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A DECADE (2014–2024) OF MTB-MLE IN THE PHILIPPINES: WHERE IT WORKED, WHERE IT STRUGGLED, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

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Abstract
Capturing a full decade of language program implementation offers a valuable opportunity to reflect on the evolution, strengths, and limitations of one of the country's most transformative language-in-education reforms. With the introduction of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) under the Philippine K–12 Curriculum, interest has grown in assessing its accomplishments and ongoing challenges. Therefore, this study aims to review key developments in MTB-MLE implementation from 2014 to 2024. A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted using peer-reviewed articles and Department of Education documents from academic databases and government archives. Following PRISMA guidelines, 14 documents were selected and analyzed thematically. Findings reveal that strong policy backing, language mapping, and teacher training improved early literacy and student engagement through first language (L1) instruction. However, challenges include limited teacher proficiency, lack of localized materials, policy–practice mismatches, and weak support for second language development. Besides, standardization pressures also clashed with the multilingual realities of classrooms. In conclusion, while MTB-MLE remains a promising reform, it has yet to fulfill its potential due to systemic constraints. Future efforts should adopt more flexible and linguistically responsive strategies, and if unrealized in basic education, MTB-MLE may find greater traction within higher education.

Keywords: language policy, MTB-MLE, multilingual instruction, Philippine education, systematic literature review

Introduction
The Philippine school system has taken steps to help Filipino students become more literate. Thus, the Department of Education (DepEd) seeks to attain national competency in Filipino and English by teaching both languages. Their use as instructional media at all levels through Department Order No. 52, series of 1987 (DO No. 52 s. 1987), also known as the 1987 Policy on Bilingual Education

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(Department of Education, 1987). Nonetheless, studies in the nation demonstrated the benefits of a comprehensive approach to language in conjunction with other languages, such as the Rizal Experiment (1960–1966) and the Iloilo Experiment (1948–1954, 1961–1964). Based on these, the Iloilo and Rizal Experiments results demonstrate the value of teaching in the native tongue in the classroom. It improves language skills and makes it easier to understand the material, resulting in greater academic achievement. These studies demonstrate that acquiring the mother tongue at a young age provides a solid basis for later language acquisition.

However, policymakers did not notice these studies until 2009 when the Department of Education (DepEd) challenged the Bilingual Education Policy through DO No. 74 s. 2009 or MTB-MLE institutionalization (Department of Education, 2009a). This mandate requires the learners' first language (L1), defined here as the language first acquired by the child and used for early cognitive development, to be used as the medium of instruction throughout formal education, including preschool, as well as in the Alternative Learning System (ALS). Notably, the Lingua Franca Project (1999-2001) and the Lubuagan Project (1999-present) provided valuable inputs in the initiation of the MTB-MLE (DO No. 16, s. 2012) (Department of Education, 2012). These projects show that learners learn to read more quickly when in their L1; pupils who have learned to read and write in their L1 learn to speak, read, and write in a second language (L2) and third language (L3) more quickly than those who are taught in a second or third language first; and in terms of cognitive development and its effects in other academic areas, pupils taught to read and write in their L1 acquire such competencies more quickly (DO No. 74, s. 2009) (Department of Education, 2009b).

It started in 2012 with the Department Order No. 16, s. 2012, or the Guidelines on the Implementation of the MTB-MLE, was issued, offering more specific guidelines for MTB-MLE and embedding the reform in the newly adopted "K to 12 Basic Education Program" (Department of Education, 2012). This order mandates the Implementation of MTB-MLE in all public schools from Kindergarten to Grade 3 as part of the K-12 Basic Education Program starting the school year 2012-2013. It also provided eight (8) major languages: Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Ilokano, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, and Waray, and four (4) lingua franca (LF): Tausug, Maguindanaon, Maranao, and Chabacano to be offered as a learning area and utilized as a language of instruction (LoI). Moreover, it has provided two (2) models for using Mother Tongue as MOI. First, Kindergarten or Grade 1 shall be taught in the children's MT. Second, when there are three or more MTs or variations of the LF without an approved orthography spoken by the pupils, Lingua Franca in that area shall be used as the MOI. Under the same order, teachers are provided government-issued materials in their regional languages but are expected to adapt them to reflect the students' L1. Finally, in January 2013, Congress officially supported this effort by passing the Enhanced Basic Education Act, which was immediately institutionalized in July through Republic Act No. 10533 (Philippines, 2013).

