

**Kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes on the role of first language  
in language learning amidst language policy change**

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**ABSTRACT**

Changes in language-in-education policy reshape formal expectations for classroom instruction, yet teachers' beliefs and attitudes remain influential in determining how such policies are understood and enacted. This study examined kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes on the role of first language in language learning amidst the recent language policy change in the Philippines. A descriptive mixed-methods approach was employed involving 300 public kindergarten teachers in Ilocos Norte who had experienced both Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education and the subsequent shift in language policy. Data were gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire that underwent expert content validation. The quantitative component consisted of ten statements rated using a four-point Likert scale, while two open-ended questions elicited teachers' perspectives on the role of first language and the influence of the policy change on their beliefs and attitudes. Weighted means were used to analyze the quantitative data, while recurring ideas from the open-ended responses were thematically organized to enrich the interpretation of the findings. Results revealed strongly favorable beliefs and attitudes toward first-language instruction, with an overall mean of 3.56. Teachers expressed the strongest support for using learners' first language in kindergarten education ( $M = 3.66$ ) and recognized it as an important component of early childhood education ( $M = 3.63$ ). Their narratives further portrayed first language as a bridge to comprehension, confidence, participation, and subsequent language development. The findings indicate that the policy shift has not diminished teachers' appreciation of first language; rather, many have adopted a more flexible view of its strategic use alongside Filipino and English.

**Keywords:** Early childhood education, first language, kindergarten teachers, language learning, language policy, teacher beliefs.

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## INTRODUCTION

Language is fundamental to learning in the early years. For kindergarten learners, language is more than a means of communication; it is a tool for understanding instructions, expressing ideas, interacting with others, connecting new experiences with prior knowledge, and making sense of the world. The language used in classroom instruction therefore influences not only what children learn but also how readily they can participate in the learning process.

In the Philippine educational context, the role of learners' first language gained considerable prominence through Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). The approach formally recognized the pedagogical value of teaching young learners through a language they understand and use in their immediate environment. The premise was that children could develop foundational literacy and conceptual understanding more effectively when instruction initially built upon their existing linguistic knowledge. The literature underpinning the present study similarly recognizes the contribution of first-language instruction to comprehension, communication, early literacy, and cognitive development.

The national language-in-education landscape, however, has undergone a significant policy transition. Republic Act No. 12027 discontinued the mandatory use of the mother tongue as the primary medium of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3, while retaining provisions that allow its use under specified circumstances. The succeeding policy direction identifies Filipino and English as the principal media of instruction while allowing regional languages to serve supportive or auxiliary functions. This policy transition represents an important change in the formal position of first language within early-grade education.

For kindergarten teachers, this transition is particularly consequential. Children do not enter school as linguistically neutral learners. They bring languages acquired through their homes, families, communities, and everyday social experiences. For many children, their first language remains the linguistic system through which they most readily understand explanations, communicate needs, express ideas, and interpret new experiences.

Consequently, changing the formal medium of instruction does not automatically alter the linguistic resources that children bring into the classroom. Teachers must negotiate the expectations of language policy while responding to learners who may have varying levels of proficiency in Filipino and English.

Teacher beliefs and attitudes become particularly important under these circumstances. What teachers believe about the educational value of the first language may influence how they interpret language policies, respond to learners' difficulties, and make decisions about language use during instruction. Teachers who perceive the first language as beneficial to comprehension may continue to draw upon it when learners encounter difficulty, whereas those who consider immediate exposure to Filipino or English more important may approach language use differently.

Policy Enactment Theory provides a useful framework for understanding this process. Ball et al. (2012) argue that policies are not simply transmitted from policymakers to practitioners and implemented exactly as written. Instead, teachers interpret, translate, and recontextualize policy within particular institutional and classroom contexts. The theoretical framework of the study likewise recognizes teachers as active policy actors whose enactment of language policy is influenced by professional beliefs, classroom realities, available resources, and learner needs.

