



Navigating Policy Shifts and Persistent Challenges in Philippine Grade School Language Education

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Abstract

This paper examines recent policy shifts and persistent challenges in Philippine grade school language education, focusing on reforms under the K to 12 and MATATAG curricula. It analyzes curriculum alignment, teacher preparedness, assessment practices, digital constraints, and learner outcomes, with particular attention to the discontinuation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education. The study argues that enduring literacy gaps arise from systemic and instructional factors, underscoring the need for coherent, inclusive, and evidence-based language education policies.

Keywords: Philippine Language Education, Grade School Literacy, MATATAG Curriculum, MTB-MLE, Curriculum Reform, Teacher Preparedness, Policy Shifts

Introduction

Language education in Philippine grade schools has undergone significant restructuring over the past decade, driven by curriculum reform, linguistic policy shifts, and changing national priorities. At the elementary level, language education is expected to develop foundational literacy, cognitive skills, and communicative competence while responding to the country's multilingual and multicultural realities. Decisions made at this stage have long-term consequences for learners' academic trajectories, equity, and participation in national and global discourse.

Under the K to 12 Basic Education Program, language education reforms emphasized outcomes-based education, performance-based assessment, and the use of learners' first languages through the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy. While these reforms were grounded in international research on early literacy and multilingual education, studies published from 2020 onward consistently point to serious implementation challenges in grade schools, particularly in public education settings (Tria, 2020; Jaca & Javines, 2021). Most recently, the introduction of the MATATAG Curriculum and related policy issuances marked a decisive shift in language education. The formal discontinuation of MTB-MLE as a mandatory medium of instruction reflects growing concerns over feasibility, learning outcomes, and instructional coherence.



This review synthesizes recent literature (2020 and up) to examine curriculum alignment, teacher preparedness, assessment practices, digital challenges, and learner outcomes in Philippine grade schools, with particular attention to the reasons for the discontinuation of MTB-MLE and its implications for language education.

Curriculum Congestion and Misalignment

Curriculum congestion has remained a persistent issue in grade school language education. Studies examining the K to 12 curriculum report that learning competencies across language subjects were excessive in number and scope, leaving limited instructional time for mastery of reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills (Jaca & Javines, 2021). Teachers were expected to address literacy, literature, grammar, and performance tasks simultaneously, often resulting in fragmented instruction.

Misalignment between curriculum standards, pedagogy, and assessment further complicated implementation. Although policy documents emphasized communicative competence and higher-order thinking, classroom practices frequently relied on rote learning and workbook-driven activities, particularly in the early grades (Navarro & Santos, 2022). This disconnect weakened the intended spiral progression of language skills and contributed to uneven literacy development among learners. The MATATAG Curriculum was introduced partly in response to these concerns, aiming to decongest the curriculum and refocus instruction on essential competencies such as reading fluency and comprehension. However, recent analyses caution that curriculum streamlining alone is insufficient without parallel investments in teacher training and instructional support, especially in language education where skill development is cumulative and time-intensive (PIDS, 2023).

Teacher Preparedness and Professional Development

Teacher preparedness continues to be a central concern in grade school language education. Empirical studies after 2020 indicate that many elementary teachers felt inadequately prepared to implement multilingual and performance-based language instruction, particularly under MTB-MLE (Espada & Del Rosario, 2020). Limited preservice preparation and insufficient in-service training constrained teachers' ability to teach literacy effectively across languages.

Professional development programs were often described as episodic and compliance-oriented. Teachers reported attending short seminars with minimal follow-through, limited coaching, and scarce opportunities for collaborative lesson design (Flores & Genuino, 2022). These conditions were especially problematic in early language instruction, where pedagogical precision and developmental appropriateness are critical. Research further underscores the role of school leadership and systemic support in shaping teacher readiness. Schools with strong instructional leadership and sustained faculty development initiatives demonstrated better alignment between curriculum goals and classroom practice (Ramos & Ignacio, 2023).



As language education policies evolve following the discontinuation of MTB-MLE, continuous and targeted teacher development remains essential.

Discontinuation of MTB-MLE: Reasons and Policy Context

The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education policy was originally implemented to strengthen early literacy by using learners' first language as the primary medium of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3. While supported by international research, Philippine-based studies increasingly documented gaps between policy design and classroom realities (Walter & Dekker, 2021).