Reinforcing the implementation of MTB-MLE, the order includes in Section 4 the following: For kindergarten and the first three (3) years of elementary education, instruction, teaching materials, and assessment shall be in the regional or native language of the learners. The DepEd shall formulate a mother language

transition program from Grade 4 to Grade 6 so that Filipino and English shall be gradually introduced as languages of instruction until these two (2) languages can become the primary languages of instruction at the secondary level. While in Section 5 (f) of the said act, it is stated, "The curriculum shall adhere to the principles and framework of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) which starts from where the learners are and from what they already knew proceeding from the known to the unknown; instructional materials and capable teachers to implement the MTB-MLE curriculum shall be available".

Thus, following this mandate is DO No. 28, s. 2013, Additional Guidelines to DepEd Order No. 26, s. 2012 (Department of Education, 2012). This order provided languages of instruction for Grade 1 pupils who speak the same languages. The languages used in the specified regions and divisions starting S.Y. 2013-2014 are the Ibanag of Tuguegarao City, Cagayan, Isabela; Ivatan of the Batanes Group of Islands; Sambal of Zambales; Akianon of Aklan, Capiz; Kinaray-a of the Capiz, Aklan; Yakan of the Basilan Province and Surigaonon of the Surigao City and Provinces. Concerning this order, DepEd developed Teacher's Guides (TG) and Learner's Materials (LM) for these languages. Strict compliance with the order is directed; however, no 'exceptions' were provided for consideration in areas where a minority of learners do not speak the language specified in their respective regions. Also, in response to achieving the MTB-MLE goals and further monitoring, DO No. 55, s. 2015, or the Utilization of Language Mapping Data for MTB-MLE Program Implementation, was issued (Department of Education, 2015). This aims to strengthen the program implementation by establishing Language Mapping Data to inform policy-making, planning, and programming across all DepEd levels. It mandates teachers to make an inventory of languages used by individual learners in the classroom setting, which will then be submitted at higher levels (national) for monitoring, evaluation, materials production, and others.

With more than a decade of MTB-MLE implementation, and amid discussions regarding its fate in the wake of curriculum changes, this paper, at least, presents a snapshot of the time when MTB-MLE was vigorously implemented in the Philippines. Furthermore, to look at the strengths and weaknesses of language programs and policies is either to continue or to change (Pugong et al., 2024). Therefore, the main achievements in implementing MTB-MLE in the Philippines from 2014 to 2024 were discussed, and some of the challenges the various stakeholders have encountered while implementing it over the last decade were explored.

Method

Research design

A systematic literature review (SLR) was employed to examine the success stories and challenges of implementing MTB-MLE. According to Moher et al. (2015), this synthesis analysis includes careful identification, assessment, and synthesis of eligible studies to answer a particular research question. Following this strategy, the researchers accessed existing literature that met predetermined eligibility criteria to warrant a comprehensive and valid analysis.

Search strategy

The researchers used the terms "MTB-MLE," "Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education," and “Indigenous language” in searching across some academic databases, including the Educational Research Information Center (ERIC), Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, JSTOR, and Taylor & Francis. These are commonly known to offer peer-reviewed and reputable scholarly work (Kibiten, 2023). In addition, since MTB-MLE is connected to the DepEd, the researchers also added documents from the official website of the said agency, thus including DOs and press releases.

Screening and coding

In doing the SLR, the researchers employed the following basic criteria: document type, time frame, and demographics. Specifically, Table 1 shows that for journal or research articles to be considered, they must be peer-reviewed and available in full text or open access. Department Orders (DO) and press releases must be officially archived on the Department of Education's official page and be openly accessible. Other document types beyond these criteria were excluded. Furthermore, the time frame for consideration includes publications or issuances between 2012 and 2024. This time frame is chosen because the K to 12 Basic Education Program was officially implemented in the country in 2012. Regarding demographics, all journal articles, research articles, Department Orders (DOs), and press releases originating from locations other than the Philippines are excluded from consideration.