This perspective is particularly relevant to language policy because language choices are made repeatedly during classroom interaction. A teacher may begin instruction in one language, shift to another to explain an unfamiliar concept, translate a direction, clarify a learner's response, or draw upon a familiar regional language to sustain participation. These

decisions illustrate that language policy acquires practical meaning through teachers' everyday pedagogical judgments.

Sociocultural perspectives on learning further emphasize the importance of language as a mediating tool in cognitive development. Vygotsky (1978) viewed learning as socially mediated, with language playing a central role in enabling children to construct meaning through interaction. From this perspective, a familiar language can provide a bridge between children's existing knowledge and new concepts introduced in school.

The policy transition therefore raises an important question. When the formal position of the first language changes, do teachers' beliefs about its educational value change accordingly?

This question is particularly relevant in linguistically diverse contexts such as Ilocos Norte, where Ilokano is widely used and other regional and Indigenous languages are present in particular communities. Teachers may encounter classrooms in which children have varying degrees of familiarity with Filipino, English, and locally spoken languages.

#### Statement of the problem

Understanding teachers' beliefs and attitudes is important because these dispositions can influence how the revised language policy is enacted at the classroom level. More importantly, teachers' perspectives can reveal whether the pedagogical value previously associated with first-language instruction remains meaningful under the changing policy environment.

Against this backdrop, the present study examined kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes on the role of first language in language learning amidst language policy change.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following research question:

What are the beliefs and attitudes of kindergarten teachers regarding the role of first language in language learning amidst language policy change?

#### METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive mixed-methods approach to examine kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes on the role of first language in language learning. The quantitative component determined the extent to which teachers agreed with statements concerning the educational value and role of first language in kindergarten, while the qualitative component consisted of responses to open-ended questions that allowed participants to elaborate on their perspectives and experiences. The qualitative responses were used to enrich and contextualize the quantitative results, enabling the study to move beyond determining the strength of teachers' agreement and to examine the pedagogical reasoning underlying their beliefs and attitudes.

The study was conducted in three Schools Divisions in the Province of Ilocos Norte, Philippines. Ilocos Norte provides a relevant setting for examining first-language instruction because of its multilingual context, as Ilokano is widely spoken across the province while other regional and Indigenous languages are also used in particular communities. This linguistic diversity provides an important context for understanding how kindergarten teachers perceive the role of learners' first language amidst changes in the national language-in-education policy.

The participants were 300 public kindergarten teachers from the three Schools Divisions. They were selected based on criteria that ensured direct experience with the language-policy transition. Specifically, the participants were currently teaching kindergarten in public schools, had taught kindergarten for at least three years, had experienced the

implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) and the use of first language as a medium of instruction, and had experienced the subsequent language policy change. These criteria ensured that the participants could draw from their professional experiences across the changing policy contexts and provide informed perspectives on the role of first language in kindergarten language learning.

Data were gathered using a validated researcher-made questionnaire developed to examine kindergarten teachers' enactment of first-language instruction amidst language policy change. The instrument underwent content validation by experts prior to its administration to ensure that the items were relevant, clear, appropriate, and aligned with the constructs and objectives of the study. For the purpose of this article, the analysis focused exclusively on the section of the instrument that measured kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes on the role of first language in language learning. The quantitative section consisted of ten statements examining teachers' views on the importance of first language in early language learning, support for its use in kindergarten education, its role as a foundation for language development, its contribution to learning and educational experiences, its inclusion in classroom instruction, and its place within early childhood education. Responses were measured using a four-point Likert scale, with 4 as Strongly Agree, 3 as Agree, 2 as Disagree, and 1 as Strongly Disagree. The weighted means were interpreted using the following ranges: 3.51 to 4.00 as Strongly Agree, 2.51 to 3.50 as Agree, 1.51 to 2.50 as Disagree, and 1.00 to 1.50 as Strongly Disagree. To complement the quantitative data, the questionnaire included two open-ended questions, namely what are your thoughts about the role of the first language in helping kindergarten learners understand lessons, and how has the language policy change affected your beliefs or attitudes about using the first language in teaching. The open-ended questions provided participants with an opportunity to elaborate on their perspectives regarding the pedagogical role of first language and to describe how the changing language policy influenced their beliefs and attitudes. Their responses were used to contextualize and enrich the interpretation of the quantitative findings, providing deeper insight into the reasons underlying the teachers' reported beliefs and attitudes.

