

THE MOTHER TONGUE IN NATION-BUILDING: THE (UN)MAKING OF A POSTCOLONIAL NATION

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Abstract: Mother tongue, used as the language of instruction, is considered vital for effective pedagogy, individual rights recognition, and social justice. It offers marginalized students a more efficient pathway to learning compared to foreign or hegemonic national languages like English or Filipino. Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) challenges systems favoring colonial languages and asserts the importance of children's first languages. However, the political and ideological dimensions of mother tongue are often overlooked, as it can be manipulated to serve specific agendas in nation-building efforts. While linguists analyze its linguistic aspects, this paper delves into its political nature, exploring how it intersects with ideologies shaping nation-building and potentially nation-destroying processes. This article asserts that the mother tongue serves not only as a learning tool but also as a contested political concept vital for envisioning inclusive nation-building. By examining MTB-MLE in the Philippines, it explores how the mother tongue influences nation-making and reimagining, shaping national identity and ideals.

Keywords: mother tongue, native language, Filipino, English, postcolonialism

INTRODUCTION

Mother tongue, as language of instruction, translates into pedagogical effectiveness, recognition of individual rights and attainment of social justice. The use of mother tongue language is deemed to be the most efficient and the fastest way to learn which, in the process, benefits students who have traditionally been marginalized in schools because their mother tongues are not the languages of instruction. Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) is set against the backdrop of national educational systems favoring foreign or colonial languages such as English, as well as hegemonic national languages such as Filipino in the Philippines (Cruz & Mahboob, 2018), Bahasa Malay in Malaysia, and Khmer in Cambodia.

However, what is increasingly sidelined in the process of promoting mother tongue-based education is the politico-ideological nature of *the mother tongue*. The

term is deployed as a reference to children's first language (or at least the language they are most comfortable with) as an indispensable tool for learning and teaching. If MTB-MLE is situated within the local politics of the language of the community or nation where it is implemented, the term has a far more complex trajectory. It has been positioned as an ideological tool to advance agendas in nation-building projects, although other terms were earlier used, such as *native language* or *native tongue* in the course of 'postcolonial' language debates. While linguists debate on the linguistic nature of the mother tongue (which is of much importance in MTB-MLE because realities in the field reveal how linguistic and cultural boundaries tend to be superficial and porous because of interlanguage contact among speakers of different groups), this paper attempts to shed light on the political nature of the term (as well as its earlier conceptualization in *native language* or *native*

tongue), or how they are constitutive of a constellation of ideologies deployed for purposes of 'nation-building' and 'nation-destroying' (Connor, 1972). What MTB-MLE in general has done is to isolate the *mother tongue* from on-going locally situated conversations about language and nation-building even if it is itself a part of this national political project.

A BRIEF DISCURSIVE HISTORY OF MOTHER TONGUE IN THE LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICY

There is practical wisdom among MTB-MLE advocates in de-linking the *mother tongue* from nation-building discourses. This is carried out even though by doing so one, in fact, participates in its (re)building: decades of fighting for the rights of marginalized communities to be educated in their own language have largely been unsuccessful precisely because of the highly politicized and divisive nature of the debates on the medium of instruction (MOI) (Lin & Martin, 2005; Tupas & Lorente, 2014). On one hand, postcolonial politics has framed the debate as a choice between the colonial language, such as English, and the local national language which was to function as a tool to decolonize the minds of the formerly subjugated people. This is not unexpected since what we are referring to here are countries which have exercised a 'postcolonial' brand of nationalism whose project of nation-building "meant the need to create a distinct yet unified national culture and identity while also addressing the legacies of colonialism" (Chai, 1977; Haque, 2016, p. 322; Lin & Martin, 2005). Thus, the cause of the *mother tongue* was mobilized by anti-colonial nationalist politics which privileged a particular hegemonic national language purportedly to rally the local population against the pervasive and continuing dominance of the colonial language in education. In other words, the national language was deployed as *the* native tongue of all local speakers regardless of the first languages they spoke.