Table 1. Inclusion-exclusion criteria used in the present study

Parameter	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Document Type	Journal or peer-reviewed research articles are available in full text or open access. Department orders and press releases are officially archived on the Department of Education's official page and are openly accessible.	Articles that are not peer-reviewed, lacking full text or open access, conference papers, books, theses, dissertations, editorials, and commentaries. Non-research articles, such as opinion pieces or news reports, and those not officially archived on DepEd’s official page.
Time frame	Published between 2012 and 2024.	Published before 2012.
Demographics	The journal articles, Department Orders (DO), and press releases are set in the Philippines.	The journal articles, Department Orders (DO), and press releases are outside the Philippines.

Moreover, the researchers utilized the latest Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines by Page et al. (2021). As depicted in Figure 1, 16,635 documents were retrieved from the five selected databases using the specified keywords. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

were applied through available automation tools, resulting in the identification of 15,513 peer-reviewed documents, with 1,122 records excluded.

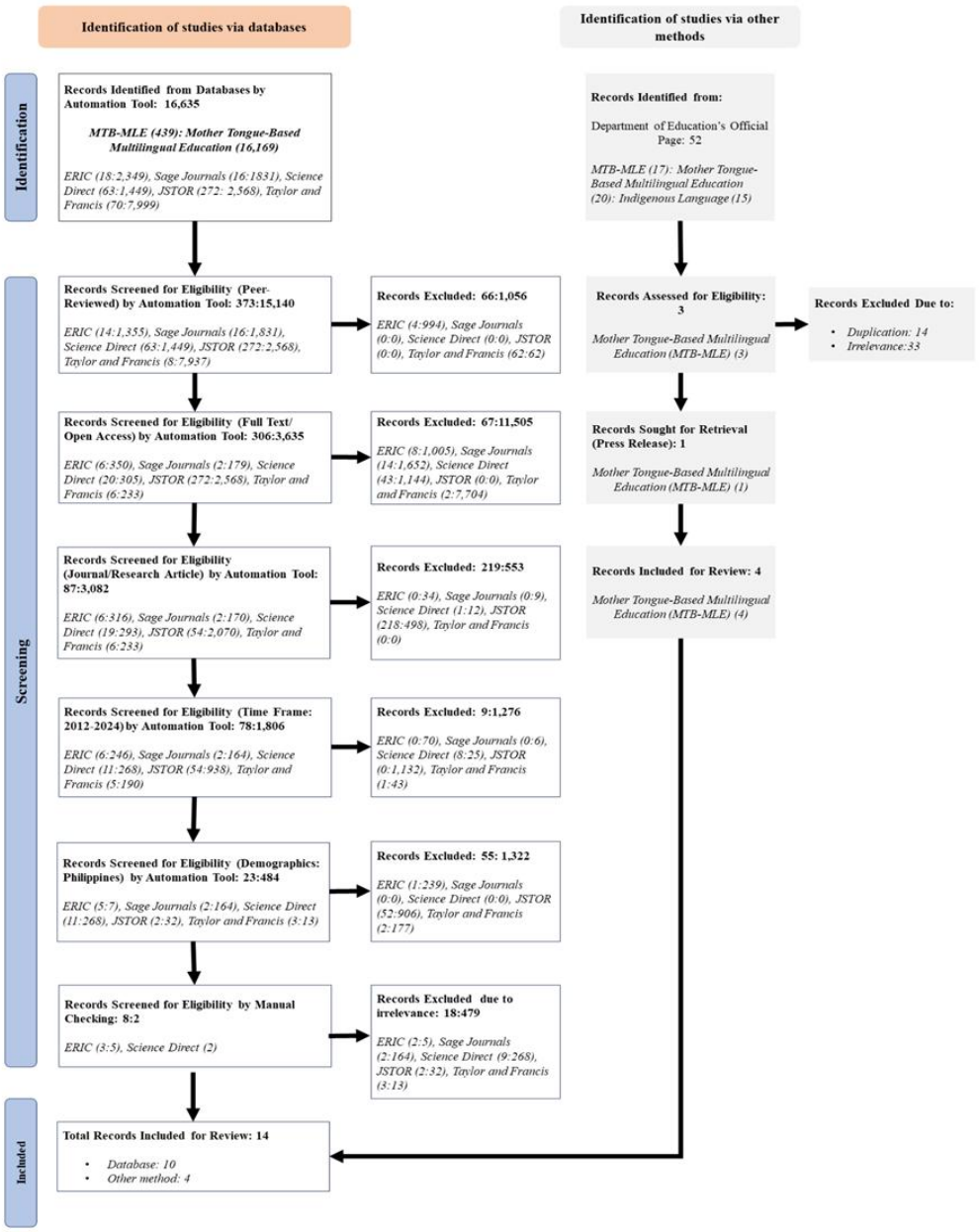


Figure 1. PRISMA flowchart utilized in the research

Next, the researchers sought documents with full text or accessible in open access, identifying 11,572 records meeting this criterion, while 3,941 records lacked attached documents. Furthermore, only documents classified as journal articles or research articles were included, excluding 772 documents categorized as reviews, questionnaires, or other types, leaving 3,169 documents remaining. The next criterion applied was the publication time frame, with documents required to be published between 2012 and the present. This resulted in identifying 1,884 documents meeting the timeframe criterion, while 1,285

documents published before 2012 were excluded. Finally, documents were filtered based on demographics, necessitating a setting in the Philippines. This step identified 507 documents meeting the criterion, while 1,377 documents outside the Philippines were removed.

Following the automated screening process, the researchers rigorously reviewed the remaining documents, selecting ten documents from the ERIC database and two from ScienceDirect, with 497 documents removed. Additionally, the researchers considered data from the DO retrieved from the DepEd's official page. In addition to the two keywords, 'Indigenous language' was included in the search. Although 52 documents were initially identified, only three were deemed relevant after screening, with 14 duplicates and 33 irrelevant documents excluded. These three relevant documents were obtained from the MTB-MLE search, with no relevant documents from the Indigenous language search. However, upon further consideration, one press release on MTB-MLE was retrieved as relevant for corroboration, resulting in four documents from the other records. Combining the records from the database and other sources, 14 documents were reviewed in this study.

