

Teacher Agency in Mother Tongue: From Social Practice to Legislation

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Abstract

Drawing on the lived experience of teachers in implementing the Mother Tongue Based – Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), this research offered a social analysis of the practice of mother tongue employing Practice Theory as a frame of analysis. This framework suggests that shift of language policy in the Philippines from bilingual to multilingual elucidates culturally diverse ways of reconfiguring the language policy, emphasizing the roles of social practice and teacher agency in policy appropriation. The history of mother tongue as a new language policy in basic education from grades 1 to 3 mirrors how a contextual use of language reflects the issues of power and negotiation of identities that enabled mother tongue to emerge as a key element in language policy within mainstream education. Following the direction on language policy in basic education, teacher agency in the implementation of MTB-MLE seeks to respond to the contextual needs of the learners on the one hand, and meet the demands of globalization on the other.

Keywords: teacher agency, mother tongue, education reform, Mother Tongue Based – Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

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Introduction

Mother Tongue as an Education Reform

Education is directly and indirectly associated with globalization structures and processes. It involves the use of a language that facilitates in meeting the goals of the state and education. Thus, the issue on what language to legitimize as a medium of instruction reflects not only the role of a language in the transmission of knowledge but also its political and social functions in globalization. The institutionalization of Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction for grades 1 to 3 in the recent education reform in the Philippines or the K-12 curriculum shows a political response to the question: What language enables Filipino learners to learn values, knowledge and skills to adapt of globalization?

From a historical viewpoint, Filipinos history of colonization (i.e. American Occupation in the Philippines) has favored the use of bilingual policy (English and Filipino) in education. English facilitated the introduction of public basic education and the construction of the nation –state. Philippines adopted the American government model. In turn, a national identity was necessitated in the process of state formation. Such political shift has relegated non-Tagalog languages as secondary languages in the whole literacy development (Tupas, 2011). In some instances, language policies contradict the use of language in practice. Philippines as a multicultural state has many languages which represent diverse Filipino identities. In practice, the use of home language is still prevalent in learning in spite of bilingual policy in Philippine education system.

Thus, the legislation of the Mother Tongue as a medium of instruction and as a separate subject from Grades one to three has redefined the context of educational reform through the collective exercise of agency of on-the-ground actors and sustained efforts of mother tongue advocates. This development gave primacy to Mother Tongue as an effective medium of teaching and learning especially in early years of schooling. Within this context, this paper seeks to investigate how diverse ways agency is exercised in teaching the mother tongue as a crucial aspect in policy formation.

Theorizing Teacher Agency in Mother Tongue

Building on Sherry Ortner's Practice theory, the development of MTB-MLE reflects the dialectic relationship between the structure (policy) and agency (human practice). Such dialectic relationship elucidates that MTB – MLE as socio-cultural product is a counter hegemonic response to disabling features of bilingual policy in education in a multicultural state. This implies that the hegemony of foreign language in Philippine education was not totally encompassing. Local actors' socio-cultural context, interest, history and experience have provided space for exercise agency. Viewing the legislation of mother tongue from practice to the implementation of mother tongue has opened a new perspective on educational reform that recognizes power from human practice that is capable to induce change within Philippine education system. The invincible practice of mother tongue in spite of the three decades of bilingual policy in basic education shows diverse of literacy practices Filipino learners which

are embedded multicultural and fluid identities of Filipino learners. McCary L. T. & Warhol L. (2011) maintain,

Like orientations and attitudes, ideologies are not about language per se, but rather about individual and collective identities and power relations (pp. 182).

Indeed, teachers at the forefront of MTB-MLE implementation, exercise their agency in order to create meaningful language learning that will respond to contextual needs and experience of diverse Filipino learners.

Methodology

A case study method was employed to explore the lived experience of mother tongue teachers in relation to the implementation of the K-12 reform. Specifically, the contextual exercise of agency was examined to look into various interpretations and applications of mother tongue in multi settings. Through narrative inquiry, the researcher was able to generate themes which were further analyzed to theoretically frame emergent issues and debates in the application of mother tongue as a medium of instruction.

Teacher	Age	Gender	Social Position	Years of Service	Type of School
1	40	Female	Community teacher	8	Community
2	33	Female	Grade 2 teacher	10	Public
3	48	Male	Grade 3 teacher	18	Private (Non-sectarian)

Figure 1. Profile of the Participants.

This study involved three teachers across Metro Manila who teach mother tongue as a subject and as a medium of instruction. The heterogeneity of school types enabled the researcher to look into the diverse ways and contexts of exercising agency in teaching the mother tongue.

Exercising Teacher Agency

At the macro-level, Ortner (2006) purports that human practice is influenced by structures (i.e, bilingual policy, history of colonization and globalization. On the other hand, human practice negotiates the policy that paved the way for the implementation of MTB-MLE. . For Giddens, structure is constantly created through collective agency and agency takes inspiration and resources for further action (VandenBroek, 2011). At the micro level, agency mediates and is mediated by structure, history, context, forms of capital, agency of other actors, constraints, personal goal and advocacy, and relationship as extracted in this study. This is shown in table below.