Weighted means were computed to determine teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward each indicator and toward the role of first language as a whole. The open-ended responses were reviewed, coded according to recurring ideas, and organized into broader thematic patterns. These qualitative findings were used to elaborate upon and triangulate the quantitative findings rather than being treated as a separate research problem. Ethical principles governing voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and appropriate handling of research data were observed throughout the study.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results and discussion on kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward the role of first language in language learning, drawn from data gathered through a structured survey instrument administered to kindergarten teacher-respondents [exact number of participants to be inserted], complemented by open-ended responses that provided qualitative depth to the quantitative findings. The study employed [research design/sampling approach to be specified] and analyzed the data using descriptive statistics, specifically weighted means and their corresponding verbal interpretations, to determine the extent of teachers' beliefs and attitudes. The discussion that follows is grounded strictly in the data collected and is interpreted in direct relation to the objectives of the study, namely, to describe kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes regarding first language use and to explore, through their lived experiences, how these beliefs were shaped by the transition in language policy.

The results show that kindergarten teachers held strongly favorable beliefs and attitudes toward the role of first language in language learning, as reflected in the overall mean of 3.56, interpreted as Strongly Agree. Of the ten indicators measured, seven were interpreted as Strongly Agree while the remaining three were interpreted as Agree. The highest mean was recorded for the statement "I support the use of the learners' first language in kindergarten education" ( $M = 3.66$ ), followed by "I recognize the learners' first language as an important component of early childhood education" ( $M = 3.63$ ). Teachers also strongly acknowledged the contribution of first language to learners' educational experiences ( $M = 3.60$ ) and to promoting meaningful learning ( $M = 3.60$ ). They strongly agreed that first language plays an important role in early language learning ( $M = 3.59$ ) and that it serves as a foundation for language development ( $M = 3.55$ ). These results demonstrate that teachers' favorable position toward first language extends beyond language acquisition alone, reflecting a broader understanding of first language as an educational resource within early childhood education. This finding is particularly significant given that respondents had experienced both the implementation of MTB-MLE and the subsequent change in the formal position of mother tongue as medium of instruction; despite this transition, their beliefs remained strongly favorable toward the educational role of first language. The result suggests that a distinction exists between the formal policy status of a language and its perceived pedagogical value, in that a policy may alter which language functions as the principal medium of instruction, but teachers may continue to recognize the educational usefulness of learners' familiar languages based on their classroom experiences. The open-ended responses help explain why these favorable beliefs persist.

First language as a bridge to comprehension. A prominent theme emerging from teachers' responses was the role of first language in facilitating understanding and comprehension. Teachers repeatedly described first language as helping children understand lessons, directions, explanations, and unfamiliar concepts, since it is the language with which many learners are most familiar; teachers therefore perceived it as reducing linguistic barriers and allowing children to focus more readily on the content being taught. This finding provides an important explanation for the strong quantitative ratings, since for a kindergarten learner, understanding a lesson delivered in an unfamiliar language may require two simultaneous processes, understanding the language itself and understanding the concept communicated through that language. When teachers use a familiar language to clarify meaning, the linguistic demand may be reduced, allowing the child to concentrate on the intended learning experience. Teachers therefore appeared to view first language not simply as a communication preference but as a cognitive bridge that connects unfamiliar school concepts with linguistic structures and experiences already available to the child, a connection that is especially important in kindergarten, where much of learning builds upon concrete experiences, familiar contexts, conversations, stories, play, and social interaction. From a sociocultural perspective, this finding is consistent with the view that language mediates learning, and when children can interact through linguistic resources that they understand, they may more readily participate in the social processes through which meaning is constructed. The teachers' views likewise resonate with literature suggesting that familiar linguistic and cultural resources can support young children's foundational learning and classroom participation.

