



## Decolonizing English Language Teaching in the Philippines: A Literature Review

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### ABSTRACT

This literature review critically examines the colonial roots and contemporary realities of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines. Using a qualitative, critical-interpretive approach grounded in decolonial and postcolonial frameworks, this study synthesizes research on language policy, sociocultural perceptions, and pedagogical reforms, such as Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). Findings reveal that English remains dominant and cannot be easily displaced due to its colonial legacy and association with socioeconomic mobility. Despite MTB-MLE's potential to affirm linguistic diversity, challenges persist due to entrenched attitudes and limited resources. Emerging decolonial strategies, including translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogy, offer promising avenues but face institutional barriers. This review contributes to ongoing dialogues on linguistic justice and the reimagining of ELT toward more equitable and culturally responsive education in the Philippine context.

## INTRODUCTION

The Philippines has been one of the countries from the Global South that experienced the unsettling phenomenon of colonialism – a condition in which a nation is dominated physically, economically, emotionally, and mentally (Kohn, 2006). Beyond the visible traumas inflicted on the colonized nation, the imprints of colonization linger in less conspicuous but equally damaging forms (Villaceran, 2019). Spanish colonization, which began in 1521 and lasted for over 300 years, marked the first significant wave of colonial influence on Philippine education.

During this period, formal education was primarily controlled by the Catholic Church and tailored to the Spanish elite, with religious instruction at its core. Access to education was limited and did not prioritize the development of local Philippine languages or indigenous knowledge systems (Abella et al., 2024).

Before Spanish colonization, education among pre-Hispanic Filipinos was informal and community-based, tailored to the practical needs of daily life (Low et al., 2021). There was no formal schooling system; instead, parents and community elders served as primary educators. Mothers typically instructed their daughters in domestic responsibilities such as housekeeping, weaving, and agricultural tasks, while fathers trained their sons in skills like hunting, carpentry, farming, shipbuilding, and mining. These skill sets varied according to the geographical and industrial conditions of each community – whether in the highlands, lowlands, or coastal areas (Tracing the Pre-Hispanic Roots of the Philippine Educational System, 2012). With the arrival of the Spanish colonizers, this indigenous system of education was supplanted by missionary-led instruction that emphasized religious indoctrination. Initially, education under Spanish rule was reserved for the elite, but the enactment of the Educational Decree of 1863 marked a significant shift in policy (Hardacker, 2013). This decree mandated the establishment of at least one primary school in each municipality and created a regular school for the training of male teachers under the supervision of the Jesuits. Although primary education was made free and Spanish was introduced as a compulsory subject, the system remained deeply colonial in orientation.

The Philippine education system has been profoundly shaped by successive colonial regimes – Spanish, American, and Japanese. Among these, the American colonial period had the most enduring impact in terms of education (De Guzman et al., 2022). Beginning in 1898, the U.S. colonial administration established a public, secular education system with English as the exclusive medium of instruction (Fleming, 2020). Hundreds of American teachers were recruited to staff and manage the colonial school infrastructure, although the long-term goal was to train Filipino educators to assume these roles (Harrington, 2015).

From its inception, education in the Philippines functioned as an instrument of colonial control. While the Spanish used religion to sustain their authority for over three centuries, the Americans utilized the public school system and curriculum to reshape Filipino identities in alignment with American values. This instrumental use of education stands in stark contrast to the more

emancipatory vision articulated by figures like Horace Mann and early 20th-century philosophers, who envisioned education as a means of fostering social cohesion, empathy, and mutual understanding across diverse communities (Low et al., 2021).

