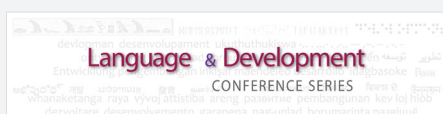


The elephant in the classroom: language endangerment

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Introduction

Amid the intense preparations for the implementation of mother tongue-based multilingual education (MTB-MLE)¹ under the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPED) programme in the Philippines, there is an elephant in the (class)room that is not being addressed: that is, language endangerment, and its implications for MTB-MLE implementation.

The IPED programme in the Philippines focuses on preserving and revitalising the culture and language of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) as it adopts Republic Act 10533, which encourages using the language(s) that children speak at home as a learning resource within the classroom. When the indigenous language is used vigorously by all generations MTB-MLE (using the children's home language in the early years of school as a bridge to the national language) is clearly appropriate. However, in some communities, preparations for the use of the heritage language (HL) as a medium of instruction in school is being undertaken when few or no children speak it. Thus, a tension develops regarding how the children's HL is best used in education in communities where the HL is not spoken by all children.

In this paper I present information about language endangerment in the Philippines and the challenges brought about by using an endangered HL in the implementation of MTB-MLE within the IPED programme. I assert that the use of an endangered language, a language that children no longer speak, in MTB-MLE is counterintuitive, non-inclusive, puts children's education at risk, and violates the stipulations of RA 10533 (2013:4), which says, 'The curriculum shall adhere to the principles and framework of ... MTB-MLE, which starts from where the learners are and from what they already knew, proceeding from the known to the unknown...' Using an endangered HL in MTB-MLE as a language revitalisation strategy is unsustainable and aggravates the language endangerment crisis among IP languages. I will also propose recommendations on policy and programme planning for the IPED Framework.

¹ In the Philippines, there is an existing MTB-MLE Programme involving 19 official languages (major languages and lingua francas) (DO 16, 2012; DO 28, 2013). Unless noted as the programme, the term MTB-MLE refers to the first-language-first approach in education.

MTB-MLE policy in the Philippines

During the last two decades, the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd) enacted several policies to advance inclusive education for all children of the country. First, was the institutionalisation of MTB-MLE through DepEd Order (DO) 74 in 2009. This policy was adopted in the National Indigenous Peoples Education Policy Framework (DO 62, 2011). In 2013, the landmark Enhanced Basic Education Act (Republic Act (RA) 10533) was passed, which mandates the State 'to make education learner-oriented and responsive to the needs, cognitive and cultural capacity, the circumstances and diversity of learners, schools and communities through the appropriate languages of teaching and learning, including mother tongue as a learning resource' (RA 10533:2).

Section 8 of the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of RA 10533 (DO 43, 2013), calls for the implementation of programmes fit for the needs of learners such as the Indigenous Peoples Education Programme (IPED:2–3). Hence, in 2015, the DepEd adopted the Indigenous Peoples Education Curriculum Framework, a rights-based policy framework that affirms 'the right of indigenous peoples (IP) to basic education that is responsive to their context, respects their identities, and promotes the value of their indigenous knowledge, skills, and other aspects of their cultural heritage (DO 32, 2015:2). One of the key features of the IPED Framework is it 'Revitalises, regenerates, strengthens and enriches Indigenous Knowledge

Systems and Practices (IKSPs), Indigenous Learning Systems (ILS) and indigenous languages' (IPED:15–16). This feature is identified under 'Curriculum design, competencies, and content', which is one of the Framework's Five Key Elements.² It is important to note that this feature implies the recognition of language endangerment that is prevalent in many indigenous languages of the Philippines and the need to revitalise them.

² The five key elements of the IPED Curriculum Framework: 1) Curriculum design, competencies and content; 2) Teaching methodologies and strategies; 3) Learning space and environment; 4) Learning resources, and 5) Classroom assessment.

