
International Forum
Vol. 19, No. 2
October 2016
pp. 64-79

FEATURE

**The Experience of Mother Tongue-Based
Multilingual Education Teachers in
Southern Leyte, Philippines**

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Abstract. *With all the studies conducted related to the use of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) in instruction, there is very limited data of the documentation of the lived experiences of the teachers in MTB-MLE. This paper documented the experiences of 10 teachers in MTB-MLE in Southern Leyte, Philippines by determining the meaning of teaching in MTB-MLE as far as the teachers are concerned, including the successes and problems in the implementation. This study employed the hermeneutic phenomenology research design. Participants were asked to share their experiences in MTB-MLE teaching through questionnaires, personal interviews, and text messaging. The data gathered generated 5 themes, which included the use of more than one vernacular as a medium of instruction in communication development, commitment to being globally competitive, limited applicability due to the superiority of English and insufficient materials, burden caused by the complexity of the vernacular, and optimism to accept the responsibility. This study concluded that the MTB-MLE curriculum is a welcomed addition to the ever-challenging tasks of the teachers. Additionally, teachers understood their role and saw the challenge given by the addition of MTB-MLE in the curriculum but accepted the challenge by realizing their importance to the success of the MTB-MLE.*

Keywords: Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education, education, Philippines, hermeneutic phenomenology, basic education teachers

Introduction

In the Philippines, the Department of Education through the Republic Act 10533 or the Basic Education Act of 2013 implemented the K+12 curriculum, which included the use of mother tongue in the instruction from Pre-Elementary to Grade III. Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE) in the Philippines is the use of more than two languages for literacy and instruction in subjects like mathematics, science, health and social studies (Nolasco, 2009). This program seeks to address the “high functional illiteracy of Filipinos” (Nolasco, 2009, p. 2) where language plays a significant factor.

Republic Act 10533 explicitly states that “the curriculum shall adhere to the principles and framework of MTB-MLE, which starts from where the learners are and from what they already knew proceeding from the known to the unknown; instructional materials and capable teachers to implement the MTB-MLE curriculum shall be available” (R.A. 10533, 2013). Walter (2011) argued that the use of mother tongue education is essential because it is “capable of producing proficient readers in 2-3 years” (Walter, 2011, p. 24) and can benefit learners who have an average ability and potential. Walter (2011) warned, however, that not all sociolinguistic patterns are suitable for the use of mother tongue education. This paper documented the experiences of 10 teachers in MTB-MLE in Southern Leyte, Philippines by determining the meaning of teaching in MTB-MLE as far as the teachers are concerned. It also included the documentation of the participants’ experiences in the successes and problems in the implementation of MTB-MLE.

Review of the Literature

Nolasco (2009) claimed that multi-lingual education is an innovative approach to learning but warned that it would not work when one only changes the language by translating existing materials into the local languages. He further added that “there must be a development of good curricula, a pool of adequately trained teachers in the required languages, content and methodology, production of sufficient and suitable teaching materials, and the empowerment of the community” (Nolasco, 2009, p. 3). Mallareddy (2012), on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the mother tongue education in early learning. In his study, he found that neglected language skills development in the mother tongue resulted in the failure of the education system especially in the undergraduate level, which highlighted the need for the implementation of MTB-MLE in the educational system.

Other studies related to the use of MTB-MLE in instruction are sometimes varied with contradictory findings. For example, no difference was found in the effectiveness of teaching geometrical figures using the mother tongue and other languages (Oyzon, Lubio, Salamia, & Ripalda, 2014). In another study, children performed better when exposed to their mother tongue (Espada, 2012).

Furthermore, as Singh (2014) found, success in the use of the local dialect in education can still be achieved in places where the pupils speak more than one language.

