Navigating the Linguistic Divide: The Lived Experiences and Coping Strategies of Kapampangan Teachers in MTB-MLE Implementation

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ABSTRACT

This study rigorously examines the experiences of Kapampangan teachers actively engaged in the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in Pampanga, Central Luzon, Philippines. This qualitative study, utilizing semi-structured interviews with five Kapampangan teachers, investigates their perspectives on the benefits, challenges, and coping mechanisms associated with MTB-MLE. Despite the policy's nationwide implementation, limited research exists on its specific application and challenges in the province of Pampanga. Findings reveal significant linguistic complexities, such as the challenges posed by differing orthographies like sulat Baculud and sulat Wawa, as well as resource limitations. The study highlights the innovative strategies employed by teachers, including code-switching and collaboration with community elders, to overcome these barriers. These findings provide valuable, concrete insights for policymakers, demonstrating the need for enhanced program support and region-specific teacher training to improve the program's effectiveness.

Keywords: MTB-MLE implementation, Kapampangan language, teaching coping strategies, mother tongue

INTRODUCTION

The global recognition of mother tongue education as a facilitator of literacy and social development is a well-established principle. The Philippines embraced this through DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2009, which mandated the use of local languages as the primary medium of instruction for students from Kindergarten to Grade 3. This national policy was designed to build a stronger educational foundation by leveraging students' existing linguistic competence, thereby enhancing cognitive development and minimizing the "cognitive gap" that often arises when instruction is delivered in a second language (Mohanty & Skutnabb-Kangas, 2013).

However, despite its sound theoretical basis and potential, the nationwide implementation of MTB-MLE has been fraught with significant and persistent challenges across various regions of the country. A synthesis of scholarly literature repeatedly highlights three major systemic barriers: inadequate instructional materials written in the requisite mother tongues (Lartec et al., 2014; Sarip, 2015), insufficient and impractical teacher training (Wakat et al., 2013), and issues of varying levels of teacher and community fluency in the mandated mother tongues (Adriano et al., 2021). These systemic shortcomings compel teachers at the grassroots level to independently develop coping strategies such as code-switching, extensive translation, and the laborious creation of localized teaching resources in an attempt to bridge the gap between policy mandates and classroom realities (Monje et al., 2021; Atong & Escote, 2023).

The Research Gap: Kapampangan Teachers in Focus

Given the Philippines' extreme linguistic diversity, with over 180 distinct languages, regional language-specific studies are essential to understanding the nuanced challenges and identifying effective localized practices. While general studies on MTB-MLE challenges are abundant, and certain major languages have received considerable attention, a notable and critical research gap exists concerning the program's specific application and implementation challenges within the province of Pampanga.

Pampanga, a region with a rich cultural heritage and a predominantly Kapampangan-speaking population (recognized as one of the country's major languages), presents a unique context. While some initial studies have assessed the impact of the policy on Kapampangan students' language use and attitudes (Oda & Vizconde, 2021) or its role in mathematics education within the province (Gempeso et al., 2022), there is a dearth of qualitative, in-depth research that captures the lived experiences and practical pedagogical responses of the Kapampangan teachers themselves. Understanding this context is crucial, as the Kapampangan language itself is facing language shift among some demographics, making its use in the classroom a vital component of its preservation (Ariel, 2022).

This study, therefore, directly addresses this lacuna by investigating how Kapampangan teachers navigate the complexities of MTB-MLE implementation in their daily instruction. By qualitatively documenting their unique challenges and the specific coping strategies they employ, this research aims to provide empirically grounded, regional data necessary to inform DepEd policymakers and school administrators, contributing substantively to the effective refinement and long-term sustainability of the MTB-MLE program.

In light of the identified gaps in the literature, this study investigates the coping mechanisms Kapampangan teachers employ to address the challenges of implementing MTB-MLE. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Kapampangan teachers regarding the benefits of MTB-MLE implementation?

2. What specific challenges do Kapampangan teachers encounter in using the Kapampangan language for classroom instruction?

3. What localized strategies and mechanisms are employed by teachers to overcome these challenges and ensure the program's successful implementation?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A qualitative research design, specifically using a phenomenological approach, was employed to capture the deep, nuanced experiences and practical perspectives of teachers involved in the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) implementation. This approach was selected because it is best suited for providing an in-depth understanding of a lived phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), allowing the researchers to focus on the participants' lived experiences and interpretations (the "how" and "what") of the program's implementation and the challenges faced. This method ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the teachers' perspectives, prioritizing their subjective reality over objective measurement.

