ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Alphabet primer as mother tongue-based multilingual education supplementary instructional material

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Abstract: This study aims to develop MTB-MLE instructional material such as alphabet primer for the use of Grade 1 pupils in Iyakan language and to test its effectiveness. 100 pupils (Grade 1) participated in the study from a selected public elementary school in a particular city and province in Mindanao, Philippines. The study used a one-group pre-test-post-test design where the worksheets were taken from the Iyakan Alphabet Primer as instruments. Experts in mother-tongue education and members of the community validated and critiqued the alphabet primer. The results of the study demonstrated that the alphabet primer may be tailored to meet the needs of students at the Grade 1 level. Word identification, alphabet knowledge, spelling knowledge, and handwriting are all areas where the learners have shown substantial improvement. The findings suggest that the mother-tongue alphabet primer has potential as a means of raising students' achievement. Based on the findings, it is suggested that the developed alphabet primer book be used as a supplementary resource for teachers of MTB-MLE with the Iyakan language as L1, that additional teaching guides be created to support teachers in the classroom, that more instructional materials in the first or local languages be created and used in the classrooms, and that the alphabet primer be translated into other dialects or languages in the city or province to maximize their use.

Keywords: instructional materials; stakeholders; word recognition

1. Introduction

When it comes to learning, language is a major determinant. Language is the fundamental medium via which humans learn about, interact with, and shape their environment (Chavez, 2022; Spolsky and Hult, 2008). In addition, Ocbian et al. (2015) have shown that only by allowing children to learn in their mother tongue can a country attain Education for All (EFA).

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is the leading advocate for mother tongue literacy in education (UNESCO, 2003). It also underlined the necessity of encouraging indigenous literacy to preserve endangered languages and variety as the world's greatest problems. An article predicted that by 2100, half of the world's languages will be extinct. According to UNESCO, a language is endangered when its speakers stop using it in daily life and pass

it down to future generations (Krauss, 1992).

In addition, Mother Tongue Based Education (also known as MTB Education) focuses its attention not only on the languages that are at risk of extinction but also on the connection that exists between language and culture. Language and culture are inseparable components that give individuals their sense of self, as well as their history and their future (Task Force on Aboriginal Languages and Culture, 2005).

Language is essential for learning about the world, sharing ideas, and making things happen. Linguist Hale, who was fluent in over 75 different tongues, described it this way—when you lose a language, you lose a culture, intellectual riches, and a work of art (Hale et al., 1992). As a result, a language conveys not just the grammatical and semantic conventions of its speakers, but also the values and beliefs held by its speakers as a whole. Individual and societal well-being, self-determination, and cultural survival all depend on the maintenance of languages, making language preservation an integral aspect of larger fights for these ends (McCarty and Romero, 2005).

Despite the importance of Iyakan language and its oral traditions, there have been limited studies conducted on how the local language can be used in teaching. This study assessed how the Iyakan language can be used as a form of mainstream teaching language. For the Yakans, their oral traditions play an essential role in maintaining their identity, cultural heritage, and passing down their knowledge across generations (Pacio, 2023). Their myths, folktales, songs, legends, and riddles served as a bridge between their present life towards their past. However, the Yakans were aware of the vulnerability of their language as their traditional practices are being forgotten (Pacio, 2023). Using mother tongue does preserve the cultural heritage of a community, at the same time, also improves the competencies of learners in learning (Allahkarami and Sahraee, 2020; Beisenbayeva, 2020). Previous literatures also indicated that language proficiency can be influenced by different sociocultural characteristics of learners. Some of these characteristics include attitude, beliefs, cultural difference, and gender (Chavez, 2022; Gunn, 2019; Kim and Bae, 2020; MacSwan, 2017).