Meanwhile, Benson (2005) stressed the benefits of teaching in the mother tongue language in schools. He highlighted that the use of MTB-MLE increases female enrollment and active participation of parents, decreases sexual exploitation by teachers, improves learning, and attracts more girls to become teachers. Khan (2016) also added the enhanced children's sense of classroom belongingness and receptiveness, and improved performance in the affective, psychomotor and cognitive behaviors as the benefits. Likewise, Sario, Guiab, and Palting (2014) found that the use of mother tongue in the classroom made pupils more active, participative, and interactive with their sense of class belongingness and receptiveness enhanced.

Meanwhile, the study by Vela (2015) revealed that teaching in the mother tongue would result in better performance in science, suggesting that the everyday language of the learners is an important factor in instruction. Walter (2011) also proposed that the impacts of mother tongue instruction are substantial and are measurable both in the short term and in the long term via more global measures such as access to higher education and more advanced career opportunities with greatest benefits to those of average ability and potential.

These and other benefits of teaching in the native language prompted world organizations to emphasize the education of children in the primary level using their native language (Khan, 2016). It is the basis for the implementation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines along with other international agreements and accords like the Bologna Accord (Sanders & Dunn, 2010) and the Washington Accord (International Engineering Alliance, 2014).

On the other side of the spectrum, there are concerns about the use of MTB-MLE like the provision of learner support materials, class size, shortages of suitably qualified teachers, preparation, and adequate training (Dio & Jamora, 2014; Gacheche, 2010; Singh, 2014; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014), and the difficulty of translating mathematical terms to the mother tongue and insufficient mother tongue instructional materials (Dio & Jamora, 2014). Some argue that children may not understand some of the phrases used because they are different from what is utilized in the child's community (Hasselbring & Phil, n.d.). Others complain of the undesirability of mother tongue utilization in some situations (Fóris-Ferenczi & Bakk-Miklósi, 2011; Sanchez, 2013) like affording little time to mother tongue; when it is already a declining language. Additionally, there is a haphazard implementation (Obiero, 2010) and the belief that English is the superior language (Khosa, 2012; Mahboob & Cruz, 2013) because there are concerns that it may impair the quality of English (Jha, 2013).

Another concern in the implementation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines is the attitude of the people towards it. In their study, Mahboob and Cruz (2013) found that the reality in the Philippines is that people regard English as the premium language with Filipino and other local languages relegated to the background. In fact, they found that more than half of the respondents considered themselves to be highly proficient in English and at the university level, over 90% preferred English as the medium of instruction above any other language. Moreover, Burton (2013) and Wa-Mbaleka (2014) found that although contented with the increase in student understanding, teachers and parents expressed concern about the future implications for learning in the mother tongue rather than in English. Furthermore, as Burton (2013) uncovered, teachers have ambiguous feelings towards the implementation of MTB-MLE. While they are following the policy, they have covertly resisted the system because of future concerns about the outcomes of the MTB-MLE.

Still, another concern in the implementation of MTB-MLE is the problem of lack of uniformity of assessment practices in primary education. For example, the study of Dio and Jamora (2014) found that the difficulty of translating technical terms in mathematics, which came about from the teachers' inability to translate technical terms to the dialect, resulted in confusion and weak results in standard tests which use English as the medium. This situation happened in using technical terms in mathematics and science subjects. There are instances where no equivalent words in the mother tongue exist for a particular term in the subject. These cases may create confusion in the translation of the word into the mother tongue, which may eventually create difficulty for the students during standardized examinations that use the English language.

However, the problems in the implementation can be overcome by "progressive powers of change" (Rosekrans, Sherris, & Chatry-Komarek, 2012, p. 1). This change can be achieved through the development of standards of learning and materials, as well as innovative aspects of a constructivist teacher education approach (Rosekrans et al., 2012) including greater resource allocation, political will and clearer policy objectives (Gacheche, 2010; Nolasco, 2008).

