



16 September 2024

ATTY. EULOGIO A.M. SABBAN, CESO III

Director IV
Legislative Office, Office of the Deputy
Executive Secretary for Legal Affairs
Office of the President, Malacañang
City of Manila

Dear **Director Sabban**:

In response to your request, we are submitting the attached comments and recommendations on Senate Bill No. 2457 / House Bill No. 6717, titled “An Act Discontinuing the Use of the Mother Tongue as Medium of Instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3, Providing for Its Optional Implementation in Monolingual Classes, and Amending Sections 4 and 5 of Republic Act No. 10533, Otherwise Known as the ‘Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013.’” This is prepared by Dr. Michael Ralph M. Abrigo, Senior Research Fellow, and yours truly.

In our assessment and with due respect to our legislators, we respectfully urge the President to consider vetoing the current version of the bill or request a revised version that offers greater flexibility and support in promoting the use of the child’s first language or mother tongue. We believe that a more promotive approach would better serve the educational development of young learners.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this critical discussion. We hope our input will be helpful as the government continues to deliberate on the consolidated enrolled Senate Bill No. 2457 and House Bill No. 6717, presented by Congress on September 9, 2024.

PIDS remains committed to conducting forward-looking, responsive, and evidence-based research that offers practical policy recommendations and actionable insights for shaping the government’s development plans and policies. For further inquiries and clarification, you may coordinate with Dr. Abrigo, as the PIDS designated handling officer related to this submission. You may contact him via email at MAbrigo@pids.gov.ph or via mobile number +639997950827.

Very truly yours,

ANICETO C. ORBETA JR., PhD
President, PIDS

COMMENTS ON SENATE BILL NO. 2457/HOUSE BILL NO. 6717 OR “AN ACT DISCONTINUING THE USE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE AS MEDIUM OF INSTRUCTION FROM KINDERGARTEN TO GRADE 3, PROVIDING FOR ITS OPTIONAL IMPLEMENTATION IN MONOLINGUAL CLASSES, AND AMENDING FOR THE PURPOSE SECTIONS 4 AND 5 OF REPUBLIC ACT NO. 10533, OTHERWISE KNOWN AS THE ‘ENHANCED BASIC EDUCATION ACT OF 2013’”

Michael Abrigo and Aniceto Orbeta, Jr.¹

September 16, 2024

With due respect to our legislators, we respectfully urge the President to **VETO** the bill or request a revised version that is more supportive and flexible in promoting the use of students’ first language (L1) or mother tongue as a medium of instruction (MOI). This recommendation is grounded in the findings of the Institute’s research, which presents the following arguments.

The Philippines has made several important strides in promoting learning among Filipino children with the enactment of Republic Act (RA) 10533, colloquially known as the K-12 Law, including the State guarantee that children attending Kindergarten to Grade 3 would be taught in a language that these children understand. However, translating such sound, evidence-based policies into day-to-day operations may be fraught with many challenges that must be addressed to ensure effective implementation.

The consolidated Senate Bill (SB) No. 2457 and House Bill (HB) No. 6717 aim to address such challenges in the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy enshrined in RA 10533 by reverting to the pre-K-12 Law of bilingual Filipino and English education, while making MTB-MLE optional to monolingual classes under specific conditions stipulated in the consolidated bills. More specifically, the consolidated proposed measures require the availability of (i) an official orthography, (ii) an officially documented vocabulary, (iii) literature on languages and culture, and (iv) teachers who speak and are trained in the mother tongue as necessary preconditions for the implementation of MTB-MLE in monolingual classrooms and return to bilingual policy otherwise.

Returning to a primarily bilingual education policy may not be the most effective way forward to address learning gaps among Filipino children. Instead of a policy reversal, it may be more beneficial for children’s learning to expand the use of local languages as a medium of instruction – whether primary or auxiliary – to make education more inclusive while ensuring the availability of the four requirements above proposed in the consolidated SB 2457/HB6717.

Before discussing the merits and pitfalls of the country’s MTB-MLE experience, it must be recognized that its implementation in the Philippine setting has two strands: firstly, as a medium of instruction, and, secondly, as a distinct curricular subject. As a medium of instruction,

¹ Senior Research Fellow and President, respectively, Philippine Institute for Development Studies.

identified mother tongues are officially used as the language of instruction in all subjects, except Filipino and English. This requires, at the very least, that teachers are conversant in the mother tongue elected as the medium of instruction by their school. As a subject of instruction, students are taught the linguistic structures of the elected mother tongues. This requires learning resources in the mother tongue (e.g., orthography, grammar, vocabulary, literature, etc.) in addition to teachers who are both conversant in the mother tongue and trained to teach in that language.