How is teacher agency reflected in the teaching of MT?	Teacher		
	Community	Public School	Private
Understand context	Understand the social, historical and cultural context of the community (i.e., learners are members of Indigenous Peoples, they are migrants who left their province due to issue on conflict and peace and order, some family members have history of , late schooling, and illiteracy, the purpose to learn a language is to be integrated in their new community	Understand the family context and nature of pupils' learning difficulty, learners have diverse reading problems	Understand how the system works and why it operates in a hierarchical manner

Navigate resources	develop support system in the community (interpreter in the community, pupils and parents) pursue graduate studies	tap social networks outside their school, spend personal money, trade learning devices with fellow teachers pursue graduate studies	pursue graduate studies
Redefine values and ideologies	Any individual can be illiterate in other communities, community, redefine the meaning of students' capacity and success and deficit family model (parents try not to reproduce history of school failure)	No specific learning theory exclusively fits a given context, you have to create your own theory according to the needs of learners	MT is not just about what language should be used in instruction. It is also making the content socially situated

Reconfiguring Social Practices	Practice the following: no assignment policy, individualized instruction, extension of hours before classes and after classes, use <u>Marungko</u> Style, home visits, develop culturally sensitive materials	Practice the following: No project Policy, develop individualized reading program and materials	Alter the schedule of MT and Filipino (the same teacher should teach both subjects),
Negotiate power relationships	Secure the trust of community people,	involve parents in remediation program,	sustain cordial social relationships with colleagues and parents, play with the system

Figure 3. Teacher Agency in Mother Tongue

Drawing on Ahearn (2001) on language as social action, mother tongue in relation to the K-12 reform illustrates how human practice reproduces and induces change within Philippine basic education system. Agency and culture are intertwined and represented in language. This resonates with the idea that the use of Mother Tongue (MT) is an assertion of cultural identity. For Davies (1991), asserting cultural identity is an act of authority. It involves an act of perpetuating collective identity and values. Thus, using mother tongue is not only an issue of using a language that facilitates effective instruction, but also an issue of asserting one's cultural identity. To speak of one's mother tongue is to speak and assert one's collective identity. McCarty and Warhol (2011) maintain,

Language reclamation is not solely or even primarily about language per se. It is revitalizing an endangered language is an affirmation of identity, community-building, and healing from past injustices (pp.189).

Moreover, Lee (2009) argued that despite competing ideologies and debates in language, many youth demonstrated a "critical indigenous consciousness," actively transforming the existing language policies in their homes and communities. This argument informs that human practice involves that use of language ingrained in indigenous ways of knowing, feeling and accessing to community capital and experience. There are certain applications of language in the community that allows community actors to transform the language to enable their community experience.

In certain occasions, formal language learned in school becomes irrelevant in the community if it deters an individual to establish community relationships that will define his identity and social position. These reconfigurations of language reflect an act of asserting authority that is inseparable in creating one's identity within a community where an identity is historically and culturally grounded.

This affirms that the practice of mother tongue is an exercise of agency that allows a group or individual to access to social and political power in order for them to make

and remake an identity within the challenges and constraints of globalization. Previous language policies failed to incorporate contextual analysis of human practice.

Mother tongue as a human practice mirrors an issue of how power that has been silenced by colonial and neoliberal policies in education. This assumption resonates with Ortner's (2001) notion of agency of power where agency is exercise when there is domination and resistance.

Moreover, one's intention is exercised in mother tongue (i.e., personal or collective) which Ortner (2001) calls agency of intentionality. It is important to note that the individual project is mediated by the actors' personal history. Participant 1 narrates, I also experienced marginalization when I was a child and social inequality continues to disenfranchise the children I am serving today. This implies that her personal history and personal goal are concretized in the exercise of agency at present. To address this project, McLaren (1989) maintains that, teachers must function as more than agents of social critique. They must attempt to fashion a language of hope that points to new reforms of social and material relations attentive to the principles of freedom and justice. In this argument, McLaren enunciates that a teacher is social and moral agent. In this regard, the exercise of agency in MT has a moral purpose to answer, for what purpose and for who is the exercise of agency?

As participant 1 suggests, my goal is for my pupils to express their voice in their family and community. Additionally, participant 2 expresses, kung matututong magbasa ang bata, hindi siya maiwan. (If a child has learned how to read, s/he will not be left behind)

Mother tongue is a social and political project that results to the attainment human empowerment. As a social and political project, Giroux maintains, the link among language, knowledge and power, the teacher must first dignify his or position by recognizing that the foundation for all human agency as well as teaching is steeped in a commitment to the possibilities of human life and freedom.