First language as a source of confidence and participation. The qualitative responses also showed that teachers associated first-language use with learners' confidence, comfort, and classroom participation. Teachers observed that young learners were more willing to speak, ask questions, share ideas, and participate in classroom activities when they understood the language being used, and the open-ended findings particularly emphasized the psychological

safety and confidence afforded by familiar language. This finding is important because participation is central to kindergarten learning, as young children learn through interaction, engaging in conversations, storytelling, songs, games, dramatic play, exploration, questioning, and collaborative activities in which language is embedded in almost every experience. When learners are uncertain about the language being used, they may hesitate to participate even when they understand aspects of the lesson; conversely, when the classroom allows children to draw upon a familiar language, they may experience greater confidence in expressing what they know. The teachers' responses therefore suggest that first language contributes not only to cognitive accessibility but also to emotional and social accessibility, in that a familiar language can create a classroom environment in which young children feel more secure in communicating, which may encourage active participation and, in turn, create further opportunities for learning. This finding helps explain why teachers strongly recognized first language as an important component of early childhood education ( $M = 3.63$ ), since its perceived value extends beyond teaching linguistic content to also supporting the interactive and relational character of early learning.

First language as a foundation for language development. Teachers strongly agreed that learners' first language serves as a foundation for language development ( $M = 3.55$ ). Their open-ended responses further reveal that they did not generally view first language as an obstacle to learning Filipino or English; instead, many regarded it as a bridge toward additional languages. Teachers explained that when children first understand a concept through a familiar language, the corresponding Filipino or English terms can subsequently be introduced, so that existing linguistic knowledge becomes a foundation upon which additional language learning can develop. This finding challenges an either-or view of language learning in which strengthening one language necessarily limits the development of another. From the teachers' perspective, first language, Filipino, and English can serve complementary purposes, with the familiar language initially supporting understanding while Filipino and English progressively become more prominent as learners develop greater proficiency. This position is especially relevant in kindergarten because children are still developing foundational concepts alongside their emerging language and literacy skills, and when a child already understands a concept in one language, introducing the corresponding vocabulary in another language may become more meaningful. The teachers' beliefs therefore point toward a developmental rather than competitive understanding of multilingual learning.

The policy change reinforced teachers' appreciation of first language. The responses to the second open-ended question provide an especially important insight into how the language policy change influenced teacher beliefs. For many respondents, the policy change did not diminish their appreciation of first language; instead, teachers reported that the transition strengthened or reinforced their belief in its educational value. Teachers explained that the policy change made them more conscious of situations in which learners struggled to understand Filipino or English, and their classroom experiences reinforced the view that first language remained useful when children needed clarification, explanation, reassurance, or additional support. This finding demonstrates that teacher beliefs are not necessarily determined by policy prescription alone. The respondents had accumulated professional experiences under the previous MTB-MLE environment, through which they had developed practical understandings of how children responded to familiar and unfamiliar languages, and the subsequent policy change did not erase these understandings. Instead, teachers interpreted the new policy in relation to what they had observed in their classrooms. This finding strongly reflects Policy Enactment Theory, as Ball et al. (2012) emphasize that practitioners interpret policy rather than simply implement it mechanically, and policy interacts with professional experience, institutional conditions, and local realities. In the present study, teachers appear to have negotiated the language-policy transition by acknowledging changing formal expectations

while retaining pedagogical beliefs developed through direct experience with young learners, a pattern that does not necessarily indicate resistance to policy but rather reflects professional judgment concerning how policy can be translated into meaningful classroom practice.