The emerging consensus from recent local empirical evidence suggests that a large-scale roll-out of MTB-MLE in a multilingual country had been very challenging at best. However, there are also many indications of successes that may be leveraged and from which Filipinos can draw inspiration.

The MTB-MLE policy made learning more accessible to Filipinos. The Philippines has more than 180 native languages spoken across its more than 7,600 islands by more than 110 million Filipinos. The MTB-MLE mandated in the K-12 Law acknowledges this linguistic diversity in the country, while being anchored on the international body of evidence suggesting that children learn more effectively when taught using the language(s) they understand. For children, this is usually the first language that they acquire at home, i.e., their mother tongue.

The officially mandated use of 19 local languages as medium of instruction (MOI) in the K-12 Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) ensured that at least 93.2% of Filipino children aged 5 to 9 years (based on the 2020 Census of Population) across the country are no stranger to the language of scholarship used to explore their surroundings, acquire knowledge, and develop their skills in primary schools. This share of students is virtually universal among learners exposed to the MATATAG Curriculum,² wherein any language shared by both teachers and students may be used as MOI. That is, the MOI need not strictly be the child's mother tongue but could instead be any language more broadly used in the community, a local *lingua franca*. The local *lingua franca* used in a specific classroom may not necessarily be confined to just one language, thereby potentially bridging learning across multiple languages. **The bottom line of the MTB-MLE as MOI is that teachers and pupils understand each other and can communicate effectively to facilitate students' learning.**

Reverting to a primarily bilingual Filipino (that is largely based on Tagalog) and English education instruction the enrolled bill is effectively mandating may potentially erode gains from the MTB-MLE policy. The proposed legislation, while allowing mother tongues to be used in monolingual classrooms, requires meeting specific conditions with no definite timeline before any other local language may be used as MOI. This is contrary in spirit to the MTB-MLE policy enshrined in the K-12 Law, which guarantees that “[b]asic education shall be delivered in languages understood by the learners” (Republic Act 10533, Section 4, Paragraph 5). **A return to a primarily Filipino (Tagalog) and English instruction may potentially disenfranchise as much as 63.5% of Filipino children whose primary language at home is**

² It must be noted, however, that learning resources in the MATATAG Curriculum provided by the Department of Education Central Office are either in English or Filipino. Teachers are expected to contextualize the provided learning resources to their specific local setting. Classroom instruction may be in other language(s) that are understood by both teachers and their students. Unlike in the K-12 BEC wherein mother tongues are also used as subject of instruction, mother tongues are only used as medium of instruction in the MATATAG Curriculum.

neither Tagalog nor English. Although Tagalog is the most spoken primary language in Filipino homes (36.4% of Filipino children), its speakers are concentrated in only four regions: the National Capital Region, Central Luzon, and the Southern Tagalog regions CALABARZON and MIMAROPA (see Figure 1). English is the primary language at home by only a very small 0.1% of Filipino children, who are usually among the most privileged. Other local languages are more dominantly used by Filipino children elsewhere in the country.

MTB-MLE improved learning outcomes when the instructional language used in school matches the primary language used by children at home. The international literature is replete with evidence supporting the use of children’s first language – their mother tongue – to facilitate learning.³ Earlier local evidence may be faulted for being more limited in scope (e.g., focus on monolingual settings) and extent (e.g., small community settings), but nonetheless, the results generally align with the global literature on the topic.⁴

Early results from analyses by our researchers at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) based on the country’s recent MTB-MLE experience show important gains in numeracy skills when the language of instruction matches the children’s primary language used at home (see Figure 2). Using school-level average achievement results in the 2018 Early Language Literacy and Numeracy Assessment⁵, they find that good language matching in schools doubles children’s average numeracy achievement without losing Filipino and English literacy skills. Despite the many implementation challenges previously documented, this result contradicts claims that MTB-MLE may erode children’s Filipino and English literacy skills.