One of the most significant and lasting effects of American colonization was the institutionalization of English as the primary language of instruction (IMJRISE, 2024). In 1901, the U.S. colonial government established a public school system in which English was not only the medium of instruction but also a tool of Americanization (Act No. 74 of the Philippine Commission, 1901). This marked a deliberate shift in educational policy aimed at reshaping Filipino identity through language. This process aligns with Robert Phillipson's (1992) term, language imperialism—the transfer of a dominant language to other peoples as a form of power and control, often justified as modernization or development. In the Philippine context, English was not simply a neutral vehicle of communication but a means of embedding colonial ideologies within the local consciousness. Over time, English evolved from being a foreign colonial language to a dominant lingua franca in the Philippines. It extended beyond classroom walls and gradually became associated with intelligence, modernity, and socioeconomic mobility (Dela Cruz, 2022). Filipino students have come to perceive English as a marker of sophistication, while local languages have been relegated to the margins, often dismissed as unfit for academic or professional use (Lorenzo, 2020). This systematic privileging of English reinforced a linguistic hierarchy that persists to this day—one that equates English fluency with opportunity and marginalizes native languages.

The normalization of English in both educational and everyday contexts has made it increasingly difficult to acknowledge and promote local languages as equally powerful and legitimate tools for teaching and learning. English remains the dominant language in academic institutions, government, media, and the corporate world. As a result, English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines is not just a matter of pedagogy—it is also a site of cultural negotiation, power dynamics, and historical reckoning (Tupas, 2022). Although Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has been formally integrated into the Philippine basic education curriculum since 2013—aiming to use students' first languages as the medium of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3 (Republic Act No. 10533, Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013)—its implementation faces significant challenges. These include a lack of resources, insufficient teacher training, and societal attitudes that continue to favor English as the language of upward mobility and academic excellence (Cabactulan & Pañares, 2023).

Recent reports further substantiate these concerns. The Department of Education (2020) acknowledges that ongoing reviews and field observations reveal persistent issues in the availability and quality of localized teaching materials, as well as the need for stronger teacher support mechanisms. Similarly, the Assessment, Curriculum and Technology Research Centre (ACTRC, 2022) highlights that resource delivery gaps and inadequate teacher preparation continue to hinder the practical realization of MTB-MLE's goals. On a broader

scale, UNESCO (2016) emphasizes that instruction in learners' first languages enhances literacy outcomes and supports inclusive learning. This insight underscores the urgency of re-examining English Language Teaching (ELT) through a decolonial lens within the Philippine educational system.

Thus, despite the existence of MTB-MLE, English continues to hold the upper hand, symbolizing power and prestige, reinforcing the perception that native languages are secondary or transitional rather than central to meaningful education. This literature review aims to critically examine how English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines remains tied to its colonial roots and how current pedagogical practices reflect, resist, or reproduce these colonial legacies. It also seeks to explore existing decolonization methods in the modern age and analyze which approaches are realistically achievable, given the structural, cultural, and institutional constraints in the Philippine context. This review hopes to contribute to ongoing conversations about linguistic justice, cultural identity, and the reimagining of ELT in postcolonial societies.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### ***Decolonizing English Language Teaching in the Philippines***

The teaching and learning of English in the Philippines cannot be separated from the country's colonial history. As a former colony of the United States, English was institutionalized as both a medium of instruction and a symbol of modernity and progress (Martin, 2014; Tupas, 2015). This legacy has led to the continued dominance of English in education, governance, and social mobility, often at the expense of local languages and cultural identities. Within this context, English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines operates not merely as a linguistic enterprise but as a sociopolitical process that reproduces existing hierarchies of power, privilege, and identity (Tupas & Salonga, 2016).

### ***Historical and Ideological Foundations of English Dominance***

The colonial introduction of English into the Philippine education system in the early 1900s established linguistic hierarchies that persist today. According to Gonzalez (1998), English became a gatekeeping mechanism for socioeconomic advancement, framing linguistic proficiency as a marker of intelligence and class status. This colonial ideology was later internalized, resulting in what Phillipson (1992) termed linguistic imperialism – a process through which the dominance of English is maintained by structural and ideological means. Scholars such as Bernardo (2004) argue that this phenomenon continues to influence Filipino learners' perceptions of linguistic value, where English is equated with opportunity, while local languages are viewed as less prestigious.

