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MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION (MTB-MLE) AND A NEED FOR PROGRAM EVALUATION

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Key points

- To date, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has been implemented in the Philippines for seven years. It is an established national program that has earned the Philippines a reputation as one of the trailblazers in large-scale MTB-MLE implementation.
- Currently, although there are available national assessments that can provide evaluation data to determine MTB-MLE effectiveness and efficiency, there is still no current formal and large-scale program evaluation that spans various program components and identifies which ones contribute to student achievement.
- Government authorities should craft a comprehensive policy on MTB-MLE program evaluation that synthesizes available assessment data and program evaluation results. Such an evaluation can be done on a macro (national) and micro (school and division) level, with the latter informing the former. Evaluation data should be disseminated nationally and internationally to contribute to local and international MTB-MLE research and practice.

Introduction

In 2009, after more than two decades of the implementation of the Bilingual Education Program (BEP), the Philippines shifted to the teaching and use of mother tongues (MTs) as media of instruction (MOI) in the early years of schooling through the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy, as articulated by the Department of Education (DepEd)'s Department Order 74, s. 2009 (*Institutionalizing Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education*). MTB-MLE is the teaching and use of more

than two languages as media of instruction that starts with the learners' mother tongue or first language. The institution of MTB-MLE is aligned with the recommendations of the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA), and the results of the Lubuagan First Language Component (FLC), Lingua Franca Project, and Math Double Exposure studies, which support the positive effects of MT use in education (Department of Education 2009). MTB-MLE became one of the banner programs of the K to 12 curriculum when it was signed into law (Republic Act No. 10533) in 2013.

In the Philippine MTB-MLE program, learners in Kindergarten up to Grade 3 use their mother tongues as MOI in learning content subjects, and they study three language subjects (Mother Tongue, Filipino, and English) from Grades 1 to 3. The program currently uses nineteen (19) official MTs² for which the DepEd provides instructional materials and teacher training. There are also other local languages which are used for MTB-MLE, especially in ethnically diverse areas. The program is nationally implemented in around 40,000 schools, and the Philippines is one of the few countries in the world that operate MTB-MLE on a massive scale.

The implementation of MTB-MLE is a landmark development as it gave formal recognition to the use of MTs in basic education in the Philippines. English had played a prominent role in Philippine society, including in the education sector, at the expense of local languages. MTs may have been used as MOI at various periods in Philippine history, but MTB-MLE is the first program to elevate the status of MTs by establishing them as language subjects.

Current situation

The MTB-MLE program is not perfect, but it has been operational and has achieved several successes to date.

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² These official MTs are Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Iloko, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Waray, Tausug, Maguindanaon, Maranao, Chabacano, Ybanag, Ivatan, Sambal, Akianon, Kinaray-a, Yakan, and Surigaonon.

First, full K–3 implementation has been achieved since the first national rollout in 2012, with the first cohort that received MTB-MLE at Grade 1 now at Grade 7. Second, several aspects of the program have been institutionalized, such as mass teacher training, materials development for all 19 official MTs, release of DepEd orders to facilitate program implementation, and administration of national assessments to measure program effectiveness. Some areas for improvement remain, particularly on advocacy efforts, teaching of reading comprehension (Pouezevara et al. 2015), linkages with relevant agencies, and program monitoring and evaluation, among others.

The scale of MTB-MLE implementation in the country and the developments it has achieved through the years have earned the Philippines a reputation as a trailblazer in MT education. In his opening speech at the 5th International Conference on Language and Education in 2016, Deputy Minister of Education of Thailand, H.E. Teerakiat Jareonsettasin, singled out the Philippines as a leader in implementing MTB-MLE. Naturally, a program of this size and status in the MTB-MLE landscape demands to be formally evaluated.

At the moment, MTB-MLE program evaluation in the country comes in three forms: through (1) national assessments, (2) large-scale studies, and (3) regular instructional monitoring.

The three national assessments that provide data on MTB-MLE are the Early Grades Reading Assessment (EGRA), Early Grades Math Assessment (EGMA), and the Language Assessment in the Primary Grades (LAPG, now the Early Language Literacy and Numeracy Assessment). These serve to provide data to determine the effectiveness and efficiency of MTB-MLE (Department of Education 2015), with the LAPG also providing 2014 baseline data on the first cohort that completed a full K–3 MTB-MLE implementation. Data from these assessments do say a lot about learner achievement, but can only tell whether the program is effective or not. If taken in itself, it cannot identify the program components that contributed to success. In an effort to arrive at these factors, LAPG data mining was conducted by the South East Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Center for Educational Innovation and Technology (SEAMEO-INNOTECH) in collaboration with DepEd. They looked at 21 predictors and assessed how these contributed to student performance. While some have been identified to be significant predictors of student performance, such as the availability of textbooks, the predictors account for only 17% of student performance, leaving a very big percentage for variance (S. Acosta, personal communication, September 2016). This highlights the need for a program evaluation that can inform teachers and

other stakeholders about program components that contribute to student achievement.

While MTB-MLE was unfolding, implementation feedback was provided by a few large-scale studies. Some of these are the Philippines EGRA Study (2014), the EGRA Follow-on Study (2015), and *Understanding Best Practices in MTB-MLE in the Philippines* (2013–2016). While these researches have provided helpful evaluation data about program components, they have already ended and are not a permanent mechanism of the program’s evaluation. Such studies are conducted rarely and are dependent on the budget and priorities of independent agencies. Thus, the lack of an institutionalized evaluation mechanism for MTB-MLE still persists.