A large quantity of high-quality learning and teaching resources is essential for any Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program. These resources should be tailored to the specific needs of the target audience in terms of both content and cultural sensitivity. It is considered crucial in making the MTB-MLE program long-lasting. For linguistic minorities in the Philippines, Sibayan (1985) highlighted a challenge to successful bilingual education: the lack of readily available reading and teaching materials in the target language. In addition, one barrier to creating a locally relevant curriculum is the lack of suitable reading and teaching resources. Thus, there must be meticulous preparation and strategic execution during the creation of new materials (Young and Dekker, 2006). Learning materials are created with the end users in mind first and foremost. Particularly in the early phases, they are indispensable. To better engage Filipino students in school, it is recommended that they use locally generated learning materials written in the vernacular language (Council for the Welfare of Children, 1999).

The resources, according to Young and Dekker (2006), will help learners feel good about themselves boost their confidence, and stay actively involved in their schooling. Resources should make use of the student's prior knowledge by displaying cultural, linguistic, and contextual clues that are already recognizable to them (Malone, 2004; Young and Dekker, 2006). So, it is essential to take into account differences in cultural and linguistic norms (Jan-Petter and Gumperz, 2020).

Same writers went on to say that those with special skills can come up with truly unique narratives by drawing on their own personal experiences (Young and Dekker, 2006). They have the ability to weave fictional tales out of their own lives and fantasies. It's important to remember that every language community has its share of insiders and outsiders. Those who are native speakers of the target language are considered insiders, while those who are not are considered outsiders. Learners, parents, families, and teachers fluent in the native tongue are all considered insiders. People from the Department of Education or other government agencies, NGOs, donors, and teachers from different linguistic communities are all examples of possible outsiders.

Furthermore, Gacheche's (2010) paper highlighted the potential advantages of an education centered on the mother tongue. It reaffirmed the benefits of increased learning outcomes, bolstered local language development, and opened doors to learning more languages for international communication. Nonetheless, some of the difficulties were also highlighted in the paper such as pedagogy, course materials, linguistic policy and planning, national development, and language prestige. However, the report does provide some potential solutions to these problems. Similarly, learning resources of any kind are indispensable. Improving students' knowledge, reasoning, and problem-solving abilities, helps them to accomplish their learning goals more efficiently and enthusiastically (Espinosa, 2010; Lucenario et al., 2016).

These efforts are fantastic models of indigenous autonomy and linguistic rights. Several communities have also launched or are thinking about starting mother-tongue medium maintenance or immersion programs. DepEd Order No. 90 series of 2011 in the Philippines supports the development of new educational resources by outlining the types of materials that should be created for MTB-MLE classes. Flash or activity cards that feature letters and numbers, as well as larger books that tell stories or serve as alphabet primers (Lear, 2018). There is also a pictorial dictionary, a thematic image chart, and a list of vital sight words for each school level.

Objectives of the study

This paper looked into the development and effectiveness of the alphabet primer as MTB-MLE supplementary material for Grade 1 pupils that supported the local culture and language of the learners.

2. Methods

It utilized a one-group pre-test-post-test design following the inclusion criteria of the study. Purposive sampling was used to identify the selected public elementary school where the study was conducted and the pupils' population is composed mainly of Yakan. Random sampling was used to identify the population of First Grade learners. Cranmer (2017) states that behavioral researchers typically utilize one-group pre-test-post-test designs to evaluate the impact of an intervention or therapy on a sample population. There are two distinguishing elements of this study methodology. The first distinguishing characteristic is that all participants are part of the same "condition", meaning they all receive the same treatments and evaluations. Second, there is a linear hierarchy, which necessitates the evaluation of a dependent variable both before and after a treatment is applied.

Data for the pre- and post-test were collected using the sample worksheets from the alphabet primer book. Experts including the stakeholders in the communities validated and critiqued the texts

Table 1. Levels of the different categories

Levels	Scores		Descriptions
Independent	40–50	100%–80%	Good
Instruction	29–39	79%–59%	Fair
Frustration	<29	<59%	Low

Table 2. Word recognition in Iyakan

Level	Pre-test		Post-test	
	f	%	f	%
Independent	5	5	55	55
Instruction	20	20	15	15
Frustration	75	75	30	30
Total	100	100	100	100

and pictures. Several school community stakeholders also sat down to review the book. Revisions were integrated afterward. After all the suggestions were integrated, the revised book with the work-sheets were prepared and tested.