### ***The Emergence of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)***

In response to these inequities, the Philippine Department of Education introduced the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy in 2012, aiming to promote linguistic equity and improve learning outcomes (Dekker & Young, 2005; Nolasco, 2013). MTB-MLE represents a key step toward decolonizing ELT by re-centering local languages as legitimate mediums of learning and communication. Studies have shown that early instruction in the

mother tongue enhances comprehension, literacy, and cultural identity (Burton, 2013; Walter & Dekker, 2011). However, the implementation of MTB-MLE faces persistent challenges – such as inadequate teacher preparation, lack of localized materials, and societal preference for English as the language of success (Tupas, 2019; Lorenzo, 2018). These structural limitations hinder the full realization of decolonial educational goals.

### ***Decolonial Perspectives on ELT***

Decolonizing ELT involves questioning not only language hierarchies but also the epistemologies embedded in English education. Canagarajah (2013) and Kumaravadivelu (2016) emphasize that decolonial pedagogy requires a shift from Western-centric models toward contextually grounded approaches that value local knowledge systems. In the Philippine context, this means reimagining ELT as a space for intercultural dialogue rather than assimilation. Tupas (2015) suggests adopting a “politics of difference” framework that acknowledges Filipino learners’ multilingual realities and legitimizes local varieties of English (Philippine English) as expressions of identity and agency.

### ***Translanguaging and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy***

Recent scholarship highlights translanguaging—the dynamic use of multiple languages in meaning-making—as a practical and theoretical strategy for decolonizing classrooms (Garcia & Wei, 2014). In Philippine ELT, translanguaging allows students to use English and their mother tongues fluidly, bridging cultural knowledge with linguistic expression. Studies by Mahboob & Cruz (2013) and Tupas (2020) demonstrate that translanguaging not only improves comprehension but also affirms learners’ cultural identities and linguistic ownership. Similarly, culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017) calls for teaching practices that maintain and celebrate linguistic diversity rather than erasing it in pursuit of “native-like” English norms.

### ***Challenges and Opportunities for Decolonization***

Despite growing academic support, decolonizing ELT faces institutional, ideological, and material barriers. English remains the preferred medium in higher education and employment, perpetuating a “colonial mentality” that equates English with prestige and success (David, 2013). Moreover, teachers often lack the training and confidence to integrate decolonial methods into their practice (Burton, 2013). Yet, opportunities exist through teacher professional development, community partnerships, and policy innovation. Integrating indigenous epistemologies, developing locally produced teaching materials, and encouraging critical reflection on linguistic identity can advance the decolonial agenda in sustainable ways (Tupas & Martin, 2017).

## **METHODOLOGY**

This literature review employs a qualitative, critical-interpretive methodology grounded in decolonial and postcolonial theoretical frameworks.

Its objective is to examine how English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines continues to reflect colonial legacies and to explore contemporary efforts aimed at decolonizing language education. Rather than collecting primary data, this review synthesizes and analyzes existing academic literature, policy documents, and historical texts to construct a nuanced understanding of the colonial roots and current trajectories of ELT in the Philippine context.

A systematic review of scholarly literature, government policies, and historical texts was conducted using academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, ERIC, ScienceDirect, and ResearchGate. Search terms included: "English Language Teaching in the Philippines," "language imperialism," "colonial education," "MTB-MLE," "decolonial education," "Philippine language policy," and "linguistic justice." To ensure historical and contextual breadth, sources ranged from colonial-era documents to contemporary scholarly articles, with an emphasis on studies published from 2015 onwards that reflect recent discourse on decolonization and educational reform.

The analysis draws on an interdisciplinary framework informed by Robert Phillipson's theory of language imperialism, Walter Mignolo's decolonial option, and Ruanni Tupas's critical ELT perspective. In total, 20 studies were reviewed – 13 related to the theoretical frameworks and seven focused on analytical and contextual insights. These frameworks collectively illuminate how language functions as a tool of ideological control and cultural hegemony within educational systems.

