Original Research Article

Rewards and Drawbacks of Modular Approach in Teaching Mother Tongue-Based Language (MTBL) during COVID-19: Reading Teachers in Focus

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Abstract: This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences in teaching reading using Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) through modular learning during the pandemic. It specifically identifies the teachers' challenges, coping, and relevant learning. It employed a qualitative method using phenomenology. It involved 12 elementary reading teachers from the Division of Don Marcelino, Davao Occidental. Interview guide question was used in focus groups to obtain the data. It revealed that reading teachers encountered significant obstacles when it came to delivering effective reading instruction, and these challenges became even more pronounced when they had to incorporate reading into printed modules without much supervision. Teachers continued beyond merely distributing these modules; they took the initiative to conduct home visits and encouraged parents to prioritize reading instruction. Additionally, they exhibited impressive creativity by modifying module content and providing extra materials to support independent learning at home. These challenges pushed them to explore new strategies and adapt to this new teaching mode through modules. In response to the challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience and developed coping mechanisms. They understood the importance of patience in their teaching roles and the value of collaboration among educators. Sharing their experiences and challenges with their colleagues became essential in helping teachers overcome these difficulties.
Keywords: Rewards and drawbacks, Modular Approach, Teaching Mother Tongue-Based Language (MTBL), COVID-19, Reading Teachers, SPAMAST.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy is thoroughly linked with children's primary language and their use of language in their homes, communities, and culture (Bruning *et al.*, 2004) [1]. In the Philippines, efforts to promote literacy are encouraged by the government, organizations, or even private individuals, as the ability to read and write is considered an utmost priority (Cristobal, 2015) [2]. Reading, as one of life's essential skills, is a tool for learning all subjects. Teaching a child's first language, dialect, or "mother tongue" in the early stage of grade level facilitates their learning because it is the dialect or language a child can understand best. It is the best way to help develop critical thinking skills essential to education and the opportunity to learn to read and write (Mańalac, 2021) [3].

In an ideal classroom, students will reflect a broad array of exposure to reading, vary in their language backgrounds, and differ in their metalinguistic awareness in ways that affect their progress toward literacy (Bruning *et al*., 2004) [1]. It is ideally how learning should be until the sudden surge of the COVID-19 virus, which nobody has ever expected to happen. The instantaneous transitions and improved sophistication of today's new normal pose challenges among reading teachers.

This study intended to examine the lives of elementary teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic and how they pushed through the mission and vision of the Department of Education (DepEd) to make every child a reader through a modular method. Furthermore, the study aimed to explore the experiences of reading teachers in the District of Don Marcelino, Davao Occidental.

This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences in teaching reading using Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) through modular learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study aimed to determine their personal experiences, challenges encountered, coping mechanisms, and relevant learning experiences and insights gained.

This study was anchored on two theories. First was the Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (LIH) proposed by [4] Cummins (1978). This theory suggests that an individual who is involved in language learning is like a dual iceberg, which describes the first language and second language as the two tips of the iceberg that can be seen above the surface, with an everyday basis that connects the two languages below the surface (Barzallo, 2022) [5].

Moreover, this study was also based on "The Four Aces of Effective Teaching" proposed by Bulger *et al*., (2002) [6]. The Four Aces represent a summary of the thinking about the "process" (ways of teaching) as it significantly affects the "product" (student learning). The first ace is the Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) orientation, which allows students to focus on specific learning objectives while informing them of their destination and how to get there. It also allows teachers to assess student learning as a measure of their effectiveness in the classroom. The clarity of instruction is the second ace. An effective instructor often provides students with highly explicit directions and clear instructions and explanations about the subject's content, as well as shows and makes the message available from many viewpoints to different senses. Engagement is the third ace. It implies that pupils learn by doing. An effective teacher must establish a dynamic instructional environment where pupils may practice

what they have learned. More effective teachers utilize instructional strategies and tactics that keep students engaged throughout the lesson. Finally, enthusiasm is the fourth ace. This idea represents the professional competence and confidence of teachers. Teachers can create a positive learning atmosphere by demonstrating their enthusiasm for the subject, using student names, and repeating expectations.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The researchers used the qualitative method using the phenomenological approach. The researchers used the qualitative method because they thought of making another study related to the topic under investigation. San Jose and Mortos (2017) [7] mentioned that the qualitative method is appropriate if an investigation is not an end in itself. The phenomenological approach aims to illuminate the specific to identify phenomena through how the actors perceive them (Qutoshi, 2018) [8]. In the human sphere, this translates typically into gathering 'deep' information and perceptions through an inductive approach (Creswell, 2007) [9]. In this study, interviews using a validated researcher-made interview guide questionnaire were utilized to gather the participant's essential experiences related to the topic.

A purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of the participants. Purposive sampling is the most fitting technique since only 12 participants were chosen. Alchemer (2021) [10] mentioned that purposive sampling, also known as judgmental, is a kind of non-probability sampling in which researchers choose people from the community to participate in their surveys based on their own experience. In this study, the participants were chosen based on the following criteria: they were elementary reading teachers; they were teaching in Don Marcelino District, Davao Occidental; they were in service for at least three years using the MTB-MLE approach; and they were willing to be part of the study.

The researchers used a researcher-made Interview-Guide Questionnaire (IGQ) to obtain pertinent information from the participants. IGQ was composed of four main questions. Each main question had probe questions to elicit more answers from the participants. The IGQ was given to expert validators who were knowledgeable in qualitative methods.

The researchers followed the following procedures in gathering the data from the participants. First, the Superintendent of the Division Davao Occidental sought authorization to conduct the study. Then, the Elementary School principals were provided with the endorsement and permit from the

Division Superintendent and a cover letter describing the study. Second, the researchers formulated an interview guide based on the research questions. The interview guide was given to three experts for validation. Third, the participants were grouped into three focus groups before the interview. Each participant was given interview guide questions for them to familiarize themselves with the questions. Fourth, after the interviews, the researchers transcribed the recordings. Lastly, the transcriptions were coded, memoed, thematized, and interpreted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the thematic analysis are shown in Table 1. According to Mortos and San Jose (2018) [11], a table may be used to present qualitative information; however, Creswell and Creswell (2005) [12] mentioned that with the qualitative method, the researchers had the freedom to select how the findings would be presented. For a more accessible presentation and better understanding, the researchers used a table to illustrate the themes and core ideas. Verbatims were also used to describe support of the claims. To protect the participants, pseudonyms were used in the presentation of results.

The researchers classified the information following Oding *et al.*, (2021) [13]. The participant's response was classified as General if the pattern occurred 50% or more, Typical if the pattern ranged from 21–49%, and Variant if the pattern occurred 20%less.

Table 1: Rewards and Drawbacks in Modular Mother Tongue-Based Language Teaching (MTB-MLE) of Reading Teachers

Themes	Core Ideas	Pattern of Response
Teaching and Learning Challenges	- writing makes the module difficult for students - pupils' lack of interest - longer teaching time - limited understanding of MTB-MLE	Typical
	- clinical reading is not possible	Variant
Opportunity to Explore	- exploring other strategies	Typical
Actions to address the challenges	- doing home visitations - encouraging parents to teach their children	Typical
	- asking for the assistance of other teachers in translation	Variant
Promotion of reading among students	- sending activity materials - consistent home visit	Typical
Reflections on the situation	- cultivate patience in teaching - students' learning depends on teachers' endeavor - sharing teaching difficulties with other teachers	Variant

Source: Data Analysis Conducted

Teaching and learning challenges

Undoubtedly, when the pandemic swept across the globe, it brought a seismic shift in various aspects of our lives, and this was particularly evident in the field of education. The way teaching and learning occurred transformed, giving rise to challenges that educational experts and teachers had foreseen. Amid this uncertainty, it became evident that a "new normal" was emerging, replete with distinct difficulties for educators and learners.

The participants' challenges in teaching and learning were categorized as difficulty in module creation, lack of student interest, extended teaching time, limited understanding of MTB-MLE, and infeasibility of clinical reading.

The process of creating educational modules became considerably more complex. Teachers found it challenging to craft materials effectively, convey information, and engage pupils. On the other hand, many pupils needed more interest in remote learning, which posed a significant hurdle for educators attempting to maintain engagement and motivation. Hence, teaching sessions became longer due to the need to adapt to new technologies and ensure that students grasped the material, which presented an additional challenge for teachers.

