

**The use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction:
Experiences in the province of Benguet**

Dominga S. Tomas, PhD

Benguet State University
La Trinidad, Benguet, Philippines
Email: d.tomas@bsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program has been implemented for more than ten years. While its benefits have been recognized, certain negative effects have also been observed. This study focuses on assessing the implementation of MTB-MLE in the Province of Benguet. It aims to identify both the positive and negative impacts of the program, as well as the continuing challenges faced, particularly by teachers. The study is expected to provide insights for concerned stakeholders on how the program may be further improved. A descriptive qualitative research design was employed. The participants consisted of elementary school teachers from various schools in Benguet Province. Data were gathered through interviews and were analyzed using coding and thematization. Findings revealed that the use of the mother tongue in teaching facilitated faster comprehension of lessons, encouraged active participation among learners, and supported easier development of reading skills. However, alongside these positive outcomes, certain negative effects were also identified. These include hindrances in learning and using two languages, difficulties in understanding lessons at higher grade levels, and a decline in students' confidence in using the second language. The study also highlighted persistent challenges among teachers, such as the lack of adequate teaching materials and the differences between the students' first language and that of the teachers. Thus, the implementation of MTB-MLE demonstrates both strengths and weaknesses, with teachers continuing to face significant challenges in its application. It is therefore recommended that equal attention be given to addressing the program's limitations and sustaining its benefits. Moreover, training in the development of instructional materials suited to learners' linguistic backgrounds should be prioritized to enhance the effectiveness of MTB-MLE.

Keywords: MTB-MLE, implementation, first language, introduction

Date Submitted: June 18, 2025
Date Accepted: July 21, 2025
Date Published: August 8, 2025

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.69651/PIJHSS0403376>

Recommended citation:

Tomas, D. S. (2025). The use of mother tongue as a medium of instruction: Experiences in the province of Benguet. *Pantao (The International Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences)* 4 (3), 4060-4067. <http://doi.org/10.69651/PIJHSS0403376>

INTRODUCTION

In education, language is the most essential tool for acquiring knowledge. Through language, individuals are able to communicate and share what they have learned. Inside the classroom, language serves as the teacher's primary instrument in ensuring successful teaching and learning, but it may also become a barrier to student learning (Tomas, 2022).

According to Mackey (1978), the idea of having different languages for school and home began with European colonizers in the Americas. In the Philippine educational system, a foreign language such as English has long been used as a medium of instruction (Launio, 2015). Mulovhedzi et al. (2015) also pointed out that English as a second language may be used as a medium of instruction due to its long-term benefits.

The use of a language that is understood by the majority is considered the most effective tool for clearer communication and better understanding. It facilitates the learning process, encourages relaxed and lively classroom discussions, allows for the free flow of ideas, and increases student participation, thereby removing barriers to effective learning (Darupan et al., 2024). In contrast, the use of an unfamiliar language often creates obstacles to education and communication. Gallego and Zubiri argue that the most effective way to ensure successful learning in school is to use the language understood by both teachers and students. In the Philippines, both Tagalog and non-Tagalog learners frequently enter schools where the language of instruction differs from their home language. For an effective learning environment, it is important to provide students with a strong foundation in their first language, which can serve as a bridge toward learning the second language and even a third language (Liwanag, 2010).

Republic Act 10533, also known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act, was established to improve the Philippine basic education system by strengthening the curriculum and extending the years of basic education from ten to twelve (DepEd Order 43, 2013; DepEd Order 21, 2019). The implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) began in June 2012 under Department Order No. 16, s. 2012, as part of the K–12 Basic Education Program. In this program, the learners' first language is used as the medium of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3, except in the teaching of Filipino and English. The K–12 program covers Kindergarten and twelve years of basic education and was designed to equip students with sufficient knowledge and skills for higher education, employment, or entrepreneurship. MTB-MLE strengthens the use of the learners' home language in the early grades, allowing more effective comprehension and learning (Rabuya, 2023).

Alongside the use of the mother tongue, English and Filipino are taught as separate subjects beginning in Grade 1, with emphasis on oral fluency. These languages are gradually introduced as additional media of instruction from Grades 4 to 6, and eventually become the main languages of instruction in Junior High School (JHS) and Senior High School (SHS). Historically, several laws related to the use of language in education have been passed. Article XIV, Section 6 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution declares Filipino as the national language of the country and mandates its promotion and maintenance as a medium of official communication and as a language of instruction (Rabuya, 2023).

The Department of Education Order No. 74, series of 2009, emphasizes the principle that learners should begin with the language they already know best. Developing the five macro-skills in the familiar language ensures stronger foundations. The first language continues to be

enriched while the vocabulary of the second language grows through communicative approaches. Thus, the first language plays a crucial role in supporting second-language acquisition (Broadway & Zamora, 2018).

