

## A Comparative Study of the MTB-MLE Programs in Southeast Asian Countries

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**ABSTRACT :** This study determined how Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education is implemented in Southeast Asian countries particularly in Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Specifically, it determined the similarities and differences in their implementation in terms of language policy, curriculum, and teachers' qualifications and training. It also identified the best practices and challenges in their MTB-MLE implementation. Moreover, a functional framework was formulated for better implementation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines. This study utilized a descriptive-comparative design. Secondary data were utilized which were gathered through data mining. Findings of the study revealed that language policies support the implementation of MTB-MLE among the five selected countries in Southeast Asia. Mother tongue languages are used in education as a medium of instruction and/or as a subject in Primary level. MT teachers among these countries are almost similar in educational attainment and skills to speak the MT languages. Nevertheless, training in curriculum and materials development, teaching techniques and methodologies in MTB-MLE are given to them. These five countries are all convinced to use mother tongue as a vehicle in learning the second language.

**KEYWORDS:** *Curriculum, Language Policy, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education, Second Language Learning, Teachers Qualifications and Training,*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Global academic institutions host several thousand languages to communicate meaning. This linguistic diversity presents a multiplicity of challenges in the education system. Questions such as: What language should children learn, What language should be used for imparting instruction in schools? need careful examination for understanding the current state of language use in education. Indeed, the vital role played by language in processes of cognition and learning is a well-established fact (UNESCO, 2007).

The use of mother tongue as primary medium of instruction in the primary level of education has been proven effective by several researches already done worldwide. The benefits of mother tongue highlighted in these studies include improved academic skills (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997; Walter & Dekker, 2011); stronger classroom participation (Benson, 2000; Dutcher, 1995); increased access to education (Benson, 2004); and development of critical thinking skills (Brock-Utne, 2006). Research has also noted the effect of multilingual education on cultural pride (Cummins, 2000; Wright & Taylor, 1995); increased parent participation (Cummins, 2000; Dutcher, 1995); and increased achievement of girls (Benson, 2005; Hovens, 2002). Another major benefit of mother tongue instruction is the foundation it builds for gaining literacy in additional languages (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997).

In different regions of the world, many children are taught in languages that are not spoken in their immediate community. Researches show that these children are over-represented among the out-of-school population. This issue has started to receive increased attention and, as a result, many countries have begun to experiment the use of some Mother Tongue languages in education (UNESCO, 2005).

In the Philippines, experimental studies on the use of mother tongue in the pre-elementary classroom also gained positive results toward literacy and learning the second language. Its value is given more emphasis in the implementation of DepEd Order No.16, s. 2012, also known as Guidelines on the Implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based-Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). This DepEd Order states that the MTB-MLE is implemented in all public schools, specifically in Kindergarten, Grades 1, 2 and 3 as part of the k to 12 Basic Education Program starting School Year 2012-2013. Since it was just implemented three (3) years ago, problems and challenges arise. Some of these are the limited materials and facilities and insufficient training for teachers.

Having in mind the value of mother tongue based instruction in processes of learning and being aware of the national and local issues about its implementation, this study determined how Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education is implemented in Southeast Asian countries particularly Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Specifically, it determined the similarities and differences in their implementation in terms of language policy, curriculum, and teachers' qualifications and training. It also identified the best practices and challenges in their MTB-MLE implementation.

Subsequently, relevant output was designed to help improve instruction among local academic institutions and educators in the Philippines which ultimately aid in curricular improvement and or modification.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study utilized a descriptive-comparative design. It focused on getting information on the current status of the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in five (5) Southeast Asian countries namely Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Specifically, it explored the similarities and differences of their implementation in terms of language policy, curriculum, and teachers' qualifications and training. Moreover, the good practices and challenges of the implementation in each country were determined.

Secondary data were utilized in this study. These were collected from diverse sources of information through "data mining". This data gathering procedure has five phases. *Establishing a Data Mining Plan* was the first phase. This began with the expression of the objectives of the study. Goals in terms of things such as "What are the countries in Southeast Asia that implement MTB-MLE program?" and "Are there available information about their implementation of MTB-MLE program?" were established. Then, a plan to meet the objectives was developed. *Identifying Sources of information* was done after establishing a data mining plan. The researcher identified the websites, books, journals, and academic research reports that were good sources of data needed for the study. This was followed by the *Gathering Existing Data* phase. The identified sources of information were explored and read. Then, helpful data were downloaded and noted. *Preparing the Data* was the next phase. The downloaded and noted data were formatted and built into the desired form. The final step was *analyzing the obtained information*. The gathered data were analyzed and used to answer the research questions.

