

Parents' Views on the Mother Tongue Instruction of Pupils with Mixed Vocabularies

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Abstract. Several studies assert that mother tongue instruction promotes academic success. This convinced policy-makers to institute a national policy implementing Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in the primary years. This study qualitatively examined the views of 32 parents with children using mixed vocabularies on mother tongue program implementation. Using a descriptive single case study design, the parents' views were explored through interviews, observations, and analysis of existing school documents. Thematic analysis was used to generate themes and patterns in the responses. The findings suggest that mother tongue instruction promotes social and cultural development. However, parents face different challenges in assisting their children who do not have a strong mother tongue foundation. The study recommends the conduct of an MTB-MLE re-orientation program for the parents and their involvement in the curriculum planning process and material production.

Keywords: parental views, mother tongue instruction, multilingual education, mixed vocabularies

1. INTRODUCTION

“Any credible educator will agree that schools should build on the experience and knowledge that children bring to the classroom, and instruction should also promote children's abilities and talents (Cummins, 2000).” This assumption led to the implementation of the mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) program in educational institutions asserting that a child's mother tongue is a rich linguistic and cultural heritage that reinforces learning.

A positive relationship was determined between mother tongue instruction and a child's educational success. Findings of Dumatog and Dekker (2003) suggest that a child's mother tongue helps him to understand, read, and write and to acquire another language claiming that "children develop new knowledge and skills based on what they already know from their community and culture". Cummins (2000), likewise, asserts that "the level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development". Malone (2004) also claims that "the challenge to mother tongue-based multilingual education is to enable mother tongue speakers of non-dominant languages to build a strong educational foundation in their first language, to bridge successfully into one or more additional languages and to continue using both or all languages for on-going education and life-long learning".

It was further explained by Krashen (2001) that "what the theory implies, quite simply, is that language acquisition, first or second, occurs when comprehension of real messages occurs. Language acquisition does not require extensive use of conscious grammatical rules and does not require tedious skills". This was seconded by Malone (2004) stating that "there is emphasis on meaning and communication (focusing on whole texts) and on accuracy and correctness (focusing on parts of the language)".

Consequently, the Department of Education (DepEd) issued DepEd Order No. 18, s. 2011 or the "Guidelines on the Conduct of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Training" along with DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2009, which institutionalized MTB-MLE. Studies, however, found several problems faced in the program implementation. Highlighted were the challenges encountered concerning the practicality of introducing the child's native language, shortage of instructional materials and qualified teachers, insufficient preparation and teacher training, and the less than ideal class size (Dio & Jamora, 2014; Gacheche, 2010; Hasselbring & Phil, 2015; Sanchez, 2013; Sanchez-Danday, 2018; Singh, 2014; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014).

It can be gleaned, however, from the literature that most of the existing mother tongue studies rest on the notion that the pupils have a strong mother tongue foundation. Very few studies address the condition of children having mixed vocabularies, especially in the Waray Region of the Philippines. In the study of Sanchez (2013), she found out that accuracy track in the MTB two-track method for literacy instruction may not work for Waray children having mixed vocabularies. Other studies of Sanchez-Danday (2018, 2019), respectively, found that modification of existing strategies may help address the needs of this type of learners and that preservice teachers have difficulty delivering instruction to pupils with mixed vocabularies attributed to lack of instructional materials and inadequate preparatory training on their part. These findings led to the conduct of this study focusing on the views of parents with children using mixed vocabularies concerning the implementation of the MTB-MLE program.

1.1 Research Question

This study sought to answer the following question:

1. How do parents of children with mixed vocabularies view the implementation of the mother tongue instruction?

2. FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Cummins (2000) asserted that learning in two or more languages does not necessarily result in the underachievement of bilingual and multilingual children. He said that on the contrary,

learning two or more languages offers academic benefits to students, depending on the sociolinguistic conditions.

The threshold hypothesis presupposes that a threshold level of linguistic competence has to be met to be cognitively significant (Cummins, 1987, Toukoma & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1977, as cited in Lindholm, 1991). Under the threshold theory, the greater the cognitive proficiency in one language, the greater the likelihood that cognitive and linguistic benefits will result in second and third languages and “the stronger the native language of children, the more efficiently they will learn English” (Malakoff & Hakuta, 1990).