Perez (2016), as cited by Bacalla (2019), noted that in selected Southeast Asian countries, mother tongue is used both as a medium of instruction and as a primary subject in the elementary level, aiming to strengthen linguistic and socio-cultural awareness. These countries believe that the mother tongue serves as a vehicle for learning additional languages. The implementation of MTB-MLE is supported by policy, inter-agency partnerships, and continuous monitoring and evaluation. However, challenges remain, including inadequate teacher training, insufficient instructional materials, and lack of community support. Alicias (2015) criticized the MTB-MLE program, particularly the use of the mother tongue in teaching Science and Mathematics, arguing that it may hinder students' competence and deprive them of the benefits of learning English earlier.

Statement of the problem

Given these issues, several studies have attempted to examine the implementation of MTB-MLE. However, most of these studies have focused primarily on the process of implementation rather than its direct effects on student learning. It is equally important to understand the impact of using the mother tongue from the learners' perspective, in order to improve implementation and strengthen language policy

METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a qualitative approach with a descriptive design in order to examine and describe the effects of using the Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction on the learning experiences of students. This design was deemed appropriate because it allowed the researcher to capture detailed insights into the participants' perspectives, focusing on the lived experiences of learners who had been directly exposed to the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program.

The participants of the study were students enrolled in the College of Arts and Humanities who had graduated from various schools across the Province of Benguet. These individuals were specifically chosen because they were products of the MTB-MLE program and had prior classroom experiences where the mother tongue served as the medium of instruction. Their backgrounds provided a valuable basis for exploring how the use of the first language influenced their comprehension, participation, and overall learning outcomes.

To collect data, the study utilized two primary instruments: a questionnaire and an interview guide. These tools were carefully designed to elicit comprehensive responses regarding the participants' experiences and perceptions of MTB-MLE. Before conducting the actual interviews, the researcher sought formal permission from the Dean of the College of Arts and Humanities to ensure institutional approval. Ethical considerations were also observed by securing informed consent from all participants, ensuring that their voluntary participation and confidentiality were respected throughout the process.

During the data gathering stage, interviews were conducted, and the participants' responses were recorded and documented for analysis. After collecting the necessary information, the researcher employed coding to identify recurring ideas and patterns, which were then organized into themes through thematization. To strengthen the credibility and accuracy of the findings, informal follow-up interviews were conducted with selected participants to clarify and validate their initial responses. This rigorous process of data treatment ensured that the results reflected the genuine experiences and insights of the participants, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the implications of MTB-MLE in the educational context of Benguet.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Benefits of the use of mother tongue

Based on the participants' responses, several benefits were identified regarding the use of the learners' first language as a medium of instruction, particularly in enhancing comprehension of lessons. Teachers often face challenges in explaining concepts and instructions in ways that students can easily understand, and comprehension is recognized as a central goal of education. In situations where students encounter difficulties, the use of their first language (L1) can serve as an effective tool to facilitate the learning process. Many of the participants shared that they found it much easier to grasp concepts when these were explained in their mother tongue. For instance, some students noted that they better understood discussions and learned more quickly because explanations were clearer and concepts became easier to understand. These findings affirm the observations of Gorgonio (2012), who emphasized that language is a key factor in academic success across different subjects. Similarly, Launio (2015) underscored the importance of explaining lessons in the learners' language, especially when comprehension becomes an issue. Research by Tan (2023) further supports this conclusion, showing that clear explanations combined with interactive strategies significantly improve students' understanding.

The use of the mother tongue also encouraged active participation among students in classroom discussions. Active engagement is a vital component of effective learning, and students' willingness to contribute is closely tied to the language of instruction. When learners are taught in a familiar language, they feel more comfortable sharing their ideas and engaging in activities. Several participants expressed that they were more active and confident in discussions when the first language was used, as it made it easier for them to articulate their thoughts and opinions. This supports the findings of García (2009), who asserted that the use of the first language boosts students' confidence in communication, making them more willing to take part in classroom interactions.

Another important observation was that the use of the mother tongue fostered the development of critical thinking skills. Critical thinking, defined as the ability to analyze, evaluate, and synthesize information, is an essential component of academic success. Participants indicated that it was easier for them to think through concepts and formulate their own opinions when taught in their first language. For example, some students explained that using the mother tongue in teaching made it easier for them to reflect on the topics being discussed. This finding resonates with Reyes (2021), who emphasized that critical thinking is enhanced when students are able to process lessons in a language they fully understand. In this way, reducing linguistic

barriers through the mother tongue enables students to engage in higher-order thinking and reflection.

