

# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTIDISCIPLINARY: APPLIED BUSINESS AND EDUCATION RESEARCH

2023, Vol. 4, No. 3, 692 – 700

<http://dx.doi.org/10.11594/ijmaber.04.03.02>

## Research Article

### A Policy Reform Framework for Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in the Philippines

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#### Article history:

Submission March 2023

Revised March 2023

Accepted March 2023

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#### ABSTRACT

The current Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education [MTB-MLE] policy in the Philippines is beset with numerous issues, and this adversely affects the quality of basic education provided across regions. To address this, this policy paper suggests reviewing the current MTB-MLE policy through a more systematic policy reform mechanism that is participatory. This way, all concerned stakeholders in the Filipino education community contribute to the growth of the basic education instruction in the country by ensuring proper implementation of a mother tongue-based instruction policy. Anchored on the Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1976), which believes on the following assumptions: *individualism, optimality, structures, self-regarding interests, and rationality*, this policy paper suggests a framework that the Department of Education can utilize in reviewing the existing policy and creating feasible decisions to improve the instruction in basic education. The proposal also drew inspiration from how the Bilingual Education Act of the United States of America became a promising legislation that has emphasized the importance of multicultural and multilingual classrooms in the country.

**Keywords:** *Education, Language, MTB-MLE, Philippines, Policy framework, Policy reform*

#### Introduction

The Philippines is home to indigenous groups that compose around 10-20% of the total population (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs, 2022). Because of this multiculturalism, linguistic diversity across the country is also prevalent. As of 2022, Ethnologue records 186 Philippine languages, of

which 182 is active while four are extinct. Apparently, the country is linguistically and culturally rich. However, this may also impact language policies in schools. While the 1987 Philippine Constitution recognizes English as the medium of instruction in academic institutions, the Department of Education implemented the use of Mother Tongue-Based

#### How to cite:

Aperochoco, M. D. B. (2023). A Policy Reform Framework for Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in the Philippines. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary: Applied Business and Education Research*. 4(3), 692 – 700. doi: 10.11594/ijmaber.04.03.02

Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), under Republic Act 10533, in the first three grade levels in public elementary schools. This underscores the use of 12 Philippine languages in 2012 and seven more in the following year. In the entire Southeast Asia, only the Philippines has this kind of national language policy (MeridiE, 2021). Even if this is an advancement for the Philippines in terms of education policies, this, too, experienced backlash from many educators and language experts. From the stakeholders' perspectives, there are problems with this language policy in the Philippine education landscape.

Cabansag (2016) found out that challenges with MTB-MLE implementation in the Philippines can be grouped into four: multilingual environment, difficulty in translation, mandatory compliance to the Department of Education order, and inadequacy of instructional materials. The disadvantages seem to be seen more by the stakeholders (Burton, 2013) as the implementation of the said policy follows a top-down approach instead of an interaction between the top and bottom to ensure effective policy implementation. Besides the issues with the system itself, many educators also experienced difficulties due to lack of books in mother tongue, vocabulary, and teacher-training (Lartec et al., 2014). Since its implementation, MTB-MLE faces endless problems with both instruction and resources. Because of this, in August 2022, several lawmakers in the country pushed for the reinstatement of the Filipino language as the medium of instruction and the suspension of MTB-MLE in kindergarten to third grade. Based on House Bill No. 2188, some lawmakers advocate for the suspension of MTB-MLE and focus on either English or Filipino as the medium of instruction. This is also supported by Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos, Jr. who believes that English is better as a medium of instruction in public elementary schools (Bautista, 2022).

Prior to the incorporation of the MTB-MLE into the public elementary education landscape, many lawmaker, stakeholders, and language policymakers had debates on whether the use of mother tongue would help improve the learners' reading skills at the earliest years possible. This is why, even if instructional and

learning materials were scarce and teacher-training was insufficient, the Department of Education still pushed through with the implementation of the policy. Malone and Malone (2011) underscored how important language competence and proficiency is for teachers who would be handling an MTB-MLE program. They strongly believe that building teachers' competence had to be prioritized before anything else. In an article they authored for the Summer Institute of Linguistics, they highlighted that trainees' language development, MTB-MLE students' background knowledge and skills, relevant theories, and curriculum and instructional materials are all essentials prior to program implementation. However, most of these, if not all, were lacking or missing when the Department of Education implemented it in 2012. While the department tried to provide more teacher-training and addressed the scarcity of books and other teaching materials, many teachers still encountered problems with the policy due to cultural and linguistic diversity in the schools where they were teaching (Billones & Cabatbat, 2019).