One major reason for the discontinuation of MTB-MLE was persistent implementation difficulty. Studies identified shortages of instructional materials, inadequate teacher training, and frequent mismatches between the prescribed mother tongue and learners' actual home languages, particularly in urban and linguistically diverse communities (Espada & Del Rosario, 2020; PIDS, 2021). These challenges undermined the effectiveness of instruction and placed additional burdens on teachers.

Another critical concern involved learning continuity and transition to Filipino and English. Evaluative reports and policy reviews noted that weak transition mechanisms resulted in delayed proficiency in English and Filipino for some learners, raising concerns about long-term academic performance (PIDS, 2023). These findings informed DepEd's decision to discontinue MTB-MLE as a mandatory policy under the MATATAG Curriculum, shifting toward earlier and more consistent exposure to Filipino and English.

Implications of MTB-MLE Discontinuation for Language Education

The discontinuation of MTB-MLE carries significant implications for grade school language education. On the positive side, proponents argue that removing MTB-MLE may improve curriculum coherence, reduce teacher workload, and streamline literacy instruction across schools with diverse language populations (PIDS, 2023). Earlier exposure to Filipino and English is also expected to address gaps in language readiness observed in later grades. However, scholars caution that the removal of MTB-MLE risks marginalizing learners from linguistically diverse and non-dominant language communities if not accompanied by inclusive instructional strategies (Walter & Dekker, 2021). Without adequate scaffolding, learners who previously benefited from first-language instruction may struggle with comprehension and participation in early grades.

Recent literature therefore emphasizes the need for context-sensitive language support mechanisms, such as differentiated instruction, bridging programs, and strengthened early reading interventions, to mitigate potential negative effects of policy change (Bernardo & Mendoza, 2022). The success of the post-MTB-MLE language framework will depend largely on how schools address learner diversity within a more centralized language policy.



Assessment Practices and Early Literacy Outcomes

Assessment practices in grade school language education have remained largely traditional, despite policy calls for authentic and formative assessment. Studies indicate that early literacy assessment often prioritizes decoding and recall over comprehension, oral language development, and meaningful use of language (Navarro & Santos, 2022).

Performance-based assessments, while encouraged, are unevenly implemented due to large class sizes, limited teacher training, and lack of assessment literacy (Alipasa, 2021). In the early grades, these challenges are compounded by developmental considerations and the need for age-appropriate assessment tools. Recent research stresses that improving early literacy outcomes requires assessment systems that are diagnostic, formative, and instructionally aligned. As language policies shift, assessment reform must remain a priority to ensure that foundational skills are accurately measured and effectively supported (Bernardo & Mendoza, 2022).

Digital Divide and Language Learning in Grade Schools

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing inequities in grade school language education. Studies document how modular and remote learning environments limited opportunities for interaction, feedback, and oral language practice—key components of early literacy development (Cabangcalal et al., 2021).

Teachers faced additional challenges related to digital pedagogy and resource constraints, particularly in teaching reading and writing skills to young learners. While technology offered alternative delivery modes, uneven access and limited digital literacy hindered its effectiveness (Flores & Genuino, 2022).

Parents played a significant role in mediating their children's language learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, often facing challenges in supporting online instruction due to technological and pedagogical limitations (Alipasa, Baroja, Gutierrez, Ramirez, & Sulse, 2021). These findings highlight the importance of family engagement and targeted support in mitigating the digital divide in early grade language education. Current literature emphasizes that post-pandemic language education reforms must address both access and pedagogy. Investments in infrastructure, teacher training, and developmentally appropriate digital resources are essential to support equitable language learning in grade schools (PIDS, 2023).

Learner Outcomes and Foundational Literacy

Studies on learner outcomes consistently reveal concerns about foundational literacy in Philippine grade schools. National and institutional assessments point to persistent difficulties in reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and written expression among elementary learners (Bernardo & Mendoza, 2022).



