

Institutionalizing a Mother Tongue-Based Approach in Teaching Multicultural Classrooms: A Closer Look at Elementary Teachers' Experiences

Asia Pacific Journal of Education, Arts and Sciences
Vol. 6 No.2, 34-39
April 2019
P-ISSN 2362-8022
E-ISSN 2362-8030
www.apjeas.apjmr.com

Benjamin B. Mangila

School of Teacher Education, J.H. Cerilles State College-Dumingag Campus,
Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines
benman1586@gmail.com

Date Received: March 23, 2019; Date Revised: April 10, 2019

Abstract – *This study was conducted to investigate elementary teachers' experiences in the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) Program in the selected elementary schools in one municipality of Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines. It made use of the qualitative method of research, specifically case study, with interview as main data gathering technique. The respondents involved in this study were the Kindergarten and Grades I-III teachers. The findings of the study revealed that teachers often encountered several problems during the implementation of the MTB-MLE program which included absence of instructional materials written in mother tongue, lack of teacher-trainings, lack of vocabulary, and language mismatch. Meanwhile, the doable solutions suggested by teachers to address the following problems include the provision of additional instructional materials written in mother tongue, conduct of intensive trainings for teachers on MTB-MLE, and provision of dictionaries and other materials to help teachers understand the unfamiliar terms used in textbooks and other instructional materials. Given the study site was small, this study recommended that a similar study must be conducted in a wider scope to get a more comprehensive view of the implementation of the program. Furthermore, it also recommended that the Department of Education must design a new mechanism by which teachers' problems are properly addressed as well as design a more effective MTB-MLE model that supports teachers' role in its effective implementation*

Keywords – *MTB-MLE program, problems, elementary teachers*

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is home to more than 180 languages, having most of its citizens speaking three or more languages [1]. Just like other Southeast Asian nations,

the Philippines is rich in linguistic diversity. However, its education similar to those in other multilingual nations is traditionally delivered exclusively in an official or colonial language for ideological, political, as well as practical reasons.

When children are taught using a language they do not own, it results to “submersion in education,” a term coined by Skutnabb-Kangas [2] as an analogy of “forcibly holding a child under water.” Submersion in education impacts both the inclusivity and quality of educational programs. Studies such as Bamgbose [3] and Lewis and Lockheed [4] disclosed that learners whose first language is not utilized as medium of instruction (MOI) generally have lower achievements just like their peers. These learners may learn to identify but they hardly engage in meaningful learning as exemplified by Hornberger and Chick [5] on student-teacher interactions in the Peruvian and South African settings that are restricted to “safe talk” or imitating of the expected yes or no responses.

To address these issues, several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Thailand [6] are experimenting the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) as a substitute to outdated school systems. However, the Philippines is the sole Southeast Asian nation which adopts a national policy requiring MTB-MLE in all private and public schools of the country. With this, the Philippines becomes a vital example to other countries as they look how language-in-education policy turns into a practice.

As a new program, MTB-MLE utilizes the learners' first language (L1) in teaching basic literacy as well as beginning academic content. Meanwhile, the second language (L2) shall be taught gradually and systematically to allow the learners to transfer their

knowledge from L1 to L2 [7]. Generally, MTB-MLE programs may follow one of the two models.

The first MTB-MLE model is regarded as weak or “subtractive” as it is based on the transitional view of bilingualism or multilingualism. This view of bilingualism or multilingualism holds that the ultimate goal of these programs is for the learners to be fluent in L2 [8]. This means that the L1 may only be employed until the learner can continue permanently in the desired language (DL). In practice, subtractive MTB-MLE commonly uses L1 as LOI for the first 1-3 years of schooling, but transitions to L2 as LOI from third or fourth year [9].

The second MTB-MLE model is strong or “additive” which is based on the maintenance view of multilingualism. This view holds that the goal of any multilingual program is fluency in both the L1 and L2 [8]. In this model, L2 is acquired in addition to the L1, which continues to be utilized throughout the program. Strong MTB-MLE programs start entirely in the L1, and slowly add L2 orally from second or third year, and subsequent languages from fourth or fifth year [9].