Implementing MTB-MLE as MOI in multilingual communities across the country may be challenging but not necessarily insurmountable. Our scholars at PIDS were among the first to publish analyses of the implementation of the MTB-MLE policy under the K-12 Law. Their study identified potential bottlenecks and highlighted actual challenges encountered in the policy’s on-the-ground operationalization.⁶ Some of these issues include poor language matching because of the limited number of official MOI languages, the lack of awareness and inadequate appreciation of teachers and education managers on the importance of MTB-MLE, and the limited availability of resources to support mother tongue-based instruction, which have been repeated in popular media and raised in policy discussions. What is not cited as much is the study’s goal of identifying avenues to improve the teaching-learning experiences by teachers and students in schools. To quote from the conclusion of the PIDS study:

“Notwithstanding the numerous problems it is facing, the MTB-MLE has very solid pedagogical foundation. Thus, this study does not question the wisdom of implementing the program but rather seeks to highlight the challenges it is facing with a view of seeking more effective, efficient, and acceptable ways of implementing the program.”

³ See, for example, [Jeon and Yamashita \(2014\)](#) on second language (L2) reading comprehension, [Schoonen et al. \(2003\)](#) on L2 writing, [Kim, Lee and Lee \(2024\)](#) on L2 learning, and [Tavares \(2015\)](#) on L2 mathematics comprehension

⁴ See, for example, [Walter and Dekker \(2011\)](#) on the Lubuagan experiment

⁵ The Early Language Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (ELLNA) is a national large-scale student assessment of learning achievement by students in Key Stage 1, i.e. from Kinder to Grade 3, collected by the Department of Education. The 2018 ELLNA is based on a random sample of schools across the country.

⁶ See [Monje, Orbeta, Francisco and Capones \(2021\)](#); an earlier version is available as [Monje, et al. \(2019\)](#)

The existing legal framework is flexible enough to address many of the implementation challenges of the MTB-MLE policy. The experience of the USAID project ABC+ in Regions 5 and 6, for instance, demonstrates that these implementation issues are not insurmountable given appropriate attention and resources.

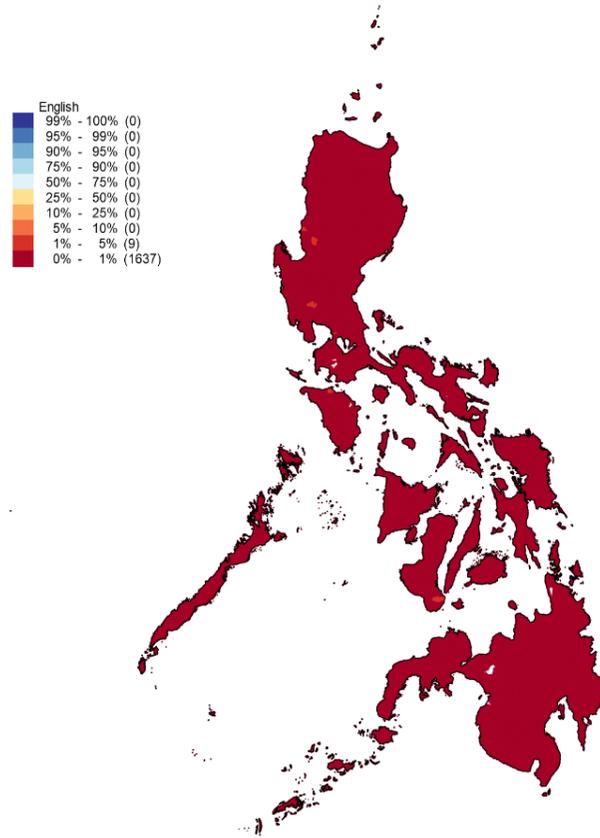
The intent of the proposed legislation – to use a common language among students and their teachers in a potentially multilingual classroom and to equip them with adequate learning and human resources – are excellent steps toward improving the MTB-MLE implementation, but these may be done without reverting to a primarily bilingual education system. The MATATAG Curriculum, as noted earlier, has been one step ahead by not confining classroom instruction to the 19 official MOI in the K-12 BEC and instead allowing any *lingua franca* understood by both students and teachers as the MOI in the classroom. Issues on resource availability and teacher capacity need to be addressed regardless of the MOI, but the need may be more urgent when mother tongues are taught as a curricular subject. Leveraging on the strengths of the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF) in documenting, developing, and publishing resources on local languages may indeed be a more rational use of resources to the extent that it can rally local language experts and storytellers, instead of relying on teachers to develop these materials. But, again, these do not necessarily need a reversion to a primarily Filipino and English instruction in schools.

