characteristics of Outer Circle countries is that they use the “colonizer’s” language to establish communication between the different linguistic groups of a country.

Second, as indicated above, many studies have already proven the positive effect of MTBE in different countries. Such studies have been the foundation of the promotion of MTBE by UNESCO. The same evidence has been used in making a case for MTB-MLE in the Philippines.

Next, it would be naïve for anyone today to ignore the impact of globalization on world economies, global markets, and international business and politics. Globalization has called for collaboration across political borders. No nation that plans to survive socio-economically and politically in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can ignore the impact of globalization. Policymakers and educators alike must take globalization with serious care. English comes strongly in this picture.

Last, Krashen’s critical period theory and input hypothesis (Cook, 2001; Krashen, 1981, 1985; Nunan, 2009) play a role in this current discussion. According to the critical period theory, language learners can only learn a language easily and to the maximal point by puberty, when the brain still has a high elasticity in absorbing a new language quite fast and more effectively (Nunan, 2009). It would make sense to introduce both the mother tongue and English at an early age.

As for the input hypothesis, Krashen argues that for language learning to happen, the learners must have access to a considerable amount of input (primarily through reading). From MTB-MLE perspectives, input will certainly be available to students, if appropriate instructional materials are in place. The challenge, however, may come with English, whose input will be highly likely limited. Quite a number of students completing K-12 education are already struggling communicating effectively in English. This extensive decrease in English input in the classroom may be disadvantageous for learners in their English learning. It must be emphasized here that, although the Philippines has promoted MTB-MLE in elementary education, it continues to promote English as medium of instruction, especially for tertiary education.

### **Contextual Consideration**

Just a couple of years ago, the Philippines was found to be a leading nation in academic English and business English (GlobalEnglish Corporation, 2012). The Philippines has become quite successful in English. English has made Filipino people travel and work around the world successfully. English has drawn international tourism and international business to the Philippines.

As indicated above, the Philippines currently has 185 languages. This great linguistic diversity makes it quite an almost impossible mission to deliver education in all those languages. The number of official languages for the implementation of MTB-MLE does not go

beyond 14. So, anyone who does not speak any of the 14 is completely left out. Yet, all the linguistic groups seem to value English highly. After all, English is part of the Philippine history and will certainly continue to play an important role in the destiny of the nation.

In addition, despite the introduction of MTB-MLE in the elementary education of the Philippines, English is still encouraged in tertiary levels to train workers who can be internationally competitive. It is important to understand that success of English language learning at the tertiary level may depend on language learning at an early age.

Furthermore, it is possible to argue that MTB-MLE poses some pragmatic challenges. First, anyone who does not speak any of the 14 officially-recognized languages for MTB-MLE has to learn his or her own language, the MTB-MLE language of his or her region, the national language (Filipino), and English. Second, if MTB-MLE policy could be successfully implemented, it would somehow slow down social mobility. People would feel obliged to stay within their linguistic area. This fact may be even truer for minority groups that are supposed to be the reason behind MTB-MLE. When a minority student cannot speak English or Filipino well, that student may end up simply staying in his or her own place, for it is a comfort zone.

Last, some linguistic groups resist Filipino, the official language of the Philippines. Based on linguistic power struggle, this resistance is explained by the fact that more than 90% of the Filipino language is made of words from Tagalog, a language spoken mainly by people in Manila and the surroundings. Given that Manila is the capital city, promoting Filipino as the national language seems to promote the Tagalog people over the rest of the linguistic groups.

## Two Proposed Models

This paper proposes two models as the Philippines continues with the implementation of MTB-MLE policy: the nationalistic model and the internationalization model. The nationalistic model promotes MTB-MLE, the Philippine values and heritage. It will, however, need to promote only one language for the true and realistic implementation of MTB-MLE. That language will have to be Filipino. The internationalization model promotes English-only instruction.

For these or other models to work, a specific chaos theory will have been fulfilled. Figure 1 presents the prediction of what will happen with MTB-MLE before an effective MTBE model is in place.