Benefits of the MTB-MLE programs over traditional educational systems have been proven frequently throughout the literature. These benefits can be loosely categorized in terms of the following major categories: educational, economic, and affective/behavioral benefits.

In education, the use of mother tongue gives children equal opportunity to gain access and facilitate learning. Studies assert that using the child’s first language is a vital factor in assisting children how to read and write and learn academic content and languages. In economy, a study conducted by Halaoui [10] had proven that additional costs for MTB-MLE resources are minimal unlike those in traditional programs and are only needed during the initial set-up of the program. Once the program is implemented, the cost of resourcing is equal to those of other programs. With regard to affection/behavior, many studies disclosed that MTB-MLE program has increased participation and student-teacher interaction [11], self-esteem and confidence [6], as well as parents and community involvement and support [12].

Aside from these benefits, a further distinguishing factor of the MTB-MLE program is the use of localized and culturally meaningful learning materials. The curriculum of MTB-MLE is based on the learners’ prior experiences, integrating cultural traditions and community practices into the classroom [13].

In spite of the many benefits of MTB-MLE, Wa-Mbaleka [14] presents several drawbacks of the program

that should not be ignored. First, instructional materials are not made available in the majority of local languages. Second, teachers are not trained in local languages used for instruction. Third, primary teachers may not have solid training on L1 or L2 learning theories and research. Fourth, several local languages may not be seen vital for formal education. Last, parents may perceive MTB-MLE as a disadvantage for future employability in which English is highly valued. These major issues must be considered by any government when promoting and implementing an MTB-MLE policy. Ignoring any of them would certainly lead to failure.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In view of the above scenario, this qualitative research was undertaken to investigate teachers’ experiences during the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) Program in the selected elementary schools of Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur during the School Year 2017-2018. Specifically, this study ascertained the common problems encountered by elementary teachers as well as the doable solutions they had suggested to effectively address the said problems.

METHODS

Research Design

This study utilized the qualitative method of research, specifically case study, in gathering the needed data on the common problems encountered by elementary teachers during the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Program as well as their doable solutions. In utilizing case study as an approach, the researcher employed personal interview as the primary method in collecting the viewpoints as well as in recording the live experiences of the elementary teachers during the implementation of the said program.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents involved in this study were the Kindergarten and the Grades I-III teachers in the selected elementary schools of Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur during the School Year 2017-2018. These respondents were selected using the purposive sampling method.

Data Analysis

The qualitative data which were obtained from the personal interviews with the identified respondents of the study were then properly transcribed for an in-depth analysis. In analyzing these qualitative data, the researcher utilized content analysis by carefully looking into the common themes or topics that emerged from the given data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Problems Encountered by Elementary Teachers during the Implementation of the MTB-MLE Program

Based on the responses provided by the respondents during the personal interviews conducted on the problems they encounter in the implementation of the MTB-MLE Program, several themes have emerged. These major themes include the following: (a) absence of instructional materials written in mother tongue, (b) lack of teacher-trainings, (c) lack of vocabulary, and (d) language mismatch.

Absence of Instructional Materials Written in Mother Tongue. The most prevalent problem encountered by the elementary teachers who are teaching the mother tongue subject is the absence of the instructional materials that are written in mother tongue in order to accommodate the needs of their learners having different mother tongues. Based on their responses, they all emphasize that they really need textbooks and other instructional materials written in their learners' mother tongue so that they would be able to implement the MTB-MLE Program successfully. The absence of textbooks written in mother tongue really affects their teaching specifically when translating some lessons or stories since their pupils are speakers of different languages. One respondent has said that, *"It is very difficult for us, teachers, to teach because there are no books written in Bisaya that are available and DepEd is not providing us these books."* Another respondent adds by saying that, *"One of the problems I have encountered in the implementation of the MTB-MLE Program is the lack of textbooks and other instructional materials written in mother tongue. That's why, it's very hard for me to teach this subject."* These responses then affirm Hall's statement as cited by Dekker et al. [15] that no teacher can teach effectively without appropriate and relevant materials to use. Furthermore, it also reaffirms Grant's assertion as cited by Sunday & Joshua [16] that teaching and learning cannot be effective without the adequate and relevant use of instructional materials. The same group has also emphasized that to implement the MTB-MLE Program effectively, the curriculum must be updated regularly and appropriate and relevant teaching materials should be made in advance.