On the other hand, arguments for education in mother tongues (understood here as first languages) have concentrated on the need for cultural minorities and marginalized ethnolinguistic groups to reclaim their lost indigenous or cultural identities. In hindsight, this proved to be an insufficient strategy for the

cause of the mother tongues because it did not overcome the symbolic significations of the colonial language and/or the national language as the language(s) of power, prestige, and social mobility (Gellman, 2020; Tupas & Lorente, 2014). In other words, conceptualizing the mother tongues as repositories of culture and identity was not enough to ameliorate the status of the other(ed) local languages as well as the well-being of their speakers (Eisenclas & Schalley, 2020; Phyak, 2021). From the academic front, the challenge has come largely from postcolonial theorizing which has reconceptualized the colonial languages as languages of resistance as well because of the incomplete subjugation of colonized people (Ashcroft et al., 1989). Colonized subjects have spoken and written back to their former oppressors, fashioning their use of colonial languages and deployment of colonial cultures according to their own experiences and desires. Thus, it has become increasingly difficult to argue for the mother tongues as repositories of culture and identity – thus, they should be used as languages of instruction to promote identity formation and preservation of culture – because the colonial languages purportedly can also serve as tools for national identity formation and national unity.

However, in recent MTB-MLE advocacies around the world, we can see a significant shift in the rhetorical positioning of the mother tongues *vis-à-vis* language-in-education and national language policies, to the point that there is, in fact, a kind of homogenization of MTB-MLE discourses. Cabral (2013, p. 96) calls them "UNESCO discourses" (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization) in reference to the organization's active involvement in the promotion of mother tongues in education. Such are embedded in arguments for the viability of mother tongues in education. The major focus has now been on the pedagogical effectiveness of mother tongue use in the classroom, which then translates to addressing the needs of marginalized pupils and communities (ACDP Indonesia, 2014; Balacano, 2020; UNESCO, 2012). This seems to have worked in convincing stakeholders such as politicians, education officials, and parents that MTB-MLE is indeed a formidable educational initiative.

Nevertheless, along with the institutionalization of MTB-MLE in many parts of the world is the reproduction of language ideologies which have animated the politics of language in these places for at least many decades now. In other words, while MTB-MLE is successful in institutionalizing some of its key features in varied classroom contexts, by and large, it has not really helped transform inequalities of multilingualism that embed these contexts in the first place (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004; Curaming & Kalidjernih, 2014; Metila et al., 2016; Mohanty, 2010; Phyak, 2013; Sah, 2022; Taylor-Leech, 2013; Tupas, 2015a). Linguistic nationalism – in the sense of an essentialist and exclusionary politics of language which privileges an indigenous national language in the imagining of the nation – remains resistant to other(ed) mother tongues as media of instruction (Aslan, 2007; DeVotta, 2004; Gellman, 2020; Hill & Lian, 1995; Tollefson & Tsui, 2003). The arguments about colonial languages as the languages of modernity, globalization, and social mobility remain relatively unscathed. Thus, we are witnessing the rising tide of, for example, English-only policies in schools and countries in what are supposedly now referred to as MTB-MLE contexts.

MTB-MLE aims to address educational and social inequalities. In fact, it is promoted as a tool for development which is critical in eradicating poverty, providing basic health services among the poor, and ameliorating the status of women in highly patriarchal communities (Benson, 2005; Egbo, 2000; Zents, 2005), among other things (Tikly, 2016; Trudell, 2009; UNESCO, 2012). However, there is a sense that it has discursively extricated itself from the ideological moorings of localized language debates, leading to growing concerns that discourses governing MTB-MLE emanate from the ‘outside’ and work to displace earlier discourses on language-in-education which are more rooted in local histories of struggle and subjugation (Cabral, 2013). This paper contends that MTB-MLE as a decolonizing or a transformative project must locate itself within a situated politics of language. Thus, it must not only deploy *the mother tongue* as a linguistic resource for learning but must also engage it as a contested political concept needed in (re)imagining more progressive and inclusive projects of nation-building. This paper draws

on the case of MTB-MLE in the Philippines to map out the close link of *the mother tongue* with the making and imagining – and, for that matter, the unmaking and reimagining – of the nation.

WHY IS THE MOTHER TONGUE AN IDEOLOGICAL TOOL?

The notion of *the mother tongue* as an ideological rallying tool to advance agendas in society is nothing new. To give two examples culled from two radically different contexts and eras: first, it was deployed to justify Nazism’s attack on universalism as it was purportedly the *mother tongue* that would bind people to their own race (Hutton, 1999, pp. 4–6). *Mother tongue*, in short, was used to justify cultural differences and boundary-making; thus, ideologically paving the way to propound the uniqueness and superiority of the German race. As part of the anti-Semitic discourse, *the mother tongue* was deployed to characterize the Jews as having a tenuous relationship with language because of their alleged nomadic nature, speaking different tongues and scattered around the world, which thus would pose a great threat to German identity and culture. Nazism was a way to fend off the threat and spread of universalism through the Jews. Therefore, the Germans’ right to their *mother tongue* was deemed indispensable in the making of a superior race (Hutton, 1999).