The result of the studies reviewed is summarized into two major themes. First, MTB-MLE can be successfully implemented if there is enough effort to produce teaching materials that are culturally relevant, to improve teachers' proficiency and collaboration with parents and the community (Sario, Guiab, Palting, Navas, Gineta, Reyes, Bautista, 2015). Second, there is a need to change people's attitude toward English as the ultimate language to be studied and regarding the mother tongue and other local dialects as good only for daily conversations, which was emphasized by Mahboob and Cruz (2013). As long as English continues to be considered a prestigious language, the will may continue to be limited for proper MTB-MLE implementation.

Nevertheless, there is very limited data of the documentation of the lived experiences of the teachers in MTB-MLE. A survey, which was conducted by Wa-Mbaleka in 2014, provided many insights on what the teachers feel about the implementation of this new policy in education. A deeper understanding of what meaning the teachers make of their experiences at the frontlines of mother tongue education, however, is of utmost importance because such an undertaking can provide a better view of what can be done especially in terms of policy amendments and additions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study is the normalization process theory developed by May and Finch (2012). This theory is a sociological theory of the implementation, embedding, and integration of new technologies and organizational innovations in organizations. According to May and Finch, the normalization process theory is concerned with the social organization of the work (implementation), of making practices routine elements of everyday life (embedding), and of sustaining embedded practices in their social contexts (integration). The implementation of the MTB-MLE in Philippine education is a new policy that has to be carried out by the teachers themselves in the field. Since it is new, there is a need for the system to be routinely embedded in the social context of the MTB teachers. The questions that guided the conduct of the study included the following:

1. What is the meaning that the teachers attach to the purpose of MTB-MLE as a newly implemented policy in Philippine Basic Education Curriculum?
2. What are the successes and the problems that the policy met?
3. What should be done to achieve complete success in MTB-MLE implementation?

Methodology

This paper aimed to examine the lived experiences of ten MTB-MLE teachers in Southern Leyte, Philippines. The methodology has been organized into research design; participants, sampling, and the research setting; and data collection methods and the procedure.

Research Design

This study employed the hermeneutic phenomenology approach of the qualitative research design. According to Kafle (2013), this design is “an attempt to unveil the world as experienced by the subject through their life world stories” (p. 6). Moustakas (1994) added that “it involves the art of reading text or

experiences” (p.1) to understand intention and meaning. The experiences of the teachers in MTB-MLE including the meaning they attached to their experiences were gathered and coded through open coding and were described accordingly.

Participants, Sampling, and Setting

The participants were limited to 10 selected teachers of MTB-MLE from different schools in Southern Leyte. Using purposive sampling, the members were chosen based on their availability and willingness to participate. The criteria applied in the selection process included being a teacher in K-1, Grade I, Grade II, or Grade III. In the selection process, only 10 teachers were able to participate due reluctance on the part of others to share and unavailability of time since the teachers were busy in the preparation of their reports.

Data Collection

Data gathering was done between August and November in the school year 2015-2016 using an open-ended questionnaire. The questions were in English, and the participants were asked to define MTB instruction, narrate their positive and negative experiences as teachers in MTB-MLE, and explain the meaning they attached to their experiences. Also, I was present during the answering of the questionnaires so that the participants could ask questions when they found difficulty. Participants were also instructed carefully on the meaning of the questions posed. Personal interviews were also carried out after the data from the questionnaires were collected and coded. At least two personal interviews were conducted with each participant. Furthermore, the short message service or text messaging was also employed after the interview when there were answers still not fully clarified.

Confidentiality was achieved mainly by not asking the participants to write their full names on the questionnaires. The questionnaires were numbered from 1 to 10 and a list was kept to track the participant with the corresponding questionnaires. In this paper, the participants are labeled P1 to P10 in order to identify them as Participant 1 to Participant 10.

Data Analysis

Open coding was employed in data analysis. The answers were grouped and categorized according to commonalities in their properties. The features of the common responses were then identified and finally the themes were determined.

Results

Table 1 below presents the academic characteristics of the MTB-MLE teachers who participated in the study.