The practical gains from the use of local languages as media of instruction must not be conflated with the many implementation issues on the use of the mother tongue as a subject of instruction. While there is a great deal to be desired in having mother tongues as *subjects* of instruction, making local languages an optional *medium* of instruction instead of being the default MOI may deprive children of potential learning gains from having a linguistically immersive education experience and the government of a cost-effective strategy of raising learning achievement through simply switching to languages closer to home. Improving teacher’s and children’s MTB-MLE experience, especially if using mother tongues as subjects of instruction, is a necessity, but it need not come at the cost of throwing the baby with the bathwater.

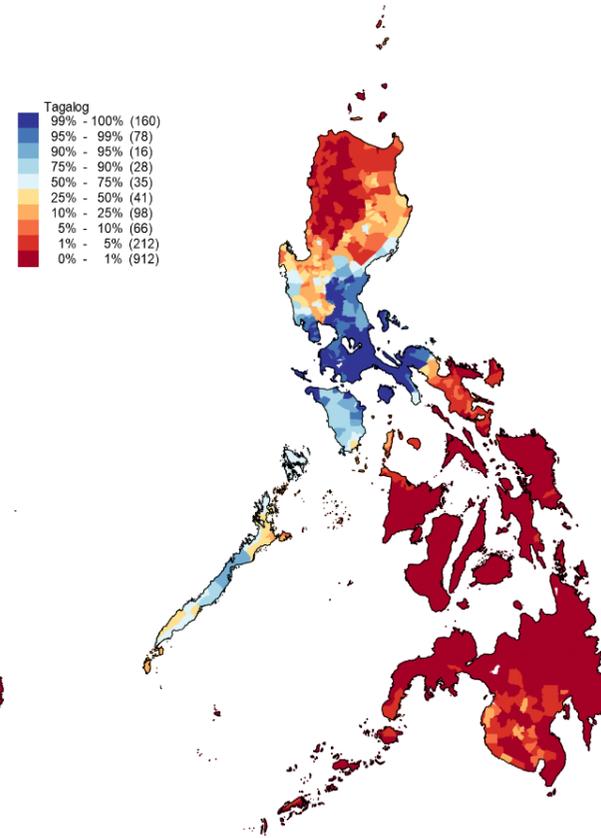
The enrolled bill makes it almost impossible to use the child’s first language (L1) or mother tongue as MOI, effectively undermining a child-centered and pedagogically sound initiative. While the bill allows the use of L1 as the medium of instruction (MOI) for monolingual classes, the conditions for this option are extremely stringent and unlikely to be met. Experience has shown that, even under the more supportive MTB-MLE policy in RA 10533, we were unable to provide the necessary materials and adequately trained teachers. How, then, can we meet the stricter conditions imposed by the optional policy in the enrolled bill? This bill effectively undermines the child-centered and pedagogically sound initiative of L1-based multilingual education.

Figure 1. Share of children aged 5 to 9 years by primary language used at home and residence location