With a more contemporary flair, the *mother tongue* in East Timor is also a viable example of how its linguistic referents may be less significant than its political and ideological connotations. Although a ‘new’ nation after its independence from Indonesian rule in 2002, East Timor’s politics of language nevertheless has a longer historical trajectory stretching back at least to the critical year of 1975 when Timorese independence from Portugal was declared and, less than two weeks later, when Indonesia forcibly annexed the place as its newest province. According to Cabral (2013, p. 84), *mother tongue* has only “entered” the debates on language and education since 2008 when the country saw an influx of development projects and non-government agencies alongside global institutions such as the United Nations, armed with their own discourses on language, education, and development. In other words, *the mother tongue* according to Cabral (2013) is not an indigenous concept

which has emerged from the intricate web of linguistic politics in the country which includes Portuguese, Indonesian, Tetum, and a dozen or so 'national languages', but a notion deployed alongside externally-driven national 'development'.

Nevertheless, the homogenization of MTB-MLE discourses calls for greater attention to how *the mother tongue* is deployed in these discourses amidst sustained and even increasing resistance to its use in education (Brock-Utne & Holmarsdottir, 2004; Metila et al., 2016; Mohanty, 2010; Phyak, 2013; Taylor-Leech, 2013; Tupas, 2015b). This paper remains committed to the broad vision of MTB-MLE but contends that it needs to expand its political vocabulary in order to relocate such a vision within a situated politics of language which, in turn, is embedded in competing discourses of nation-building. Historically, language-in-education debates and policies have never been only about pedagogical efficiency. Thus, even if this is and should be central to any discussion concerning the medium of instruction, language educational reform initiatives cannot afford to gloss over historically-shaped conversations in local language politics (Manan et al., 2016; Taylor-Leech, 2008; Tse et al., 2007).

MTB-MLE AND BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN THE PHILIPPINES

On paper, the country currently has two forms of educational provision based on languages of instruction. MTB-MLE was institutionalized in 2009 through Department of Education (DepEd) Order No. 74 and was later part of the revised "Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013" which essentially made it legally binding for all basic education institutions to use the MOI from Kindergarten to Grade 3. English and Filipino will be taught as subjects (focusing on oral fluency) until a transition program is initiated from Grades 4 through 6 where these two languages will be slowly introduced as languages of instruction. In short, primary education is MTB-MLE in the first three years of education and then Bilingual Education in the last three years. Junior High School (four years) and Senior High School (two years) will further entrench English and Filipino as primary MOI. As will be discussed below, this MOI structure in primary education is a product of immense political

maneuvering from different sides of the language debate which stretches back to the 1930s when Tagalog (renamed Pilipino in 1949, and then Filipino in 1973 essentially to de-ethnicize the language) was chosen by the national political leadership as the national language amidst the dominance of English (then the sole MOI in schools under direct colonial rule) (Gonzalez, 1980).

From 1974 until 2009, bilingual education characterized most of the country's education system. English was to be used as MOI in Math and Science subjects and Filipino in all other subjects. The students' first languages – then referred to as 'dialects' as opposed to 'language' to refer to Filipino as *the* native language (Constantino, 1980) – were to be used in the early grades as auxiliary languages to aid teaching and learning. Throughout this bilingual education period in Philippine education, Filipino as MOI was justified as the language of nationalism and national identity, as well as the "native tongue" that was superior to English as MOI. It must be noted that bilingual education by itself was a political compromise between the 'nationalists' (pro-Filipino) and the 'pragmatists' (pro-English) (Gonzalez, 1980), and was then considered a breakthrough in education because it undermined the monopoly of English as MOI in the schools. Before 1974, despite intermittent experiments in vernacular education, English was essentially the undisputed MOI in schools since the start of the 20th century when the United States forcibly occupied the Philippines to become its first colony in Asia.