Moreover, the findings revealed that the use of the mother tongue enhanced students' communicative competence and self-confidence. Several students admitted that they felt less anxious about making mistakes when speaking in their first language, which in turn encouraged them to participate more actively in class. One student explained that they were not afraid to speak because they did not have to worry about choosing the right words, while others said they were more comfortable and expressive in discussions. This is consistent with Garcia (2020), who found that learning in the first language fosters comfort in generating ideas and expressing oneself, leading to stronger classroom interaction. Constantino (2014) also noted that using the mother tongue improves literacy, creativity, and self-confidence by removing barriers that might prevent students from participating.

Drawbacks

Despite these positive outcomes, the study also revealed several drawbacks in the use of the mother tongue in instruction. One of the most significant concerns raised by the participants was the difficulty they experienced when transitioning to Filipino and English, especially in higher grade levels where these languages become the primary media of instruction. Some students admitted that they struggled to communicate in Filipino or English because they had become accustomed to the mother tongue. This observation supports the findings of Gallego and Zubiri (2011), who argued that using a language unfamiliar to students can impede education and communication. Hunahunan (2019) also observed that while students responded positively to MTB-MLE, the policy raised concerns about a possible decline in English proficiency. Similarly, Alicias (2015) criticized the use of the mother tongue in Science and Mathematics, contending that it delays exposure to English and potentially undermines students' competence in technical subjects.

In response to these issues, Fortunato (2012) recommended the adoption of a bilingual approach to instruction, arguing that teaching should incorporate both the mother tongue and a second language. Such an approach would allow students to build strong foundations in their first language while simultaneously developing proficiency in English and Filipino, which are crucial for higher education and professional advancement.

Taken together, the findings of the study demonstrate that the use of the mother tongue in education yields significant benefits in terms of comprehension, participation, critical thinking, and confidence. At the same time, however, it presents challenges in language transition and long-term proficiency in Filipino and English. These results underscore the importance of adopting a more balanced approach to the implementation of MTB-MLE—one that leverages the strengths of the mother tongue while mitigating its limitations. In doing so, educators and policymakers can develop strategies that integrate multilingual learning, ensuring that students thrive not only in their first language but also acquire the skills necessary to succeed in a multilingual academic and professional environment.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction plays a significant role in supporting student learning. It enhances comprehension, fosters active participation in classroom discussions, and builds students' confidence in expressing themselves. By reducing linguistic barriers, the mother tongue allows learners to engage more meaningfully with lessons and contributes to their overall academic development. These outcomes affirm that the use of the first language provides a strong foundation for learning during the early years of education.

However, the study also revealed that reliance on the mother tongue presents certain challenges, particularly in the acquisition and development of second languages such as Filipino and English. Since these languages serve as the primary media of instruction in higher levels of education and are essential for broader communication, limited proficiency in them may hinder students' academic progression and future opportunities. This underscores the complexity of implementing mother tongue-based instruction, as it simultaneously strengthens learning in one domain while potentially limiting growth in another.

In light of these findings, it is necessary to strike a balance in the use of the first and second languages within the instructional process. Giving equal attention to both allows learners to build on the advantages of mother tongue instruction while ensuring adequate exposure to Filipino and English. Such an approach prepares students not only to excel in their immediate learning contexts but also to adapt successfully to the linguistic demands of higher education, professional environments, and diverse social interactions. By integrating the strengths of both the mother tongue and second languages, educators and policymakers can create a more holistic and sustainable framework for multilingual education.

REFERENCES

- Alicias, E. (2015, October 22). Yes to Filipino-English bilingualism. *Inquirer.net*. <https://opinion.inquirer.net/88696/yes-to-filipino-english-bilingualism>
- Amparo, J. (2020). Paglalatag ng karanasan ng mgaguro sa implementasyon ng Mother Tongue-Based. [Incomplete reference; publication details needed].
- Arevalo, M. (2022). Preferensyang wikasapagtuturo at pagkatuto ng mother-tongue sa distrito ng San Miguel: Batayansapagbuo ng kagamitang panturo. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.57200/apjsbs.v20i0.326>
- Ausubel, D. P. (1977). The facilitation of meaningful verbal learning in the classroom. *Educational Psychologist*, 12(2), 162–178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00461527709529171>
- Bacalla, L. (2019). Pagtataya ng MTB-MLE: Tugonsapagpapaunlad ng implementasyon ng K to 12 kurikulum. *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)*, 3(3), 252–261.