The basis for interpreting the individual recognition skills of the pupils was adapted from the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) of the Department of Education.

As this study introduced the alphabet primer to the pupils and investigated their word identification fluency, phonological awareness, and letter knowledge, the pupils involved were officially enrolled in Grade 1 at the selected public elementary school.

3. Results and discussions

100 pupils were tested in a selected public school in Mindanao, Philippines for the Iyakan Alphabet Primer. The level of comprehension for word recognition in terms of independence, instruction, and frustration is shown in **Table 2**.

The results showed that during the pre-test, only 5 or 5% of the pupil respondents were considered independent learners, and 20 or 20% were considered instructional learners. In comparison, majority (75 or 75%) were considered in the frustration level. More than half (55 or 55%) of the child respondents' levels increased to independent, followed by 15 of them in the instruction level in the post-test findings, indicating after the alphabet primer was introduced and applied by the instructors teaching MTB-MLE in Iyakan. At the same time, only 30 were left at the frustration level. The data reveals an improvement from the pre-test to the post-test result among the 100 pupil respondents of the study.

A child's native language (also known as the mother tongue or the L1) serves as the foundation upon which a second language such as Filipino is built. A child's cognitive development is best served by beginning their formal education in the language in which they are fluent.

Half of the world's out-of-school children, according to the World Bank, do not speak a school language at home (Bender et al., 2005). The difficulty of teaching in a regional language is only one

of several problems plaguing modern Southeast Asian educational institutions. But, without the ability to communicate in the classroom, learners face significant challenges. Significant gains may be gained by changing the medium of instruction to the mother tongue, which can increase access and quality for millions of students (Benson, 2005; Oluwole, 2008). Learners can start from what they already know and go towards the unknown, and a bridge is built between the home and the school when the local language is used. Validating the local culture is one of the benefits of switching to the local language. It facilitates greater conversation and deeper engagement of students in the classroom, which helps kids feel more confident and builds a sense of identity (Benson, 2005; Sotvoldievich, 2022).

As Benson (2008) noted, "*In sum, using the learner's language goes a long way toward resolving many of the access and quality issues that would lead us closer to reaching Education for All goals.*" Teaching children in their native language is an approach and a program that has been shown to be successful, according to evidence from worldwide empirical research.

A new Education Note from the World Bank classifies the use of colonial languages as a medium of education as one of the "non-productive practices that lead to low levels of learning and high levels of dropout and repetition". It is deemed "the greatest problem facing Education for All" (Bender et al., 2005). According to the same source, mother language education results in expanded access and equity, enhanced learning outcomes, decreased repetition and dropout rates, sociocultural advantages, and decreased total costs.

This conclusion runs counter to the findings of a research that was carried out by RTI International in collaboration with SEAMEO INNOTECH. The study indicated that 10%–25% of the youngsters who were polled were unable to accurately identify a single letter sound and instead identified the letter by its name (RTI International, 2016).

Table 3 shows the results of a pre-test and a post-test designed to assess students' alphabet knowledge after they have completed the exercises in the Iyakan Alphabet Primer Book.

Results showed that 65% of the pupils were at the frustration level during the pre-test, 20 were at the Instruction level, and 15 were considered independent. After using the Iyakan Alphabet Primer, the result increased to 45% from the previous 15% for independent learners. Fifteen were at the instructional level, while only 20 stayed at the frustration level. The results signify an improvement based on the scores obtained by the pupil respondents.

Regulations and Rules for the Implementation of Republic Act 10533, Section 4 (Enhance Basic Education Act of 2013) states that "the language/languages first learned by a child, which he or she identifies with, identified as a native language used by others, which he or she knows best, or uses most."