We can thus see how MTB-MLE as it is practiced today was a direct reaction to the dominance of bilingual education in the country. The main argument is that, if it is indeed the pupils' mother tongue (in the sense of 'first' or 'home' language) which is the most efficient and effective language of instruction, at least in primary education, then Filipino should be displaced by other(ed) languages in education (Nolasco et al., 2010). The Filipino language is *not* the mother tongue of the majority of Filipino students. Their mother tongue is Tagalog, the language primarily of speakers in Metro Manila and neighboring provinces. Thus, if Filipino were to become a mother tongue in the classroom, it would be in these places where Tagalog is used as the home

language or the main community language. Therefore, while the argument that an indigenous mother tongue was more desirable than a foreign language such as English as MOI paved the way for bilingual education in both Filipino and English, the same argument closed the doors on the rest of the country's 'real' mother tongues to become MOI. Thus, bilingual education, while breaking the monopoly of English in the educational system, also served to marginalize all other languages in the country, and MTB-MLE was presented as an alternative form of education. To accomplish this, however, English and Filipino would have to be displaced as MOI.

The focus on pedagogical effectiveness through MTB-MLE proved to be rhetorically helpful in convincing stakeholders, especially those in the Philippine Congress, which is responsible for creating laws, that this was indeed a viable alternative to bilingual education resulting in its enactment as part of a law revising the structure of basic education in the country. Nevertheless, despite protestations from MTB-MLE advocates who use research to argue that the use of mother tongues as MOI will be effective only if implemented in at least the first six years of formal education (Gunigundo, 2010; Nolasco, 2013), MTB-MLE was to be implemented only from Kindergarten to Grade 3. The revised education law would still see the return of bilingual education from Grade 4 until the end of Senior High School, and even College where schools and universities are given greater freedom to structure their curriculum based on English and Filipino as possible MOI. Therefore, this paper sees this as the continuing *saga* of language wars in the Philippines which have animated the politics of nation-building in the country since the beginning of the 20th century (Gonzalez, 1991; C. S. Hau & Tinio, 2003; Tupas, 2015b). The tension between MTB-MLE and bilingual education is mediated by various issues, foremost of which are the competing claims for *mother tongue* by advocates of both the indigenous first languages and Filipino as MOI. Out of this context emerged an MTB-MLE which one of its advocates recently referred to as "castrated" (Nolasco, 2013), confirming "suspicions that the government's language-in-education policy is MTB-MLE in name but L2 bilingual education in practice". As mentioned

in this paper, MTB-MLE would have to reconfigure its political vocabulary if it is to engage more substantively with the country's language politics. While the pedagogical effectiveness of the mother tongues should remain central to such vocabulary, it cannot ignore the pushback caused by the linguistic nationalism of advocates of the national language, as well as the dominating ideologies associated with English.

NATIVE TONGUE OR NATIVE LANGUAGE IN 'LINGUISTIC NATIONALISM'

According to Prah (2009, pp. 85–86), "the retreat of colonial power in Asia has revealed the strategic weakness of the colonial languages in the face of the resilience of the literate Asian languages [for example] ...Tagalog/Filipino has in recent years been consolidating its social significance". This is certainly a debatable statement, especially if it relates to English as a colonial language because alongside the retreat of colonial power, we have also seen the greater dominance of English in the lives of people in the region. However, this statement would make some sense in the context of bilingual education in the country in the 1970s as it became the battleground for anti-colonial politics following the 'independence' of the country from direct American colonial rule in 1946.

In the years preceding the institutionalization of bilingual education in 1974, there was a massive call to decolonize or indigenize all of the country's major institutions, captured powerfully in 1970 by historian Renato Constantino's (1980) lament about the 'miseducation of the Filipino' through English and education. English, it was argued, was not Filipino's mother or native tongue (with the exception of the small socioeconomic elite), and which therefore had created a wedge between the Filipino masses and the privileged few (Constantino, 1980). Through English and education, colonial constructs of marginality were propagated and internalized by Filipinos themselves, such as calling English the language of enlightenment and democracy, and the lack of proficiency in it as indicative of one's lack of education and backwardness in thought.

Anti-colonial street demonstrations in the 1960s grew in numbers and disturbed the

political status quo; thus, linguistic nationalism also intensified as Filipino emerged as the language of the indigenous protests. The national language became synonymous with nationalism. Much has been written about US neocolonial rule in the Philippines (Bello et al., 1982) and a substantial amount of work has been dedicated to reconfiguring English as a neocolonial language as well (Tollefson, 1986). Thus, it is sufficient to say in this paper that central to anti-colonial politics was the argument that the Philippines did not really break free from the clutches of American control, except that this time around the mechanisms of control were more subtle and indirect. English was a tool of indirect control. Thus, an indigenous language had to be displaced from the educational system in order to make learning more meaningful and appropriate. As Llamzon (1970, p. 687) pointed out, “The signs of the times demand the propagation and use of the national language”, and while its use as MOI would not solve all educational problems, “it can be a good start” (Llamzon, 1970, p. 694).