Data analysis

The researchers used thematic analysis based on the six-stage framework that Clarke and Braun (2013) suggested to study MTB-MLE implementation. The researchers read the data repeatedly and got familiar with it before making initial codes, which captured frequent ideas. These codes were analyzed, clustered, and condensed into general themes capturing the success and challenges experienced in MTB-MLE implementation from 2014 to 2024. Here, strong policy and material support, better student outcomes through mother tongue use, and teacher capacity development through constant training are the key success factors for the said implementation. On the other hand, the challenges comprise insufficient teacher knowledge and materials, disconnection between language policy and local linguistic environments, inadequate second language acquisition, and teaching challenges in multilingual and inclusive classrooms.

Findings and Discussion

Successes that have marked the implementation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines

Strengthened system support through policies, language mapping, and materials development

Supportive policies, structured planning, and improvements in learning materials have significantly strengthened MTB-MLE implementation in the Philippines. When the program was introduced, it aimed to do more than shift the language of instruction; it sought to transform foundational learning by making every child a reader and writer by Grade 1. This goal was rooted in earlier initiatives like the Lingua Franca and Lubuagan Projects, demonstrating the cognitive and academic benefits of using the mother tongue in early education.

As Harden et al. (2022) noted, successful implementation depended heavily on the capacity of teachers to speak and teach in the local language. In response, regional education supervisors were trained to lead MTB-MLE implementation in their areas, and institutional support grew through the issuance of DepEd Order

No. 16, s. 2012 and its supplement, DepEd Order No. 28, s. 2013. The latter expanded the program to include seven more languages, such as Ibanag (some spelled it as Ybanag), Ivatan, and Surigaonon, helping to reach more learners in their native tongues.

By 2015, the Department of Education introduced Language Mapping, allowing school leaders and teachers to gather accurate linguistic data from their communities. According to the Department of Education (2015), this data was used to inform school-based planning: improving class sectioning, designing in-service teacher training, and creating localized instructional resources. However, the quality of learning materials remained a challenge. Many translated textbooks relied on literal or phonetic conversions, often leading to confusion. Scholars like Marquez and Bandril (2014) developed a specialized academic word list at their university, providing carefully vetted Filipino translations of commonly used academic terms to address this.