From prescribed first-language instruction to strategic multilingualism. Although teachers strongly valued first language, their qualitative responses do not suggest that they uniformly favored its exclusive use; instead, an important pattern emerging from the responses was flexibility in language use. Teachers acknowledged the importance of Filipino and English while continuing to recognize situations in which the learner's first language remained pedagogically useful. Some reported moving among languages when learners required clarification, while others described classrooms in which children did not share the same first language, requiring teachers to adapt their language choices accordingly. Some teachers explicitly described language choice as dependent on the learner and classroom situation, with first language used when learners struggled with instructions or unfamiliar concepts while Filipino and English were gradually introduced and strengthened. These responses reveal an important evolution in teachers' perspectives, in that under the earlier policy environment, mother tongue occupied a formally prescribed position as medium of instruction, whereas under the changing policy environment, teachers appear to increasingly conceptualize first language as a strategic pedagogical resource. Such an orientation resembles translanguaging, where teachers and learners draw strategically upon their available linguistic repertoires to facilitate understanding and communication, and this approach does not necessarily position one language against another but rather asks which linguistic resource can best support learning at a particular moment. For kindergarten classrooms, this flexibility may be particularly valuable because children's language profiles are not uniform, as some may be fluent in the regional language but have limited Filipino or English proficiency, others may already use multiple languages at home, and still others may speak a different first language from most of their classmates. Teachers' responses therefore point toward a context-responsive multilingual pedagogy rather than a rigid language hierarchy.

Although the overall mean indicated Strongly Agree, three indicators received slightly lower means and were interpreted as Agree. Teachers agreed that first language facilitates learning ( $M = 3.49$ ), supported policies encouraging its use in kindergarten ( $M = 3.48$ ), and agreed that discontinuing its use may affect the quality of learning among kindergarten learners ( $M = 3.47$ ). These findings provide an important nuance to the otherwise strongly favorable results. The relatively lower rating for supporting policies that encourage first-language use may suggest that teachers distinguish between valuing first language pedagogically and supporting a particular policy prescription, a distinction that is reasonable within multilingual classrooms, since a teacher may strongly believe that first language helps children learn while simultaneously recognizing that mandating its use across all classrooms may not account for linguistic diversity, particularly where a class includes children who speak different first languages, children who are already multilingual, or children with different levels of proficiency in Filipino and English. Similarly, the mean of 3.47 for the possible effects of discontinuing first-language use suggests cautious rather than absolute agreement, as teachers may recognize that the effects depend on how the transition is implemented and whether appropriate linguistic support remains available. The qualitative responses support this interpretation, as some teachers emphasized the importance of Filipino and English while others described the need to determine language use according to the learner, lesson, and classroom situation. These findings should therefore not be interpreted as a simple call for reinstating the previous language policy in exactly the same form, but rather point toward teachers' desire for pedagogical flexibility, that is, the ability to draw upon first language when

it supports learning while progressively developing children's competence in Filipino and English.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings present a coherent picture of kindergarten teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward first language. The overall quantitative mean of 3.56 establishes that teachers hold strongly favorable views, and their open-ended responses explain the pedagogical foundations of these views through four interconnected ideas. First, teachers regard first language as a bridge to comprehension, in that familiar language allows children to understand instructions and concepts without the additional difficulty of first decoding an unfamiliar instructional language. Second, teachers view first language as supporting confidence and participation, since children who understand the language used in classroom interaction are perceived as more comfortable communicating, asking questions, and participating in learning activities. Third, teachers perceive first language as a foundation for additional-language development, treating it not as a barrier to Filipino and English but as a linguistic and conceptual base from which additional languages can be introduced. Fourth, teachers demonstrate an emerging orientation toward strategic multilingualism, as the policy shift has encouraged many of them to think less in terms of a single prescribed language and more in terms of choosing and combining linguistic resources according to learner needs. These findings reveal an important relationship between policy and pedagogy: the formal status of first language may have changed, but its perceived pedagogical value remains strong among kindergarten teachers, who continue to interpret language policy through their observations of how children understand, communicate, and participate. In this sense, their beliefs are neither simply remnants of the previous MTB-MLE policy nor evidence of opposition to the new policy, but rather represent professional judgments shaped by classroom experience, a distinction that is central to understanding language-policy enactment in early childhood education and that directly addresses the study's objective of describing how teachers' beliefs and attitudes toward first language were shaped amid a shifting policy landscape. These insights lay the groundwork for the succeeding chapter, which examines the broader implications of these findings for classroom practice, teacher preparation, and future policy considerations in early language education.