Perspective on language revitalisation and MTB-MLE in the context of sustainable language development

The IPED Curriculum Framework, as it is implemented, intends to use the HL in MTB-MLE while revitalising or maintaining the IKSPs, ILS, and indigenous languages that are under threat. Yet to be successful in both, sociolinguistic factors must be carefully considered. The Sustainable Use Model (SUM) (Lewis and Simons, 2016) is a robust framework for discussing the 'hows' and 'whys' of sustainable language development programmes; for example, MTB-MLE and language maintenance and revitalisation. The model's key concept for language development is sustainability. Sustainability is defined in the framework as a state of language use that is maintained over a long period, at least two decades. Sustainable use is characterised by persistence, prevalence and predictability.

The SUM posits that only three 'configurations' of language function qualify as sustainable use. These are sustainable literacy, sustainable orality and sustainable identity.

Sustainable literacy is said to be the highest level of language use: the language is used extensively in both written and oral form. In sustainable orality, the language is used orally by all generations for most of their day-to-day, face-to-face communication. The lowest level of sustainable language use is a sustainable identity where the language is used only as a marker of ethnic identity. On this level, it is not the language per se that is sustained but the

association of the language to its ethnic identity through the occasional use of the language. For each sustainable level, the assumption is that the lower sustainable level(s) is strong. Thus, the higher levels of sustainable use cannot be established if the lower level(s) of sustainability is not in place. Accordingly, sustainable literacy cannot be achieved if there is no sustainable orality or identity.

The sustainable levels correspond to the levels in the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (EGIDS), which is used to measure language vitality. The scale is a further development of Fishman's Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS, 1991) by Lewis and Simons (2010, 2013, 2016). (The EGIDS levels are described in Appendix 1.) In Figure 1 below, the EGIDS is pictured as a mountain and the different points in the mountain correspond to a vitality level. The higher the language is on the mountain, the higher its vitality. The levels on a plateau are considered sustainable while those on the slopes are unstable. Without serious intervention, languages on the slopes slide down due to the sociolinguistic factors causing endangerment.