Participants

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants who could provide rich, insightful data based on a set of predetermined criteria, essential for achieving information richness in qualitative research. A total of five teachers were selected from Grade 1 and Grade 2 classrooms across three strategically chosen municipalities in the province of Pampanga, representing varied socioeconomic and linguistic contexts within the Kapampangan-speaking region.

The primary selection criteria required participants to:

1. Be currently teaching Grade 1 or Grade 2, the core grades of MTB-MLE implementation.

2. Have at least three years of continuous teaching experience with the MTB-MLE program.

3. Hold a "Very Satisfactory" performance rating for at least the last three years, which serves as an

indicator of their professional competence and capacity to have effectively navigated and innovated solutions to implementation challenges.

This strategy of criterion-based sampling ensures that the data collected are from experienced, effective practitioners who have profound knowledge of the phenomenon under study.

Data Collection

Primary data were collected through individual, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, with each session lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. An interview protocol was rigorously developed, pilot-tested, and structured around three core areas: (1) the teachers' general experiences with Kapampangan as the Medium of Instruction (MOI), (2) the specific challenges encountered (e.g., materials, training, linguistic issues), and (3) the personal and collaborative coping mechanisms they developed.

To ensure ethical rigor and data trustworthiness, the following steps were taken:

• Informed Consent: Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews, detailing the study's purpose, their right to withdraw, and the procedures for data handling.

• Anonymity and Confidentiality: Participants were assured that their identities and school affiliations would be kept strictly confidential, using pseudonyms in all transcripts and reports to encourage honest and open responses.

• Audio Recording: All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure the capture of verbatim data.

Data Analysis

The collected interview data were meticulously prepared for analysis to ensure accuracy and reliability. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and supplemented with detailed field notes taken by the researchers during and immediately after the sessions, noting non-verbal cues and contextual observations. The data were then analyzed using a rigorous thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006), following these systematic steps:

1. Familiarization: Reading and re-reading the transcripts to gain a deep immersion in the data.

2. Coding: Generating initial codes by identifying key phrases, concepts, and teacher language related to experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

3. Theme Development: Grouping related codes into potential emergent themes and sub-themes.

4. Reviewing Themes: Checking themes against the entire dataset to ensure they accurately reflect the meaning embedded in the transcripts.

5. Defining and Naming Themes: Refining the themes to accurately represent the core narratives and formulating the final thematic categories and sub-categories.

This systematic process ensured that the final themes were directly derived from the participants' voices, thus enhancing the credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this qualitative study are presented thematically, organized around the research questions concerning the perceived benefits, key challenges, and teacher-led coping mechanisms in the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE).

Perceived Benefits of Mother Tongue-Based Instruction

The findings consistently demonstrate a strong consensus among teachers regarding the positive impact of MTB-MLE on learner development, specifically in enhancing comprehension and promoting cultural preservation. The data highlights that using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction is a powerful tool for improving educational outcomes and fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

Enhancing Cognitive Comprehension and Fostering Learner Confidence

All participating teachers acknowledged that the use of the mother tongue (L1) significantly enhanced comprehension and classroom engagement for native speakers. By delivering instruction in the L1, teachers observed a notable simplification of the students' cognitive load, which is the mental effort required to process new information. This made abstract concepts, particularly in subjects like mathematics and science, more accessible and accelerated the pace of initial mastery. Instead of grappling with both a new language and a new concept simultaneously, students could focus all their mental energy on understanding the core subject matter.

This observation is not merely anecdotal; it is a principle strongly supported by historical and contemporary research. For instance, this finding resonates with the landmark First Iloilo Experiment conducted by Dr. Jose V. Aguilar in the 1950s. This pioneering study demonstrated that students who received instruction in their vernacular language achieved superior literacy and subject proficiency outcomes compared to those taught exclusively in English. The historical efficacy of this approach serves as a crucial foundation for modern MTB-MLE policies.

Crucially, the use of Kapampangan, as noted in the text, was also observed to act as a socio-emotional buffer. Teachers reported a significant increase in student confidence and self-esteem. When students were no longer inhibited by the affective filter, which is a psychological barrier of anxiety and fear of making errors often associated with using a second language, they displayed a greater willingness to participate, ask questions, and engage in meaningful discussions. This uninhibited interaction not only deepens their understanding of the subject but also builds a positive self-image as capable and effective learners.