Table 3. Alphabet knowledge in Iyakan

Level	Pre-test		Post-test	
	f	%	f	%
Independent	15	15	65	65
Instruction	20	20	15	15
Frustration	65	65	20	20
Total	100	100	100	100

In MTB-MLE, students are required to read works of local literature that are either narrated or written in their native language. This helps them feel a stronger connection to and pride in their own cultural background.

Hinton (2001) argued that "*More broadly, language loss is part of the loss of whole cultures and knowledge systems, including philosophical systems, oral literary and music traditions, environmental knowledge systems medical knowledge, and important cultural practices and artistic skills.*"

When students from Grade 1 through three listen to and respond to varied texts in the mother tongue, they develop phonological and phonemic awareness, alphabet knowledge, sound-letter correspondences, decoding, vocabulary, and comprehension abilities (Lear, 2020). In addition, students exhibit fundamental communication abilities while addressing known themes with basic words and diverse issues with a growing vocabulary. Students' vocabulary is expanded through the development of fundamental communication skills on a variety of themes.

Table 4 displays the pre- and post-test results for spelling utilizing activities from the Iyakan Alphabet Primer Book.

The spelling exercises from pages 39 and 61 of the alphabet primer show that during the pre-test, 10 pupil respondents got scores between 50–40 or 100%–80%, whereas the majority got scores below 29 or 59%.

The post-test results showed that most pupil respondents were independent, with scores between 50–40 or 100%–80%. Meanwhile, ten were at the Instructional level with scores between 39–29 or 79%–59%, while 20 of the pupil respondents were left in the frustration level with scores below 29 or 59%.

The handwriting result for both pre-test and post-test from the Iyakan Alphabet Primer Book is shown in **Table 5**.

Results showed an improvement in the handwriting skills of the 100 Yakan pupils after introducing the alphabet primer. After the intervention, the number of students scoring at the independent

Table 4. Spelling in Iyakan

Level	Pre-test		Post-test	
	f	%	f	%
Independent	10	10	70	70
Instruction	25	25	10	10
Frustration	65	65	20	20
Total	100	100	100	100

Table 5. Handwriting in Iyakan

Level	Pre-test		Post-test	
	f	%	f	%
Independent	20	10	50	50
Instruction	25	25	30	30
Frustration	55	55	20	20
Total	100	100	100	100

level rose from 20 to 50. By comparing pre- and post-test levels of frustration, there was a dramatic drop from 55 to 20.

Supporting the Philippines' MTB-MLE program, RTI International and SEAMEO INNOTECH conducted baseline assessments utilizing contextualized EGRA instruments in collaboration with the Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines (DepEd) (2011), the Bureau of Elementary Education, and TNS Global. Students in third grade from 40 different schools were selected at random and evaluated on their English and Filipino reading skills. In comparison, in 2013, over 500 first graders were sampled to assess their Ilokano reading competence, and in 2014, around 400 first graders and another 400 second graders were sampled and evaluated to assess their Ilokano, Hiligaynon, Sinugbuanon Binisaya, and Maguindanaon reading proficiency. Teachers were also interviewed, and their classes were observed so that we could have some background information for administering the MTB-MLE program and for identifying any other characteristics that could be connected to the students' reading progress. We may infer that gaps in effective teaching approaches are related to student success based on the test results (RTI International, 2016).

While most students improve their reading fluency scores between Grades 1 and 2, many still require extra instruction to decode even a simple one- or two-syllable word. Results on reading comprehension might be better; between 8% and 38% of pupils, depending on the language, cannot read even one word of a short tale. Observations and conversations with teachers reveal that students in Grades 1 and 2 are taught in their native language for reading and other courses. However, teachers need to be better equipped to handle the mother tongue subject, and some need to speak more of the children's first language or L1. During reading lessons, many educators were found to devote little time to reading instruction, and pupils seldom provided evidence of effective reading, listening, or writing.