Cummin’s (1979) developmental interdependence hypothesis assumes that the “development of second language competence is a function of the level of the child’s first language competence already attained at the time when intensive exposure to the second language begins”. Under the interdependence theory, proficiency gained in the first language will be transferred to the second language if there is sufficient exposure and motivation to learn the new language.

These theoretical constructs will be referred to in examining the benefit derived from the mother tongue program based on the parents’ perspectives.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 Design

This study used a descriptive single case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2008) to explore the parents’ perspectives on the implementation of the MTB-MLE program. This is part of a developmental study to improve mother tongue instruction of Waray children using mixed vocabularies.

3.2 Participants

The participants of this study were 32 parents of the grade one pupils enrolled in one private school in the Philippines who were invited four years after the MTB-MLE implementation in the school. Their children were pre-identified in a preliminary survey conducted to be using mixed Waray and English vocabularies in their daily conversations at home and with their in-service and preservice teachers, classmates, and peers.

3.3 Data Gathering Procedure and Data Analysis

Informed consent forms were filled out by the parents before joining the study. The data gathered were then methodologically triangulation (Diehl, Guion, & McDonald, 2011) through interviews, observations, and analysis of existing classroom documents such as notebooks, books, and paper works. The saturation point was also considered in determining the final number of participants. Thematic analysis was used to generate themes and patterns in the responses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The answers of the parents leaned more to the identification of the advantages and the challenges as experienced by both the parents and their children in the implementation of Waray mother tongue instruction.

4.1 Sentiments about Mother Tongue Instruction

The parents have varied views on the implementation of MTB-MLE. One parent shared that through MTB-MLE her child will become fluent in Waray and learn sets of words not commonly used. Another parent said:

“I am happy that they know how to read, write, understand and speak Waray words. *Nangangalimtan na ini kasi.*” (Waray tends to be forgotten.)

However, most parents shared their negative views of MTB-MLE. They were not convinced with its effectiveness even three to four years after its implementation in the school. When asked about the benefits of mother tongue instruction, one parent answered:

“None. It is just an additional burden to the pupils.”

Meanwhile, others shared these sentiments.

“A separate MTB subject is useless and does not serve the purpose of letting pupils learn easily the sciences and math.”

“Counting in Waray is a difficult task and is impractical for the pupils as well as the parents in real-life situations. Also, there are these crazy terms for colors and shapes.”

“The development of her fluency in speaking the international language (English) will be less expected in her early age.”

Some parents offered to give their observations and suggestions as stated below.

“Counting in Waray was indeed surprising and quite funny for us adults because we didn’t know how to count in Waray as we had a Spanish way of counting numbers before. Also, the name of the shapes...[laughs].”

“Science and Math subjects where books are usually written in English should be explained in Waray to be understood by the pupils. Of course, English and Filipino subjects should be taught as is.”

“We have no issues so far but we hope that still, the English language will be used more in teaching the child since the mother tongue is a language used only at home.”

“It is better to teach Waray as a subject but not to use it as a medium of instruction for other subjects, especially, in Math, Science, Arts, P.E and Health. Teaching these subjects in Waray would only complicate learning.”

“Waray should not be given as a separate subject but as a mode of instruction.”

These interview snippets illustrate the different beliefs of the parents about mother tongue instruction. These also show that some have not understood the reason why the program was being implemented.

4.2 Benefits of the Mother Tongue Instruction

Despite the varied sentiments, the answers revealed that mother tongue instruction has several benefits based on the experiences of the parents and their children. Four main categories emerged: instructional benefits, language acquisition/enhancement, social development, and promotion of cultural awareness.

4.2.1 Instructional Benefit

The following snippets were shared by the participants:

“They (children) gained knowledge in speaking Waray words and understanding them and to identify things or objects in Waray.”

“They can answer easily what is being asked without hesitation.”

“The interaction is present.”

“They can read Waray faster than English.”

“Topics are linguistically contextualized.”

“Children can easily relate to the language used, except when terminologies are taken from archaic and obsolete Waray lexicon that people now no longer use.”

“The children are being cooperative when it comes to the activity.”

“My child can identify objects as shown to him through word cards.”

“The child is more attentive in class.”