## **RESEARCH RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### ***Colonial Influences in Language Policy and Pedagogy***

Colonial legacies continue to exert a strong influence on English language policies and pedagogical practices in postcolonial countries such as the Philippines. English remains the primary medium of instruction and government administration – a condition maintained by power structures established during the colonial era (Tupas, 2015). This historical entrenchment links English with modernity and socioeconomic advancement, positioning it as the language of opportunity while marginalizing local languages within educational frameworks (Tupas & Martin, 2017). As a result, educational policies often prioritize English proficiency, reinforcing systemic inequalities that limit access to quality education and culturally alienate learners (Lorente, 2017).

Scholars describe English language policy in the Philippines as a colonial legacy deeply intertwined with social class and national identity. According to Tupas (2015), the prioritizing of English as the language of instruction reinforces the colonial structure that equates English proficiency with intelligence and power. Similarly, Lorente (2017) observed that English functions as linguistic capital, reproducing social hierarchies in education. Martin (2020) and Mendoza and Wong (2021) highlight that while English continues to symbolize modernity and progress, its dominance also sustains educational inequality and cultural alienation. These parallels demonstrate that the persistence of English supremacy in Philippine language policy mirrors broader postcolonial patterns across Asia, where colonial languages continue to be central to nation-building and social mobility.

The persistent marginalization of indigenous languages and knowledge systems perpetuates a cultural disconnection among students from their own languages and traditions (Tupas & Martin, 2017). The enduring dominance of English reflects the continued valorization of colonial languages over indigenous ones, often portraying English as a vehicle for modernity, progress, and advancement (Mendoza & Wong, 2021). Consequently, English is not only perceived as a pathway to upward mobility but is also prioritized in curriculum design and standardized testing, further marginalizing local languages and knowledge systems (Lorente, 2017). The prioritization of English has significant implications for educational equity and cultural identity. Scholars argue that linking English to social advancement perpetuates structural inequalities by disproportionately benefiting learners with early access to English resources (Martin, 2020). This linguistic stratification creates barriers for students from rural or indigenous backgrounds, who may feel alienated by English-only instruction (Mendoza & Wong, 2021). The dominance of English in schools often leads to the devaluation of home languages, adversely affecting learners' confidence and sense of belonging (Tupas & Martin, 2017).

However, some educators and policymakers argue that the continued use of English in postcolonial education is pragmatic and strategically beneficial globally. They argue that English proficiency grants access to international markets, academic mobility, and participation in the global knowledge economy (Lorente, 2017; Martin, 2020). While this perspective underscores the functional value of English, scholars caution that an uncritical reliance on it can obscure more profound inequalities and suppress local epistemologies (Tupas, 2015). This tension between practicality and cultural preservation reflects a broader debate found in existing literature on language and postcolonial education.

### *Sociocultural perceptions of English and the local language*

In many postcolonial contexts, English continues to be perceived as a prestigious and influential language that offers access to socioeconomic mobility, global networks, and professional advancement. This perception significantly influences both parental and institutional preferences for English-medium education, often at the expense of local languages (Lorente, 2017; Mendoza & Wong, 2021). The symbolic capital of English—a legacy of colonial education systems—elevates it above indigenous languages, which are frequently considered inadequate or irrelevant for achieving personal and economic success (Tupas, 2015). This linguistic hierarchy, reinforced by globalization, exacerbates the marginalization of local languages in both policy and practice, contributing to the erosion of linguistic diversity (Tupas & Martin, 2017).

In the Philippine context, English is not merely a language of wider communication—it serves as a gatekeeping mechanism that determines access to higher education, employment, and social mobility (Fleming, 2020). As a result, proficiency in English is often equated with intelligence, professionalism, and competence, while those who are less fluent are frequently stigmatized or perceived as less capable.

