

Chapter 2.6

English in Mother Tongue based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE) in the Philippines

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For the first time since 1898, when the American colonizers introduced English to the Philippines, language policy in the country has officially recognized the place of mother tongues in basic education. The recent passing of Republic Act 10533, known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, requires Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE) in all schools. Specifically, this means “. . . kindergarten and the first three years of elementary education, instruction, teaching materials, and assessment shall be in the regional or native language of the learners” (Republic of the Philippines 2013).

This is certainly a welcome development in Philippine language policy. Prior to 2013, Philippine language policy was bilingual, as provided for in the Constitution, which mandates that Filipino be the national language and English the official language. Tollefson (1993, 89) argues that this provision in the Constitution presents an “. . . ambiguity (that) reflects the ongoing political conflict over the role of English.” Such conflict is aggravated by what Bautista (1996, 223) describes as the “the competing demands of ethnicity (the vernacular), nationalism (the national language), and modernization (an international language)” in language policy. In addition, myths about English and Philippine languages abound, making the effective implementation of the BEP, as well as of MTBMLE, a difficult task for language policy stakeholders (Martin 2010).

This paper describes English language policy in the Philippines from the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) of the 1970s to the present-day policy of MTBMLE. In doing this, I hope to address the following questions: (1) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the BEP? (2) How are the weaknesses of the BEP addressed by the new MTBMLE policy?

(3) What are the challenges faced by the MTBMLE policy? And finally, (4) how would a proper implementation of MTBMLE support the country’s need for a citizenry that is proficient in the English language?

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Bilingual Education Policy

The Philippine education system has been supportive of the maintenance of English in the country. This was especially true during the 1970s, which is the period of the Marcos dictatorship. Marcos himself was a staunch advocate of the promotion of the English language education. Marcos stated in 1977 that the use of the national

language alone “would seriously impair immediately the acquisition of learning in our society” (Benton 1996, 309).

The BEP, which was first introduced in 1974 and later reinforced in 1987, required the equal use of English and Filipino as media of instruction in basic education. The BEP carried out the constitutional mandate of English as the official language and Filipino as the national language of the Philippines. However, the policy was widely criticized, especially in its perceived failure to produce a citizenry that was proficient in the English language. Benton (1996, 319) argues that the BEP promoted elitism in that it “. . . (made) it more difficult for the ordinary Filipino to obtain an adequate command of English, and through this the possibility of sharing the benefits for which this linguistic proficiency is a pre-requisite.”

In 1985, the Linguistic Society of the Philippines, under the leadership of Dr. Andrew Gonzales and Dr. Bonifacio Sibayan, undertook a nationwide evaluation of the BEP by testing a national sample of grade 4, grade 6, and fourth year HS students (Gonzales 1996). The LSP study found that the students’ exposure to the BEP was not a significant factor in increasing student achievement, nor did exposure to the policy significantly predict the students’ love for country. It was also found that the BEP was most beneficial to Tagalog and Manila students, with those living in urban Metro Manila as having gained most from the policy. This is evident in another important finding of the study that identified socio-economic status as the main predictor student achievement, with proficiency in the subject areas as the second most important factor influencing student achievement (Gonzales 1996).

This nationwide study of the BEP also yielded some unexpected results. As most instructional materials used in the classroom were written in English, it was found that Filipino students had become dependent on the English language for their learning. It was also found that skills transfer from one language to another occurred, but this transfer was of one direction only—from English to Filipino. Finally, the BEP was found to have contributed to the widening of the gap between students from Manila and those outside the city, as well as between Tagalog and non-Tagalog students (Gonzales 1996). This prompted Gonzales to make the following claim about the policy:

The formula for success in Philippine education is to be a Tagalog living in Metro Manila, which is highly urbanized, and studying in a private school considered excellent. And of course, the formula for failure is the opposite: being non-Tagalog, studying outside of Metro Manila, in a rural setting, in a public or government school considered substandard! (Gonzalez 1996, 333)

Clearly, the BEP has not been successful in ensuring high student achievement through the years. The results of the National Achievement Tests (NAT), conducted among grades 3 and 6 pupils, as well as among high school students, illustrate this reality. The following tables reveal the continuing deterioration in basic education in the country (Department of Education 2012).