To check and establish validity of the gathered secondary data, the researcher conducted a data triangulation. This type of triangulation involved using different sources of data from different authors, data from the official website of the Ministry in Education/Department of Education of each country, and responses from the interviews of teachers in countries included in this study.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discusses and compares the language-in-education policies, curriculum, teachers' qualifications and training, and practices in the selected five (5) Southeast Asian countries. The focus is on the use of mother tongue in primary level of public schools.

### A. Language Policy

Language-in-education policy is what a government does officially through legislation, court decisions or policy to determine how languages are used in education. This section outlines the main language policies of the five selected Southeast Asian countries based on the available documents, particularly on statements regarding the use of Mother Tongue languages.

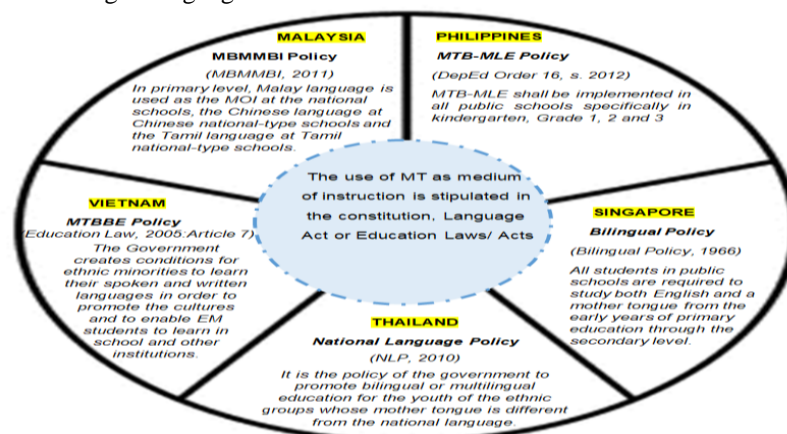


Figure 1: Summary of Language Policies in Five Selected Southeast Asian Countries

Figure 1 summarizes the key language-in-education policies facts in Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. These five selected countries implemented Mother Tongue – Based Instruction through constitutional mandates, education acts, decrees or orders issued in each country.

Policy supports for the use of Mother Tongue as language of instruction among these countries is evident. Mother tongues are used in education to some extent. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Mother Tongues are languages of instruction in all subject areas. Singapore permit several languages, though only dominant ones such as Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, as a subject (Ministry of Education, 2007). The use of Mother Tongue as language of instruction in Thailand and Vietnam is still implemented in some action research projects (Djite, 2011). In Malaysia, dominant mother tongues are used as language of instruction in national-type primary schools. Other non-dominant languages are taught as subjects in some areas of the country (David and Govinsamy, 2007; Nagarathinam, 2008). In the Philippines, Mother Tongues are deployed in education as language of instruction in all public schools in kindergarten to Grade 1, 2 and 3 (DepEd, 2012).

This summary reveals that the five Southeast Asian countries have gradually moved towards potential mother tongue-based multilingual education. This agrees with the findings of SEAMEO (2009) that in these countries, as well as in other parts of the world, MTB-MLE has been started. It usually begins with community and Non-Government Organization efforts in adult and pre-primary education, and is nonformal in nature. As a result, the government’s formal system may include local language components in the curricula, mainly by using these languages orally in classrooms or teaching them as subjects. This has paved the way to stronger forms of multilingual education, or even to a change in national language policy, as in Papua New Guinea (SEAMEO, 2009).

Moreover, policy developments in the use of Mother Tongue languages in education and the latitude given to ethno linguistic minorities in Southeast Asia have generally been positive over the past decade. If the current trends, efforts, and advocacy continue in the years to come, it is likely that in some Southeast Asian countries the situation of non-dominant languages and ethno linguistic minorities will improve.

**B. Curriculum**

The curriculum associated with MTB-MLE program determines the scope and sequencing of learning objectives. The goal of the curriculum is to build for teachers a comprehensive framework to fully understand the planned learning outcomes. This section discusses the prescribed MTB-MLE curriculum of the five selected Southeast Asian countries based on the available documents.