- Badayos, P. (1999). *Metodolohiyasapagtuturo ng wika: Mga teorya, simulain at estratehiya*. Makati City: Grandwater Publication and Research Corporation.
- Constantino, P. C. (2014). *Panitikan ng Pilipinas*. Quezon City: Departamento ng Filipino, Unibersidad ng Pilipinas Diliman.
- Cummins, J. (1981). *Schooling and language minority students: Theoretical framework*. Los Angeles: California State University, Evaluation, Dissemination and Assessment Center.
- Dag-uman, E. M. S., & Dela Peña, P. F. C. (2019). MTB-MLE. Academia.edu. <https://www.academia.edu>
- Darupan, J. M. D., Herminigildo, L. M., Maniego, S. C., Martinez, E. G. S., & Socorro, L. V. (2024). Kahalagahan ng paggamit ng wikang Filipino sapag-aaral ng mgaassignaturasapanitikan, kultura at kasaysayan ng Pilipinassa mag-aaralnamedyorsa Filipino. *Ascendens Asia Singapore – Bestlink College of the Philippines Journal of Multidisciplinary Research*, 3(2). <https://ojs.aaresearchindex.com/index.php/aasgbcpjmr/article/view/13502>
- Espada, J., Bayrante, J., Mocoero, R., Vinculado, O., Vivero, P., Bongcaras, L., Daga, M., Pelingon, J., Quimbo, E., & Labarrette, R. (2017). Challenges in the implementation of the mother tongue-based multilingual education program: A case study. *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, 5(4), 510–527.
- Gallego, M. K. S., & Zubiri, L. A. M. (2011). MTB-MLE in the Philippines: Perceptions, attitudes, and outlook. EBSCOhost. <http://connection.ebscohost.com/c/articles/79323941/mtbmle-philippines-perceptions-attitudes-outlook>
- Gunigundo, M. T. (2010). The right to learn in one's own language. In R. M. D. Nolasco, F. A. Datar, & A. M. Azurin (Eds.), *Starting where the children are: A collection of essays on mother tongue-based multilingual education and language issues in the Philippines* (pp. 170–174). Quezon City: 170+ Talaytayan MLE Inc.
- Hunahunan, L. (2019). Coping with MTB-MLE challenges: Perspectives of primary grade teachers in a central school. *International Journal for Social Studies*, 6(2), 298–304.
- Lartec, J. K., Belisario, A. M., Bendanillo, J. P., Binas-o, H. K., Bucang, N. O., & Cammagay, J. L. W. (2014). Strategies and problems encountered by teachers in implementing mother tongue-based instruction in a multilingual classroom. *The IAFOR Journal of Language Learning*, 1(1).
- Launio, R. M. (2015). Instructional medium and its effect on students' mathematics achievement. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary and Current Research*, 3.

Malone, S. (2004). Education for multilingualism and multi-literacy in ethnic minority communities. *ABD*, 34(2).

Mackey, W. F. (1978). The importance of bilingual education models. In J. E. Alatis (Ed.), *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1978: International dimension of bilingual education* (pp. 1–14). Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press.

Mariano, L. M., & Gime, A. V. (2020). Ang pagtatayasaimplementasyon ng polisyasa MTB-MLE ng mgapribadongpaaralansarehiyonsaPilipinas. *International Journal of Research Studies in Education*, 9(3), 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.5861/ijrse.2020.5821>

McCombes, S. (2022). *Descriptive research design: Definition, methods & examples*. Scribbr. <https://www.scribbr.co.uk/research-methods/descriptive-research-design/>

Mulovhedzi, S. A., Ngobeli, D. T., & Mudzielwana, N. P. (2015). The effects of second language as a medium of instruction on pre-school learners. *International Journal of Educational Sciences*, 10(1), 110–114.

Nolasco, R. M. D., Datar, F. A., & Azurin, A. M. (Eds.). (2010). *Starting where the children are: A collection of essays on mother tongue-based multilingual education and language issues in the Philippines*. Quezon City: 170+ Talaytayan MLE Inc.

Nolasco, R. (2015). The prospects of multilingual education and literacy in the Philippines. *Web Journal*.

Nolasco, R. (n.d.). 21 reasons why Filipino children learn better while using their mother tongue: A primer on mother tongue-based multilingual education (MLE) & other issues on language and learning in the Philippines. University of the Philippines Diliman.

Perez, G. S. (2015). Problems encountered by teachers in implementing mother tongue-based instruction in a multilingual classroom. *Panibatuhanes.com*. <http://panibatuhanes.com/problems-encountered-by-teachers-in-implementing-mother-tongue-based-in-a-multilingual-classroom/>

RTI International. (2015). *PhilEd Data II: Early grade reading assessment results: A cross-language look at MTB-MLE implementation in the Philippines*. <https://shared.rti.org/content/philed-data-ii-early-grade-reading-assessment-results-cross-language-look-mtb-mle>

Rabuya, J. C. A. (2023). Pananaw ng mga mag-aaralsapaggamit ng Filipino at Ingles bilangmidyum ng pag-aaral ng matematikasamakabagongdaigdig. *International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research*, 5(4).

Tomas, D. S. (2022). *Assessment of the implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education in the Province of Benguet*. [Unpublished thesis].