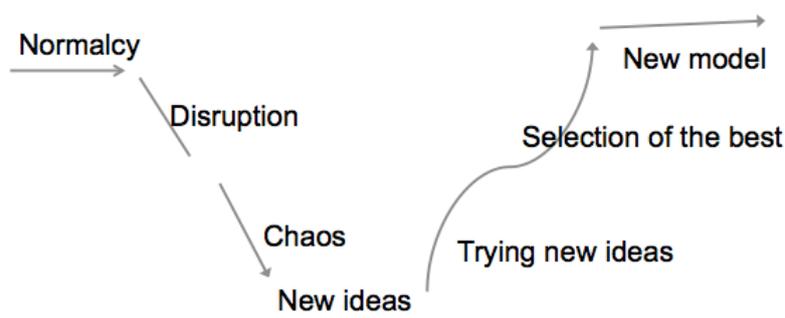


Figure 1. *Language Chaos Theory*

Before the implementation of MTB-MLE policy, educators in the Philippines were at the *normalcy* level of language teaching. They had their own comfortable ways of teaching literacy. The introduction of the policy *disrupted* that normalcy. As one talks with classroom teachers today, it is quite normal to hear the *chaos* that is going on. The majority does not know what they are doing and what to do next. Instructional materials are not yet in place in

all the languages of MTB-MLE instruction. The training has not been delivered to even half of the educators (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014a).

This chaos is pushing scholars to create *new ideas* and *try them* to see how they work. As more publications become available on MTB-MLE, somewhere the *best models* will be presented, based on actual research of MTB-MLE implementation. The best model(s) will emerge. Below are the two proposed ones for now.

### The Nationalistic Model

The nationalistic model is based on three assumptions. First, English will and must continue to play the role of linking the Philippines to the world. For that reason, it cannot be ignored in the language policy of the nation. Second, all Filipinos will have to adopt the Filipino language as their true national language, not just the Tagalog linguistic group. The government would have to lead the entire nation to buy in the idea that Filipino is the language of all Filipinos (practically not simply theoretically or politically). Every Filipino born and raised in the Philippines will need to identify with Filipino and be proud of that language. It will have to be part of every Filipino's identity. That is what can easily be seen with people from North and South Korea, and Japan, who were born and raised in their respective country.

Last, Filipino would then need to be the "mother tongue" used for MTB-MLE. Filipino would be the medium of instruction for the elementary school and English for all other educational levels. The fourth to sixth grades would need to help transition students from Filipino to English, while the first three elementary grades would be uniquely in Filipino. Mother tongues of students would be taught as subjects throughout K+12. English would continue to be taught as a subject in elementary school, while it would be both a medium of instruction and a subject in all other levels.

Figure 2 presents the nationalistic model. According to this model, for MTB-MLE to work, Filipino will have to be the only medium of instruction considered as mother tongue. Every Filipino will need to adopt Filipino as the lingua franca.

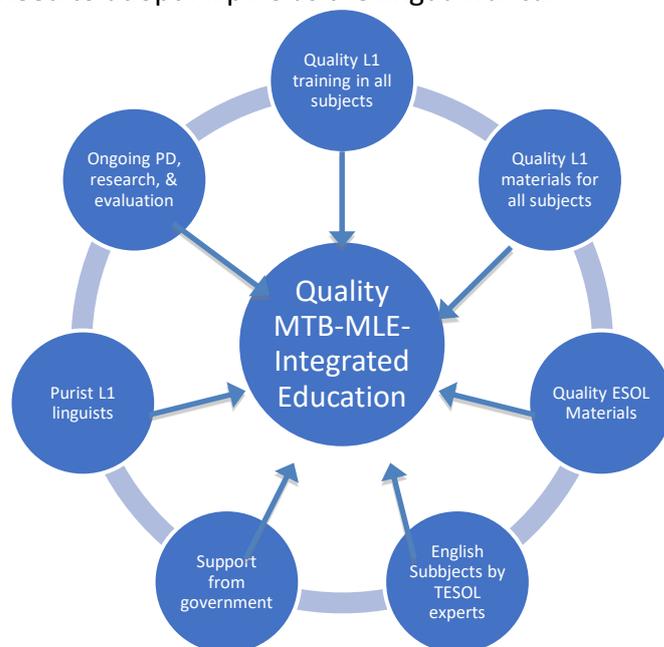


Figure 2: Nationalistic Model

All elementary school teachers will need to be trained in how to teach in Filipino. They will need to have the mastery of Filipino in informal and formal or academic usage. They will also need to take critical period and input hypothesis into consideration. Quality instructional materials will have to be in place in Filipino all around the country. As students transition between Filipino and English-only instruction (in grades 4 through 6), they would need quality English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) materials because in the Outer Circle, English speakers are usually not considered native speakers (simply because they speak other languages that they call their mother tongues).