These answers support findings of studies that mother tongue aids learning as it eliminates language boundaries and encourages interaction (Cummins, 2000; Dumatog, 2003; Malone, 2004).

4.2.2 Language Development

The following snippets also conform to the threshold hypothesis of Cummins (2000) that the cognitive proficiency in the first language affects the child’s potential to learn other languages and the developmental interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1979) which explains the positive correlation of first and second language competence.

The participants shared:

“Transition of language from school to home is easier.”

“My child can connect from Waray to English or English to Waray.”

“They can understand conversations in Waray.”

“My child learned some Waray words that are not commonly used nowadays.”

4.2.3 Social Development

The children’s social interaction with other people also seemed to have improved with the use of mother tongue. Below were some of the comments shared by the parents.

“They can use Waray words everyday especially in talking with people like when they buy something.”

“There is a better and open communication line between children and parents.”

4.2.4 Promotion of Cultural Awareness

Parents also realized the importance of mother tongue in promoting the Waray culture. Below are the interview snippets supporting this finding.

“There is now a better appreciation of cultural functions through language.”

“My child gains knowledge regarding his own dialect.”

“The Waray- waray identity is asserted.”

“It taught the child to love his native tongue.”

“Now Filipino literary works, especially Waray, will flourish.”

“Teaching in Waray has its advantage. The children realize and understand that being a speaker in Waray is a part of their national and cultural identity as Filipino. The Waray language makes them unique individuals different from the Cebuano’s, Ilocano’s, Tagalogs’, and so forth.”

Only two main categories emerged as to the benefits of mother tongue instruction on the part of the parents: instructional support and behavior management.

4.2.5 Parents’ Instructional Support

Mother tongue instruction has its advantages according to some of the parents. It made their task of assisting their children with school works easier.

“We can easily explain to them the subject.”

“Parent-child mentoring is made easy since the medium of instruction is in the vernacular.”

“We can teach him to read and learn how to speak Waray at the same time”

“Our study time is shorter already because no further explanations are required.”

4.2.6 Behavior Management

One peculiar answer given by a parent shows how important mother tongue is in expressing one's thoughts and emotions. She explained that using a second language could somehow repress one's statement and intended expression. She further shared that:

"Now, I could easily reprimand my child using Waray. I could just spontaneously speak what I have in mind without thinking anymore whether my words are grammatically correct or whether it is the appropriate term. Removing this language filter in my brain whenever I speak is quite liberating."

4.3 Challenges and Issues in the Implementation of MTB-MLE

The parents experienced several difficulties in the implementation of Waray mother tongue instruction. They claimed that these challenges were related to instructional difficulty in using the mother tongue, shortage of instructional materials and well-trained teachers, and language confusion.

4.3.1 Instructional difficulty in using the native tongue

The parents observed the following difficulties encountered by their children which may be owing to the unique dynamics of the language.

"It is hard for her to pronounce and understand some words in Waray."

"Sometimes, he gets exhausted in reading texts because of the strong accent and intonation."

4.3.1.1 Difficulty in Assisting Instruction

As persons primarily assisting their children in the assignments and other school requirements, the parents shared about their difficulties in explaining some Waray concepts and their struggle of recalling certain Waray terms.

"I somehow struggle recollecting what some of the Waray words mean."

"It's so challenging to teach my child Waray terms especially the archaic ones. *Nkukurian talaga pgbasa kay dire* familiar an terms." (My child finds it difficult to read because most terms are unfamiliar.)

"It is challenging for me as a parent to assist my child because I also find it difficult to understand some Waray terminologies."

"Teaching reading in Waray sometimes leads to confusion. We have to exert effort reminding them that the words are Waray and not English. They often read English words as if they are Waray and the other way around." Age becomes /agi/ *na lugod*. (Age becomes /agi/ (Ouch!) [laughs].

4.3.2 Shortage of Instructional Materials in the Mother Tongue

The parent also stressed the importance of instructional materials in effectively implementing the program. However, they noted the following:

“There are no available instructional materials in Waray to assist them in making their assignments. Books in other subjects are available only in Filipino or English.”

“The process is hard as we are using English-written books. We still have to simplify these English words to Waray but we cannot convey the same idea sometimes.”