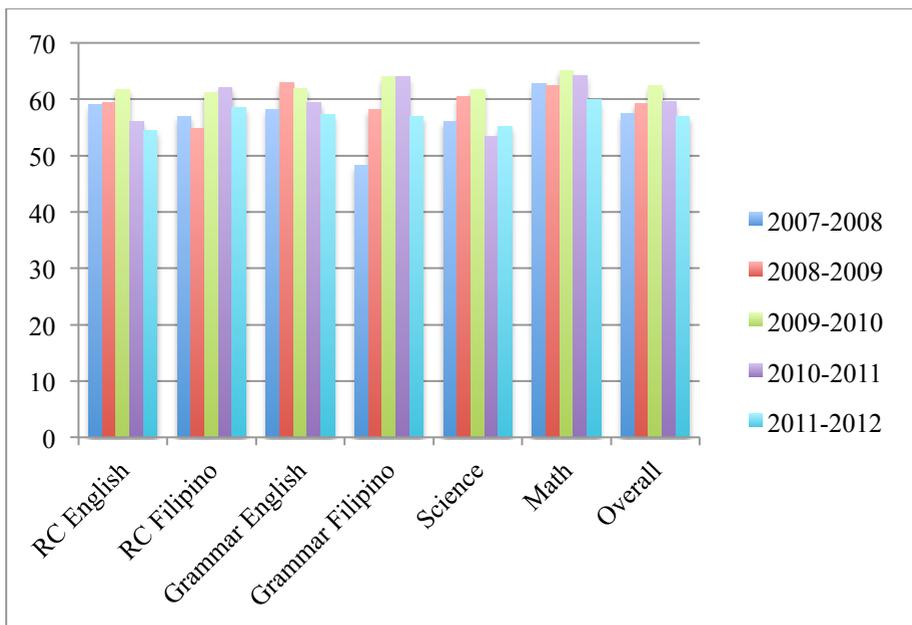


Figure 2.6-1. The National Performance of Grade Three Pupils in the National Achievement Test (NAT) Subtests.

As seen in Figure 2.6-1 above, the government’s goal of achieving a 75 percent rating for the schoolchildren remains elusive. The same situation holds for students in grade 6, as revealed in Figure 2.6-2 below.

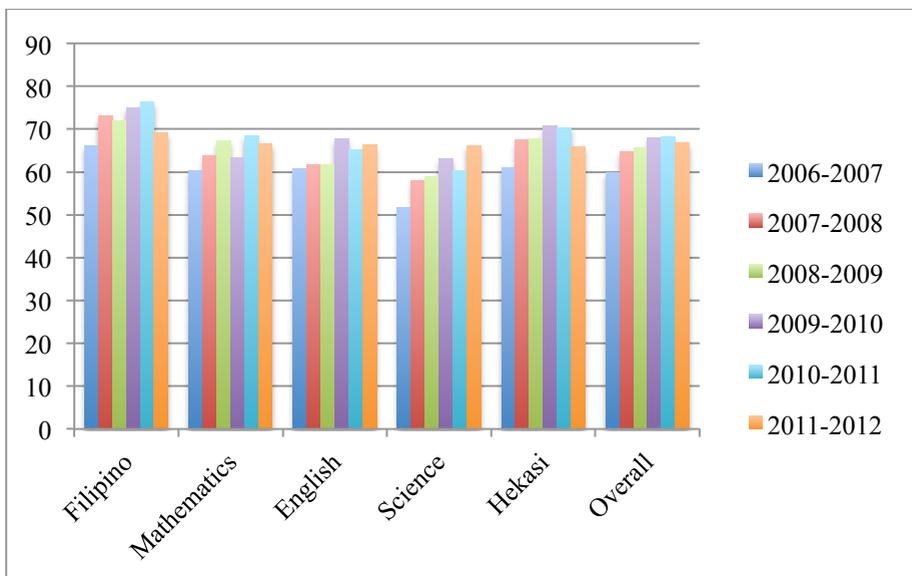


Figure 2.6-2. The National Performance of Grade Six Pupils in the National Achievement Test (NAT) Subtests.

In the meantime, high school students receive even lower NAT scores that, on the average, are slightly higher than 50 percent. We can see this situation in Figure 2.6-3 below.

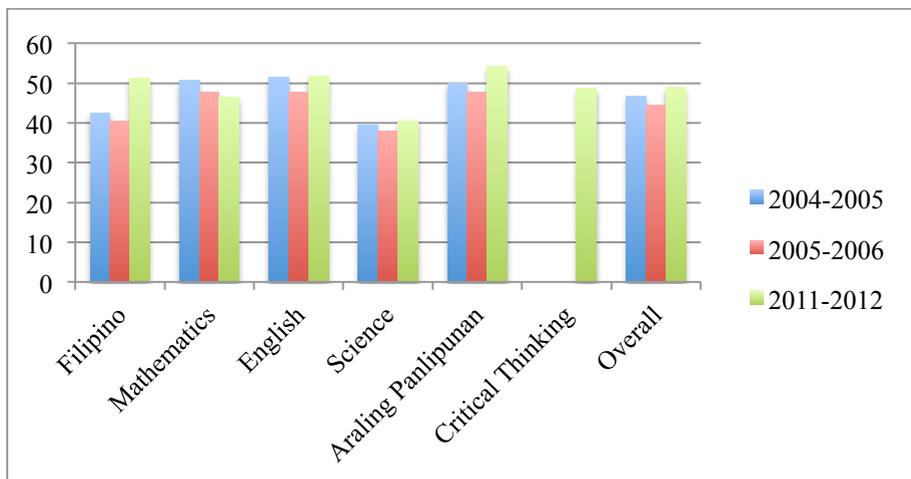


Figure 2.6-3. The National Performance of High School Pupils in the National Achievement Test (NAT) Subtests.