Implementing Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) raised issues as students and educators grappled with adjusting to this approach, leading to potential communication gaps. Moreover, clinical reading, an essential component of language learning, became impractical in a remote learning environment, limiting students' language development opportunities. More specifically, Mother Tongue-based Language Teachers observed that students encountered significant hurdles when it came to writing.

Understandably, students faced challenges in this area as they required guidance and support to improve their writing skills, organization, and overall coherence.

> "It is difficult because there are difficult words." - Lamee (FGD1)
> "Difficult because there is writing." - Lucia (FGD1)
> "It is difficult because only the child is reading." Crissalee (FGD3)

This finding coincides with Bawm-Mangshang (2022) [14], who found that students' difficulty in mother tongue vocabulary writing was very high. Hence, students could not compose a sensible sentence in their Mother Tongue. Despite teachers' struggle and determination to sustain education, issues with reading and writing instruction were among the expected problems, particularly for the Kindergarten to Grade Three classes (Bagood, 2020) [15]. As reading and writing are necessary for these stages, the modules cannot guarantee building the fundamental skills.

Also, some mother tongue-based Language teachers observed that students lacked interest in learning reading through their Mother Tongue. It was noticeable that students needed more retention of the lessons, as mentioned by the reading teachers.

> "Pupils have no retention and no interest in reading." - Lamee (FGD1)
> "We need more time for teaching the pupils." - Lucia (FGD1)

Variantly, only some mother tongue-based Language teachers believed that longer teaching time was necessary to teach students reading using Mother Tongue. As teachers were not around during the learning process of the learners, and only parents were there to guide the pupils, the reading teachers were calling out to parents to give them enough time to guide their children, especially in reading. The teachers also observed that the students needed a greater understanding of the mother tongue even though it was used in daily conversation at home, with friends, and at school.

> "It is difficult to understand difficult words." - Crissallee (FGD3)
> "Difficult to teach because it needs translation." - Lora (FGD3)

It can be gleaned from the verbatim above that teaching MTB-MLE was difficult for the reading teachers because they needed more language knowledge and proper avenues for training to enhance the strategies to deliver reading using the program. Moats (2020) [16] emphasizes that teaching reading is a job for an expert. Contrary to the popular theory that learning to read is natural and easy. Learning to read is a complex linguistic achievement; it is one of the drawbacks when teachers themselves need more knowledge or even fall short of expertise. Also, a few mother tongue-based Language teachers wanted to have a one-on-one teaching strategy so that they could give focus to each student. However, it was not possible because there were so many students, and they needed more time.

Opportunity to explore new strategies

Another theme that emerged from focus groups was a positive experience, considering their experiences of challenges and an opportunity to explore new strategies. It was true that while teachers noted that there were challenges to delivering learning, especially when teaching reading, the challenges were also considered for some teachers an opportunity to explore new strategies, hence, regarded as the positive side of the experience.

> "We need to study and explore new ways of teaching, especially when it comes to teaching reading to children using modules."- Rachel (FGD2)

The teachers opted to become more resourceful by studying and exploring other strategies. They even admitted that they lacked sufficient knowledge in teaching using MTB-MLE, hence calling for the initiative to explore strategies to teach reading.

Actions to Address the Challenges

Teachers continuously conducted home visitation and encourage the parents as partners in teaching their children. Moreover, asking assistance from other teachers for translation was another way to cope with the challenges in teaching reading. Typical responses revealed that teachers had

practiced these in many ways. Teachers were obliged to conduct home visitations as part of their teaching

related jobs, even before the implementation of modular learning.

> "We visit my pupils at home to see their performances." - Margie
> "I motivated the parents to encourage their children to read."- Lucia

It can be gleaned from the responses that teachers regularly conducted home visitation as their way to make follow-ups on the learner's status. They also used this as an opportunity to talk with the parents sincerely and asked their participation in teaching their children at home. Teachers thought that parents should provide enough time for the kids. While there were some reports that most of the parents could not teach their children at home because they were occupied with their jobs or household chores such as taking care of younger children.