From its inception, education in the Philippines functioned as an instrument of colonial control. According to Low et al. (2022), the American colonial government used the public school system and curriculum to reshape Filipino identities in alignment with American values and global standards. This instrumental use of education stands in stark contrast to the more emancipatory vision articulated by figures like Horace Mann (1995), who envisioned education as a means of fostering social cohesion, empathy, and mutual understanding across diverse communities, both local and global.

The internalization of English as the language of progress and modernity has profound sociocultural ramifications. When local languages are institutionally devalued, speakers may begin to perceive them as backward or unworthy of formal recognition, leading to a weakening of linguistic pride and identity (Martin, 2020). Such dynamics have been linked to language shift, wherein younger generations gradually abandon their mother tongues in favor of English. This shift undermines the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge and disconnects learners from their cultural heritage (Mendoza & Wong, 2021).

Despite these concerns, scholars emphasize that English need not displace local languages if approached through a framework of additive multilingualism. Rather than viewing the use of English as a threat to linguistic diversity, educators and policymakers can adopt models that foster both global communication and cultural preservation (Lorente, 2017). Promoting critical language awareness among teachers, learners, and communities can help challenge dominant ideologies and cultivate more inclusive and equitable educational practices (Tupas, R. 2015).

### *Resistance and reform efforts such as MTB-MLE*

In response to the dominance of English and its associated colonial legacies, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) has emerged as a significant policy and pedagogical reform in the Philippines. This initiative seeks to recognize and legitimize learners' first languages as foundational to effective education and cultural identity formation. The 2012 institutionalization of MTB-MLE in the Philippines was a landmark reform aimed at improving literacy, learning outcomes, and cultural inclusion by mandating the use of the learner's mother tongue as the primary language of instruction from kindergarten to Grade 3 (DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2012).

Research suggests that MTB-MLE supports cognitive development, reading comprehension, and critical thinking by allowing children to learn in a language they understand (Ball, 2011; Malone, 2007). It also affirms learners' cultural and linguistic identities, creating a more inclusive educational environment (Tupas & Martin, 2017). According to Burce and Tupas (2021), MTB-MLE serves as both a pedagogical and political intervention—it resists the historic privilege of English by restoring dignity and relevance to minoritized languages.

However, the implementation of MTB-MLE faces substantial challenges, such as resistance from lawmakers due to implementation challenges. And

instead of addressing the obstacles and providing adequate resources, critics in Congress proposed removing the program or limiting its implementation. Various studies have identified various challenges; however, discontinuing the program was not an option. (Arzadon, 2024) According to the Philippine Institute of Development Studies (PIDS) study, the challenge lies not in the theoretical foundation of MTB-MLE but in its implementation. The program has been hindered by logistical constraints, including inadequate teacher training, a shortage of instructional materials in local languages, and an inconsistent policy framework (Monje et al., 2019). Without a strong commitment to overcoming these obstacles, the potential of MTB-MLE remains unfulfilled (Monje et al., 2019). Moreover, the reform is also challenged by sociolinguistic hierarchies that continue to position English as more prestigious and economically valuable (Martin, 2020; Dekker & Young, 2005). Many parents and educators still perceive English as the most critical language for future success, leading to resistance toward MTB-MLE despite its educational benefits (Lorente, 2017; Tupas, 2015). A significant part of this resistance stems from the prevailing perception of English—particularly American Standard English—as a superior and more legitimate form of communication. Many Filipinos struggle to view English as a language rather than a marker of intelligence, professionalism, or social mobility, mainly when it is used as the primary medium in high-status domains.

There is a growing recognition that MTB-MLE must be accompanied by broader systemic reforms, including curriculum decolonization, critical language awareness, and the incorporation of indigenous epistemologies in teaching and assessment practices (Tupas, 2020). Without these parallel efforts, the reform risks becoming a tokenistic gesture rather than a transformative initiative.