Thus, the key point to note in the Philippine version of linguistic nationalism is the conflation of Filipino and nationalism, or more specifically the discursive entanglement of ‘Filipino as the national language’, ‘Filipino as the medium of instruction’, ‘Filipino as the language of nationalism’, and ‘Filipino as the native tongue or language’. All these would congregate around Filipinos’ fight against neocolonial education which was (and continues to be) premised on the belief that *the native tongue* is a tool for decolonization. In the anti-colonial struggle to dislocate English from the educational system, the national language had “suddenly become a fashionable accoutrement of nationalism” (Asuncion-Lande, 1971, p. 690).

Indeed, linguistic nationalism elevated English and “our tongue” (the national language) (Constantino, 1980, p. 440) as the two languages worthy of debate and, in the process, marginalized the other Philippine languages in the nationalist (re)making and (re)imagining of the nation. Constantino would even refer to these other(ed) native languages as “dialects” (Constantino, 1980, p. 441) and reserve the use of ‘language’ for Filipino as the national language and the desired medium of instruction. He would also argue, just like the

more recent advocates of MTB-MLE, about the advantage of the native tongue as a medium of instruction – “Experience has shown that children who are taught in *their native tongue* learn more easily and better than those taught in English” (Constantino, 1980, p. 442, italics added) – except that he was specifically referring to Filipino as the national language as the only desirable local language worthy of being elevated as a medium of instruction. In fact, he bemoaned the fact that “[o]ur educators do not see any opposition to the use of a foreign language but fear opposition to the use of the national language just because it is based on one of the main dialects” (Constantino, 1980, p. 441). Thus, anti-colonial linguistic nationalism would propagate an essentialist belief that only one language – Filipino – could express nationalist sentiments.

During and after the debates on the language issue in the early 1970s which saw the institutionalization of bilingual education as a political compromise (as mentioned earlier, English as a medium of instruction for science and mathematics and Filipino for all other subjects), advocates of Filipino as medium of instruction would continue to deploy the same view of linguistic nationalism. The MOI debate would animate the national political discourse intermittently. But the ideologies of linguistic nationalism would remain unchanged: the national language was the nation’s *native language* or *native tongue*; thus, perpetually silencing the other(ed) Philippine languages in nation-building and nationalist imagination. We would see this clearly demonstrated when the ‘return to English’ as the primary language of instruction agenda of the Arroyo administration in the early 2000s threatened to replace bilingual education. It was strongly argued, for example, that “a system that emphasizes the role of *the first language* will produce students who are literate *in Filipino* and are very ready to learn English and in English” (Zafra in The Manila Times, 2003, p. A3, italics added).

Moreover, it was noted that “the effective way to teach students, particularly preschoolers, is to use *Filipino* since experts discovered that children learn faster and better in their *native language*” (The Manila Times, 2003, p. A3, italics added). We would also see this clearly in how a ‘truly’ national Philippine literature would be defined. According to

National Artist Bienvenido Lumbera, former Chair of *Komisyon sa Wikang Pilipino* (Commission on the Filipino Language) and an advocate of Filipino as the national language and primary medium of instruction, literature written in the regional or local languages can only be considered part of the 'national' literature if translated into Filipino (Villareal, 2010). In other words, (re)imagining the nation through the other(ed) Philippine mother tongues is not possible. Once again, linguistic nationalism as deployed in anti-colonial politics is an exclusionary ideology with very little space for the native languages or native tongues to flourish. At the time English lorded it over in the educational system as the sole medium of instruction, it functioned as a form of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988) necessary to mobilize the people against the colonial language and colonial education. But it resisted transforming itself into a more inclusive politics when it became clear that nation-building could not be steered by the Filipino language alone. Through the legitimization of bilingual education, Philippine language policy has become complicit with what Gonzaga (2008, p. 62) calls the "repressive ideology of the nation", indeed a particular sense of linguistic nationalism which "crushes the multiplicity of reality" (Gonzaga, 2008, p. 21).

