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**FEATURE**

**THE EFFECTS OF MOTHER TONGUE-BASED  
MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION ON THE  
ENGLISH LITERACY OF CHILDREN  
IN SILANG, PHILIPPINES**

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**Abstract.** *Education is vital for success in life. Globalization, however, has changed the trend so that mere education is becoming insufficient. English proficiency has become equally vital for success in the global arena. With the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in the Philippines, the English literacy development of Filipinos may be adversely affected. This paper, therefore, examined the effects of MTB-MLE on the English literacy development of Filipino children. In this experimental study, the same pre-tests and post-tests were administered to two groups of 68 students from a public elementary school in Silang, Philippines. One group was taught in the mother tongue while the other group in English. Test results were analyzed using t-test through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) package. Results showed that children taught in the mother tongue demonstrated a decline in English literacy level, confirming certain language acquisition theories and fears of some scholars. This paper ends with recommendations for further study and recommendations to policymakers.*

**Keywords:** English literacy development, MTB-MLE, effects, Philippines, experimental design, children

### **Introduction**

Many countries have implemented strong English language policies in their belief that the English language will alleviate social, economic, and political problems, among others (Hillman, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2014). On one hand, some countries are adapting the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy to join the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in upholding the mother tongue of learners as the medium of instruction (Cruz, 2015; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b). In this globalized world, on the other hand, the role of English language cannot be overlooked.

Linguistic imperialism has limited the accessibility of many resources to certain language groups (Phillipson, 1992). Because of this phenomenon, UNESCO (1953, 2003, 2010) advocated the MTB-MLE policy as a way of upholding equal rights and opportunities for all (Ball, 2011). It is also a means of safeguarding indigenous languages and promoting sustainable national development (Ouane & Glanz, 2011; SIL International, 2009; UNESCO, 1953; Wa-Mbaleka, 2015). MTB-MLE, however, poses potential adverse effects on English language acquisition considering the role of English in globalization (Alberto, Gabinete, & Rañola, 2016; Li & Majhanovich, 2010; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b). These concerns are expressed by parents, teachers, and second language acquisition (SLA) experts alike.

Several studies relevant to MTB-MLE have been done in the Philippines (Alcazaren, & Rafanan, 2016; Burton, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014a). After thorough search, however, no study on the impact of MTB-MLE on English literacy development was found. Therefore, this study, founded on post-positivist and advocacy approach, sought to find the effect of MTB-MLE on English literacy development of children. The knowledge on the effects of MTB-MLE on English learning may help policymakers, school administrators, parents, and students make informed decisions.

### **Review of the Literature**

There are opposing views about MTB-MLE. Many countries have decided to take the MTB-MLE direction while others have taken the opposite. The Philippines is no exception to this pulling of ropes, and it has chosen to be on the side of the proponents of the policy. This is the reason why this policy has become a controversial topic of debate in the country. This literature review introduces the history and goal of MTB-MLE then proceeds to the discussion of the impact of the policy on the individual and national levels as presented by different scholars.

### **History of MTB-MLE**

In 1948, the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights was passed with its Article 2 affirming that everyone is entitled to education without discrimination (Ball, 2011). Then UNESCO, in the 1950s, advocated that children be educated in the language they know best to maximize learning (UNESCO, 1953). Later, Article 5 of the 1960 Convention and Recommendation against Discrimination in Education reechoed the same sentiment that every citizen of a country should enjoy the right to education even in their mother tongue (Ball, 2011). MTB-MLE is education through learners' mother tongue and other languages as they are gradually acquired (Trammel, 2016). In other words, this policy lets children start formal education in their mother tongue and finish in a more dominant language (Malone, 2016). As a response to the act of UNESCO enjoining countries to preserve national identity and make education available to all, the Philippines passed Republic Act No. 10533 otherwise known as the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013. Aside from the addition of years to basic education, this act requires instruction, instructional materials, and assessment to be in the learners' mother tongue from kindergarten through the first 3 years of elementary education (Official Gazette, 2013).

### **Goal of MTB-MLE**

The world has witnessed a great decline in literacy rate and a steady rise of the number of out-of-school children (United Nations [UN], 2015; UNESCO, 2015). These children either did not have access to formal education, or attended school only to leave later because they did not understand the language of instruction. In addition, the number of indigenous languages becoming extinct is rising because the newer generations speak English or a foreign language more than they speak their own mother tongue. UNESCO seeks to address these problems through MTB-MLE (Stone, 2012; UNESCO, 1953; Wa-Mbaleka, 2015).