### *Emerging decolonial strategies in ELT*

In response to enduring colonial structures in English Language Teaching (ELT), a growing body of scholarship advocates pedagogical approaches that are culturally sustaining, inclusive, and critically reflective. These emerging strategies aim to dismantle colonial biases embedded in conventional ELT by centering learners' linguistic and cultural identities (Lorente, 2017). Translanguaging has gained particular prominence in this discourse as a decolonial practice, allowing learners to fluidly draw from their full linguistic repertoires rather than adhering to rigid English-only norms (Vallejo, 2018). Recent studies further emphasize that translanguaging not only validates students' linguistic resources but also enhances critical language awareness and literacy development by bridging multilingual practices with multiliteracies frameworks (Translanguaging and Multiliteracies in the ESOL Classroom, 2022). In parallel, culturally sustaining pedagogy foregrounds the importance of integrating local knowledge systems, histories, and values into classroom instruction to resist assimilation models and promote learner agency (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Such approaches offer a decisive shift from deficit-oriented models that often position non-native English speakers as lacking. Instead, they view multilingualism as a resource, not a barrier, and position the classroom as a space

for identity negotiation and cultural affirmation (Martin, 2020). By legitimizing diverse linguistic practices and foregrounding learners' sociohistorical contexts, these decolonial frameworks challenge the universalist assumptions of traditional ELT curricula. Moreover, they support critical engagement with dominant ideologies, enabling students to question whose knowledge and language practices are valued in the educational system (Tupas, 2015).

However, the implementation of such strategies remains uneven and faces significant institutional and ideological barriers. Standardized curricula and assessments continue to prioritize monolingual English proficiency, undermining attempts to embrace linguistic diversity (Lorente, 2017). Additionally, teacher training programs often lack preparation in decolonial and multilingual pedagogies, limiting the practical application of these approaches (Tupas & Martin, 2017). There are also concerns about the scalability of translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogies across diverse educational contexts with varying resource levels (Paris & Alim, 2017).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This literature review highlights that English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines remains deeply influenced by its colonial past, sustaining the dominance of English while marginalizing local languages and cultural identities. Although the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) represents a significant step toward linguistic justice, its full potential has yet to be realized due to challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited instructional materials, and persistent societal preference for English as a marker of success.

To make decolonization efforts more achievable, practical interventions must be prioritized. Strengthening teacher training through continuous, accessible programs that equip educators with the skills to use mother tongues alongside English effectively can enhance instructional quality. Developing and distributing simple, contextually relevant teaching materials in local languages – ideally co-created with community members – will address resource gaps while fostering cultural connection. Raising awareness among parents and community leaders about the educational and cultural benefits of MTB-MLE can help shift attitudes that favor English exclusively.

Additionally, promoting translanguaging practices in classrooms – allowing students to draw on their full linguistic repertoires – offers a flexible, low-cost approach to support multilingual learning. Collaborations with local stakeholders, such as educators, cultural practitioners, and language experts, are essential to ensure that curricula and teaching methods are culturally responsive and contextually grounded. Piloting decolonial pedagogical approaches in selected schools or districts will enable educators to test, refine, and demonstrate their effectiveness before broader implementation. By prioritizing these attainable steps, ELT in the Philippines can gradually move toward a more equitable, inclusive, and culturally sustaining educational system that honors the country's linguistic diversity and historical context.

### **ADVANCED RESEARCH**

Future research on the decolonization of English Language Teaching (ELT) in the Philippines should adopt an interdisciplinary and participatory approach that critically examines how power, language, and identity intersect within multilingual educational settings. Advanced studies could employ ethnographic, longitudinal, and mixed-method designs to explore how teachers and students negotiate linguistic hierarchies and cultural identities in classrooms implementing Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE). Furthermore, research should investigate how translanguaging and culturally sustaining pedagogies can be systematically embedded into ELT curricula to balance English proficiency with linguistic justice. Collaboration between educators, linguists, and local communities is essential to co-develop scalable frameworks that measure not only academic outcomes but also shifts in attitudes toward local languages, cultural confidence, and classroom equity. Such research would provide robust, context-sensitive evidence to guide national education policy and contribute to the global discourse on decolonizing language education.

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