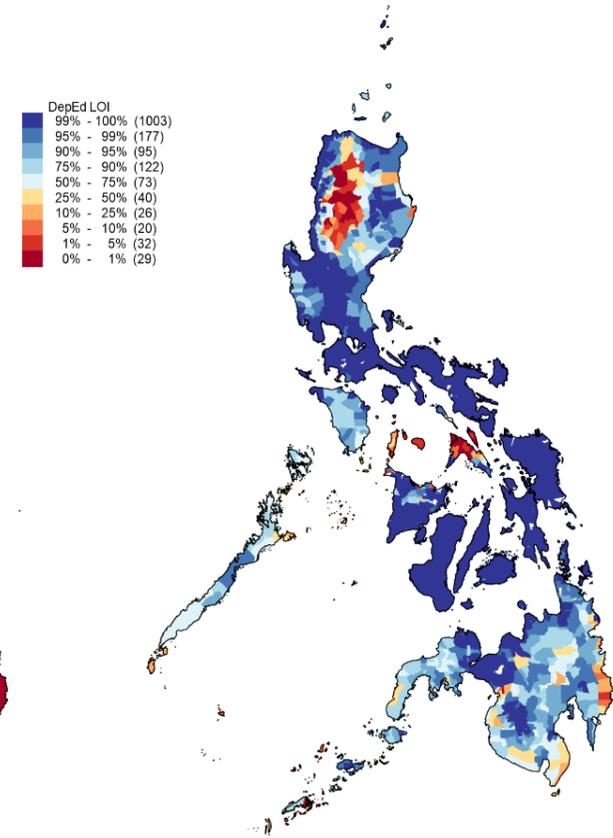
A. English



B. Tagalog

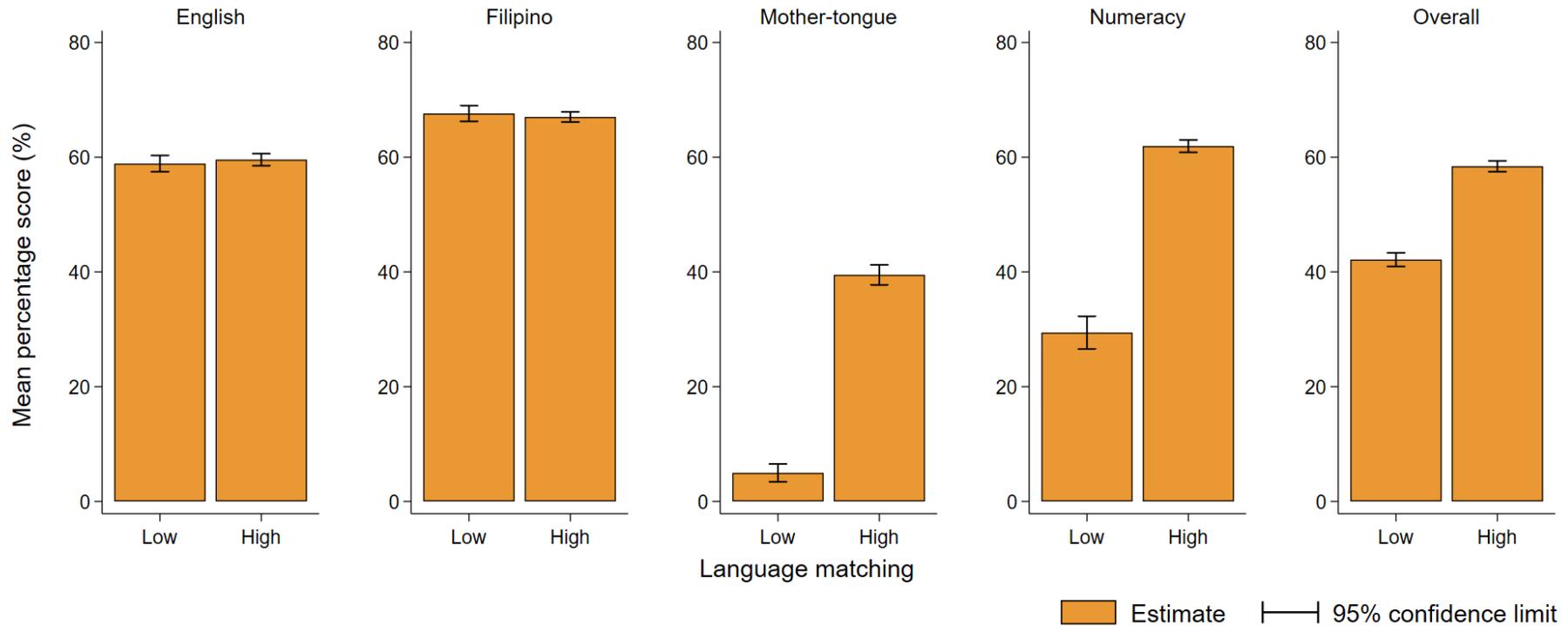


C. Any of the 19 DepEd official MOI



Source: PIDS staff compilation based on Philippine Statistics Authority 2020 Census of Population and Housing. Note: The figure shows the proportion of children aged 5 to 9 years who live in a household whose primary language spoken at home is as indicated estimated at the municipality/city level. The numbers in parentheses refer to the number of locations for each of the indicated band of values.

Figure 2. Impact of high language matching in school by ELLNA subject



Source: PIDS staff estimates based on Department of Education 2018 Early Language Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (ELLNA). Note: The figure shows the estimated mean percentage score of ELLNA schools with low and high language matching. Language matching between a school’s medium of instruction and children’s mother tongues is approximated as the proportion of children aged 5 to 9 years in a municipality that use the indicated school-specific mother tongue identified in ELLNA as the primary language spoken at home based on the 2020 Census of Population and Housing. A school is designated as having high language matching if it has at least 80% language match, while a school is designated as having low language matching if it has at most 20% language match. Estimated averages are corrected for potential confounding using inverse propensity score reweighting with regression adjustment.