



# Teachers' shifting language ideologies and teaching practices in Philippine mother tongue classrooms

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## ABSTRACT

Though attracting some attention since its implementation, only a few scholars have closely examined how the Philippines' Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy gets enacted at the classroom level. This study critically examines how elementary teachers' language ideologies and teaching practices changed since the country institutionalized said policy. Using ethnographic methods, the researcher collected the data over 14 weeks in a predominantly Cebuano-speaking public elementary school in Northern Mindanao. The findings reveal that the elementary teachers were initially antagonistic toward MTB-MLE, but their attitude gradually shifted as they realized the pedagogical and learning benefits of mother tongue instruction in their own context. The study also found that translanguaging is often deployed by both teachers and students in order to negotiate and resist language standardization and the idealization of Cebuano native speakers as a result of the implementation of MTB-MLE. Moreover, the English-only ideology has continued to challenge the legitimacy and value of MTB-MLE, as learning English is often invoked by some teachers as a means to participate in a globalized world. This paper concludes by arguing that engaging both preservice and in-service teachers not only in MTB-MLE trainings and workshops but also in ideological conversations on multilingual education is a necessary step toward reversing the inequalities and challenges of MTB-MLE in the Philippines.

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## 1. Introduction

In previous years before the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education policy (MTB-MLE) was institutionalized in the Philippines, many Filipino children had to face the challenges of being educated in English and (Tagalog-based) Filipino, both of which many of them did not speak or understand. This experience was ubiquitous among young learners outside Manila, specifically for the majority of children in the Northern Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao regions, as they were forced to leave their mother tongues outside the classroom. The country's old Bilingual Education (BE) policy, which had institutionalized the use of English and Filipino as media of instruction inadvertently positioned many students at a disadvantage. In 2012, however, the Department of Education (DepEd) started implementing MTB-MLE, refining the old BE policy by giving local languages a space in the country's educational landscape. This language policy shift has gradually changed some of the discourses on language practices, ideologies, and

policies in Philippine schools. While MTB-MLE as a language-in-education policy has given a lot of hope to many of its advocates and supporters, it has attracted debates about its relevance and practicality among policymakers, teachers, parents, and even among teacher-education students. These debates have become the primary motivation behind this research work. The issue of which languages deserve to be taught in Philippine schools inspired this ethnographic study because the author is a product of the old bilingual education policy.

Though MTB-MLE has attracted some attention since its implementation, only a few scholars (Burton, 2013; Dawe, 2014; Mahboob & Cruz, 2013) have examined how MTB-MLE gets enacted at the classroom level. This study, therefore, aims to fill this gap in the literature by answering the following questions: *How do elementary teachers understand MTB-MLE? And how has said policy affected or changed, if any, their language ideologies and classroom practices?* At the same time, I wanted to investigate the challenges that MTB-MLE teachers face since they hold the responsibility for implementing language policies at the classroom level (Creese, 2010; Ricento & Hornberger, 1996). Creese (2010) maintains, "Individually or collectively teachers within their school communities will operate policy according to their local contexts, experiences and values even where there is a strong element of statutory

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compliance” (p. 34). The same scholar further contends that it is important to look at how the MTB-MLE policy is interpreted at the local level, because teachers “will interact with policy not in a one-to-one reading of what is required, but in an interactive frame which involves their own interpretation within their own localized communities” (p. 34). Furthermore, this work is grounded on [Tollefson's \(1991\)](#) position on the politics of language in the Philippines. He said, “what language(s) should be used in education and in the exercise of commerce, mass media, politics and government” is a key question that deserves attention since this “has a crucial impact upon access to economic resources, to policy-making institutions, and to political power” (p. 141). Focusing on language ideologies or “the abstract (and often implicit) belief systems related to language and linguistic behavior” ([McGroarty, 2010](#), p. 3), and classroom practices of teachers (i.e., using the mother tongue as language of instruction and literacy) found in one public elementary school, this ethnographic work hopes to engage teachers and researchers in discussions of language ideologies and politics that influence educational and language policymaking, planning, and implementation. In the next section, I discuss the language policies adopted by the Philippine government to show that these policies are socio-politically embedded and ideologically and discursively constructed, negotiated, and resisted in various ways.