4.3.3 Lack of Trained Teachers

The parents claimed, as well, that the preservice teachers handling the subjects were not well-adept with the correct strategy and are not proficient themselves with the mother tongue. They noted several inconsistencies in delivering the instruction and in correcting student output. One parent shared that:

“The teacher’s spelling *kay nag-iiba-iba. Naililipong an bata.* (The teachers’ spelling is inconsistent confusing the child.”

4.3.4 Language Confusion

Another peculiar answer shared by a parent said that her child gets confused on what language to use in conversing. She shared that the child needs to be prompted as to what language to utter.

“Our child has a language confusion. *Dire na maaram ano yayaknon.*” (She doesn’t know what language to use anymore.)

The snippets above support studies claiming that MTB-MLE program implementation has several loopholes that need to be addressed such as the lack of teaching materials and qualified teachers to implement the program (Dio & Jamora, 2014; Gacheche, 2010; Hasselbring & Phil, 2015; Singh, 2014; Wa-Mbaleka, 2014). Further, teachers are found to be pedagogically unprepared to teach children with mixed- vocabularies confirming the findings of Sanchez-Danday (2018).

The recurrently stated problems such as the difficulty of grasping Waray vocabulary and poor background of students in English and of the pupils, preservice teachers, and parents in the mother tongue confirm the findings of Sanchez (2013). The dynamics of the language also pose a challenge in implementing the program. Training is needed to expose the teachers to the Waray orthography and to identify effective teaching strategies for children having mixed-vocabularies as suggested in some studies (Sanchez, 2013; Sanchez-Danday, 2018).

The difficulty of the parents in assisting their children may also reflect that they, too, do not have a strong linguistic foundation in Waray. The various reactions about the program may be settled through conferences or training to understand the program objectives and to enlist help in implementing it.

The answer of one parent claiming that the MTB-MLE program causes language confusion clashes with the theoretical underpinning of mother tongue instruction and thus, needs, further research. Child psychology should be considered in determining whether an innate language confusion exists or if only an uncertainty of what language is appropriate is being manifested in the child’s behavior.

5. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

Mother tongue education is still under development and the relative theory, as well as empirical studies, are still insufficient. There is also a dearth of research evidence to make binding decisions about MTB-MLE implementation on pupils with mixed vocabularies.

Findings of studies suggesting that existing methods are not effective for Waray speakers using mixed vocabularies and that current initiatives seem inadequate to aid the parents and teachers of these children (Sanchez, 2013; Sanchez-Danday, 2018, 2019) should be probed and resolved. This may be because studies supporting mother tongue instruction such as Cummins (2000), Dekker (2003), and Malone (2004) were done only on children with a strong native tongue foundation as opposed to these pupils' case.

The practice of most parents to talk to their children in English and to converse with other housemates in Waray, contribute to the mixed vocabularies used by the pupils. Further, the results imply that parents are not fully aware of what MTB-MLE is even years after its implementation in the school. This lack of awareness may affect the quality of assistance they provide to their children.

Since the program is primarily intended to "save a marginalized language and to support the rebuilding of the vocabulary in one's own language" (Arzadon, 2010), mother tongue instruction may be modified in such a way that meets the needs of the native speakers and of the parents assisting them. One study on the Waray language even suggested the use of syllabic teaching according to the syllabic pattern of Waray language (Nolasco, M.R.D., Oyzon, V.Q., & Ramos, F.J., 2012).

Public attitudes have to be considered in educational decisions concerning bilingualism (Romaine, 1995) and multilingualism. Failure of the policy-makers to investigate the attitudes of the major stakeholders, such as parents' perspectives and attitudes, may lead to the program's downfall. Opinions of the major stakeholders, such as the parents, are valuable in the educational practice. Hence, their perceptions and views should be recognized in the decision-making process.

Several implications for further research may also be drawn from this study. There is a need to explore whether the current method of teaching indeed promotes cultural and linguistic development and awareness via sociolinguistic and linguistic studies. The relationship between mother tongue proficiency and the academic achievement of this type of learners can also be examined.

The study, therefore, recommends the conduct of an MTB-MLE re-orientation program for the parents and their involvement in the curriculum planning process and material production. A similar study may even be conducted in other schools implementing the program to verify the results. A study on the perspectives of other stakeholders on MTB-MLE is likewise recommended.

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