In addition, UNESCO envisions more children enjoying equal opportunity for education. It also sees the future with more people fluent in their mother tongue, their national language, and other international languages regardless of ethnicity. Furthermore, it foresees the preservation of indigenous languages and cultures (Alcazaren & Rafanan, 2016; SIL International, 2009; UNESCO, n.d.). UNESCO hopes to turn these visions into reality through MTB-MLE.

### **Impact on Individuals**

MTB-MLE aims to promote the development of competent and well-rounded individuals. It maintains that teachers should start where the students are and build new knowledge from what they already know. When students are taught in their mother tongue, they think more effectively and perform better

(Medilo, 2016; Ricablanca, 2014). This type of education also prevents marginalization of speakers of minority languages. In the end, lifelong learners are produced (Mohanty, as cited in Malone, 2007; SIL International, 2009; Stone, 2012; Torpsten, 2012; UNESCO, n.d.). Proponents of MTB-MLE believe that this policy also prevents the development of individuals who are not fluent in any language.

A solid mother tongue foundation may also help strengthen learners' ethnic identity. Children who have good mother tongue foundation learn additional languages faster than those who do not (Bellamy, 1999; Benson, 2005; Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997). This is so because their prior knowledge on signs and symbols in their mother tongue helps in the learning of a new language (UNESCO, 1953). Skutnabb-Kangas and Toukamaa's threshold level hypothesis and Cummins' interdependency hypothesis assert the same idea (Burton, 2013). These facts reveal a common conclusion, that MTB-MLE may be beneficial to second language learning.

MTB-MLE, however, may cause adverse effects on people's English literacy (Alberto, Gabinete, & Ranola, 2010) consequently affecting their lifelong learning and competitiveness. MTB-MLE reduces individuals' amount of exposure to the English language, thus adversely affecting their English proficiency (Li & Majhanovich, 2010). Yet, English is the language of the academic world. Many scholars write in English. Most books and other sources of knowledge are written in the English language (Hillman, 2015). Furthermore, in countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines, where the number of instructional materials written in the mother tongue is low due to the presence of multiple local languages, students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are in danger of underdevelopment (Alberto, Gabinete, & Ranola, 2010; Wa-Mbaleka (2014b, 2015). Furthermore, many concepts written in English do not have equivalents in the different mother tongues in the Philippines so that teachers still have to resort to English (Medilo, 2016). Teachers also lack training in providing instruction in the mother tongue which may affect the quality of instruction provided to students (Medilo, 2016; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). In these cases, MTB-MLE may hamper individuals' acquisition of skills and information about themselves and around them.

Further, globalization is undeniable. In the global perspective, there are certain privileges that are only accessible to people who are proficient in, or at least knowledgeable of, the English language (Hillman, 2015). Tourism, business, and education are among these major privileges (Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b). In Uganda and the Philippines alone, most people who gain employment in international companies are proficient in English (Tembe & Norton, 2011; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b). In the light of the critical period hypothesis (Hummel, 2014), MTB-MLE

may cause many people to miss these privileges and be robbed of the opportunity to be at pace with the globalized world.

### **Impact on the Nation**

Another purpose of MTB-MLE is sustainable national development. Since MTB-MLE develops individuals who have solid mother-tongue foundation, it can prevent the death of many indigenous languages. Further, since language and culture coexist, cultural heritage is also preserved. This fact solidifies the identity of the nation. A country producing intellectually competent learners enjoys high productivity resulting to economic stability (Mohanty, as cited in Malone, 2007; Ouane & Glanz, 2011; SIL International, 2009; Stone, 2012; UNESCO, n.d.).

MTB-MLE, however, is a costly policy of choice for developing countries and countries with many languages. It requires the development and maintenance of instructional materials in the mother tongue and the intensive training of teachers to teach in the mother tongue, among many others (Alberto, Gabinete, & Ranola, 2010; Hillman, 2015; Wa-Mbaleka, 2015). Further, as was mentioned earlier in this paper, MTB-MLE may adversely affect the English language learning of individuals. Yet, English is closely linked to a nations' economy (Hillman, 2015; Tembe & Norton, 2011; Yakoumetti, 2011). English is also proven to be a vehicle for rapid national development, a means of international relations, and a tool for inter-cultural communication and understanding (Chang, 2011). English has given economic lift to countries like Nigeria, the Philippines, and Uganda, among others (IBP, 2015; Olusoji, 2012; US Commercial Service, 2015). In fact, although an economic giant, Japan is implementing a strong English language policy to preserve its economic status in the globalized world (Regalado & Calica, 2013). With MTB-MLE stunting the English literacy development of individuals, the nation may also be in danger of stagnation or worse yet, regression.