Enhanced learner learning through mother tongue and multilingual approaches

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Empowered teachers through training and professional development

Teachers play a central role in the success of MTB-MLE. From the beginning, the Department of Education emphasized the importance of well-trained educators by requiring them to undergo specialized training in MTB-MLE and the broader K to 12 Basic Education Program (Department of Education, 2016). These professional development efforts were expanded in 2015 with

DepEd Order No. 55, s. 2015, which recommended using language mapping data to inform school-based in-service training. Programs like Learning Action Cells (LACs) were established to continuously build the skills of teaching and non-teaching personnel in line with local language contexts (Department of Education, 2015). Beyond skills training, MTB-MLE has helped nurture a deeper commitment among teachers to use and support mother tongue instruction. In a study by Alieto (2018), many pre-service teachers expressed willingness to use their learners' mother tongue in the classroom as a medium of instruction and as a subject. Their positive attitudes were partly shaped by their teacher education experiences, which included discussions and coursework on the value of linguistic diversity in education.

Challenges experienced by different stakeholders during the implementation of MTB-MLE

Teacher capacity, learning resources, and technical subject challenges

A recurring concern in implementing MTB-MLE is the limited capacity of teachers, especially in regions where instructors are expected to teach in a mother tongue that is not their own. Many teachers have not received sufficient training in the linguistic foundations or pedagogical strategies required to effectively implement MTB-MLE, and some are even unfamiliar with the mother tongues of their students (Besa, 2014; Harden, 2022). This gap in preparedness is compounded by the lack of teaching guides, dictionaries, and culturally appropriate instructional materials, especially in linguistically diverse and resource-constrained areas (Rosero, 2022; Sanchez et al., 2023). In many cases, teachers are forced to rely on outdated English textbooks or resort to their translations, which may be inconsistent or confusing to students.

The problem becomes more pronounced when teaching content-heavy subjects like Science and Mathematics, which present unique linguistic challenges. Teachers struggle with translating abstract or technical terms due to the absence of standardized equivalents in the local languages (Medilo, 2016). These terminological gaps and orthographic inconsistencies make it difficult to build learners' conceptual understanding in these subjects (Nolasco, 2024). As a result, the cognitive load of both learners and teachers increases, potentially undermining the academic goals of MTB-MLE.

Mismatch between national language policy and local linguistic realities

While the MTB-MLE policy aims to support learners by using their L1 as the medium of instruction, the selection and designation of languages for instruction often fail to reflect actual linguistic diversity on the ground. Initially, only eight languages were included, and although more have been added over time, many communities still feel linguistically excluded (Department of Education, 2015). Research shows that in several regions, the language designated by the policy does not match the students' real mother tongue, creating confusion and negatively affecting learning outcomes (De Guzman & De Vera, 2018).

This misalignment also results in inequitable implementation across linguistic communities. Harden (2022) found that access to training, support, and implementation fidelity varied widely, often privileging regions where the assigned MTB language aligned closely with students' L1. In contrast, minority

language communities struggled with limited materials, undertrained teachers, and inadequate language documentation. These disparities expose systemic inequities and suggest that the one-size-fits-all rollout of MTB-MLE has inadvertently created new barriers for learners in marginalized linguistic groups.

Barriers to successful second language (L2) *acquisition*

One of the objectives of MTB-MLE is to establish a solid foundation in the mother tongue so that students can easily transfer to Filipino and English afterwards. Yet, there is evidence that this transfer is not always successful. According to De Lemios (2023), most students approach the intermediate grades with minimal writing and comprehension abilities in Filipino and English, although they are proficient in their L1. The sudden transition from L1 to L2/FIL after Grade 3 and the lack of bridging mechanisms lead to gaps in the second language acquisition. Moreover, the short duration of MTB-MLE implementation, typically up to Grade 3, seems inadequate to maximize learners' multilingual growth. The lack of continuous L1 support in upper levels and proper scaffolding in Filipino and English might lead to a decline in academic achievement and literacy. This volatility in language development undermines the long-term objectives of the multilingual education policy of the K–12 curriculum.