Exploring this policy needs a framework that can help identify the problematic aspects such as the system or preparedness of the key individuals involved in the planning, implementing, and monitoring stages. Hence, it is necessary to look into how programs are designed to ensure policy success. Looking into the American policy on bilingual education and other language-related policies in the education system is a good way to identify points for improvement in the current MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines. Crawford (1998) highlighted in his research on the language policy of the United States that developing students' bilingualism is correlated to cultivating academic excellence. Pedagogically speaking, they are complementary. Crawford also accentuated in his findings that native language-instruction could become instrumental in addressing poverty, family illiteracy, and stigma related to indigenous or minority language. In fact, Bautista (2022) reported that the Department of Education feels that there is a need for the improvement of the current MTB-MLE policy. Instead of suspending it, it will be ideal to allot more budget for research, instruction, and resources.

Learning from America's success in implementing bilingual education, although not a perfect one, can be very helpful for the Philippine education landscape to improve and for the current policy to be enriched. This way, a country like the Philippines learns from the language policy rigors went through by policymakers and school stakeholders to ensure success in language learning and academic excellence.

In this paper, I explored the following: (a) the history of MTB-MLE in the Philippines and (b) a proposed framework, based on theories and research findings, that can help improve the system of the MTB-MLE currently implemented in public elementary schools across the Philippines.

## Methods

This qualitative paper incorporated various data collection methods such as reviews of existing studies, case reports, and literature on the MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines. The author of this paper did extensive reading of related literature and studies to come up with the proposed framework. In the conduct of the analysis of available resources, the author observed objectivity to ensure that all aspects of this paper are based on a scientific analysis of existing facts pertaining to MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines.

## Results and Discussion

### *The Policy History*

The Philippines currently experiences language policy challenges in terms of the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). As previously mentioned, I would like to investigate the following the benefits and disadvantages of MTB-MLE policy in the Philippine education landscape, the strong points of American language policies in education that the Philippines can model from, and a proposed framework based on theories and research findings, that can help improve the system of the MTB-MLE policy currently implemented in public elementary schools across the Philippines. There is the necessity to propose a policy reform that can help the Department of Education in the Philippines address issues pertaining to the

implementation of a policy that has been impacting basic education stakeholders and academic communities.

In the previous sections, the background of the issue and the necessity to resolve this in connection to how MTB-MLE policy is procedurally implemented in the country were comprehensively discussed. Looking into the policy loopholes, it is vital to determine the strategic points where policy reform can take place and American education policy modelling can be taken into consideration. Apolonio (2022) posits that the re-evaluation of the present MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines is important considering all the issues that beset educators and learners. Based on critical analysis, he also found out that mother tongue interference at an early age may impede a learner's ability to learn English as a second language. Consequently, a learner may experience delays in using the target language communicatively. Therefore, the re-evaluation and proposal of a better MTB-MLE or any language policy that concerns basic education in the Philippines are deemed significant in many ways. First, public officials such as those working in the Department of Education (DepEd) may have the time to contemplate on the effectiveness of the program since its conception and initial implementation years ago. DepEd's role in the implementation of this policy is crucial as it is primarily responsible for any unforeseeable issues that involve implementation. As Gempeso and Mendez (2021) reported, there were administrative discrepancies, incongruences, and insufficiencies which resulted in learners' underdevelopment of the four macro skills. Hence, the policy reform proposed in this paper can help in looking into the current issues. Also, practitioners such as basic education teachers and school administrators may learn a lot from the policy reform being offered, which was also inspired by the American education language policies which have been products of years of refinement. Brisk (1981) emphasizes that language policies in American education underwent historical evolution that can be traced back to multilingual histories and native language pedagogy before. If this policy is considered by the Department of Education, Filipino

learners may no longer worry about their second language (L2) acquisition or learning and their ability to use the mother tongue for communicative purposes.