MOTHER TONGUE AS A PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVE

As it should have been hopefully clear by now, *mother tongue* has recently replaced *native tongue* and *native language* which was dominant at the height of the anti-colonial struggle in the 1960s and 1970s. But at this time, ideological contestation over the term *mother tongue* is much more pronounced as MTB-MLE struggles to occupy its place in Philippine society. In the years preceding the institutionalization of MTB-MLE in 2009, advocates of mother tongues in education had the ideological upper hand over those who espouse linguistic nationalism in the sense explained above. These advocates through their focus on *the mother tongue* as a pedagogical imperative (the political discourse preferred by UNESCO) muted the cause of both bilingual education and Filipino as a medium of instruction. In a sense, the proponents of MTB-MLE dispossessed the Filipino language of one

of its fundamental nationalist essences, which is its being *the* native tongue of all Filipinos. The premises of both ideological camps are the same: the pupil's *mother tongue* is the best tool for teaching and learning, but they radically differ in assigning meaning to the term.

What advocates of MTB-MLE have done – and these would include proponents of the initiative in the Philippine Congress – has been to focus on the question of pedagogical effectiveness and social justice which, they argue, could be achieved through the use of the 'real' mother tongues of Filipino children in teaching and learning. This is exactly the content of the MTB-MLE bill passed in Congress (Gunigundo, 2010) and the recurrent theme put forward by its proponents (Nolasco et al., 2010). In other words, the deployment of *mother tongue* has mainly revolved around the issue of medium of instruction as pedagogy and educational (in)equality because of the belief that mother tongue-based pedagogy would benefit minority or disadvantaged students the most. In the process, this particular *mother tongue* discourse has uncoupled the question of medium of instruction from its anti-colonial moorings such that the language issue in the country is now essentially delinked (discursively at least) from its postcolonial history and politics.

Instead, the *mother tongue* discourse has aligned itself more with the international discourse associated with UNESCO which has been pushing vigorously for mother tongue or vernacular education since the publication of *The Use of Vernacular Languages in Education* (UNESCO, 1953) which actually also partly drew on the Philippine case. It is a 'flattening' discourse in the sense that it homogenizes language-in-education issues across different contexts around the world, a curious effect of a discourse which is meant to respect the local politics of language. The case of the Philippines draws on similar international research findings (Cummins, 2000; Thomas & Collier, 1997) to argue for the pedagogical effectiveness of the use of mother tongues in education, bolstered by a few local studies (Walter & Dekker, 2008) which showcase the same results as that in the international literature. To put it in another way, it is a two-edged MTB-MLE discourse: on one hand, it has exposed the untenability of the linguistic nationalist position on Filipino as the only

alternative indigenous language of instruction. But, on the other hand, it has also avoided confronting the chauvinistic ideology that precisely underpins linguistic nationalism in the country. Such an ideology, as described above, adheres to the essentialist belief that only one indigenous language can express the dreams and aspirations of a nation and, thus, can steer the country's nation-building project.

The consequence is precisely what we have described at the start of the paper: an educational system with overlapping 'bilingual' and 'multilingual' agendas, with bilingual education barely unchecked by MTB-MLE in terms of the former's ideological underpinnings. An essentialist linguistic nationalism remains integral to the ideological framework of bilingual education against which MTB-MLE has been mobilized in the first place. In other words, MTB-MLE, in constraining its discourse on *the mother tongue* to de-highlighting questions about nationhood and national identity, has failed to convince those in favor of Filipino as the primary medium of instruction that it deploys a far more inclusive and expansive discourse which is necessary for the nation-building project. Nevertheless, there have been pockets of positive signs for an expansive discourse even from individuals who are pro-Filipino. For example, Tenorio (in Apilado et al., 2013) insists that the issue of language (in the context of the MTB-MLE debate) "must reflect issues of identity" and frames it as a mutual effort between the national language and the rest of the mother tongues to forge a "national identity that respects and encourages diversity". In the end, "one can support MTB-MLE while being both pro-English and pro-Filipino".

However, as is the case at the moment, MTB-MLE fights both English and Filipino, thus pushing Filipino language advocacy to continue to resist MTB-MLE on the ideological front through its insistence that the national language should be the default choice as a medium of instruction. For the past few years, while being silent on the MTB-MLE argument that *the mother tongue* is not the exclusive property of the Filipino language, many Filipino language advocates have continued to fight for the centrality of the language in the curriculum (from basic to tertiary education). But they also ignore the cause of the mother tongues, on grounds that those against it either

ignore the "1987 Constitution's emphasis on nationalism and cultural awareness as core values of Philippine education" (Merueñas, 2015) or are simply traitors to the national language (Ayroso, 2014).