Literature has been extensively searched. Studies have been conducted on the different components and aspects of MTB-MLE. No empirical study conducted to see the actual effects of the policy to English literacy development, however, was found. Specifically, no study of this nature conducted in the Philippines was found.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the current state of MTB-MLE implementation in the selected school?
2. What is the current English literacy rate and level in the selected school?
3. What relationship exists between MTB-MLE and the English literacy of Filipino children in Silang, Philippines?

4. How can this relationship affect the English literacy of Filipino children in Silang, Philippines in the future?

### **Methodology**

English language is taking the center stage in the global arena. Many countries are implementing English language policies in their belief that English will solve national problems (Hillman, 2015; Kirkpatrick, 2014). In fact, English language has afforded the Philippines some privileges in the areas of business, education, and tourism as in many other areas (IBP, 2015; Regalado & Calica, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014a). The problem is that; the English literacy development of the country may be threatened by the implementation of the MTB-MLE. Based on Krashen's (1982) input hypothesis, MTB-MLE can reduce the English input students receive (Li & Majhanovich, 2010). Additionally, in the light of the critical period hypothesis, students may lose the chance of learning English during the best years of learning it. Further, Parents and teachers are expressing their concerns that although MTB-MLE promises benefits in many areas of learning (Burton, 2013; Ricablanca, 2014; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b), it will adversely affect students' English literacy development (Burton, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b).

The purpose of this study was to shed light on the effects of MTB-MLE on the English literacy of Filipinos. The results of this study may help parents, teachers, and policymakers make informed decisions on which educational path to take. This study may be especially helpful to policymakers. Before making drastic moves that may affect the entire country, they must weigh crucial issues and look ahead.

### **Research Design**

This study employed the experimental design. The experimental design is a quantitative research design used to test the effect of a treatment on a result if indeed it affects the result. In other words, this design is used to create a cause-and-effect relationship between variables—the independent and dependent variables. This design also involves a pre-test which is administered before the treatment procedure and a post-test which is administered after the treatment (Abbuhl, Gass, & Mackey, 2012; Creswell, 2012). This design was used for this specific study because it was the best design to meet the purpose of the study. Hence, the independent variable in this experiment was the mother tongue instruction while the dependent variable the English language learning of the participants which was measured through an English proficiency test.

The between-subjects experimental design was specifically used. This design involves at least two comparison groups—the experimental group and the comparison group. The experimental group is the group treated with the idea

being experimented. The comparison group is the group treated with another idea (Abbuhl et al., 2012; Creswell, 2009, 2012). In this study, the experimental group was the group that was taught in the mother tongue; that is, Tagalog, while the comparison group was taught in English.

### **Participants, Sampling, and Setting**

The sampling procedure that was used for this study was multistage random sampling. Multistage random sampling is a sampling procedure that involves two or more stages. The first stage is the random selection of a cluster or a fixed group of people. The final stage is the random assignment of the members of the cluster to participate in the study or to belong to different groups (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007).

The first stage of this study involved the random selection of the grade level where the participants would come from. This process was done through lottery random sampling (Asthana & Bhushan, 2016). The grade levels that were included in the selection were those under the MTB-MLE program. The second and final stage involved the lottery random selection of two heterogeneous sections that served as experimental group and comparison group. This was so because all grade levels in the school are subdivided into 8-10 sections. There was no more need to randomly assign students to the experimental and comparison group since they were already randomly assigned to their sections upon enrolment as confirmed by the teachers and the principal.

This sampling procedure was chosen over other sampling procedures for three reasons. First, random sampling is required of a study for it to be considered a real experimental study (Abbuhl et al., 2012; Creswell, 2009). Second, the total population size was too large for this study. Third, having students from the same grade level study together in one class is most ideal especially in an elementary school. After all, the administration would not have possibly approved the mixing of students from different grade levels in one classroom.