Philippines' rich history of colonialism influenced the various language policies that took place in the country's education landscape. As per accounts, the Educational Decree of 1863 established that Spanish be used in any formal education across regions (Gonzales, 2003). However, with the American occupation, the introduction to the use of the English language began, and this, in fact, prohibited the use of any Philippine language. For years, language policies in the country have evolved and were later polished with the implementation of the Revised Education Program (REP) in 1957 which allowed schools to independently design a curriculum based on local circumstances (Gonzales, 1998). More reformations were done in the next years until in 2012, the guidelines for the MTB-MLE implementation in the country were released. This gave birth to the current MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines. Amidst the rich historical traces of policy reforms in the country, issues still haunted basic education institutions. The Department of Education (2020) reported that the agency was willing to host conferences and hold dialogues to listen to all concerned parties. The problem though was the lack of polyvocality which did not give other stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, the voice to express their views on MTB-MLE in the Philippines. In fact, issues still emerged amidst the continuous policy reviews and the lack of a more proactive re-evaluation so that a better policy could be offered. This endangered the quality of basic education in the country, and it continues to the present with more concerns with multilingual environment and diversity (Cabansag, 2016), instructional materials and vocabulary (Lartec et al., 2014), and implementation (Burton, 2013). Apparently, the several attempts of policy reforms have not been successful because of the inappropriate identification of the problem that exists on the grassroots, i.e., the country's linguistic diversity that disallows the implementation of an academic-related mother tongue-based language policy in a community.

The framework design used in this paper is anchored on the Rational Choice Theory (Becker, 1976) which believes on the following assumptions: *individualism, optimality, structures, self-regarding interests, and rationality*. Operationally, individualism points out to how individuals take actions to advance larger social outcomes, such as educational reform with focus on language policies. Optimality, on the other hand, suggests that individuals choose their actions optimally, banking on the notion that, given the circumstances, they do the best they can. In this paper, individual actors are language policy reformists who see opportunities for the advancement of policy changes to elevate the quality of language instruction in Philippine basic education. Structures tell how a unitary decision can be made in special cases. However, this can be damaging to potential rational choices that should be made given a situation. Self-regarding interest, on the one hand, can be applied to how educators push for policy reforms as far as MTB-MLE is concerned because of their firsthand experience with the policy at school and encounters with learners. Lastly, rationality comes into play in terms of coming up with the best decision for personal good such as advancing policy reforms that can benefit learners, teachers, or parents themselves. The personal perspective towards the positive impact of an MTB-MLE policy reform serves as fuel to the educational engine that keeps language instruction running in academic institutions.

Another fact considered in writing this paper is that public policy is not gradual and incremental but rather is disjoint and episodic (Baumgartner & Jones, 2010). Philippines did experience a long period of stability when it comes to language policies as, for many years, Philippine basic education used the English as the medium of instruction (MOI) as mandated by the Constitution. However, the emergence of literacy problems in the Philippines showed a causation of how sudden decisions for language policy changes were enacted through the MTB-MLE initiative. This is a clear manifestation of what Baumgartner and Jones maintain as "disjoint and episodic." As far as policy modelling is concerned, the current MTB-MLE pro-

cess initiated to reach settlement and implementation has been vague for most who have been affected by the policy. However, the best policy to address current MTB-MLE issues is the *three-into-one tribunary model* which Teisman (2000 in Howlett, McConnell, Perl, 2015) describes as a “a policy process stream that then begins to work in its own way towards an outcome. As this model suggests, three elements are required to come up with authoritative decision-making and policy implementation: *problems, policies, and politics*. In the same manner, these are all important to be considered in making the current policy framework proposed to the Philippine government through its Department of Education.

In this paper, I intensively reviewed the American education’s BEA or the Bilingual Education Act, also known as the Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1967. After careful review of this, I did in-depth readings on various case studies in relation to BEA implementation across basic education institutions in the country. In the context of this paper, I recommend the following: (a) definition of the literacy issues that were considered for the MTB-MLE policy and the contrasting viewpoints on the effectiveness of the current implementation; (b) crafting decision criteria for MTB-MLE policy reform that should include consultations with stakeholders, case study reviews, dialogues with experts in the field, and consultative sessions with language policy scholars and professionals; (c) evaluation of the prospective decision criteria, with phases of consultative meetings with local

public school administrators and teachers through the Department of Education; (d) creation of valid alternatives with advisement from language policy experts and researchers in the field of language education and curriculum; (e) identification of optimal policy decision for reform by rating each alternative through a panel of experts representing all spheres concerned with the implementation and monitoring; and (f) drafting and recommendation of a new policy that is grounded on the findings of the preceding stages.

