

Mother Tongue or Muddled Tongue

Mary Joy B. Gelizon

*School of Teacher Education, Biliran Province State University, Biliran Campus 6566, Philippines
Corresponding email: mjgelizon2@gmail.com*

The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy was introduced in the Philippines to help young learners understand concepts more easily by using the language they speak at home. While the idea carries strong educational value, its implementation has caused widespread confusion. For many students and teachers, the classroom has become a place of uncertainty, not because of a lack of effort, but due to insufficient support and unclear direction.

In diverse and multilingual regions, deciding which mother tongue to use is already a major issue. Some communities speak multiple dialects, yet the Department of Education expects a single local language to be used for instruction. Teachers are often caught in between, many were trained in Filipino or English and are now required to teach in a language they themselves barely speak fluently (Dagalea et al. 2022). Instead of improving learning, this disconnect adds another layer of complexity to an already struggling education system.

The lack of appropriate and quality instructional materials further worsens the situation. Textbooks, modules, and activities in mother tongue languages are either unavailable or poorly translated. In many cases, teachers rely on translating existing English or Filipino content themselves, resulting in inconsistent and sometimes incorrect teaching. This undermines the original goal of helping students build strong reading and thinking foundations in their own language. According to Lartec et al. (2014), teachers face serious challenges in preparing lessons due to the absence of standard materials and clear guidelines in multilingual contexts.

To make MTB-MLE truly effective, the national government must begin with a serious evaluation of its implementation. The Department of Education must conduct region-specific assessments to determine which areas benefit from the policy and which face greater challenges. As emphasized by Berame et al. (2023), implementation of MTB-MLE varies widely, particularly in Indigenous Peoples Education, where cultural and linguistic diversity is high. Teacher training must also be prioritized, not as a one-time seminar but as an ongoing program. Educators need language enhancement, materials development training, and pedagogical support that acknowledges the real challenges they face daily.

Local government units (LGUs) can serve a proactive role by funding localized learning projects such as storytelling sessions, reading camps, and writing workshops in the mother tongue. They can also collaborate with local universities and language scholars to produce quality, culturally relevant educational materials. Avel et al. (2022) highlighted that strong community partnerships and school-level innovations play a critical role in successfully implementing MTB-MLE, especially in Indigenous learner-dominated areas. Community involvement is crucial. Barangay councils, local writers, and parents can all take part in creating a learning environment that embraces local culture and language without compromising academic growth.

Non-government organizations (NGOs) and education-focused institutions can assist by partnering with schools to provide technical support, training, and materials.

These partnerships can bridge resource gaps and offer sustainable solutions for long-term improvement. Velasco (2024) noted that the ideological beliefs of educators and policy makers about language often impact how MTB-MLE is carried out, making it all the more important to align values, training, and community efforts.

When used effectively, the mother tongue can serve as a bridge to deeper understanding. But if it continues to be implemented without clear direction and strong support, it risks becoming more of a barrier than a benefit. Education must not confuse or divide, it should empower. Turning the muddled experience of MTB-MLE into a meaningful one requires united efforts, proper investment, and a renewed focus on what truly matters: helping Filipino children learn, understand, and grow.

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