Understanding learners' socio-cultural and religious contexts is essential for developing inclusive language education practices, as non-Catholic students navigate and interpret values-based education differently within Lasallian schools (Gatdula, Ramirez, Regis, Domingo Jr., & Sebastian, 2021). These outcomes are closely linked to curriculum coherence, quality of instruction, and language policy stability. Frequent policy shifts, including the discontinuation of MTB-MLE, risk creating instructional discontinuities if not carefully managed at the school level. Recent scholarship underscores the importance of a balanced language education framework—one that prioritizes early literacy, supports linguistic diversity, and ensures continuity across grade levels. Such a framework is critical to improving long-term educational outcomes and equity in Philippine basic education.

Conclusion

Language education in Philippine grade schools is at a pivotal juncture, shaped by long-standing learning gaps, evolving policy directions, and renewed calls for instructional coherence. The recent discontinuation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) under the MATATAG Curriculum reflects institutional recognition of persistent implementation challenges rather than a rejection of multilingual education as a pedagogical principle. Consistent with earlier and recent Philippine studies, including Alipasa's evaluations of curriculum reforms and performance-based assessments, the effectiveness of any language policy is ultimately contingent on teacher readiness, administrative support, and alignment between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment.

Evidence from post-2020 research and national policy reviews demonstrates that foundational literacy problems in the early grades—particularly in reading comprehension, academic language use, and written expression—cannot be attributed solely to the choice of language of instruction. Rather, these difficulties stem from systemic weaknesses such as insufficient teacher preparation, uneven access to instructional resources, fragmented assessment practices, and limited professional development. While MTB-MLE was grounded in strong theoretical assumptions, its uneven execution mirrored broader governance and capacity issues already documented in Philippine basic education reforms.

The MATATAG Curriculum offers a renewed opportunity to address these structural concerns through curriculum decongestion and a stronger focus on foundational skills. However, without deliberate mechanisms to support linguistically diverse learners, the reform risks reinforcing inequities, especially among pupils from rural and marginalized communities. Studies on GRASPS-based tasks, performance-based assessment, and teacher readiness—including those conducted by Alipasa—underscore that reforms succeed only when educators are adequately supported and assessment practices meaningfully reflect learning goals.



Ultimately, sustainable improvement in grade school language education requires moving beyond cyclical policy shifts toward long-term system strengthening. A research-driven, equity-oriented approach—one that integrates curriculum design, teacher development, authentic assessment, and continuous monitoring—is essential. Language education must be treated not merely as a subject area but as the foundation of all learning, civic participation, and national development. Only through coherent, evidence-informed reform can Philippine grade schools achieve lasting gains in literacy and educational equity.

Recommendations

Based on empirical studies, policy analyses, and Philippine-focused research, the following recommendations are advanced:

- 1. Strengthen sustained teacher professional development in language education.**
Teacher readiness has repeatedly been identified as a decisive factor in reform implementation. Continuous, school-based professional development focusing on early literacy instruction, language scaffolding, and authentic assessment should be institutionalized, moving beyond short-term training initiatives (Alipasa, 2021; Flores & Genuino, 2022).
- 2. Reinforce authentic and performance-based assessment in early language learning.**
Language instruction in the early grades should be supported by formative, performance-based assessments that capture learners' communicative competence and comprehension skills. Evidence from GRASPS-based implementation studies highlights the need for alignment between learning outcomes, tasks, and assessment standards (Alipasa, 2021a; Alipasa, 2021b).
- 3. Implement context-responsive strategies for linguistically diverse learners.**
Despite the discontinuation of MTB-MLE, schools must retain bridging strategies and differentiated instruction to support pupils whose home languages differ from the language of instruction. Research cautions that neglecting linguistic diversity may widen early literacy gaps (Walter & Dekker, 2021; PIDS, 2021).
- 4. Enhance administrative and institutional support for language reforms.**
School leadership and administrative backing are essential for translating policy into classroom practice. Studies on teachers' readiness and administrators' support emphasize the role of leadership in sustaining curriculum reforms and assessment innovation (Alipasa, 2021; Ramos & Ignacio, 2023).
- 5. Institutionalize monitoring, research collaboration, and policy evaluation.**
Large-scale reforms such as the MATATAG Curriculum should be accompanied by continuous research-based evaluation. Partnerships among DepEd, higher education institutions, and researchers can ensure that policy decisions are responsive to classroom realities and grounded in empirical evidence.



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