Research shows that without teachers, an educational system would not function, and that if educators were not on board with an intervention, it would fail. Several indicators point to the presence of educators who have unfavourable views about mother-tongue-based curricula. One expert argues that instructors' inability to speak or write local languages is a significant obstacle to mother tongue education (Paulson, 2010). Teachers need to be able to read and write in the language of their students if they are to successfully teach in the mother tongue (Timor, 2012).

According to RTI International's research, discrepancies in reading results across languages may not be attributable to differences in language or MTB-MLE implementation, but rather to differences in demographic and socio-economic factors including how well-resourced schools are. The extent to which students are immersed in a reading- and learning-focused environment at school and home also plays a substantial role in explaining disparities in academic performance.

A child's language is a crucial factor in developing early literacy. A child develops his language and literacy skills in the years before formal schooling. A child's confidence, sense of pride, and potential may all flourish as he taps into the transformative power of education through a medium he already understands (Id21 Insights, 2006). Studies have shown that learners who learn to read and write in their first language before moving on to another language have a far easier time picking up the new language and progressing at a much faster rate than their classmates who didn't learn to read and write in their first (UNESCO, 2002).

Throughout the first years of school, children should be introduced to read and write in their native language. The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines has made mother-tongue education a central policy and program across the board of formal education, from preschool through university, because of the growing body of evidence demonstrating that the learner's mother language is indeed the best medium of instruction in the early years (ALS).

DepEd cited research from the Lingua Franca Project and the Lubuagan First Language Component Program, both of which found that students improved their reading skills more quickly when taught in their native tongue. According to the results, students who have already mastered reading and writing in their native tongue have a significant advantage over those who are taught the language as a third or even fourth one. Learning to read and write in one's native tongue has far-reaching benefits for a student's cognitive growth and the rest of their education as well (Department of Education, Republic of the Philippines, 2009).

The same study lists the creation, production, and distribution of low-cost instructional materials in the designated language at the school, division, and regional levels as one of the ten core needs of MTB-MLE, with an emphasis on early literacy and children's literature. These resources should be authentic, represent learners' language and culture, be age- and level-appropriate, and be as innovative as feasible.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The following findings are the result of the researcher's careful examination of the information provided by the respondents:

The MTB-MLE Alphabet Primer is a customizable resource that has been shown to raise first graders' proficiency in reading, writing, and language arts. Young students' usage of their mother tongues reflects an understanding and acceptance of their heritage. The process through which a student moves from speaking his or her native language at home to learning and utilizing a second language in school should be as seamless as possible.

Moreover, language acquisition is how a child picks up a language without formal study. It occurs organically within the household context and the child's immediate environment. A youngster would benefit from having positive role models to learn a language effectively.

The single most important thing that can be done to prepare a kid for learning to read is to read aloud to them on a regular basis, since this has been demonstrated to increase their brain's capacity for language and literacy abilities. Further, Iyakan's MTB-MLE textbooks for first graders emphasize the importance of learning the alphabet, accurate spelling, and legible handwriting for future success in reading.

This study has certain limitations which majorly focused on standardizing the MTB-MLE contents and its application to other native languages. The researcher further recommends the following: (a) it is critical for students to have access to a broad range of reading materials, both within and outside of the classroom; (b) reading resources for first grade students should also be created, improved, and innovated by the instructors, and then shared with the other teachers; (c) translation to other regional or native languages could increase the reach of output; (d) teachers utilizing MTB-

MLE should have proper orientation, training, and supervision; (e) for educational reform to be effective, it must meet the basic needs of both students and teachers, including the accessibility of high-quality textbooks and other instructional materials; (f) the best mother-tongue-based multilingual education programs solicit feedback from as many stakeholders as possible when deciding which languages/dialects to use and how to develop them; and (g) policies need to be drafted to provide enough financing for textbooks written in minority languages.

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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