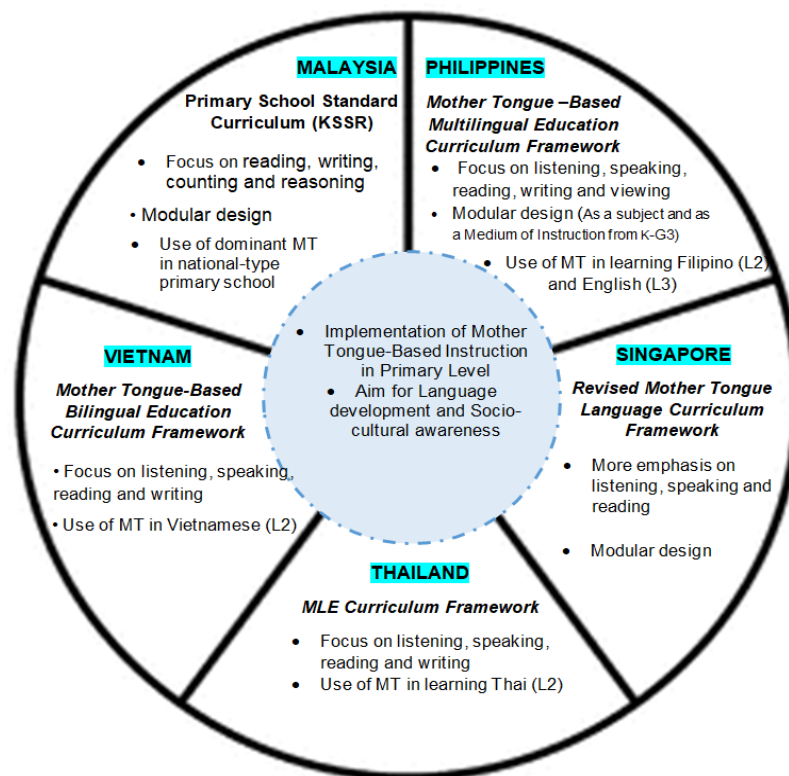


Figure 2: Summary of the MTB-MLE Curricula in Five Selected Southeast Asian Countries

Curriculum is an integral part of an instruction as it contains the content areas and the strategies used by the teachers. To make curriculum locally relevant and accessible to all students, it should be built on the students’ existing knowledge and varying backgrounds (Malone, 2009). Figure 2 summarizes the MTB-MLE curriculum in Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. As shown in the inner circle of the figure, these five (5) selected countries in Southeast Asia implement MTB Instruction in Primary level. They also share common goals in implementing the program. They aim for language development – improvement of language acquisition of students in mother tongue and in the second language, and socio-cultural awareness-cultural preservation and revitalization among students (Tao, 2013; Hodge, 2013; Ministry of Education OBEC, 2008; Thao, 2013, DepEd, 2012)

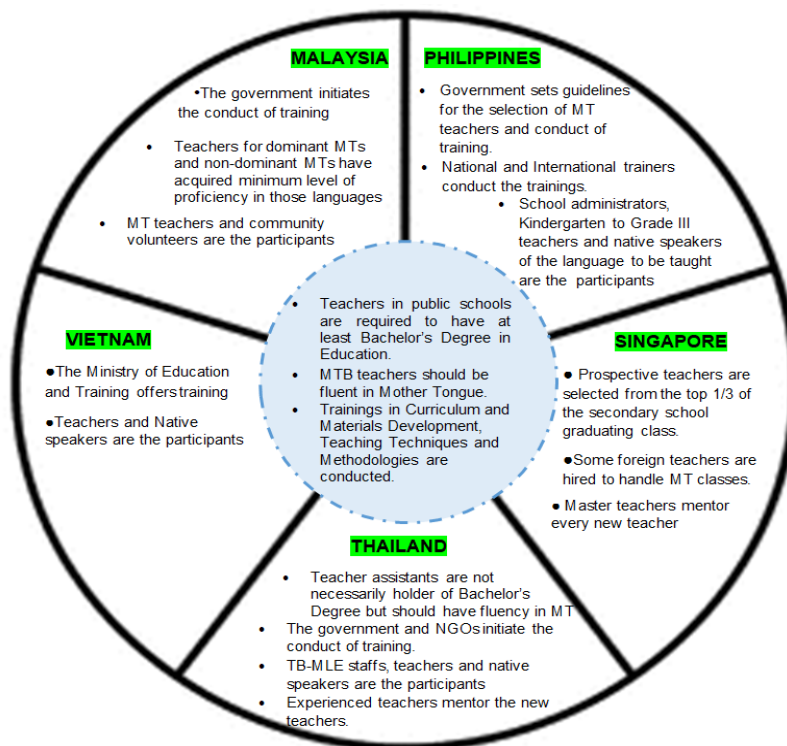
Furthermore, figure 2 shows the differences of MTB-MLE implementation among the mentioned countries. The skills being developed through MT instruction varied. In Thailand and Vietnam, skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing in MT are given highlights. In the Philippines, the focus is developing listening, speaking, reading, writing and viewing skills in MT. In Singapore, listening, reading and writing skills are given more emphasis. On the other hand, developing skills in reading, writing, counting and reasoning are the focus in Malaysia. Majority of these countries are using modular design of curriculum.