In the 2008 Education for All Global Monitoring Report, UNESCO described the Philippines as having “performed dismally” in the 2003 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), when grade 4 students came out third to the last in both Math and Science tests. In addition, the Philippines ranked forty-first in Math and forty-second in Science (out of 46 participating countries) in the second year high school level (Caoili-Rodriguez 2007, 13). It was noted in this report that the low scores in Math and Science “prompted the government to re-evaluate science and math education in the country and implement remedial actions such as intensified teacher trainings” (Caoili-Rodriguez 2007, 13). One such remedial action considered was the introduction of Mother-Tongue based multilingual education (MTBMLE).

Mother-Tongue Based Multilingual Education in the Philippines

Efforts to push for MTBMLE began after reports from public schools in the Lubuagan District (north of Manila) revealed that learning in the mother tongue actually raised learning outcomes. Through the initiatives of SIL Philippines in 1998 (Dumatog and Dekker 2003), these schools implemented a First Language Component (FLC) Bridging Program, which deviated from the BEP by introducing the use of Lilubuaen in the primary schools, instead of the BEP-mandated languages of English and Filipino. Learning outcomes improved in math, science, as well as in the subjects English and Filipino, as a result of the use of Lilubuaen. In 2007, it was reported that Lubuagan District grade 3 students ranked number one

in the Kalinga Division in the 2006 NAT grade 3 Reading Test, scoring in the English and Filipino reading tests 15-25 percent higher than all other Kalinga Division districts (Dekker and Dekker 2008).

What exactly is MTBMLE and how does it work? Literacy specialist Diane Dekker (2010) explains that MTBMLE involves more than simply replacing the language of instruction. Instead, an effective MTBMLE program is characterized by the following (Dekker 2010, 23):

- Introduces literacy in the first language (L1) which transfers to the second language (L2);
- In presenting new concepts, makes use of what the learner already knows;
- Develops critical thinking in the L1 first before proceeding to critical thinking in the L2;
- Teaches the subject matter in the L1 for concept mastery; and,
- Develops a good bridge for learning the L2 after L1 is mastered.

The promotion of MTBMLE is intended to address the deterioration of learning outcomes in the schools, which has not been improving under the Bilingual Education Policy. However, MTBMLE also contributes to achieving other goals that directly or indirectly address government-directed educational objectives. One goal is sustainable development. In the Apu Palamguwan Cultural Education Center¹ (APC), for example, mother tongues are used in educating members of indigenous peoples who live along the Pulangi River in Sitio Bendum, Malaybalay City in Mindanao. Although the center, which has been in existence for more than 15 years, recognizes the curriculum prescribed by the DepEd, it has not observed the BEP simply because it was not possible to do so. Mother-tongue literacy has always been the mode of delivery of education among these indigenous groups, as described in the following way:

Culture has concepts that are “concepts of living” that language communicates. This is the importance of using mother tongue as the medium of instruction. APC has its own core curriculum in line with government, but using mother tongue as basis to interlink with the national language. The core classes are presented as “Our Language,” “Our Culture,” with science, health, and mathematics. The daycare and the first three years . . . are in Pulangiyan. For the second half of primary education, about a third of the classes are held in the local language, which is the basis of explaining what is difficult in other sections. In this way children can move from one language to another working effectively with early concept framework of their culture and of lowland cultures integrating with equity. It incorporates skills in four languages (Pulangiyan, Visayan, Tagalog, and English) (Apu Palamguwan Cultural Education Center 2010, 9).

MTBMLE also addresses the need to preserve local languages, as well as protect these from endangerment. The SIL Ethnologue identifies 185 individual

languages in the Philippines. Among these individual languages, 181 are living and four are extinct. Of the living languages, 43 are institutional, 70 are developing, 45 are vigorous, 13 are in trouble, and 10 are dying (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2013). An education policy that makes use of the local languages would certainly contribute to protecting endangered languages by providing communities with a motivation for developing the orthographies of their respective languages so these may be used for literacy.

Challenges Facing MTBMLE Implementation

Although the MTBMLE policy, as described in RA 10533², is new (having been implemented in 2013), the policy had already been in place in 2009 through Order No. 72 of the Department of Education (DepEd). At that time, teachers had already begun to use the mother tongues in their teaching. In this early period of implementation, education stakeholders faced several challenges in carrying out the policy.