## 2. Language policies in the Philippines within their socio-historical context

Before the coming of the Spaniards in 1521, the Philippines was already very diverse both culturally and ethnolinguistically. When the Spaniards occupied the archipelago for over 350 years, they imposed the Spanish language. The language became dominant in terms of governance and continued to be spoken in the archipelago even after Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States through the Treaty of Paris in 1898. When the Philippines became one of its territories, the United States introduced the public school system, and with it came the use of English as medium of instruction. Slowly, English took the place of the Spanish language, as the number of Spanish speakers in the country rapidly declined. [Gonzalez \(2003\)](#) claims that when the U.S. government took over after the treaty, English became “the language of government and competence in English became a condition for work and advancement in the civil service (p. 2). Gradually the teaching shifted from Spanish to English as the latter became the medium of instruction, facilitating the spread of English all over the Philippines (cf. [Bernardo, 2008](#)). According to [Gonzalez \(2004\)](#), a special survey conducted by the Linguistic Society of the Philippines (LSP) in 1990 showed that the number of English users in the Philippines during that time was at 56%, a giant leap considering the small percentage (only at 4%) of English users during the early American occupation. This number continued to increase, as only four years later, the Social Weather Stations ([SWS, 1994](#)) surveyed 1, 200 respondents and found that 56% of Filipinos could speak, 73% could read, 59% could write, and 74% could understand English. At present, English continues to be a dominant language in the Philippines, as it is used as medium of instruction in many content area subjects, especially in private schools and in both public and private higher educational institutions. English is also widely used in many other government and private agencies and industries such as in law and judicial practice, health and social services, politics, and entertainment ([Gonzalez, 2006](#)).

Another dimension critical to our understanding of the Philippines' sociolinguistic contexts is the different language ideologies that are being circulated and reproduced in the country with regard to Filipino—the Philippines' national language. Until now, there is confusion as to how or to what extent Filipino is

different from Tagalog. The latter was formerly tagged as the country's national language ([Cruz, 2003](#)). Due to space constraint, I will only briefly discuss the historical background of the controversies surrounding the naming of Filipino as the ‘national language’ enshrined in both the 1973 and 1987 Philippine Constitution. Before Filipino became the national language, the Philippines' policy makers originally advocated for the use of the vernacular as medium of instruction in the early 1930s in order to preserve the native languages and shield them from the dominance of English. However, in 1935 during the Constitutional Convention, a time when the Philippines was transitioning into becoming an independent nation, the issue of national language surfaced and became part of policymakers' conversations. The members of the convention then proposed that a national language be developed and adopted. This effort to create a national language supports [Fishman's \(2008\)](#) contention that national languages are based on the ideology of nation-state building, a practice common among post-colonial countries like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore among others. In 1937, the National Language Institute recommended Tagalog to become the national language; this was, however, renamed as *Pilipino* in 1959 to create a national identity for all Filipinos all over the country. Even with a new name, many policymakers, especially those coming from outside Manila saw *Pilipino* as a “pure” version of Tagalog ([Dawe, 2014](#)). In spite of the debates and resistance of some policymakers, however, *Pilipino* continued to be used in the bilingual education program, which the Board of National Education espoused and implemented in the 1970s. During this period, the local languages were used as auxiliary languages<sup>1</sup> during the initial stages of teaching and literacy. For instance, in Cebuano-speaking regions, Cebuano was used to support the teaching of various subjects that were taught in Filipino and English. However, [Gonzalez \(1998\)](#) reported that the use of the vernacular or local languages was discouraged beyond the first year of education “as afterwards an alternating variety of Filipino and English is used” (p. 497). Yet again, the 1987 Philippine Constitution renamed the national language, this time as *Filipino* (now with an F) as it “developed” and became a dialect of Tagalog ([Cruz, 2003](#)). The institutionalization of Filipino as the country's national language has marginalized and to some extent erased other Philippine languages from the country's linguistic landscape ([Sercombe & Tupas, 2014](#)), as the former Spanish and American colonial state embarked on the complex project of nation-building. And while the Philippine Constitution assigned Filipino as the country's national language to be used as lingua franca in the archipelago, English was also institutionalized as an official language for purposes of instruction and communication (1987 Philippine Constitution Article 14, Section 7). In other words, the two languages—English and Filipino—have enjoyed the hegemonic privilege of being used, circulated, and taught in many facets of Philippine society for many years now. While the Constitution promotes the use of Filipino and English all over the country, efforts to preserve and promote the use of the local non-dominant and regional languages remained scant before MTB-MLE was put in place. The negligence of policymakers to promote the regional and indigenous languages was a major concern raised by minority language users, especially since the constitution explicitly stated that as the Filipino language evolves “it shall be further developed and enriched on the basis of existing Philippine and other languages” (1987 Philippine Constitution Article 14, Section 7). Efforts to include the other Philippine languages

<sup>1</sup> The local vernaculars were used to support understanding of lessons taught in either Filipino or English depending on the subject. For instance, after explaining a lesson in Filipino, Cebuano might be used to provide examples and further explanation.

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