### The Proposal

To review Philippines’ MTB-MLE policy, I intensively reviewed the American education’s BEA or the Bilingual Education Act, also known as the Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Amendments of 1967. After careful review of this, I did in-depth readings on various case studies in relation to BEA implementation across basic education institutions in the country.

After all the aforementioned phases and in light of all the scholarly readings done for the purpose of this paper, I am recommending a framework that can help the Philippine government, through its Department of Education, undergo a systematic process of reviewing the case of MTB-MLE across basic education levels in the country and of crafting a better policy that is based on a series of consultative sessions with different social agents involved to ensure representation in the policy-making stage. Shown in Figure 1 is the proposed framework.

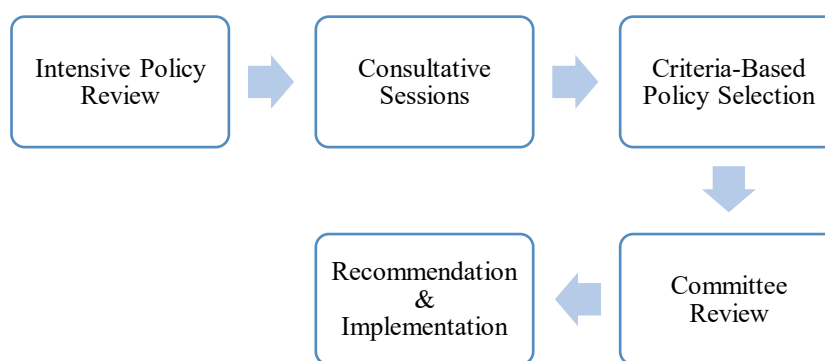


Figure 1. Proposed MTB-MLE Policy Reform Framework

As Figure 1 shows, the policy reform process involves five major steps. First is the *Intensive Policy Review* that includes extensive reading, document reviews, and case analyses of previously conducted studies and other reportorial documents. The second step is composed of *Consultative Sessions* which are basically a series of group discussions, dialogues, and committee conversations to understand the problem with the current MTB-MLE policy and craft alternatives that the different social institutions can choose from. In this phase, expected participants are the Department of Education, district and division education leaders, school representatives like administrators and faculty, student union, parents, and most importantly, language policy makers or reformists who have incontestable knowledge of MTB-MLE in the Philippine context. Among the proposed alternatives, the members then choose one best policy to consider for recommendation to the government. This is the *Criteria-Based Policy Selection* where everybody involved gets to determine the best choice based on pre-determined criteria. Once done, the members deliberate on the soundness of the policy choice and decides on the specifications of the said policy. Here, *Committee Review* shall take place. After this stage, policy reform decisions then advance through its *Recommendation and Implementation*.

The framework begins with a review of the MTB-MLE policy currently in effect. As what Apolonio (2022) posed, there is a need to re-evaluate the current policy to address the learners' and teachers' challenges as far as teaching-learning process is concerned. The framework is highly contextualized considering that Philippine educational issues are considered in each of the processes. Perez (2019) presented a framework for MTB-MLE implementation from the Southeast Asian countries' perspectives. Although this framework suggests important elements such as appropriate curriculum, community support, policy support, inter-agency partnership, qualified and well-trained teachers, and thorough documentation, monitoring, and evaluation, it has limitations in terms of the context of MTB-MLE policy implementation in the Philippines with consideration of the vast array of education-

related issues across regions. Hence, the proposal of this framework, which is also based on the Bilingual Education Act of the United States, is a novel attempt to create a more systematic mechanism of reviewing, evaluating, and implementing policy changes in the current MTB-MLE policy enforced by the Department of Education. The contrastive analysis of Philippine MTB-MLE policy and that of the U.S. is helpful enough to earn some insights on what can work best in a third-world country like the Philippines. As Brisk (1981) maintained, the language policies in American education underwent historical evolution that could be traced to the country's rich multicultural histories and native pedagogies.