Table 1.
Academic Characteristics of the Participants

Participant	Age	Academic rank	Years in teaching	Years teaching MTB-MLE
1	32	2	7	2
2	30	2	8	3
3	29	2	6	3
4	35	3	5	3
5	34	3	6	3
6	38	2	6	3
7	30	2	7	1
8	30	2	7	3
9	29	2	5	3
10	38	2	12	3

As shown in Table 1, there were a total of 10 teachers who participated in the study. The average age of the participants was 32.5, the average years of teaching was 6 years, and the mean number of years of teaching in MTB-MLE was 2.7. Meanwhile, there were eight teachers ranked as Teacher II and two were classified as Teacher III. In the Philippines, teachers in Basic Education are ranked from Teacher I to Teacher III and Master Teacher I to Master Teacher III with Teacher I as the entry point position.

The data transpired from the questionnaire, personal interview, and the queries via text messaging generated five themes. The emerging themes included the use of more than one vernacular as a medium of instruction in communication development, commitment to being globally competitive, limited applicability due to the superiority of English and inadequate materials, burden caused by the complexity of the vernacular, and optimism in accepting the responsibility.

Use of More than One Vernacular in Teaching

The teachers acknowledged that MTB-MLE instruction is teaching with the use of the vernacular or the language of the area where the learning process is taking place. They emphasized, however, that teaching in MTB-MLE does not practically depend only one language but two or more languages in the learning process. Moreover, the teachers believed that MTB-MLE is a medium of instruction in the first 3 years of primary education of the children. The teachers

understood clearly the framework of MTB-MLE as a component of the K+12 program in the Philippines:

It is an education, formal or non-formal, using the learners' mother tongue and additional languages in the classroom (P5).

Mother tongue-based instruction for me is teaching the subjects like Math, Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (Values Education), Araling Panlipunan (Social Studies), MTB-MLE and Music, Art, Physical Education, and Health using the native dialect or the language in that particular area (P8).

Besides, the teachers understood that MTB-MLE would lead to communication development. It helps build confidence in communication among the pupils because when they start their primary education they can freely express their thoughts in addition to being able to understand the concepts taught by the teachers. Teaching through MTB-MLE can prepare the children to develop literacy abilities to be able to succeed at school.

In school, mother-tongue based instruction is used as the medium of instruction for some subjects like Math, Araling Panlipunan (Social Studies) and Edukasyon sa Pagpapakatao (Values Education). The reason is to make children easily understand the lessons, and to encourage them to participate actively during the discussion or in the learning process. With the mother tongue-based instruction, the children or the students can freely express their thoughts, and what they know already. They can understand the discussion and what is being asked of them (P3).

It is clear that the teachers understood and internalized the objectives of the government in the inclusion of MTB-MLE in the first 3 years of education as provided in the guidelines for the implementation of MTB-MLE enclosed in the Department of Education Order no. 16, Series of 2012 (DepEd, 2012). The teachers are hopeful that the children will be able to acquire the foundational competencies, which they can carry when they go on to higher learning skills in the intermediate and secondary education. When children have a strong foundation, they may be able to transfer that base to higher learning.

The teachers also see the importance of being understood when it comes to teaching. As implementers, they see that through MTB-MLE instruction, they are followed by the children, and that connotes real learning; not just rote memorization. Hence, they are eager and excited to teach because of the novelty of the instruction. As one teacher puts it, "*Teaching MTB-MLE is fun because this is new to me.* (P6)"

Commitment to Being Globally Competitive

The MTB-MLE teachers believed that they were the teachers of the 21st century because they were the implementers of the new curriculum. This belief made them feel they were becoming globally competitive teachers. The Department of Education implemented the K+12 curriculum with the inclusion of the MTB-MLE instruction in the first 3 years of primary education with the aim of uplifting the core education of the Philippines to become at par with the rest of the world regarding skills and competencies. The teachers in the current study understood well the objectives of the MTB-MLE instruction, and that is a good sign for the success of the program. P1 stated, “*We are the teacher of the 21st century and globally competitive.*” They emphasized, however, that they are only guides. They do not transfer learning to the pupils. They see themselves as partners in learning, acknowledging that they are on the same path with their students regarding learning, which is an indicator that the teachers do not possess a selfish attitude of having the monopoly of knowledge. It further means that there is so much room for improvement because the teachers are open for more input.