Among the selected countries, only the Philippines implements Mother Tongue (MT) as Medium of Instruction (MOI) in all public schools of the country. MT is used as MOI in all subjects from Kindergarten to Grade 3. Meanwhile, Thailand and Vietnam implement MTB-MLE only in some areas of each country. In these two countries, MT is used as MOI in most subjects in primary level. In Malaysia dominant MTs are used as MOI in national-type primary school and other non-dominant languages are taught as subjects. In Singapore, Mother Tongues are used as MOI for MT subjects only.

The data implies that Philippines is more advanced than other Southeast Asian countries as to the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based instruction. This study affirmed with SEAMEO (2009) that the use of non-dominant languages as language of instruction is more evident in the Philippines.

**Teachers’ Qualifications and Training**

Teachers are essential to the successful implementation of MTB-MLE. They play a key role in determining the extent to which language policies are implemented. Therefore, it is necessary to ensure that they are qualified and trained to teach. This section entails the qualifications and training of the teachers in MTB-MLE program among the five selected Southeast Asian countries based on the available documents.



**Figure 3: Summary of the Teachers’ Qualifications and Training for MTB-MLE in Five Selected Southeast Asian Countries**

Teachers greatly affect the success of the MTB-MLE program. Thus, selection of teachers should be given importance in order to assure that they are qualified to teach (Dooley, 2013).

The five selected Southeast Asian countries have almost the same guidelines on the selection of teachers for MTB-MLE program. For them to be qualified, they should acquire at least Bachelor's Degree in Education. Moreover, they should have fluency in the Mother Tongue to be used in the classroom.

Likewise, Training and seminars are important for teachers who are teaching multilingual learners because they need to be oriented and guided on how to handle learners with different languages. Seminars and training also served as opportunities for the teachers to learn from and interact with the different participants (Lartec, 2014).

Countries like Philippines, Singapore and Thailand's pre-service programs include training in Mother Tongue-Based instruction in some teacher education institutions. On the other hand, Malaysia and Vietnam do not specify the inclusion of MTB instruction in the pre-service training of the teachers.

To fulfill the need to successfully implement MTB instruction, the selected countries offer different in-service training packages. In Malaysia, the government initiated the conduct of training through tests and interviews. Participants of the training are the MT teachers and the community volunteers. On the other hand, the Philippine government sets guidelines for the conduct of training. These guidelines include the selection of participants, topics for the training and identification of trainers. In Singapore, foreign teachers are hired to teach Mother Tongue classes. With this, MT teachers' training is given much importance; thus, budget for training is allocated. However, in Thailand and Vietnam, small scales training among MT teachers and community volunteers are conducted especially that only selected areas in these countries are implementing MTB instruction.

These five (5) Southeast Asian countries use the cascade model of training which involves the delivery of training through layers of trainers until it reaches the teachers in their own districts. Training topics are also similar among these countries such as curriculum and materials development and teaching techniques and methodologies. Further trainings and workshops to refresh and update the teachers on current development in teaching techniques and methodologies are regularly carried out.

All the selected countries consider teachers' training as imperative in instruction. This affirmed with Dutcher (2004) who stated that teachers need training in using first language in the classroom. Most teachers need training in methodology so that they can exploit the advantages of teaching in the language that children can understand. Wedell (2005) supported that teachers have to be specifically trained in order to implement Mother Tongue-Based instruction in the classroom.