The third source of evaluation data is class observations, as part of mentoring or instructional supervision. The mandate for monitoring programs and policies is delegated to school heads and division offices. However, with around 40,000 elementary schools scattered all over the archipelago, consistent, comprehensive, and standard monitoring is a challenge for the DepEd system. Currently, there is no available information on program monitoring, particularly on various adaptations done and what drives them. While some sort of evaluation takes place in several schools, this still warrants some form of regularity and standardization which will come from conducting a formal and permanent program evaluation.

The need for program evaluation

While looking at student achievement is helpful in monitoring program effectiveness, program or policy evaluation remains essential, as it “capture[s], in a credible manner, the drivers of quality and the factors which mediate them” (Kiely and Rea-Dickins 2005, 11). While we, for example, may know that learners are performing well, strong program components that contribute to student achievement will not be identified without program evaluation data.

Conducting MTB-MLE program evaluation is in line with the shift in MLE research to look into the ‘hows’ of successful program implementation (Cummins 2013). With the Philippines leading the pack of large-scale MTB-MLE implementers, there is great interest from peers to know how the program is doing.

After ten years of BEP implementation, a large-scale evaluation was conducted by the Linguistic Society of the Philippines, under the leadership of Brother Andrew Gonzalez, F.S.C.. The evaluation found that the decline of education and English competence of students were multi-factorial and involved teacher competence, lack of materials, and financial support. Recommendations focused on program components such

as language, advocacy, and teacher training (Gonzalez and Sibayan 1988). No other comprehensive program evaluation of a language in education policy has been conducted since.

One study (Metila 2014) aimed to fill the absence of an evaluation mechanism in Philippine MTB-MLE by conducting a theory-based evaluation of Lubuagan Central School (LCS), one of the participating schools in the FLC study. The study aimed to see what program components made it successful, and design a context-based evaluation model from its experiences and best practices. The study proposes a two-level program evaluation model that focuses on materials and instruction. The primary (Level 1) evaluation is school-based, while the optional Level 2 evaluation is conducted in coordination with a partner school that has a common linguistic and cultural background which serves as baseline. Schools evaluate each other's MTB-MLE programs in Level 2. The conduct of Level 2 inter-school evaluation is ideal, and is done only after a school has performed well based on Level 1 evaluation results. A baseline Level 1 performance is set to ensure that a school is capable in evaluating and helping a partner school in program implementation.

As a way of involving and empowering program participants, both levels of evaluation rely on the participation of teachers and school heads. Evaluation of activities that look into materials and instruction is designed so that they could be integrated with other tasks of school heads. The study has also designed a set of validated and piloted class observation tool and instructional materials evaluation tool specifically for MTB-MLE evaluation. This kind of micro-level program evaluation can be easily integrated into DepEd's system and conducted regularly with minimal costs. Data can be checked and submitted to the next tiers of the Department for consolidation and synthesis. The model is flexible enough to be modified to cater to a national or macro-level evaluation. The model, however, has not been tested yet, and there is surely some requisite polishing necessary to improve the model and to bolster data objectivity. For this, data checks by an external coordinator from another school or division can be conducted.

While a more formal evaluation of the program is one of the research priorities of DepEd and plans for an omnibus policy for MTB-MLE which includes monitoring and evaluation is underway, what is more favorable is a separate policy on formal program evaluation that will establish it as a permanent component of MTB-MLE and will involve regular and consistent evaluations throughout its implementation. This has to be integrated as an inherent and indispensable part of the program, and should be context-based and emancipatory for

key participants as well. This, along with national assessment data, can offer a comprehensive evaluation feedback on MTB-MLE implementation, which will then rebound on present and future steps to improve and enhance the MTB-MLE program.

Ways forward

Given the lack of an inherent evaluation mechanism in MTB-MLE, relevant government agencies should craft policies that will require the systematic and widespread conduct and report on program evaluation that complements available relevant assessment data. Such a policy should make monitoring and evaluation an inherent and indispensable aspect of the program that is conducted on a regular basis.

Such policies should include guidelines that will inform evaluators on how to conduct program evaluation. For cost- and time-efficiency, these can be conducted through a micro-level or school-based form of evaluation that feeds data to a macro-level evaluation. The cited evaluation model for materials and instruction, though not piloted yet, can serve as a guide for drafting this kind of plan.

In line with MTB-MLE's valuing of the local, any large-scale evaluation should still aim to be context-based and in touch not only with local cultures and languages, but also with the specific pragmatic and socio-political nuances in every setting. This can be done by using evaluation tools that accommodate these and tapping the participation of evaluators who both understand the socio-cultural contexts of study areas and could maintain objectivity. For the policy to be implemented efficiently, it should include a set of contextualized tools for a standard, practical, and convenient evaluation.

To check for consistency and to get a more varied perspective of program performance, policies can be crafted for encouraging research that particularly caters to the program evaluation of MTB-MLE and synthesizing available assessment/evaluation data for it.

Finally, a policy that requires the use and dissemination of micro- and macro-level evaluation data should be in place. Considering the scale of the program, and the attention it has received in the international landscape, the Philippines should regularly share information about program evaluation. Data should be disseminated in both national and international contexts, especially to local teachers and stakeholders.

The policy should also make room for the analysis of evaluation data as possible bases for the modification of program design (for example, for shifting from an early-exit to late-exit MTB-MLE design). ■

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