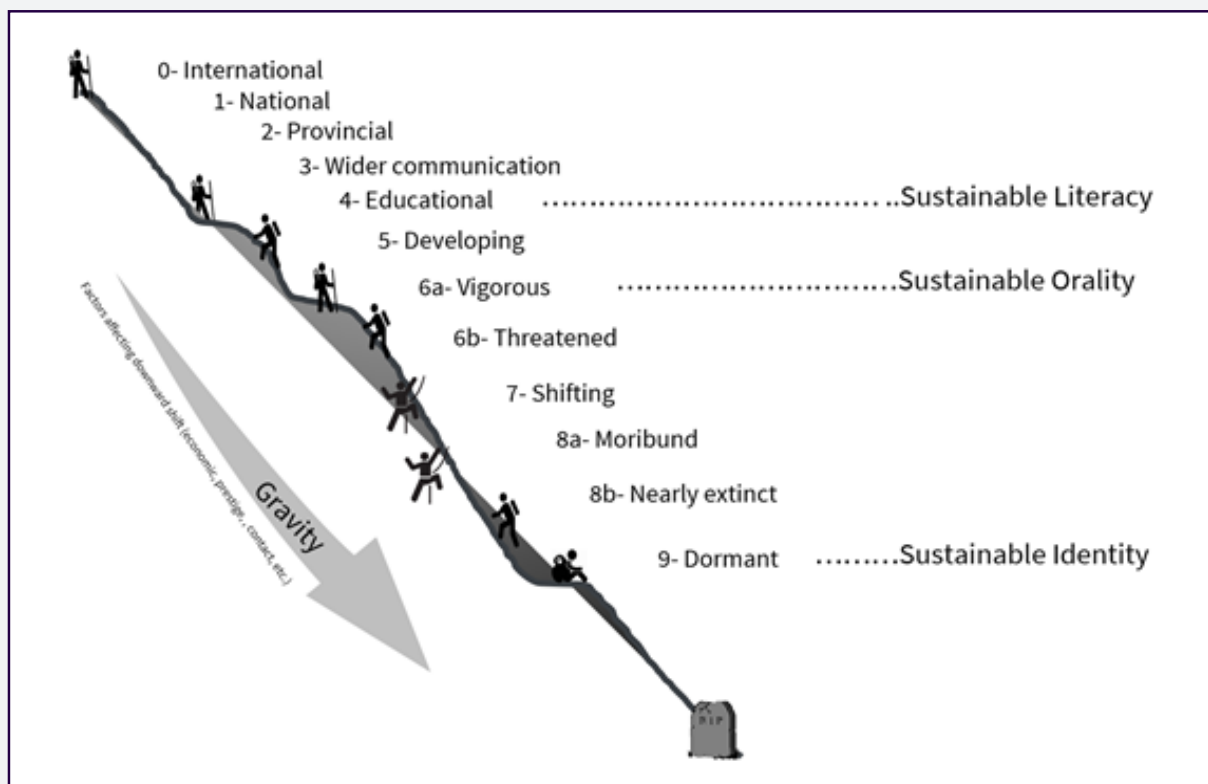


Figure 1: EGIDS and the sustainable levels of language use (mountain model adapted from Hanawalt, et al., 2015)

When language revitalisation and MTB-MLE collide

Endangered languages experience 'a growing trend of language loss through the process of language shift and death' (Lewis and Simons, 2016:14). During the endangerment process, the HL loses its speakers among children until no one speaks the language in any generation (extinction). When the HL is no longer spoken by children because of parents or grandparents not speaking the language to them (disruption in intergenerational language transmission), complex factors, developed over generations, have contributed to this. To reverse the situation or revitalise the language, people often look to literacy as the solution for the problem. However, literacy will not revitalise endangered languages as expected. 'Some languages have already disintegrated to such an extent that the first step must be piecing together what is left. When a language is no longer being passed on at home, efforts to promote it outside that domain

– in church or school, for instance – usually end up being symbolic and ceremonial' (Nettle and Romaine, 2000:178).

'Does literacy prevent language endangerment?' Mufwene (2003:4) asked. By presenting cases of language endangerment and extinction in Europe and Africa, Mufwene declares that languages in Europe (for instance, Greek and Latin) with rich literary history were not spared from extinction despite their writing systems and the literacy of their speakers. Further, in the case of some endangered languages in Africa, Mufwene (2003:5) observes: 'It appears that the development of writing systems for, and literacy in, some endangered languages guarantee not their revitalisation but their (lifeless) preservation like preserves in a jar,' and concluded: 'It is obvious that writing systems and literacy among their speakers did not prevent their death.'

Implementing MTB-MLE in an endangered language with a goal of revitalisation would be extremely challenging. At the stage where children's language proficiency is either weak (6b) or missing (7 and below), the few hours devoted to learning the language in school would never develop proficiency in the HL, which is foundational for developing literacy in the language as is discussed in the preceding section. For children to gain a basic fluency (basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in the HL through MTB-MLE alone, it would take longer than the usual one to three years (Cummins, 1979, 1981). This means that they would not have gained enough proficiency in the language by the time they exit the MTB-MLE programme.

Further, studies have shown that without oral proficiency in the HL, children have difficulty learning to read and write in that language. This is because oral proficiency is the foundation

for developing literacy skills in a language (Roskos, et al., 2009; Malone, 2012; Reeder and Baxa, 2017). '... if an endangered local language is introduced into a school setting, it is something of a "foreign" language', according to Grenoble and Whaley (2006:2–3). The practice of teaching children in a foreign or unfamiliar language (L2), causes children learning difficulties (World Bank, 2006; cited by Malone, 2012). However, for children who have HL oral proficiency, studies have consistently shown that when education moves from what children know to what is unknown, the children become more successful in their educational journey. Malone (2012:1) affirms that 'the first language is the best language for initial literacy.' Literacy in a child's first language supports children in acquiring literacy in a second language (L2) (August, et al., cited in Malone, 2012). The Lubuagan Kalinga experiment in the Philippines demonstrated the benefits of learning first in the MT (Dekker and Dumatog, 2003; Walter and Dekker, 2011).