## CONCLUSION

The study found that kindergarten teachers held strongly favorable beliefs and attitudes toward the role of first language in language learning amidst language policy change, as reflected in the overall mean of 3.56.

Teachers expressed their strongest support for the use of learners' first language in kindergarten education and recognized it as an important component of early childhood education. They likewise strongly valued its contribution to meaningful learning, educational experiences, early language learning, and language development.

The open-ended responses provided a deeper understanding of these beliefs. Teachers perceived first language as a cognitive bridge that makes lessons more understandable, a linguistic resource that promotes confidence and participation, and a foundation upon which Filipino and English can subsequently be developed.

The policy transition did not necessarily diminish these beliefs. For many teachers, it reinforced their appreciation of first language because they became more conscious of the challenges experienced by learners when unfamiliar languages hindered comprehension.

At the same time, the findings reveal that teachers' beliefs are not characterized by rigid preference for exclusive first-language instruction. Instead, many demonstrate a flexible multilingual orientation. They recognize the importance of Filipino and English while

maintaining that first language remains useful for clarification, bridging, concept development, and learner support.

This suggests that the central issue in kindergarten language education should not be reduced to choosing one language over another. The more important concern is how teachers can use available linguistic resources purposefully to ensure that children understand, participate, and progressively develop multilingual competence.

Viewed through Policy Enactment Theory, the findings demonstrate that teachers are active interpreters of language policy. Their classroom decisions are shaped not only by formal directives but also by professional experience, learner needs, and local linguistic realities.

Thus, even amidst policy change, first language remains pedagogically significant in kindergarten; not necessarily as an exclusive medium of instruction, but as a meaningful resource for making early learning accessible, inclusive, and developmentally responsive.

Based on the findings, kindergarten teachers should be provided with clear and practical guidance regarding the appropriate use of first and regional languages within the current language-policy framework. Such guidance should move beyond explaining policy provisions and demonstrate how familiar languages may be used strategically for clarification, vocabulary development, storytelling, concept formation, and bridging toward Filipino and English.

Professional development should strengthen teachers' competencies in multilingual pedagogy and translanguaging. Training activities may include classroom-based scenarios demonstrating how teachers can respond to learners with varying linguistic backgrounds without compromising the progressive development of Filipino and English proficiency.

Schools may also strengthen professional collaboration through Learning Action Cells, peer mentoring, and collaborative planning focused specifically on language use in kindergarten. These mechanisms can provide teachers with opportunities to discuss classroom experiences and develop context-appropriate strategies.

Learning-resource development should likewise recognize the linguistic diversity of young learners. Contextualized and multilingual materials may support teachers in connecting children's home-language experiences with the formal languages of schooling.

At the policy level, implementation guidelines should preserve sufficient pedagogical flexibility for teachers to respond to local linguistic conditions. A uniform language expectation may not produce uniform learning opportunities when classrooms differ substantially in linguistic composition.

Finally, future research may investigate the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their actual classroom language practices. Classroom observations, interviews, and learner-level evidence may help determine how strongly favorable beliefs toward first language are translated into instructional decisions and how these decisions influence children's comprehension, participation, and language development.

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