The practice of mother tongue shows how actors strategize agency to achieve their project. Sewell (1991) suggests agency is the ability to apply creatively schemas in social situations and resources are embodiment of schemas. He maintains understanding schemas and the application of resources is dependent on the context. As narrated by the actors understanding of the environment, redefining social practices and navigating resources are crucial in understanding the power of agency. Resources carry diverse meanings depending on their application in the environment. These allow them to diversify the practice of their agency in order to achieve their agency.

The existing notions of agency lack the discourse on reflexivity. Reflexivity of agency illuminates the actors' redefinition of their values and ideologies in order to build up enabling experience as part of the actor's community integration. In this process the individual, questions his/her own value system as part of negotiating with on the ground experience and redefines it in order to successfully exist within the community.

Participant 1 suggests, I need to redefine my views about schooling and school success. I used to think that ability to write and speak the dominant language defines one's intelligence because I was taught that way but with my experience in the community elucidates otherwise. There are forms of knowledge and skills taught in formal schools that are not relevant in the community. I have also transcended the idea that school failure is attributed to family deficit because as I observe with the parents of my pupils, they resist family history of school failures. On the other hand, participant 2 explains, No specific learning theory exclusively fits in the context. You have to create your own theory according to the needs of the learners.

These narratives also contradict to Bourdieu's notion of habitus that is deeply internalized structured, powerfully controlling and largely inaccessible to consciousness (Ortner 2006). Teachers as constituted by their struggles to legitimize MT have demonstrated that they are not passive agents but authors of enabling human practice. This suggests Giddens and Scott's understanding of human subjects that emphasize they are partially knowing subjects. Actors are able to reflect to some degree on their circumstances and by implications develop a certain level of critique and possible resistance which Giddens refers to "dialectic control" as an integral part in the process of making of the agent called "structuration" (VandenBroek, 2011).

Indeed, the diverse ways of exercising agency in different social contexts (i.e., community school, public school and private school) reflect that it is situated and mediated by existing forces within the context including the larger structures that constitute the context. This rests on the notion that agency is not autonomous; it is context dependent and always subject to social constitution and redefinition. Following these arguments, this paper also intends to challenge the idea equating agency to humanness that tends to describe it as autonomous. Participant 1 shares that , agency is context dependent.

In contradiction to the chodial triad model of Emirbayer and Mische, the contextual experience of actors in navigating the practice of MT through their agency illustrates a different framework. In their analysis, the past (life history, professional history) the present (cultural, structural, material), and the future (short term and long term goals) influence agency which reduces the analysis to unidirectional relationship between agency and social factors. In this sense, agency mediates these factors and the relationship among these factors. This implies that the relationship of social factors and agency is not linear, chordal and deterministic. It is fluid and dynamic where agency is at the center of the framework navigating social factors that constitutes agency. In this analysis, it is also important to implicate in the discourse that teacher agency is mediated by the agency of different actors within the community. Participant 2 laments, The pupil perseveres when s/he feels that s/he is being valued. In effect, their parents also persevere when they see the progress in the child. This discourse enunciates that the exercise of agency is imbued with notions affect and care.

Conclusion

My exploration of agency in this paper has challenged and redefined my own understanding of agency and has allowed me to reflect on ways I exercise agency in

the context where I operate. Reflecting on teachers' experience of navigating the practice of mother tongue through their agency, has informed me of its social and political functions in which the choice of mother tongue as a language speaks of indigenous rights to participate in mainstream education and broader society.

It is situated within the context of power relationships that is subject to social constitution and redefinition (involving the issues of race, gender, mobility, migration and post colonialism). In this sense, mother tongue is a product of the individual and collective agency that operates within the context of power relationships in a field fraught with domination and inequality. Hence, speaking the mother tongue is an assertion of one's authority, accessing the cultural capital of the community and reflecting one's cultural identity and collective history.

Drawing on the on the ground experience of the participants in this study, agency is viewed as a complex and subjective concept. It is contingent on human experience and the context where human experience is grounded. Its polysemous meanings and subjectivity in relation to the practice of mother tongue elucidates culturally diverse ways of navigating power relations and human and non-human resources in order for mother tongue as a political project to be legitimized.

Furthermore, agency is relational, in a sense that it is mediated by agency of actors by whom and for whom agency is exercised. Agency is relating to self, actors within the community and structures. Central to the power shift of language from universal to local is role of teacher agency to negotiate, navigate and reconfigure power relationships. Unlike other reforms, mother tongue stemmed from the bottom that has challenged and redefined the language policy amidst the demands of globalization. The power shift in language policy from universal to local speaks of what human practice and experience have to contribute in shaping and reshaping the structure that would respond to the contextual needs and of local actors vis a vis the political and cultural challenges of globalization. Hence, the trajectory of postcolonial language politics of Mother tongue in the Philippines should answer the following challenges and issues: how can mother tongue be reconfigured and navigated in order to meet the demands of globalization? To what extent can mother be an effective language in the educative process? At the forefront of implementing the mother tongue, how can teacher agency contribute to the empowerment of mother tongue? As a new language policy, how will it illuminate linguistic justice in terms of protecting the marginalized against the disabling effects of globalization?

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