According to the study conducted by Castroverde and Acala (2021) [17] that teachers used various ways to cope with the challenges encountered in the modular distance learning modality such innovating teaching strategies, adapting to the changes brought by the pandemic in

education, being flexible, providing alternative plans, being optimistic, patient, and equipping oneself with the necessary skills for the new normal ways of education.

Promotion of reading among students

Since reading is the basic of life and children as early as four years old need to acquire, it is important that this skill should be taught as a tool for learning in all subjects. Teaching a child's first language, dialect or "mother tongue" in the early stage of grade level facilitates their learning, because it is the dialect or language a child can understand best. It is the best way to help develop critical thinking skills essential to learning and opportunity to learn to read and write (Mańalac, 2021) [3]. Thus, intensive promotion of reading among students is essential and one of the coping mechanisms of teachers to address the challenges.

> "Consistent home visitation." - Dora
> "Nagahatag ko ug reading materials arun basahon nila sa balay."- Tipay
> "Naga-home visit ko and gina contextualize nako ang contents sa modules."- Vera

According to the reading teachers, they can promote reading to learners when they also conduct consistent home visitation. By giving also additional reading materials to supplement what is in the modules is another way to consistently promote reading. As teachers noted that majority of their pupils are Manobo, they also have to contextualized some Visayan terms suggested in the materials and translate them into Manobo, hence, collaboration and working with other teachers surely help them address the challenges of teaching reading among the type of learners.

Relevant learning experience and insights gained

It is also relevant to note the important reflections coming from the insights and experiences of teachers. The theme for an appropriate learning experience for this study is categorized as reflections of the situation. Students' learning depends on teachers' endeavors, sharing teaching difficulties with other teachers. Some teachers noted that patience and passion for teaching are always necessary as sometimes they bring too much stress among teachers. However, as they say, cultivating patience and love is one of the basics of teaching. As enthusiasm is the fourth ace presented in the theory of "The Four Aces of Effective Teaching" proposed by Bulger *et al.,* (2002) [6], the idea represents teachers' professional competence and confidence.

> "The teacher's diligence can help the children." - Vera (FGD2)
> "If the teacher works hard, the children can learn." - Ever (FGD2)
> "Teachers need to work diligently and make an effort to teach the children how to read."- Tipay (FGD2)

While patience is required in teaching, teachers also indicated that students' learning depends on the teachers' endeavors and how hard the teachers put effort into delivering quality learning despite difficulties. The work that teachers put in and the attempts to understand the struggles of both

pupils and parents also play a significant role in teaching. More effective teachers utilize instructional strategies and tactics that keep students engaged throughout the lesson (San Jose *et al.*, 2019) [19].

On the other hand, sharing the experiences and difficulties with other teachers also became part of the teachers' reflections during the focus groups. In the twenty-first century, collaboration is one of the most crucial talents. As technology has progressed, it is simpler to collaborate with other teachers, stakeholders, students, and the school administration (Morel, 2014) [20]. Collaboration between teachers is essential. One of the most crucial determinants of a school's success (Agustine *et al.*, 2019) [21].

CONCLUSIONS

During the pandemic, reading teachers faced significant challenges in delivering effective reading instruction, especially when face-to-face teaching was impossible. These challenges were exacerbated when teachers had to incorporate reading into printed modules, often with limited supervision. In this context, parents took on a pivotal role in their children's education, necessitating their active involvement in teaching reading at home.

Teachers went beyond simply distributing modules; they conducted home visits and encouraged parents to prioritize reading instruction. Teachers also displayed remarkable innovation by adapting module content and providing supplementary materials to support independent learning at home. These challenges, therefore, prompted teachers to explore new strategies and adapt to a new way of teaching through modules.

In response to these difficulties, teachers displayed resilience and developed coping mechanisms. They realized the need for patience in their teaching roles and recognized the significance of cooperation among educators. Sharing experiences and difficulties with their peers became crucial in helping teachers overcome challenges.

The pandemic necessitated a shift in the role of parents in teaching reading, with teachers adapting by innovatively contextualizing module content and sharing experiences with their colleagues. Through these efforts, they demonstrated resilience and an unwavering commitment to their duty as educators amidst complex challenges.

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