Preserving Cultural Heritage

The teachers viewed the classroom as a sanctuary for Amanung Sisuan, or the "nurturing language." Through the systematic integration of local stories, traditional songs (Paraluman), and authentic Kapampangan literature, the curriculum becomes a living repository of local traditions. This is not just about reading but about actively reviving and maintaining cultural practices that might otherwise fade. This pedagogical approach reinforces the fundamental link between language and identity.

This perspective strongly echoes the influential work of Jim Cummins, a renowned expert in bilingual education. Cummins's Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model argues that a strong foundation in the mother tongue is crucial for developing proficiency in a second language. More than that, he emphasizes the inseparable bond between a child's first language and their sense of cultural belonging and academic confidence. When a child's home language is valued and used in school, it affirms their identity and validates their heritage. This affirmation provides a solid foundation from which to build confidence and competence in other languages.

In essence, the MTB-MLE policy transforms the classroom from a simple place of learning into a dynamic hub for cultural transmission. It ensures that while students are mastering academic skills, they are also developing a deep appreciation for their roots. This dual purpose makes the policy not only an effective educational strategy but also a vital tool for community empowerment and cultural survival. The classroom becomes a place where the Kapampangan identity is not just remembered, but actively lived and celebrated.

Identified Challenges: The Friction Between Policy and Practice

While the benefits of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) are clear, its implementation in the classroom faces significant hurdles. The challenges identified by teachers in this study highlight the friction that exists between policy and actual practice, particularly concerning linguistic standardization,

teacher capacity, and resource scarcity.

Linguistic and Orthographic Complexities

A major challenge for teachers is the inherent complexity and lack of standardization within the Kapampangan language itself. As the study revealed, Kapampangan orthography, or the way the language is written, is not uniform. Teachers have to navigate at least three distinct systems—like "sulat Baculud," "sulat Wawa," and the "Amung Samson hybrid"—which leads to widespread inconsistencies in spelling and a lack of uniformity in written materials. This forces educators to become linguistic arbiters, deciding which spelling to use on the spot, which can undermine a consistent curriculum across different schools.

The existence of multiple, competing orthographic systems for Kapampangan (like the older sulat Baculud and the modern sulat Wawa) is not just a language issue, but a significant barrier to teaching literacy. When a child learning to read encounters the same word spelled differently across various official and localized materials, their decoding fluency is impaired, forcing them to focus on reconciling inconsistent spellings instead of comprehending the text. This orthographic variance increases the student's cognitive load and turns basic reading instruction into a process of *ad-hoc translation* for the teacher, thereby slowing the pace of literacy acquisition and ultimately undermining the MTB-MLE policy's core promise to accelerate learning in the early grades.

The issue goes beyond just spelling; it also involves intralingual variation, or the differences within the same language. Teachers reported confusion arising from regional variations in vocabulary and word usage. For example, the word "asan" means "fish" in San Simon but "viand" in San Fernando, while "fell down" can be expressed as either "mitongga" or "mituwang." These subtle but significant differences can cause confusion even among native speakers and make it difficult for teachers to maintain conceptual uniformity in the classroom. This challenge of navigating regional dialects on the fly compromises the consistency of the curriculum across the entire Division.
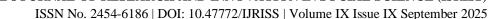
This finding adds specific, localized detail to broader reports on the ambiguity of mother tongue education in multilingual regions. Researchers like Lartec et al. (2014) have pointed to these very issues, noting that the lack of standardized language systems can be a major barrier to effective MTB-MLE implementation. The teachers' daily experience with these variations shows that without a unified linguistic framework, even a well-intentioned policy can struggle to gain a firm footing in the classroom.

The Paradox of Inadequate Pedagogical Vocabulary

It is a common misconception that speaking a language fluently is enough to teach it. However, language has two distinct forms. The first is Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS), the casual, everyday language we use to socialize and get by. The second is Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), the highly specialized, formal language used for subjects like math, science, and history. The teachers in this study, despite being fluent in Kapampangan, were caught in the middle of these two forms. They struggled to find the precise Kapampangan terms for concepts like "photosynthesis," "gravity," or "equation," which are essential for teaching. This forced them to improvise, which can lead to inconsistent and confusing lessons for students.

This linguistic gap is a key finding in the work of Mohanty and Skutnabb-Kangas (2013), who argued that while teachers may have strong BICS in the mother tongue, they often lack the formal, academic language (CALP) needed for the classroom. Their research highlights that conversational fluency and academic proficiency are not the same thing, and that neglecting the latter can be a major obstacle to successful mother tongue-based education.