In this model, English must be taught by Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) experts. They understand how additional languages are taught and learned effectively. Support would be needed from the government and purist first language linguists to support the implementation of MTB-MLE. The students' mother tongues (all the 184) will need to be taught as subjects at the elementary school. Last, school administrators, the department of education, together with language policymakers would need to continually support professional development, research and evaluation. The implementation must be intentional, supported, and monitored.

### **The Internationalization Model**

For some reason, the Philippines may be unsuccessful in pushing the whole nation into adopting Filipino as the actual national language, the true lingua franca of the whole country. This resistance to Filipino, which is mainly from Tagalog, may be politically or linguistically motivated. No matter what the reason is, it is quite a challenge to have every Filipino buy in the use of Filipino as required lingua franca. In fact, it is possible that this is why English is the lingua franca of the country. To keep all languages equal, Kachru explains that former colonies adopt the colonizer's language (Kachru, 1990; Kachru et al., 2009), especially in the case of the Outer Circle.

The internationalization model is also based on three main assumptions. First, English is and will continue to be the lingua franca of the Philippines. Therefore, English should continue to be encouraged for instruction. There are other ways that can be used to support the local languages, as represented in this model. Second, using English as medium of instruction should not be reason to remove the instruction of mother tongues. Mother tongues are important, as they are part of people's cultural heritage. Last, in addition to the plethora of information that is available in English today (making English as medium of instruction quite important worldwide), this language helps the Philippines compete on the global level. Figure 3 presents the internationalization model.



Figure 3: *Internationalization Model*

English is fairly politically neutral on the national level, given that it is not a Philippine language; it is a European language. It seems to fit in addressing the potential power struggle based on language policy that can exist between different linguistic groups. It creates a level ground for all the linguistic groups. As important is the role that it plays, its usage should never suppress the importance of teaching local languages. For this model to work within the philosophy of multilingual education, a number of factors need to be taken into consideration.

First, TESOL experts need to play an important role in training teachers in teaching different subjects in English. Input and critical period theories must be considered. This is based on the fact that most Filipino learners will speak more than one language. They cannot be taught as if they spoke only English. Additionally, teachers will need to be trained in how to teach mother tongues and the culture those languages represent at the elementary school and also Filipino as a subject throughout K+12.

Quality English would be needed for English as medium of instruction. Instructional materials will need to be designed taking into account TESOL theories, models, and strategies. Support from the government will be needed. Ongoing professional development together with ongoing research and evaluation will help to continually improve the instruction. Purist linguists in mother tongues would be needed to help develop materials in different mother tongues.

## Conclusion

The idea of MTBE is attractive to anyone who ever thinks about democratizing education. It simply sounds genial. Its implementation, however, brings challenges that are directly linked to language learning theories, politics, culture, linguistic diversity, and globalization. The complexity in the implementation explains why some countries have been successful while others have not. In a particular way, the great linguistic diversity seems to have played a critical role in the current state of MTB-MLE in the Philippines.

Two linguistic models have been proposed in this paper as alternatives for the improvement of the implantation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines. They were based on the current state of affairs of the Philippines as a nation, as a *plurilingualistic* country, and as part of the global community. The first model takes the nationalistic perspective of promoting the national identity and national heritage. The other emphasizes the importance of international competitiveness. Assumptions were given on why these two models are proposed. An important purpose for these two models is to generate discussion over potential models for a more effective implementation of the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines and MTBE in the world in general. It is my hope that these two models will trigger the development of other models for the same purpose until the best model is available to help the quality of education in the Philippines.

Last, more research is needed to understand better the implications of MTB-MLE in the Philippines. It has been only a few years now since MTB-MLE was officially implemented in the Philippines. More research must be conducted to capture better the impact of this national policy on learning, literacy development, and on the nation in general.

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