One challenge involves instructional materials and teacher training. As in any new education policy, teachers practicing MTBMLE were faced with the challenges of limited, inappropriate, or even the absence of instructional materials. In addition to this, the teachers were poorly prepared and had to undergo teacher-training sessions delivered in haste.

Linguist Ricardo Nolasco, one of the staunchest supporters of MTBMLE in the Philippines, describes this challenge in the following way:

Teachers are being herded by the hundreds into weeklong camps only to be trained haphazardly by instructors who are mostly unfamiliar with MTBMLE (Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education) concepts . . . Teachers are not being given enough time to learn their own L1, particularly for literacy, much less learn how to teach in the L1. Teachers who think that they are implementing MLE may not be doing much different from what they did previously. They need to be retrained entirely, and that takes time (Nolasco 2012).

A second challenge involves attitudes towards the policy. There is resistance to the implementation of MTBMLE as the policy continues to be seen as a threat to the development of English language proficiency in the country. One congressman (Cebu representative Gerald Anthony Gullas Jr.) has already authored a measure to restore English as medium of instruction in all school levels. The bill requires that English be used “as the language of assessment in all government examinations, and in entrance tests in public schools as well as state universities and colleges.” According to this congressman, his bill shall have English “forcefully promoted as the language of interaction in schools” (Manila Standard Today 2013).

Among the educated Filipinos, resistance to MTBMLE remains strong. Mahboob and Cruz (2013, 17), in a study of language attitudes in the Philippines, argue that,

... while English is perceived to hold a position of power that is the key to socioeconomic and global opportunities, local languages will always be on the margins. It is this perception that has to change for mother-tongue policies to become truly empowering.

Stakeholders of Philippine languages have also raised concerns about the inclusion and exclusion of some local languages. Questions about which language to use in MTBMLE are often raised alongside protests about excluding certain languages from the policy. Clearly, not all of the 181 living Philippine languages can be used in the classroom. Languages that do not have an orthographic system (or writing system) cannot be used for education. However, even some languages with established writing systems have not been included in the policy. To date only 19 languages are recognized in MTBMLE. These are the 12 major languages of Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Iloko, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Waray, Tausug, Maguindanaoan, Maranao, and Chabacano, as well as seven more languages namely, Ybanag, Ivatan, Sambal, Aklanon, Kinaray-a, Yakan, and Surigaonon (Geronimo 2013).

Some groups have lamented the absence of their own languages in the MTBMLE policy. Others have become wary of MTBMLE being used to promote “Tagalog imperialism.” Stakeholders in Romblon, for example, are considering a law suit against the government for declaring Tagalog as the mother tongue of the province³, when the first languages in Romblon are Romblomanon, Asi/Bantoanon, and Unhan. According to Tupas:

... while mother tongue instruction has proved to be pedagogically sound, its valuing differs across communities and societies. The many layers of ideology and politics, which undergird it, reveal, in particular, a specific politics of language and education and, in general, a sociopolitical landscape characterized by tension between inclusionary and exclusionary policies. (Tupas 2011, 108)

Conclusion

What has MTBMLE got to do with English language teaching and learning in the period of ASEAN Integration? A lot! The perception that MTBMLE threatens English language learning is expected in the Philippines considering that myths about languages persist (Martin 2010). However, such perception is unfounded. The Lubuagan experience, as well as a number of international research studies⁴ on mother-tongue literacy, has clearly established that literacy development in the mother tongue, if carried out well, provides a sound platform from which students may successfully transition to a second language, such as the national language, Filipino, and the international language, English. In other words, education in the mother tongue, contrary to popular belief, does in fact strengthen English language learning, as well as supports the learning of other vital content areas like mathematics and science.

As the ASEAN region prepares for integration in 2015, it is important for stakeholders to keep in mind that integration does not mean giving up one's local identity and culture. Each member-state must continue to preserve, protect, and strengthen its local languages so that these co-exist with the national language, as well as with English, which is the lingua franca of the ASEAN.

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Notes

¹ The APC, which is located in Sitio Bendum, the most northeasterly part of Malaybalay City in Mindanao, was recognized by the Department of Education in 2004 as the first formal indigenous people-based education center. Its Executive Director is Fr. Pedro Walpole, S.J. (Nolasco et al 2010).

² RA 10533, or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, is not entirely about MTB-MLE. Its main concern is to extend basic education school years from ten to

12 years. However, the law includes some provisions that mandated the use of the mother tongues in early years of learning.

³ Romblon, which used to be part of Visayas, has been declared by the government to be a region belonging to Luzon. The people of Romblon speak Visayan languages. But because it has become part of Luzon, the government (incorrectly) considers the province as a Tagalog-speaking area.

⁴ Notable studies on mother-tongue education include Thomas and Collier's (1997) *School effectiveness for language minority students*.