Sustaining MTB-MLE and language revitalisation programmes

According to the SUM, literacy programmes are only appropriate and sustainable for languages that have a strong base of children speaking the language (languages at EGIDS level 6a and higher). At this level, an MTB-MLE programme increases the function of languages from being oral to being used as a language of instruction and literacy. Most indigenous languages in the Philippines have speech communities that are vigorous enough to sustain an MTB-MLE programme. To achieve the goal of sustainable literacy in the HL, the SUM stresses that the sustainable levels below it (sustainable orality and identity) must be in place first.

When the vitality is between EGIDS 6b and 8b, orality is not sustainable enough to support literacy in the language. For these levels, the

SUM recommends first working to sustain orality. For example, when a language is only spoken by the grandparent generation (EGIDS 8a) a solid goal is to document the elders' language so that valuable cultural knowledge is preserved. Documenting the language prevents the language from falling past level 9 or becoming extinct. At the same time, adults may increase oral use of HL in the home so their children gain oral proficiency in the language. In school, instead of using the HL as language of instruction and literacy, activities should be conducted to help children gain oral proficiency in the HL and learn the IKSPs. For learning their subjects, the children would be taught in their true MT, which is often the language of wider communication (LWC).

In the implementation of MTB-MLE, it is important to realise that MTB-MLE and language revitalisation are two programmes with different aims for languages on different vitality levels. Hence, it is critical to know the vitality status of a language before starting any language development programme. MTB-MLE is not a strategy for revitalisation (a concept associated with endangered languages). It is for vigorous languages or languages that are spoken by children (EGIDS 6a and above). Language revitalisation, on the other hand, is for languages

with low vitality (EGIDS 6b and below). When a language is endangered, the pressing need is to do activities that encourage adults and children to increase the oral use of their HL, rather than investing time and resources in literacy programmes. In this way children's learning is not sacrificed. Thus, when it comes to language revitalisation, the home and the community have the primary roles in creating an environment where children hear and speak the HL.

The Philippine language endangerment situation and IPED implementation

General language vitality status

According to the UNESCO Ad Hoc Expert Group on Endangered Languages (2003:2), 'a language is in danger when its speakers cease to use it, use it in an increasingly reduced number of communicative domains, and cease to pass it on from one generation to the next. That is, there are no new speakers, adults, or children.' On the other hand, the Ethnologue says, 'language endangerment is a matter of degree' since even vigorous languages could still be threatened by more dominant languages just like the languages

that have very low vitality (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, et al., 2020).

The Ethnologue currently lists 177 indigenous languages in the Philippines. Two of these are now extinct, while 11 are dying (EGIDS 8a-8b), and 34 more are in trouble (EGIDS 6b and 7) (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, et al., 2021). An overview of the vitality levels of living Philippine languages from the Ethnologue is shown in Figure 2 below.

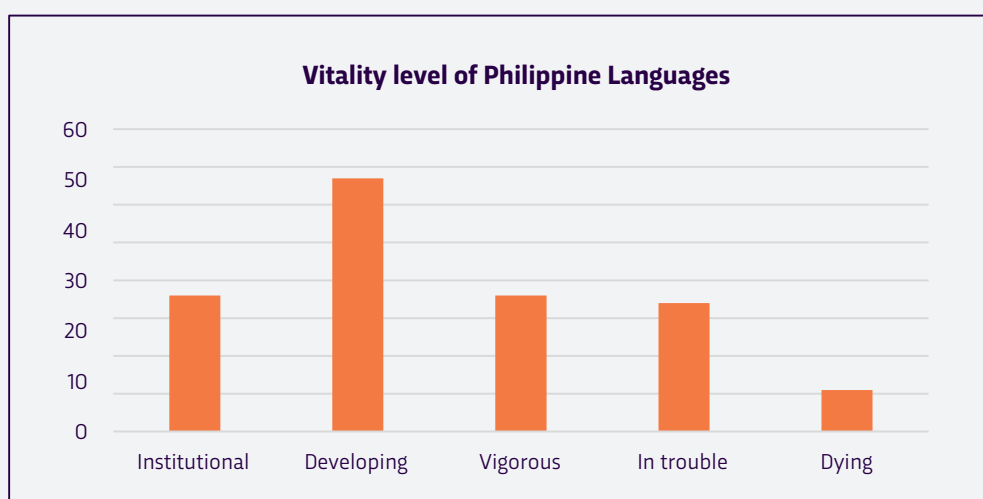


Figure 2: Vitality level of Philippine languages (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, et al., 2020)