Anchoring on Becker's (1976) Rational Choice Theory, the framework also revolves around the following assumptions: *individualism, optimality, structures, self-regarding interests, and rationality*. In the context of the proposed framework, individualism is manifested when policymakers draw their policy reform inspiration from their personal experiences with the existing policy. Therefore, teachers and parents need to be included in the policy making decisions to ensure that policy reforms will be based on a purpose that can advance larger social outcomes. Optimality shows how policymakers need to act to the best of their capacity in realizing MTB-MLE policy reforms given the numerous issues encountered by schools across the Philippines. Structures, on the other hand, refers to how unitary decisions can be made by all individuals and agencies involved in the policy reform process to ensure a more coherent policy change in the system. Hence, all people and departments need to work hand in hand so that the common goal of polishing MTB-MLE policy reforms in the country can become possible. Self-regarding interests show how teachers, being the implementers of the policy, need to voice their narratives so that a bigger picture of the problem can be made for the purpose of creating further policy reforms and enabling policy changes in the future. Finally, rationality underscores the importance of criteria-based selection of the policy change. When these criteria crafted by and decided upon by all involved agencies, the best option can be selected so that bigger changes

can be enacted in the MTB-MLE policy of the Philippines.

With this proposal, I am projecting to influence the policy decisions of the Department of Education, which is the decision-making and policy-enforcing body in terms of MTB-MLE. Hence, convincing them of the benefits of this policy review and the advantages of undertaking a policy reform that is robustly based on a scientific process are all significant in seeing potential growth when it comes to MTB-MLE in the Philippines. Consequently, I hope that this will also impact the presently problematic stance of MTB-MLE education on the elementary level of schools across regions. As Hernandez-Malipot (2020) reported, the Department of Education continually improves its MTB-MLE roadmap in the years to come. Hence, it is my desire that the department remains open-minded about policy reviews, and then, policy reforms for the betterment of Philippine education quality. Also, I believe that proposing this framework can become a milestone to advance potential changes in how MTB-MLE policies are implemented in the country. After all, scholars recommend policy review and reform to address issues pertaining to the current implementation (Cabansag, 2016; Lartec et al., 2014; Burton, 2013).

Although the proposed framework may be far from being considered by the concerned agencies, I can say that with proper platforms, I can provide other scholars and even policymakers the insights they need to reconsider the review or re-evaluation of the current MTB-MLE policy by undergoing a more systematic mechanism that is participatory, contemplative, and problem-oriented. The success of this proposal is heavily dependent on policymakers' decisions, obviously. However, when political barriers like self-interests and apathy are overcome, growth in the country's language policies may become as evident as how it should be.

## **Conclusion**

This paper focuses on the proposal of a policy reform framework that will systematize the review of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy in the

Philippines. This framework draws inspiration from the American Bilingual Education Act and is anchored on political theories that explain how rationality in decision-making contributes to the policy reform success.

For the implementation of the policy review and reform, this article suggests a step-by-step procedure that will allow policymakers to systematically review the existing policy and reflectively decide on the best policy reform based on a series of reviews, consultative sessions, and criteria-based selection stages. This framework may be similar to whatever unknown framework that the Philippine government, specifically the Department of Education, utilized prior to the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy in the country, this can provide scholars, language educators, and policymakers the insights on the structure that must be observed to ensure a more effective policy implementation in the Philippine education landscape.

The largest impediment though in the implementation of this framework is the potential objection coming from the Department of Education itself, denying the existence of the issues with the current policy mechanism of MTB-MLE across the country. The possible denial of the problematic policy situation may hinder the department itself and the government as a whole from seeing the clear picture of the problems experienced by schools, teachers, parents, and young learners across the country. Hence, this barrier needs to be addressed or avoided to ensure that the proposed policy reform framework can be considered by people who truly care about the MTB-MLE instruction in the country. Because there is no such thing as perfect education system, the Philippines, through its Department of Education, must be continually open to all shapes of potential change and growth. This way, all aspects of the Philippine education system can be developed for the future of all Filipino youth.

## **Acknowledgment**

The researcher extends his utmost gratitude to Dr. Sarah James of the Department of Political Science, Gonzaga University, Spokane, WA, USA, for her invaluable recommendations

that enriched this article. Gratitude is also extended to the Gonzaga University for the Jesuit education that gave the researcher the inspiration to pursue a paper dedicated to his home country, the Philippines. He is also immensely thankful to the Fulbright Philippines and the University of Mindanao for giving him the opportunity to undergo ten-month teaching and study at Gonzaga University through the Fulbright Foreign Language Teaching Assistant Program.

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