The research setting chosen for this study was a public elementary school in the town of Silang, Cavite, in Luzon, which is located in the north of the Philippines. In this school, each grade level is divided into 8 to 10 sections with an average of 42 students in each section. Since MTB-MLE is implemented from kindergarten through Grade 3 (Official Gazette, 2013), the research setting was an elementary school. A government school was preferred because government schools in the Philippines are always the first to implement mandates and policies from the government. The research setting was especially chosen because, aside from its being a public school, it is also near the country's capital.

**Data Collection**

The collection of the data for this study involved several steps. First was the administration of the same pre-test to both the experimental and comparison groups. Second was the treatment process which began the day after the pre-test was administered. The homeroom teachers of each class taught the participants using the assigned medium of instruction. During these teaching sessions, there were short daily observations of the classes of both groups to ensure that they learned using the language designated for them as treatment. The treatment went on for about two weeks. Finally, after the treatment process, the same post-test was administered to both groups.

The pre-test that was given to the participants was the Cambridge Young Learners English Starters Sample Test Volume 1. The post-test was the Cambridge Young Learners English Starters Sample Test Volume 2. Both tests were paper-based. These tests, although samples, closely resemble the real tests given by Cambridge English Language Assessment (Cambridge, 2017b). In addition, although these tests are not primarily designed as research instruments, they are reliable measures of children's English language proficiency.

Cambridge English Language Assessment is affiliated with Cambridge University and is an English testing center recognized around the globe. It has been providing English tests for more than 100 years. It has partnerships with both private and government institutions in different parts of the world as well (Cambridge, 2017a). Most importantly, it is comprised of a team of experts in English language teaching (Cambridge, 2017c). Permission from the administrators to use the sample tests was secured through in writing.

**Data Analysis**

The data gathered were checked, organized, and coded. Due to the nature of the study, inferential statistics was employed for data analysis. The data were analyzed through both independent and dependent *t*-test using SPSS. The independent *t*-test compared the average scores of the two groups in the pre-test and the post-test separately. The dependent *t*-test measured the progress in English proficiency of each group (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2007).

**Ethical Considerations**

To recognize the authority of the school administration, a face-to-face meeting with the school principal was arranged to personally explain the study and secure permission before the study could start. As soon as permission was granted by the school principal, a personal interview with the homeroom teachers was conducted. They were informed about the import of the study, how it would



be carried out, and how they could participate. In this interview, they were asked to sign an informed consent form. Although negotiation was done, no form of coercion or payment was used to acquire the consent and participation of the people concerned.

### Results

After performing independent *t*-test analysis in SPSS, it was found that there is no statistically significant difference ( $p = .064$ ) between the pre-test scores of the experimental group and the comparison group. This finding is shown in Tables 1 and 2. In other words, both groups began the experiment at approximately the same level of English proficiency. This fact establishes the grounds for comparison.

Table 1

#### *Descriptive Statistics of the Pre-test Scores*

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test scores	MTBE Group	37	14.7568	5.55480	.91320
	English Group	31	17.4516	6.13644	1.10214

Table 2

#### *English Proficiency Pre-test Scores*

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.33	.57	-1.90	66	.062	-2.69486	1.419	-5.527	.13755
Equal variances not assumed			-1.88	61.26	.064	-2.69486	1.431	-5.557	.16697

Table 3

#### *Descriptive Statistics of the Post-test Scores*

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Post-test Scores	MTBE Group	37	12.08	5.565	.915
	English Group	31	18.84	5.984	1.075

Table 4  
*English Proficiency Post-test Scores*

	F	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Diff.	Std. Error Diff.	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
							Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.358	-4.819	66	.000	-6.758	1.402	-9.557	-3.958
Equal variances not assumed		-4.788	62.07	.000	-6.758	1.411	-9.579	-3.936

The result of the independent *t*-test performed on the post-test scores reveal that there is a significant difference ( $p = .000$ ) between the post-test scores of the experimental group and the comparison group. This is shown in Tables 3 and 4 above. After about two weeks of treatment, the group taught using English as the medium of instruction obtained a higher average score in the English proficiency test than the group taught in the mother tongue.