Lack of Teacher Trainings. The second most common problem encountered by teachers who are teaching the mother tongue subject is their lack of training on MTB-MLE. Lack of teacher-training includes the unpreparedness of the teachers to teach their learners with the use of mother tongue as their medium of instruction considering that their pupils have different

mother tongues. Most of the respondents feel that trainings and seminars for teachers should be provided regularly and academic support from specialists on the various issues of mother tongue instruction should also be required. One respondent states that, *"We were sent to few trainings and seminars on MTB-MLE and immediately we were required to teach the subject among our pupils. This then makes the situation more complicated."* Another respondent shares that, *"We had only undergone few trainings. These trainings only lasted for few days. We failed to learn more."* From their responses, it becomes evident that these teachers are not prepared because they have only undergone fewer trainings on MTB-MLE. Having a limited background in using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction can hinder one in becoming an effective teacher. Trainings and seminars are important for teachers who are teaching multilingual learners because they need to be oriented and guided on how to handle learners with different languages. Also, through trainings and seminars, teachers' knowledge about the program is enriched because they are being involved in the different workshops or activities conducted during the seminars. Furthermore, seminars and trainings also serve as an opportunity for the teachers to learn from and interact with the different participants.

Lack of Vocabulary. The other prevalent problem encountered by elementary teachers is their lack of vocabulary of the language being taught. Majority of these teachers have said that they find difficulty in understanding the lessons because some of the terms that are used in the textbooks are new or unfamiliar to them. Even though the mother tongue used is Bisaya, but there are still some Bisaya terms which are not comprehensible to them and even to their pupils. One respondent has said that, *"I cannot effectively teach my pupils because some of the words used in the textbooks or even in stories are very deep or unfamiliar to me although these are all in Bisaya."* Furthermore, another respondent shares by stating that, *"Some terms used in the textbooks are unfamiliar to me and it is very hard to understand them. I think we, teachers, must be provided with dictionaries to help us understand all of them."* These responses strongly confirm that lack of vocabulary becomes one of the hindrances for successful MTB-MLE Program implementation. Moreover, this situation implies that teachers need to be linguists and/or polyglots in order to effectively address their learners' diverse linguistic needs. This makes their learning interactive and meaningful. This also means that the task of educating children becomes much difficult when teachers have to face a heterogeneous group with multilingual and

multicultural backgrounds [17].

Language Mismatch. The last prevailing problem encountered by elementary teachers who are teaching the mother tongue subject is language mismatch. Language mismatch pertains to the use of another language that is also considered as mother tongue in a setting where another mother tongue is used. In this study, the problem occurs particularly in Subanen communities where Subanen is the mother tongue used by most pupils but were taught in Bisaya, another mother tongue, that is identified by the Department of Education. All of these teachers who are assigned to teach in Subanen classes have shared that it is very difficult for them to teach Bisaya as the mother tongue because their pupils' mother tongue is Subanen and that their pupils can hardly understand Bisaya. One respondent has said that, *"I think the problem that we commonly face in the implementation of MTB-MLE is the mismatch between the language to be taught and learned and the language that my pupils are used to."* Another respondent adds by saying that, *"MTB-MLE is only good in theory but in terms of application, there lies the problem. Bisaya is taught as a mother tongue in Subanen-dominated classrooms. This creates a problem among us, teachers, and to our learners."* From these responses, it clearly shows that for these teachers to teach and for pupils to learn effectively, they must both use the same language. With pupils who are not all speakers of the same mother tongue, teachers then would have more difficulties when they are not experts of the different mother tongues. In this situation, the teacher would rather use the language that is understandable to the pupils. This situation then weakens the teaching of mother tongue.