The teachers' admissions are not a personal failing but a systemic one. The fact that a teacher had to rely on self-study and even seek help from older community members highlights a critical failure in the professional development provided for MTB-MLE. The current training programs simply do not equip teachers with the necessary academic lexicon or pedagogical strategies to bridge this linguistic gap. This places an unfair and

significant burden on educators, forcing them to spend extra time and effort just to find the right words. Without a standardized, formalized approach to building academic vocabulary in the mother tongue, the entire MTB-MLE program risks being a half-measure, the one that has good intentions but lacks the necessary linguistic tools to succeed. The teachers' reliance on community elders, while resourceful, shows that the policy has not yet created the institutional support needed to carry out its mission effectively.

Systemic Scarcity of Instructional Materials

The problem of resource scarcity is twofold and deeply affects teachers' ability to implement the curriculum effectively. First, many teachers reported receiving the official Teacher's Guides well after the school year had already started. This delay meant they could not properly plan lessons in advance and had to teach without the foundational support materials they needed. This forces them to improvise, which leads to inconsistencies in instruction. Second, there was a severe lack of a one-to-one ratio for Learners' Materials (LMs). This meant that students had to share textbooks and other resources, which made it difficult for them to complete assignments and study independently. This scarcity was made worse by the poor quality of the materials that were eventually distributed, including pages that were poorly printed or contained errors.

The ongoing lack of resources forces teachers to use their valuable time to create their own instructional materials. This situation turns what should be a fully supported national policy into a "perpetual pilot program" that depends on the individual efforts of teachers. This finding is consistent with broader national evaluations, such as the one conducted by Sarip (2015), which found that the lack of essential resources and delayed distribution are common and persistent problems in MTB-MLE implementation. Instead of focusing on instruction and student engagement, teachers are burdened with tasks like writing their own textbooks and designing worksheets, which is not what they were trained to do. This systemic problem shows that a policy's success requires adequate, timely, and high-quality resources to be successfully implemented.

Teacher-Led Coping Mechanisms: Resilience and Adaptability

In response to these systemic gaps, the Kapampangan teachers demonstrated remarkable resourcefulness and adaptability, transforming from mere implementers into curriculum developers and community mediators.

Proactive Resourcefulness and Digital Adaptation

Faced with a severe shortage of official materials, the teachers did not wait for a solution; they created their own. They demonstrated remarkable proactive resourcefulness by developing indigenous visual aids and rigorously contextualizing their lesson plans to fit their students' specific needs and cultural backgrounds.

Beyond their own classrooms, they embraced technology. They actively leveraged digital platforms like the DepEd Learning Resources Management and Development System (LRMDS) and other online hubs to find supplemental resources. This practice isn't just a sign of their tech-savviness; it's a necessity-driven digital adaptation to overcome the institutional failure to supply basic materials. They are essentially creating a parallel support system to fill the gaps in the official one.

Community Collaboration and Strategic Code-Switching

The teachers' coping mechanisms extend beyond individual effort. They have built a model of community collaboration by actively reaching out to local elders. These elders act as essential, non-formal knowledge repositories, helping teachers enrich their vocabulary, settle linguistic disputes, and ensure the cultural authenticity of their lessons. This collaboration turns the community into a crucial partner in education.

In the classroom, teachers have become masters of strategic code-switching, a flexible pedagogical tool to manage the classroom's increasingly multilingual reality. They use Tagalog for students who do not speak Kapampangan and shift to Filipino or English for complex concepts. This practice acts as a linguistic bridge, ensuring all students can access the content regardless of their first language. This highlights a key insight: successful MTB-MLE in diverse settings often requires teachers to move beyond the rigid "mother tongue

only" mandate in the lower grades and adopt a practical, flexible multilingualism to serve their students best.

The Unsustainable Burden of Teacher Ingenuity

While the coping mechanisms used by teachers show remarkable resilience and professional dedication, they are ultimately unsustainable. These innovative efforts are born out of necessity, essentially shifting the cost of systemic failure onto individual educators. The constant work of creating their own materials (localized content) and constantly arbitrating language issues (on-the-fly linguistic arbitration) directly leads to teacher burnout and consumes valuable time that should be spent on lesson planning and high-quality instruction. Moreover, relying on individual teachers and community elders for linguistic decisions results in an uneven quality of instruction across different schools, violating the equity goals of a national policy. This creates a critical policy paradox: teacher ingenuity secures the program's short-term survival but actively prevents its institutional maturation.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

A key limitation of this study is its phenomenological design, meaning it focused intensely on the lived professional experiences of the teachers. As a result, this paper does not include the voices, perspectives, or direct learning outcomes of the students themselves. To achieve a more holistic understanding of the MTB-MLE program's effectiveness, future research should use a mixed-methods approach (like combining quantitative student scores with qualitative classroom observations). This would allow researchers to directly assess how the problems identified here, such as orthographic conflicts and resource gaps, actually impact student performance and their attitudes toward their mother tongue.