Note, however, that the vitality levels in the Ethnologue provide a general evaluation that is not reflective of each speech community where the language is spoken. This is especially the case when the language is geographically scattered. Thus, due to differences in language ecology, some speech communities may have

lower vitality levels than the Ethnologue reports for the whole language. For example, in rural and isolated speech communities, a HL may be vigorous while in more urban areas the speakers are shifting to another language. Such is the case with many languages in the Philippines.

The endangered mother tongue: fieldnotes on IPED implementation

The provision in the IPED framework for revitalisation, regeneration, strengthening and enriching of IKSPs, ILSs and languages acknowledges that indigenous cultures are threatened, and that the government intends to act. Regarding language revitalisation, this provision refers to the implementation of MTB-MLE in consultation with the community and notes, 'Continuous dialogue with the community shall guide the implementation of MTB-MLE, sensitive to the community's aspirations for their local language in relation to the lingua franca and other languages' (DO 32, 2015:15). In the last five years or so, SIL in the Philippines, together with its partners, has been engaged with more than 50 languages that are MTs in MTB-MLE under the IPED programme. Some of these languages are also in the MTB-MLE programme (see Appendix 2).

In the IPED programme, the default practice is to use the HL for MTB-MLE. A number of these languages are at EGIDS levels 6b (threatened) and 7 (shifting) in the Ethnologue (Eberhard, Simons and Fennig, 2020). EGIDS level 6b is described as 'all generations are speaking the language but not all parents are passing the language to their children,' meaning there are children who no longer speak the language. On the other hand, EGIDS Level 7 means that the youngest users of the language are the parents' generation, and they are not passing the language to their children. This means that the

children have a different MT from their parents. Languages that are considered safe are those with EGIDS level 6a (vigorous) and above. However, some languages in this category have several speech communities with low vitality (i.e. urban, mixed communities, or diaspora areas where they are a minority). Similarly, some 6b languages can be 7 or 8a in other areas. Some examples are Ayta Ambala (Mercy Ramos, (pers. comm.) 12 July 2019), Ayta Magbukun (Catadman and Nielsen, 2009), Central Subanen (Lynne Pina and Ronil Emblan (pers. comm.) 1 January 2021), and Eastern Subanen (Mallorca, et al., 2018). The languages in trouble that are part of the IPED programme SIL was and is engaged with are listed in Table 1 below.



EGIDS Level (Ethnologue 24th Edition)	Endangered in many speech communities	Endangered in some speech communities
6b- Threatened		
Itneg Illaud [iti]	Western Subanon [suc]	Ibaloy [ibl]
Alta Southern [agy]	Northern Subanen [stb]	Kalanguya [kak]
Ayta Abellen [abp]	Central Subanen [syb]	Kankanaey [kne]
Ayta Ambala* [abc]	Southern Subanen [laa]	Ayta Mag-indi [blx]
Ayta Mag-antsi [sgb]		Sambal Botolan [sbl]
Ayta Magbukun [ayt]		Agta Casiguran [dgc]
Dumagat Bulos [due]		Kamayo [kyk]
Eastern Subanen* [sfe]		Mamanwa [mmn]
		Obo Manobo [obo]

Note: * Moribund in some speech communities

Table 1: Endangered languages that are part of the IPED programme

At the IPED workshops for the preparation of the requirements³ for MTB-MLE implementation, the teachers and community elders were asked to give feedback or report on the materials that they field-tested with children and adults in the community. Field-testing was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of materials that were produced in the workshop. In several reports, the teachers and elders shared how children's lack of language proficiency in the HL affected the result of the tests. The following are reports from some of these language groups:

- In Region 1, where Ilokano is the LWC, the Itneg Illaud in the provinces of Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur appears to be threatened as more children speak Ilokano as MT than speak Itneg. In fact, during the field-testing of instructional materials conducted by teachers and/or leaders in the community who speak Itneg Illaud, most children gave Ilokano names for the illustration or pictures of things shown to them. They were unable to name many of the objects that are associated with the culture (Jhony Azada and Nick Bringas (pers. comm.) 5 August 2019).
- Also, in Region 1, the Ibaloy in the different speech communities in Pangasinan have varied levels of vitality. In speech communities located in the towns of Aguilar

and Infanta, only the adults are speaking Ibaloy, and they are speaking Ilokano to the children. The Ibaloy children use Ilokano, Tagalog and Kankanaey to communicate with other children in the community. Hence, children acquire more proficiency in Ilokano than Ibaloy in the home and the community than Ibaloy (Jonathan Namoca (pers. comm.) 24 August 2019). In contrast, in San Manuel, around 50 per cent of learners still speak Ibaloy while in San Nicolas, Pangasinan, which is quite isolated and closer to province of Benguet (main language area of the Ibaloy), the language is vigorous (Charlie Cayabas (pers. comm.) 24 August 2019).

- In Region 3 (Central Luzon), most Ayta languages are threatened and the speakers are shifting to the LWC, which is Tagalog or Kapampangan. In 2008, a sociolinguistic survey was conducted in four main Ayta Magbukun communities in the province of Bataan. Two communities were found to have very low language vitality while the other two were vigorous. The Abucay municipality was reported to have high vitality (Catadman and Nilsen, 2009). However, it seems that the vitality of the language has decreased in recent years in

³ The Four Minima refers to the four basic requirements for the implementation of MTB-MLE especially for IP learners. This includes: (1) Orthography; (2) Officially documented vocabulary; (3) Grammar book; (4) Things to read (DO 21, 2019)

Abucay. Now, Tagalog is reported to be used in most domains. While some people of all generations speak Ayta, oral proficiency is reportedly low. An ongoing informal language class is reportedly being conducted for interested elders and parents. This class aims to raise more language teachers to teach children their language and culture in the Bahay Wika⁴ (Rebecca Reyes (pers. comm.) 17 October 2019).

Based on what teachers and elders share during the workshops about the language situation in their communities, the reality of endangered HL poses serious challenges to MTB-MLE implementation. The current implementation of MTB-MLE under the IPED programme assumes

that all children are speaking the HL. However, from what has been reported, the percentage of children using the HL in different speech communities varies. In some speech communities, the HL is the strongest language for more than 90 per cent of the children (A). In other speech communities, the HL is the strongest language for some children, but for others it is the LWC (B). For still other speech communities, less than ten per cent of the children have the HL as their strongest language, while for the rest it is the LWC (C). In still other communities, no children speak or understand more than a few words in the HL (D). Children's use of the HL falls along a continuum, as illustrated in the diagram below (Sue Hasselbring (pers. comm.) 16 December 2020).

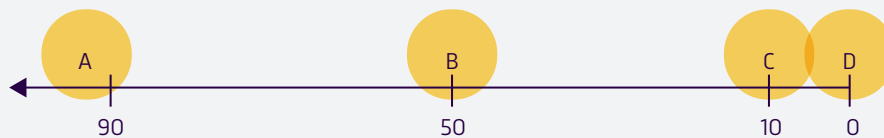


Figure 3: HL use of children in different speech communities

Therefore, to assume that all IP languages are like situation A would be putting children's education at risk. Different strategies should be designed for each type of situation so that MTB-MLE and language revitalisation could both flourish under the IPED programme. Traditional MTB-MLE is designed for situation A but many

language communities are either B or C. For these situations, the use of the LWC as language of instruction and literacy is more appropriate. Translanguaging (Solorza, et al., 2019; Son, 2018) is another strategy that may be employed in such situations, especially when children are multilingual or in a mixed group.