For me, being a teacher in MTB...is very interesting to be part of my teaching because it helps to the learners to easily catch up knowledge. The teacher in MTB instruction is a guide of the learners.... The learner is the center of the MTB instruction (P4).

We are considered as the implementer of new a curriculum mandated by the Dep Ed (P5).

Challenges of the Superiority of English and Inadequate Materials

The teachers still look at English as a preferred language and a symbol of intellectual and material superiority. They tend to undermine students who are not able to speak or interact in English, which is an attitude not right for the success of the MTB-MLE implementation.

Students don't like to read English and can't understand when the teacher uses the second language and third language (P1).

They are fluent in communicating but in the English instruction they are poor (P4).

Students do not know even simple English words (P5).

For me as a teacher, it's a big problem on my part because most of my students have poor knowledge in English instruction in the sense that they are more focused on the MTB-MLE rather than...the foreign language (P8).

Pupils can interact in the discussion, but they [find it] hard to understand especially in English (P10).

The teachers also realized that there are limitations of the applicability of the MTB-MLE. They noticed that not all concepts of mathematics and the natural sciences could be taught through MTB-MLE. For example, the children do not use the vernacular versions of number names. In addition, there are concepts in mathematics and natural sciences that have no equivalent terms in the vernacular language; hence, making them hard to translate.

The problems that I have experienced in MTB were during the preparation of lessons; I noticed that there are words or terms in the guide that are hard to understand especially in the Mathematics subject. I need to find the meaning of the word (P9).

Another problem is the fact that the vernacular languages used in the geographic area are complex. The teachers find it hard to connect the meanings of the words with different varieties in the vernacular language. One mother tongue may have interchangeable words and meanings. For example, the words “saya,” “sayal,” and “palda” in the local language of that region mean the same thing—skirt. The teachers are feeling lost, alienated, and burdened. A term in a vernacular language could mean many things depending on the place where it is used. Many times these differences are observed even between two different municipalities. It is more difficult teaching mathematics or natural sciences because the concepts have to be translated first into the vernacular then the teacher must find out if the colloquial term fits the particular place where the term is used. When the teacher cannot find a particular word used in the place, things can get awkward because there are no other references except the teaching guides provided by the Department of Education.

Most common problems I have experienced in teaching MTB-MLE is that students used different terms of the same thing for example, “saya”. Others call it “sayal” while others call it “palda.” Students argue on this, my role as a teacher is to let them understand that all are the same. I will let them understand that even the Bisayan [language] has many varieties (P8).

When it comes to instructional materials, the teachers admitted that the program is not ready. Learners’ materials and other textbooks are severely inadequate to provide enough skills to educators and students. The teachers find it difficult to prepare and conduct the lessons for the pupils. It is tough to acquire skills when they cannot contextualize the concepts taught because there are no local equivalents of the concepts.

Some problems I experienced in teaching MT-MLE are: (1) in the first year of teaching/implementing the program; I had the difficulty of securing the teaching materials like the curriculum guide, teaching guide, and the learners’ guide. All the materials needed were not yet available; some instructional materials secured were not complete; (2)

it also took time for me to understand and adjust to the new teaching method; and to understand the whole concept of the new curriculum; (3) the pupils are also taking their time to adjust because MTB-MLE instruction is not yet connected to their kindergarten lessons; (4) some parents have negative attitudes towards the MTB-MLE instruction; (5) some teaching and learner's materials are confusing because the available or the supplied guides are in Cebuano-Bisaya while in my school we use Boholano-Bisaya; (6) there are also Bisayan terms that are not familiar to the learners and the teacher (P10).