Instructional limitations in inclusive and multilingual classrooms

Applying MTB-MLE in heterogeneously linguistically or specially needs-inclusive classrooms offers additional challenges. Teachers are expected to provide differentiated instruction, translate on the spot, and deal with classrooms where multiple languages could be used, all within constrained instructional time. As De Lemios (2023) explains, the ongoing necessity to translate ideas and differentiate lessons hinders instruction, frequently leaving instructors unable to finish the adopted curriculum or assist students in achieving grade-level ability. This is especially true in underserved schools with crowded classrooms, heavy teacher workloads, and limited support systems. Lacking adequate institutional support, teachers find it difficult to strike a balance between inclusivity and content coverage, which could undermine both access and quality of education for linguistically diverse students.

Discussion

Over a decade after its implementation, MTB-MLE has shown that instruction in the student's mother tongue is not merely an approach but a statement. It speaks to each child: "Your language matters. You belong here." The strategy has enabled children to learn more effectively, communicate confidently, and understand the world more clearly, particularly during their early years. But beyond improved test scores or reading levels, it has done something more profound; it has helped define who these students are. As reflected in the reviewed documents, when students hear their language used in school, they do not merely learn lessons; they see themselves represented in the curriculum. They feel heard, seen, and valued. In a country as multilingual as the Philippines, this is vital. It reminds learners that their identity is not a barrier to learning, but a bridge. However, the implementation of such language programs is not without challenges. Across all MTB-MLE implementations in the Philippines and

globally, the lack of localized teaching materials, often due to the absence of standardized orthographies, remains a serious issue. Another critical challenge identified in this review is teachers' proficiency in using their mother tongue. Not all teachers are assigned to areas where their language is spoken. Many are deployed away from their hometowns to places where the local language is unfamiliar to them. Given the teacher shortage, requiring educators to teach a mother tongue they do not speak creates a major barrier. This can result in forced or ineffective instruction, placing an undue burden on the teacher.

Moreover, it was mentioned that teaching technical subjects in the mother tongue also poses challenges, as there is often a lack of equivalent vocabulary. In some cases, translations are forced or inaccurate, leading to confusion. But Pelila (2025) explains that in a language, borrowing is an occurrence that happens naturally, whether through language contact (intimate borrowing) or encounters with new cultural ideas and technologies (cultural borrowing). Therefore, not everything needs to be translated literally or directly, particularly if some ideas are equivalent in a speech community's cultural and linguistic experience. The researchers believe also just like what De Guzman and De Vera (2018) and Harden (2022) said that behind these abovementioned challenges, the main under-emphasized challenge in MTB-MLE implementation is the presumption on the part of some curriculum writers that there must be an existing or ‘genuine’ equivalent in each local language for every technical or academic term being taught at school. This thinking not only misinterprets how languages work but also puts pressure on creating or coercing what to put in the materials, such as translations, which could sound artificial, confusing, or even wrong to teachers and students alike.

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Conclusion

The roll-out of MTB-MLE in the Philippines' basic education curriculum has been a revolutionary move, if only many claim that it failed to work in practice. Despite its defeats, it is still a hopeful and developing program. Had MTB-MLE not been included in the K–12 curriculum, these problems might have remained under wraps. Some stakeholders, worst hit, such as students and their families, will see it as a failure, but its failings at the basic education level might be the start of something better in the future.

For MTB-MLE to be effective, however, all parties must leave behind overly rigid language regulations and embrace more flexible and pragmatic

strategies that mirror how people and teachers naturally speak and write language daily. This will take long-term investment in teacher education, production of inclusive resources, and ongoing policy development based on what's going on in classrooms. Also, it is difficult to fully achieve its objectives at the basic education level. In that case, MTB-MLE can be reborn and given a new direction in higher education, where deeper analysis of language, culture, and identity can be undertaken. Educating mother tongue principles at the collegiate level can assist future teachers, researchers, and policy makers in better grasping the significance of linguistic diversity and becoming more well-equipped to implement it.

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