#### BEST PRACTICES IN MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SELECTED SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES

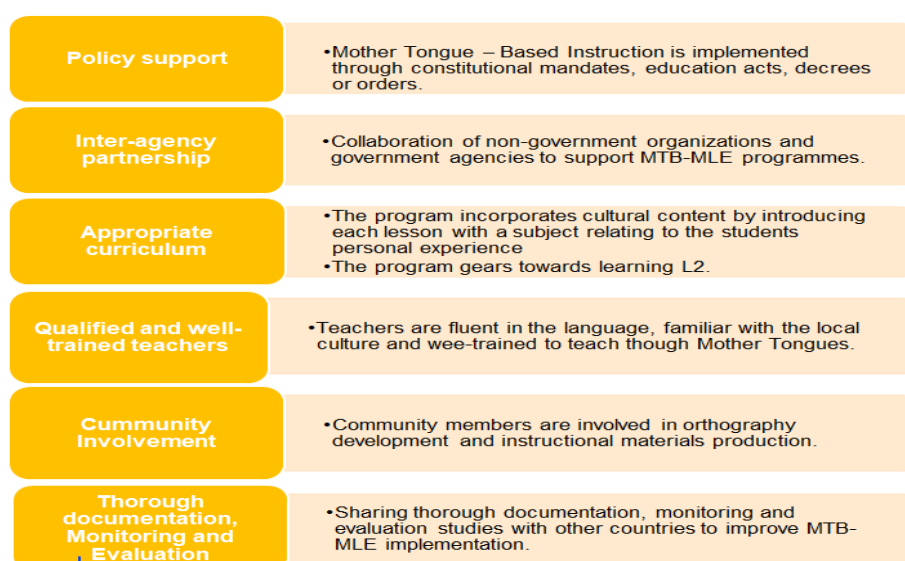


Figure 4: Best Practices of MTB-MLE Programs in Selected Southeast Asian Countries



Figure 4 exhibits the good practices of Mother Tongue-Based Instruction among five Southeast Asian countries. These practices are categorized into six (6): policy support, inter-agency partnership, appropriate curriculum, qualified and well-trained teacher, community involvement, thorough documentation, monitoring and evaluation.

A country that aims to have a successful implementation of MTB-MLE has government agencies that establish supportive policies with clear directions for the program. In the Philippines, a policy underscored the significance of Mother-Tongue Based Instruction and legalized its implementation in the country (DepEd, 2012). This affirmed the findings of SEAMEO (2009) that the language policy support of a country is a great factor to the success of MTB-MLE program. In Malaysia, good inter-agency collaboration supported the creation of community-owned MTB-MLE pre-schools. Partnerships among non-government organizations, community organizations and local government units are very significant in developing high quality programs on language and education.

Another contributing factor to the success of Mother Tongue-Based Instruction is the curriculum. In Thailand and Vietnam, curriculum incorporates cultural content by introducing lesson with a subject relating to the students personal experience. Their curricula were designed to be taught to children at the primary school level using the local language. These then build links from the local language to the national or official language.

Teachers' training is very relevant in the success of Mother Tongue-Based Instruction. Teachers who are well-trained are more effective in teaching through mother tongue. In Singapore, MT teachers are highly qualified who are knowledgeable about the MT subject. Good training and continuing support are given to them. This is the reason why the country doesn't have problems of persistently ineffective teachers

A participatory process centering on the language community is crucial to ensuring appreciation, acceptability, accuracy and ownership. In the Philippines, participatory orthography development and instructional materials production have been initiated among several non-dominant language communities, which in turn have encouraged participation and motivation for Mother Tongue-Based Instruction within the communities (Williams et.al, 2014). In Malaysia, committed individuals who are well versed in the Kaduzandusun language voluntarily assist in developing teaching materials to be used in schools (Nagarathinam, 2009). Finally, sharing thorough documentation and thorough monitoring and evaluation studies provide the information required for replicable approaches to be adopted and adapted among countries in Southeast Asia and beyond.