Moreover, the curriculum is based on the vernacular language. The teachers found it difficult to implement in the classroom setting. As far as the learners' modules and teaching guides are concerned, the words used in the classroom are not the exact words used by the children in their daily conversations. For example, the students do not use the vernacular words for numbers inside the classroom, but they use English, hence, the teachers dubbed it as an unusual program that needs unusual solutions. P1 stated, "*There are words which are not suitable in the daily conversation*".

Burden Caused by the Complexity of the Vernacular Language

The teachers find it difficult to teach using the mother tongue because the nature of the language itself is complex. The teaching materials pegged the mother tongue to "sinugbuanong binisaya," which has many semantic nuances in the Visayan language. This situation is also true in Southern Leyte, where the people do not speak entirely the same version of the Sinugbuanong Binisaya language. Hence, in the actual classroom instruction, there are terms used in the teaching material that are not understood by the teachers. The burden is on the teachers since they are the ones who will find the meaning of the words before they can teach them to the students.

Some of the words found in the references are too hard to understand particularly the Sinugbuanong Binisaya words (P1).

Teachers have problems to translate (P3)

There are also Bisayan terms that are unfamiliar to the learners and to the teacher (P5)

Some of the words are too hard to understand (P6)

There are words or terms in the guide that are hard to understand (P7)

Even Binisaya... has many varieties (P10).

Optimism in Accepting the Responsibility

One important element in this study is the commitment and confidence of the teachers. All the stakeholders in primary education are new to the MTB-MLE instruction. There is, therefore, the need for dedicated and optimistic teachers to make this work. Without the teachers' commitment and positive attitude, all the other stakeholders from the students to the parents and the community may fail to see the importance of this curriculum.

These are positive experiences to me: (1) success in the goal of the program, despite some problems of the implementation; (2) strength/hope for the struggles towards effective and quality education; (3) output/results of the program implementation; (4) encouragement to do more to excel in implementing the program; (6) encouragement from the community to embrace the program (P8).

While the teachers already felt the success they achieved, they still sensed that something needed to be added to their skills. More effort is needed from all the stakeholders to achieve more in the MTB-MLE implementation process. The teachers emphasized that the success of the curriculum does not depend only on the commitment and the acceptance of responsibilities on their part. The teachers need to be prepared regarding the competencies and skills as well as the provision of the necessary faculties from training to learning and instructional materials. The training that the teachers received from the national government is not enough, and the instructional materials are inadequate to answer the learning needs of the children. For example, as teachers in MTB-MLE, they emphasized the need to have a mastery of the vocabulary of the first language and to be able to translate it to the target language. They also acknowledged that fluency and confidence in the vernacular is a critical part of the teaching-learning process. Fluency and confidence are accomplished through additional training and textbooks for teachers and students.

These problems mean CHALLENGE, challenge in my teaching career so that I will be more flexible and innovative in my ways of teaching and to strive harder to grow professionally as to deliver the needed educational services to all my diverse learners. These also mean that, government should provide more educational supplies (books, references) to the teachers and the learners (P1).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The success of the implementation of the MTB-MLE curriculum in the Philippines is difficult to attain but not impossible. As experienced by the teachers in this study, progress in mother tongue instruction is difficult in an archipelago with complex and varied vernacular languages. But the MTB-MLE curriculum is a welcomed addition to the ever-challenging tasks of the teachers. As can be observed, the teachers understood their roles and discerned the challenge resulting from the addition of MTB-MLE in the curriculum. Moreover, the teachers accepted the challenge and realized their importance to the success of the MTB-MLE.

Nevertheless, the success or failure of the MTB-MLE curriculum of the Department of Education lies heavily on the support and prioritization of the national government and the political will of the Department of Education in providing the needs of the teachers, the classroom, and the learners. In the first 3 years of implementation, the teachers have observed success. It is not yet the end of the line, however. There is still a lot to be done and to be improved. Further studies about the experiences of MTB-MLE teachers are highly recommended to gain a deeper understanding of how the teachers experience MTB-MLE.

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