The dependent *t*-test performed on the pre-test and post-test scores of the group taught in the mother tongue, as shown in Tables 5 and 6, shows that there is a significant difference ( $p = .000$ ) between the group’s pre-test and post-test scores. This difference is positive. This is because the mean of the scores for the pre-test is higher than that of the post-test. This means that there is a significant decline in the group’s English proficiency.

Table 5  
*Descriptive Statistics of the MTB-MLE Group Pre-test and Post-test Scores*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-Test	14.7568	37	5.55480	.91320
Post-Test	12.0811	37	5.56466	.91482

Table 6  
*MTB-MLE Group Pre-test and Post-test*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pre-Test - Post-Test	2.67568	2.77943	.45694	1.74897	3.60238	5.856	36	.000

Table 7  
*Descriptive Statistics of the English Group Pre-test and Post-test*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pre-test	17.4516	31	6.13644	1.10214
Post-test	19.0000	31	5.74456	1.03175

Table 8  
*English Group Pre-test and Post-test*

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
				Lower	Upper			
Pre-test – Post-test	-1.54839	2.73055	.49042	-2.54996	-.54681	-3.157	30	.004

The dependent *t*-test performed on the pre-test and post-test scores of the group taught in English, as shown in Tables 7 and 8 above, shows that there is a significant difference in the group's pre-test and post-test scores. This difference is negative. This is because the mean of the scores for the post-test is higher than that of the pre-test. In other words, there is a statistically significant improvement ( $p = .004$ ) in the group's English proficiency.

The school of the setting of this study has been implementing MTB-MLE since 2013. In other words, the school implemented the policy the very year it was approved (Official Gazette, 2013). This policy has added a subject to the curriculum of the grade levels affected. This subject is rightly called MTB-MLE because in this subject, students study their mother tongue the way they study English and Filipino. The mother tongue of the students in this school is Tagalog. The school also has enough materials for the subject.

As is common in elementary schools, additional sources of knowledge for the different subjects taught in school are posted around the classroom. In this school, however, these posters and visual aids are written in English even when they are taught in the mother tongue. This practice, among others, may account for the relatively high English literacy rate in the school. In fact, during the treatment period, the students in the experimental group would ask their teacher to translate certain concepts and words to English. Often times, they also answered in English some questions asked in their mother tongue. This English literacy rate is also exhibited in the pre-test results of both groups. This practice may also raise questions and suspicion regarding the school's effective implementation of the policy.

The results of the study are both alarming and encouraging. It is alarming to see that even in as short as about two weeks, students taught purely in their mother tongue showed a significant decline in their English proficiency. On the other hand, it is encouraging to note that even in so short a time, students taught in English showed significant progress in their English proficiency.

The results of this study affirm what many scholars have already concluded that MTB-MLE may adversely affect children's English literacy development (Alberto, Gabinete, & Ranola, 2010; Krashen, 1982; Li & Majhanovich, 2010; Saville-Troike, 2006; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Additionally, this study confirms the fears of many scholars and parents alike that children's global competence will be weakened (Alberto, Gabinete, & Ranola, 2010; Medilo, 2016; Regalado & Calica, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014b).

### **Conclusion**

MTB-MLE has always been a highly debated policy from the time of its conception. Those who propose it claim that it is the best way to give all children equal chance for education. Those who oppose it do not altogether disagree with the argument of the proponents. They are, however, concerned about its long-term effect on children, especially in this globalized world where English is the lingua franca.

The findings of this experimental study reveal that MTB-MLE may indeed adversely affect children's English literacy and, therefore, jeopardize their fighting chance in the global arena. The experimental and the comparison groups' average pre-test scores confirmed that students in both groups started the experiment with nearly the same English literacy level. After about two weeks of treatment, the average scores of the group taught in the mother tongue went significantly low, while the average scores of the group taught in English went significantly high.

There are certain limitations to this study, however. First, the treatment duration was only about two weeks, which is very short. Second, the sample size of 68 Grade 3 students is small. This sample size shrinks even more compared to the approximately 960 students in the school who are under the MTB-MLE program.

As such, it is recommended that a similar study be done with a larger sample size. It is also more ideal to lengthen the treatment duration to one school year. A similar study can also be done in a different research setting with participants from other language groups. Additionally, studies should be done on how countries that have implemented MTB-MLE are performing in the global arena. Further, the government should make a periodic assessment of the policy to see whether it is fulfilling its purpose. Finally, the government should examine the nation's top priorities and implement a language-in-education policy that will address these needs.

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