#### CHALLENGES IN MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN SELECTED SOUTHEAST ASIAN COUNTRIES

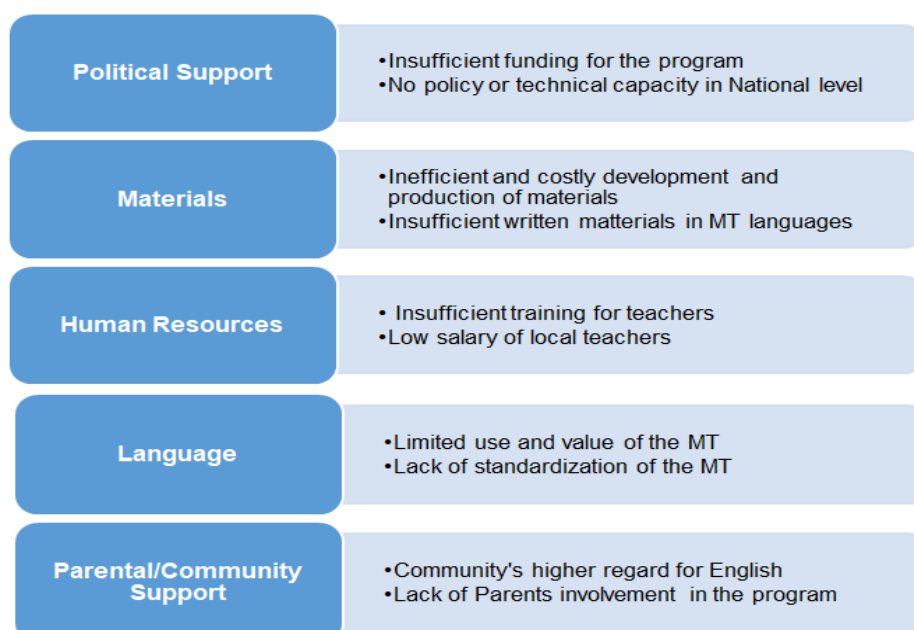


Figure 5: Challenges of MTB-MLE Programs in Selected Southeast Asian Countries

Figure 5 shows the several challenges of the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based instruction in Selected Southeast Asian countries. These challenges are categorized into five (5) themes: Political Support, Materials, Human Resources, Language, and Parental/Community Support.

Although there is a policy provision of the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based instruction, continuous support of the government at multiple levels in a nation or province is importantly needed. In Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, planning for sustainable source of funding and policy support for the MTB programs were inadequate. These were perceived as the reasons of other encountered challenges such as insufficient materials and low salary of teachers in these countries.

The insufficient instructional materials which hinder the transmission of content in local language are not only experienced in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, but also in the Philippines and Singapore. Only limited reading materials in MT languages were available when MTB implementation was started. However, to solve this problem, community members in each country were involved in the production of materials.

Another concern on MTB implementation is the challenge in Human resources which includes the salary and training of the teachers, teacher aids and other staff. As mentioned above, low salary of local teachers was experienced in Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam. Aside from this, the issue on insufficient training for teachers is a concern in five countries except Singapore. The teachers in these countries felt that training and seminars should be provided regularly and academic support from the specialist on various issues of MTB instruction is also required.

Language status is also one of challenges encountered in the implementation of MTB instruction in five selected countries. Some MT languages have no written and standardized form; hence, limited use and low value of Mother Tongues. With this, a challenge on community's regards towards MT languages was raised. English and other official languages were given higher value than the MTs, thus community members and parents were not encouraged to get involved with MTB programs.

### FUNCTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR MOTHER TONGUE-BASED MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

To have an effective and sustained Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education program, there is a range of factors to be considered. Some of these were identified as the best practices in MTB-MLE implementation in the selected Southeast Asian countries such as a strong policy support, inter-agency partnership, appropriate curriculum, qualified and well-trained teachers, community involvement and thorough documentation, monitoring and evaluation. However, only a few of these factors are evident in the implementation of the said program in the Philippines. In addition, several challenges are encountered which may hinder the success of the program. With an aim to improve its implementation, a functional framework for MTB-MLE in the country was formulated.