CONCLUSIONS

This qualitative study confirms the vital role of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy in advancing learner comprehension, engagement, and the preservation of Kapampangan cultural heritage. The findings, however, underscore that the success of this nationwide policy is highly dependent on the resilience and ingenuity of local educators. Kapampangan teachers face significant interconnected challenges, notably the complexities arising from linguistic diversity (e.g., varying orthographic systems and dialectical differences), inadequate pedagogical vocabulary, and systemic resource shortages.

Crucially, this research highlights that the continuation of the program has been secured by teacher-led coping mechanisms that serve as a testament to their professional dedication. These strategies include adopting the standardized Ortograpiyang Kapampangan, developing localized instructional materials, strategically employing code-switching and translation techniques, and actively engaging with community elders to validate cultural and linguistic content.

For the MTB-MLE program to transition from a policy reliant on individual teacher resourcefulness to a truly sustainable and equitable national education framework, future action is required. It is recommended that policymakers prioritize region-specific professional development focused on linguistic standardization and pedagogical content knowledge, alongside ensuring the timely and sufficient distribution of high-quality, standardized instructional materials. Ultimately, the insights garnered from the Kapampangan teachers' experiences offer a critical roadmap for strengthening MTB-MLE implementation across all linguistically diverse regions of the Philippines.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the empirical findings regarding the challenges and coping strategies of Kapampangan teachers, the following policy and research recommendations are proposed to enhance the sustainability, equity, and effectiveness of the MTB-MLE program:

1. Mandate and Resource a Single Orthography

To quickly solve the literacy issues caused by spelling confusion (sulat Baculud vs. sulat Wawa), policymakers must officially mandate the standardized Ortograpiyang Kapampangan (OK). This single standard must be enforced across all curriculum guides, textbooks, and teacher training in the Kapampangan region. This action is critical because it will eliminate the mixed signals teachers and students are currently facing, creating a stable linguistic foundation necessary for students to become fluent readers.

2. Prioritize Teacher Capacity Building and Orthographic Mandate. The Department of Education (DepEd) should immediately mandate and fund the development of region-specific, intensive professional development programs. These programs must move beyond general MTB-MLE training to specifically address the identified linguistic and orthographic diversity within Kapampangan dialects across different municipalities. Training must focus on building teachers' pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) in Kapampangan, particularly to resolve confusion arising from varying dialectical terms (e.g., "asan" and "mitongga") and must be explicitly tied to the mandatory and consistent use of the standardized Ortograpiyang Kapampangan in all instructional contexts.

3. Ensure Resource Equity and Standardization Enforcement. To address the systemic shortage of learning resources, a comprehensive audit of instructional material supply chains must be conducted. Policy must be revised to ensure the timely and guaranteed distribution of high-quality, durable instructional materials that meet a minimum one-to-one student-to-material ratio. Crucially, all localized materials should be professionally vetted to ensure strict and non-negotiable adherence to the standardized Ortograpiyang Kapampangan before mass production and distribution.

4. Institutionalize Community Collaboration. DepEd must formalize and institutionalize community involvement protocols that leverage the linguistic expertise of local elders and cultural gatekeepers. This includes establishing regional MTB-MLE working groups to assist teachers in curriculum contextualization, validation of local stories and songs, and continuous enrichment of the Kapampangan pedagogical vocabulary. This secures cultural authenticity and positions the community as a formal curriculum partner.

5. Formalizing the Code-Switching Strategy. Recognizing that teachers already rely on strategic code-switching and translation, DepEd should develop clear, research-informed guidelines on the pedagogical efficacy and appropriate threshold for using Filipino or English to bridge conceptual gaps for non-native Kapampangan speakers in multilingual classrooms. This transforms an informal coping strategy into a sanctioned, evidence-based teaching technique.

6. Inter-Regional Comparative Analysis. Future research should replicate this qualitative design across other linguistically diverse regions in the Philippines (e.g., Ilokano, Cebuano, Waray) to conduct a cross-regional comparative analysis. This will determine which challenges are universal (systemic resource issues) and which are language-specific (orthographic complexity), leading to more targeted and efficient national policy reforms.

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Informed Consent

The author has obtained informed consent from all participants.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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