Doable Solutions to the Problems Encountered by Teachers during the Implementation of the MTB-MLE Program

Aside from identifying the problems, there are also themes that emerged regarding the doable solutions to the problems encountered by teachers in the implementation of the MTB-MLE Program. These themes include the (a) provision of additional instructional materials written in mother tongue, (b) conduct of intensive trainings for teachers on MTB-MLE, and (c) provision of dictionaries and other materials to help teachers understand some unfamiliar terms used.

Provision of Additional Instructional Materials Written in Mother Tongue. One of the leading solutions suggested by teachers in addressing their main problem on the unavailability of instructional materials is the provision of additional instructional materials written in

mother tongue. All of the respondents emphasize that it is the main responsibility of the Department of Education to ensure that instructional materials written in mother tongue are available to help improve the teaching-learning process and outcomes. One respondent shares by stating that, *"I believe that before DepEd implements this program, they must see to it that instructional materials are ready so that we will not have a hard time in finding the appropriate materials to use. DepEd must at least provide us with these materials."* Another respondent adds by saying that, *"For me, the best way to solve the unavailability of these materials is to urge DepEd to provide us with these. What we usually do is only to photocopy if these materials are not available. They can also allocate additional budget to procure and make these materials available for teachers."* The foregoing statements made by these respondents strongly reveal that in order for this particular problem to be immediately solved, instructional materials must be provided to teachers and that they must be adequate and made in advance.

Conduct of Intensive Trainings for Teachers on MTB-MLE. To address the unpreparedness of teachers in the implementation of the MTB-MLE Program, most of the respondents have suggested that teachers must be sent to intensive trainings and seminars to equip them with the desired knowledge and skills needed to teach the mother tongue subject effectively. Others have also emphasized that trainings must be intensive; they don't only last for several days; and that enough academic support must be given to them while having their trainings. One respondent claims this by saying that *"I believe that for us teachers to be fully equipped, DepEd must send us to more trainings on MTB-MLE. The trainings must not only last for three to five days as we normally experience. They must be intensive as much as possible."* Meanwhile, another respondent adds by stating that, *"Aside from sending us to several trainings, they must also invite resource speakers who can really provide us with the needed support especially in terms of methodologies and preparation of instructional materials."* These responses clearly tell us that for the implementation of the MTB-MLE program to be successful, teachers who are also the key players in the teaching-learning process must be fully prepared.

Provision of Dictionaries and Other Materials. To address the problem on the unfamiliar terms used in textbooks and in other materials, majority of the respondents have asserted that dictionaries and other materials must be provided to teachers teaching the mother tongue subject in order to help them understand the terms used. One respondent has emphasized this by

saying, “It is really important that DepEd must provide us with dictionaries in Bisaya so that it will be easier for us to understand the unfamiliar terms used even though these are written in Bisaya. Some terms used have deeper meanings and it is very difficult to comprehend them without the help of a dictionary.” Another respondent has also shared that “One major problem we teachers teaching mother tongue is of course the unfamiliar terms used in stories. Maybe, they can provide us a dictionary to help us understand some of those words.” The respondents’ answers somehow prove that dictionaries and other similar materials can be valuable tools that teachers can effectively use in order to better understand the lessons they teach to their children.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigates the experiences of teachers in implementing the MTB-MLE Program in the selected elementary schools of Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur. Findings of the study disclose that teachers often encounter various problems during the implementation of the MTB-MLE Program. These problems include the absence of the instructional materials written in mother tongue, lack of teacher-trainings, lack of vocabulary, and language mismatch. Meanwhile, the doable solutions suggested by teachers to address these problems include the provision of additional instructional materials written in mother tongue, conduct of intensive trainings for teachers on MTB-MLE, and provision of dictionaries and other materials to help teachers understand the unfamiliar terms used in textbooks and other instructional materials. These problems encountered by teachers, the researcher strongly believes, call for an immediate attention not only from the Department of Education but also from the other school’s stakeholders such as parents, community members, and others. Furthermore, doable solutions to these problems must also be taken into prime consideration to ensure the overall success of the MTB-MLE program.