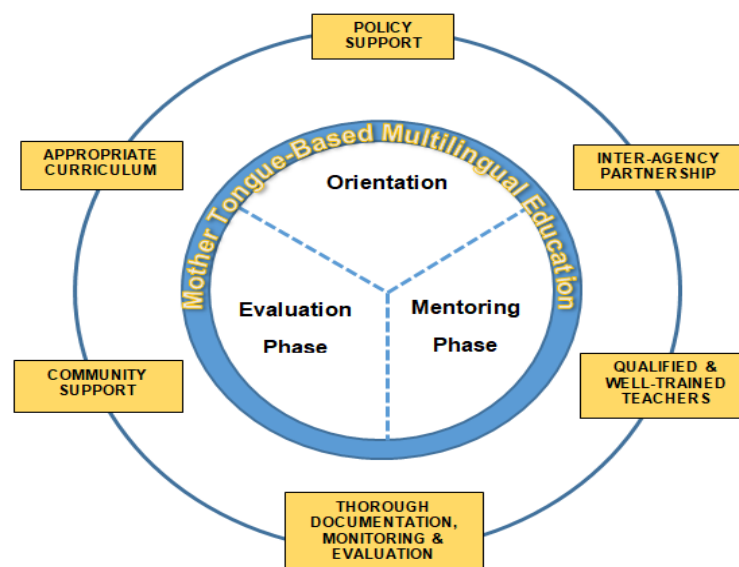


Figure 6: Functional Framework for Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education in the Philippines

The framework is entitled “Mentoring-Monitoring Framework for Mother Tongue-Based Instruction. This framework is intended for the public schools in the Philippines. This shows that to better hurdle the challenges encountered in the implementation of MTB-MLE in the country, a mentoring-monitoring process should be done applying the identified best practices in selected Southeast Asian countries.

The mentoring-monitoring process is divided into three (3) phases: the orientation, mentoring phase and evaluation phase.

In the orientation period, the school principal will conduct a needs assessment in order to identify the things needed for the implementation MTB-MLE program. Teachers, students and parents will also be informed on the salient parts of the program: the language of instruction and how this language would help the students in learning the second language. This orientation will provide them concise and accurate information about MTB-MLE to make them more comfortable when the classes start.

During the implementation of the program, teachers may encounter some challenges; hence, mentoring will be very important. In this phase, the school principal may act as the mentor or he may assign qualified teachers who will serve as mentors. These mentors will help the kindergarten, grades 1, 2 and 3 teachers in formulating appropriate responses on the challenges they encountered. This will be done through conferences and workshops.

After the implementation of the program, its effectiveness will be evaluated. This will be done at the end of each school year. The integration of the different aspects that make an effective and sustained MTB-MLE program (six identified best practices) will be assessed. Moreover, successes and challenges of the implementation will also be identified. This will provide further information on how to strengthen the MTB-MLE program in public schools in the Philippines.

#### **IV. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

This study aimed to find out how the Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education is implemented in five Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Specifically, it looked into the similarities and differences of their implementation in terms of language policy, curriculum and teachers’ training. Furthermore, best practices and challenges they met during the implementation were identified.

Findings of the study revealed that language policies support the implementation of MTB-MLE among the five selected countries in Southeast Asia. Mother tongue languages are used in education as a medium of instruction and/or as a subject in Primary level which aim for language development and socio-cultural awareness. MT teachers among these countries are almost similar in educational attainment and skills to speak the MT languages. Nevertheless, training in curriculum and materials development, teaching techniques and methodologies in MTB-MLE are given to them.

Moreover, policy support, inter-agency partnership, appropriate curriculum, qualified and well-trained teachers, community involvement and thorough documentation, monitoring and evaluation are recognized as the best practices in the implementation of MTB-MLE. On the other hand, inadequate political support, limited instructional materials, inadequate teachers’ training, limited use of the language and lack of community involvement were identified as challenges to the success of the program.

For better implementation of MTB-MLE in the Philippines, a functional framework was formulated. This framework gives consideration on the learnt best practices and challenges on MTB-MLE in the selected countries in Southeast Asia.

#### **V. CONCLUSION**

The five selected Southeast Asian countries have varied ways of implementing MTB-MLE. They are all convinced to use mother tongue as a vehicle in learning the second language. This affirms Cummins and Krashen’s Theory on Second Language Acquisition.

#### **VI. RECOMMENDATION**

In the light of the findings and conclusion, the following are highly recommended:

1. Stakeholders are encouraged to be involved in the decision-making regarding the implementation of the MTB-MLE, as well as which languages will be used and how they will be developed.
2. Teachers need to be properly oriented, trained and supervised in the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Instruction. Sufficient trainings should be given to them.



3. Needs of the students and teachers, such as instructional materials, must be met for any reform to be effective.
4. There should be policy formulation that will ensure adequate provision for instructional materials in mother tongue. Moreover, all MTB teachers should be encouraged to be exposed to, and trained on the art of improvisation of instructional materials on regular basis so as to make teaching-learning more effective.
5. Tracking the background of the teachers in terms of their readiness of MTB implementation is encouraged.

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