Overall, the politico-ideological nature of the deployment of *the mother tongue* should be a timely reminder about the need to unpack the politics of MTB-MLE around the world. This globally recognized educational initiative has produced positive results in terms of ameliorating the educational and social conditions of marginalized pupils around the world. However, MTB-MLE does not happen in a vacuum but is, in fact, mired in the complex realities of globally-shaped but locally-produced configurations of politics, making its implementation painfully slow and difficult. The continuing making, remaking, and unmaking of nations complicate the agenda advanced by MTB-MLE. Thus, it needs to broaden (in fact, reconfigure) its discursive take on language-in-education issues in the communities and countries within which it operates. It is, indeed, primarily an educational initiative, but we also know that all education is political in nature (Apple, 1996; Freire, 1985; Matasci, 2017) and is embedded in the contested histories of nation-building (Chai, 1977; Hill & Lian, 1995; Lin & Martin, 2005).

"Historically", according to Wurfel (2004, p. 201), "the Filipinos were the first people in Southeast Asia to throw off colonialism", having waged a battle against Spain in 1896 and declared its independence in 1898 after being ruled by it for 333 years. Unfortunately, this was soon to be a short-lived taste of freedom because the Philippine-American War began a year after (1899), and for the next three years before the formal establishment of American colonial rule through 'benevolent assimilation', the "bloody acquisition of the Philippines" (Kolko, 1976, p. 42) saw the "first American entry into Asia". Filipino nationhood was rooted in these critical moments of the country's struggle for self-determination, and language was certainly a central part of this struggle. After all, whatever forms of nationalism there are, "language continues to be a significant and constitutive aspect of nation formation" (Haque, 2016, p. 327). MTB-MLE has threatened to unsettle more than a century of (post)colonial politics grounded in economic, political and cultural

transformative projects, including the search for the elusive national identity and unity through language. It has partially succeeded in unsettling the issue regarding the medium of instruction as a pedagogical question. However MTB-MLE supports the chauvinistic nature of linguistic nationalism, embedded in the broad context of nationhood and nation-building.

This paper believes that MTB-MLE is a huge step forward towards redistributive justice because, in the context of bilingual education (in English and Filipino), many Filipino children have been disenfranchised not only because of their inability to speak English well but also because of their difficulty with the content of education delivered through the national language. These children do not speak Filipino as their mother tongue. This paper also believes that the focus on pedagogical efficacy to advance the cause of the mother tongues in education has been strategic and effective in putting in place a legally binding educational structure centered on the mother tongues as the primary medium of instruction in the lower primary levels of education. However, in the same way that it has exposed the essentialist excesses of postcolonial linguistic nationalism, MTB-MLE must likewise make sure that it does not go the same way in current and future debates on language-in-education. It must take the lead in confronting head-on the problematic nature of linguistic nationalism and reconstruct it as both a pedagogical and a political imperative needed in pursuing the unfinished (C. Hau, 2005) but anticipative project of the revolution to “complete the movement started by our revolutionary leaders of 1896” (Constantino, 1980, p. 429).

CONCLUSION

The study suggests that prioritizing pedagogical effectiveness in promoting mother tongues has helped establish an authoritative educational framework where mother tongues are the primary medium of instruction in lower primary levels. However, it warns against the pitfalls of essentialist thinking in language-in-education debates, emphasizing the need for MTB-MLE to address problematic aspects of linguistic nationalism and redefine it as both a pedagogical and political imperative in advancing national goals.

Since this study is limited to the Filipino context, future researchers interested in the role of mother tongue language can extend the discussion by examining similar initiatives in other countries with diverse linguistic landscapes. By comparing different approaches to multilingual education and their impacts on marginalized communities, researchers can provide a broader understanding of how MTB-MLE strategies can be adapted and implemented effectively in various cultural and linguistic contexts. Additionally, exploring the long-term effects of MTB-MLE on educational outcomes, linguistic diversity, and social equity would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of its potential benefits and challenges. Furthermore, investigating the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and policymakers, can provide valuable insights into the implementation process and inform future policy decisions regarding language-in-education programs. Overall, future research in this area has the potential to enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between language, education, and social justice in diverse global contexts.

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