Summary and recommendations

The IPs of the Philippines are finally benefitting from an education policy that affirms their right to an education that serves them best and at the same time gives focus to sustaining and enriching their IKSPs, ILSs and languages. Significant progress has been made towards these goals. In this section, I summarise the issues concerning MTB-MLE implementation

and revitalisation of endangered HL in the IPED programme. I also offer some recommendations as the IPED moves forward.

⁴ Bahay Wika is a kind of language nest put up in 2018 by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF) or Commission on the Filipino Language to assist the community in language and culture revitalisation.

On MTB-MLE implementation...

The existing policies clearly define the MT: the child's first language or the language the child knows best. The policy also reiterates that the language would be a learning resource. However, the language revitalisation feature of the IPED Framework overlaps with the MTB-MLE policy. Thus, in some speech communities, HLs that are not spoken by (most) children are being developed for literacy. This puts the children's education at risk and clearly violates the stipulations of RA 10533. MTB-MLE in an HL is only appropriate for communities where the HL language use is vigorous (more than 90 per cent of the children are strong speakers of the HL).

The provision in the IPED framework for MTB-MLE as a language revitalisation strategy has to be clarified because as it is written, as provided

in the framework, this leads to improper implementation of MTB-MLE. In this regard, the policy must be improved so that it gives clearer guidelines for when MTB-MLE is appropriate and when it is not. It should also not link language revitalisation with MTB-MLE, as this is counterproductive. Related to this, it would be helpful for policy implementors, especially those who are directly involved with the community, to reinforce their understanding of the principles of MTB-MLE. This is necessary so that they can give proper guidance to the community in their continuing dialogue about effective/appropriate children's education. Concepts must be clearly communicated to enable indigenous cultural communities (ICCs) to make the appropriate decisions and take action.

On language revitalisation...

The DepEd's action on language revitalisation through the IPED programme is commendable. Language endangerment is a crisis that will be affecting the DepEd more in the future and put additional HLs at risk. To stay relevant and involved, DepEd must inform itself about the issue to be able to make the appropriate interventions concerning language endangerment and revitalisation. Language development organisations and linguists might be beneficially involved in the dialogue with

communities so that a more holistic approach to language endangerment issues can be designed. Time is of the essence for language revitalisation.

While IPED plays a significant role in the maintenance and transmission of IKSPs, ILSs and indigenous languages to the next generation, its programme design must fit the various levels of HL language use of children in the community. For example, see the table below.

Language Vitality		Use of the HL in School
Children's HL use type	EGIDS level	
A	6a	HL will be used for literacy (MTB-MLE)
B	6b	Translanguaging (HL and LWC) for literacy; Build oral proficiency in the HL
C	6b	Translanguaging (HL and LWC) or use the LWC for literacy; Build oral proficiency in the HL
D	7 and lower	Literacy in the LWC; Build oral proficiency in the HL

Table 2: Suggested use of the HL in school according to language vitality

Some would argue that using an endangered HL for literacy is a start. This might be so, but a literacy programme on an endangered language would not be sustainable in the long run. This may even aggravate the language endangerment crisis because attention and resources are diverted into a programme that is also not strategic for language revitalisation. Considering that language revitalisation is urgent, interventions have to be carefully planned.

In both literacy and language revitalisation programmes, knowing the vitality status of a language is critical in strategic planning. The DepEd should include this in their research agendas. Assessment of linguistic vitality '... is important in determining the viability of effective and sustainable mother tongue-based multilingual education for minority ethnolinguistic communities in the Philippines' (Young, 2011:103). The assessment might be done in many ways, but I propose a collaborative assessment where the community is a key player. If the community and other stakeholders are interested, they could request training from language development organisations such as SIL.

There are still many challenges and even challengers to the MTB-MLE implementation in the Philippines. The DepEd has already done so much to make education for Filipino children inclusive and responsive to the challenges and opportunities of the times. I hope that the DepEd, especially the IPED officials and teachers, does not give up but rather continues to learn from the rich experience of working with ICCs. I also hope that the ICCs know that many institutions and individuals would like to see them succeed in providing the best education for their children. *Walang bibitiw!*⁵

⁵ An exhortation in Tagalog equivalent to 'Don't give up!'

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