The present study, however, has a certain limitation. Given that the study site is small, its findings may not generally reflect the experiences of all elementary teachers locally and nationally. Thus, it recommends for another investigation which can be conducted in a wider scope and may involve more respondents to validate some of the major findings obtained in this study. Furthermore, it also recommends that the Department of Education can initiate a new mechanism by which teachers’ problems and their solutions are assessed, monitored, and evaluated at the same time design a more effective model of MTB-MLE that is geared towards supporting the teachers’ vital role in its efficient and

successful implementation.

REFERENCES

- [1] Lewis, M., Simons, G. F., & Fennig, C. D. (Eds.). (2013). *Ethnologue: Languages of the world* (Seventeenth ed.). Dallas: SIL International.
- [2] Skutnabb-Kangas, T. (1990). *Language, literacy and minorities*. London, UK: The Minority Rights Group.
- [3] Bamgbose, A. (2004). Sauce for the goose, sauce for the gander: Why an African child should be taught in an African language. In J. Pfaffe (Ed.), *Making multilingual education a reality for all* (pp. 18-36). Zomba, Malawi: University of Malawi, Centre for Language Studies.
- [4] Lewis, M. & Lockheed, M. (2006). *Inexcusable absence: Why 60 million girls still aren’t in school and what to do about it*. Washington, D. C., USA: Center for Global Development.
- [5] Homberger, N. H. & Chick, J. K. (2001). Co-constructing school safetime: Safetalk practices in Peruvian and South African classrooms. In M. Heller & M. Martin-Jones (Eds.), *Voices of authority: Education and linguistic difference* (Vol. 1). Westport: Ablex Publishers.
- [6] UNESCO. (2007). *Mother tongue-based literacy programmes: Case studies of good practice in Asia*. Bangkok: UNESCO.
- [7] Heugh, K. (2006). Theory and practice – language education models in Africa: Research, design, decision making, and outcomes. In H. Alidou, A. Boly, B. Brock-Utne, Y. S. Diallo, K. Heugh & H. E. Wolff (Eds.), *Optimizing learning and education in Africa - the language factor*. Paris: Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA).
- [8] Crystal, D. (2006). *How language works*. London, UK: Penguin.
- [9] Malone, S. (2007). *Mother tongue-based multilingual education: Implications for education policy*. Retrieved on November 20, 2017 from <http://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/176282/ino-mother-tongue-multilingual-education.pdf>.
- [10] Halaoui, N. (2003). *Relevance of education: Adapting curricula and use of African languages*. Paper presented at the ADEA Biennial 2003, 3 - 6 December.
- [11] Benson, C. (2006). Language, education and (dis)empowerment – The important role of local languages in educational development. In L. Dahlström & J. Mannberg (Eds.), *Critical educational visions and practices in neo-liberal times*. Umeå, Sweden: Global South Network Publisher.
- [12] Dutcher, N. (2004). *Expanding educational opportunity in linguistically diverse societies* (2nd Ed.). Washington, D.C., USA: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- [13] Decker, D., & Young, C. (2005). *Bridging the gap: The development of appropriate educational strategies for minority language communities in the Philippines*.

- Current Issues in Language Planning*, 6 (2), 182-199
- [14] Wa-Mbaleka, S. (2014). English teachers' perceptions of the mother tongue -based education policy in the Philippines. *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Educational Sciences*, 2 (4), 17–32. Retrieved on November 20, 2017 from <http://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ENGLISHTEACHERS%E2%80%99PERCEPTIONS-OF-THE-MOTHER-TONGUE-BASED-EDUCATIONPOLICY-IN-THEPHILIPPINES-Full-Paper.pdf>.
- [15] Dekker, D., Walter, S., Dekker, G., Duguang, N., Dumatog-Camacam, R., Calsiw, A., Gawon, L., Lumasoc, M., Sabian, N., & Tangob, L. (2008). Initial results of the Lubuagan project. Paper presented to the First MLE Conference on February 18 – 20, 2001 at Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao.
- [16] Sunday, A., & Joshua, A. (2010). Assessment of resources and instructional materials status in the teaching of Mathematics in South Western Nigeria. Nigeria: Euro Journals Publishing, Inc.
- [17] Pai, P. (2005). Multilingualism, multiculturalism and education: Case study of Mumbai city. SNDT Women's University.