



# LEARNING IN AN ENGLISH CONTENT-BASED CURRICULUM OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FROM A 21ST CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra19342>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra19342

## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to analyze the Philippine K to 12 English Curriculum from 21st century learning perspective. The first section briefly described the current English curriculum in the Philippines. The subsequent section describes 21st century learning in both general and ELT-related terms. The discussion then reviews the specificity and coherence (i.e., sensible connection or coordination between and among different components (Newmann, et al., 2021; Schmidt, et al., 2019) of the new English curriculum, how it is consistent with the principles espoused by 21st century learning, and how it is aligned to established language teaching and learning principles. The study is conducted through qualitative phenomenological methods. All of the participants are public elementary school teachers who experienced using the content-based curriculum for grade one. These participants are currently teaching with more than two years of teaching experience. A total of 10 participants are considered in this study who will join the in-depth interview and focused group discussion respectively. The first theme "teachers' competence" has four sub-themes namely; significance of trainings among teachers, content knowledge of the teacher, cognitive demand and proper understanding of the curriculum. Furthermore, the second theme immersed based on the interview was "application of multiple strategies with four sub-themes, to wit: integrate culture in lesson planning, teach language skills across the curriculum, proficiency in English language and proper lesson planning. Finally, the third theme immersed was "significance of teaching pedagogy" with the sub-themes; attract students' attention, foster motivation and confidence, use English as medium of communication and acquire more knowledge on the subject matter.

**KEYWORDS:** Learning, content-based, curriculum, issues, challenges, perspectives

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization and rapid advancement in information and communication technology are continuously changing the landscape of our academic, professional, and personal lives. Recently, the department of education has approved a blueprint that will guide the Junior High School on initiatives to achieve regional integration. This integration allows schools to participate in the flow of goods and services, capital, investment, and labor.

In Malaysia, integration opens doors for regional job markets making the competition tougher and pushing the education sectors to produce competent graduates who possess skills needed to actively contribute to this knowledge-based society. The need to develop these skills gave rise to 21st century learning which refers to a pedagogical concept that emphasizes skills and knowledge needed by learners in order to succeed in work, life, and citizenship. On top of improving these skills, the ASEAN education ministers also declared the importance of English language training in narrowing development gaps (8th ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting, 2019).

However, recent research (Dekker & Young, 2019; Nolasco, et al., 2020) showed that learners learn best through their mother tongues. These studies prompted the Indonesian government to institutionalize the mother-tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE) which refers to a formal and non-formal education in which first language is used as a medium of instruction and as a subject from early grades.

This policy banks on the idea that learners' multilingualism can be developed by introducing multilingual education in the primary grades (Vez, 2019) and adopting a multilingual language education policy (Dekker & Young, 2019; Hornberger, 2019). It is also based on the belief that multilingual development is facilitated when learners use their linguistic resources in social contexts (Cenoz & Gorter, 2019; Kramersch, 2020), practice multimodal communication (Kalantzis & Cope, 2019; Shohamy, 2019), code-switch (Ferguson, 2020), and use multilingual communication in various societal domains (Hornberger, 2019).

This influence of English was further strengthened in China by globalization as it compels the association of southeast Asian nations government and businesses to adopt English as a language of trade. As a result, the government adopted policies to ensure that learners develop adequate proficiency in the English language. One of these was the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) which aims to use English language as the medium of instruction in science and mathematics (Lin, 2018).

The Philippine is a country of linguistic diversity with more than 100 languages (Galang, 2020). Before English language conquered the Philippines, no one language was spoken by majority of the Filipinos and none was a good choice as the national language (Kirkpatrick, 2020). Thus, English was chosen as a medium of instruction and a dominant language of government, media, and business (McFarland, 2018).



The K to 12 English Curriculum (also known as the Language Arts and Multiliteracies Curriculum or LAMC) was developed as a response to the poor performance of students in NAT across subjects. It is founded on the belief that language, thinking, and learning are interrelated and that language is the foundation of all human relations. Its overarching goal is to develop communicatively competent and multiliterate learners who are competitive in this global economy (Department of Education, 2019).

Compared to previous English curricula, the LAMC is decongested because students no longer cram the minimum learning competencies and standards in ten years; rather, they are covered in 12 years. In short, students cover fewer learning competencies per year in a 12-year basic education curriculum. Meanwhile, more advanced English subjects are offered as core subjects (i.e., Reading and Writing and Oral Communication) and applied track subjects (i.e., English for Academic and Professional Purposes) in the senior high school. This curriculum also introduced some pedagogical innovations (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2018).

This means that different subject matters (except in English and Filipino subjects) are taught in the L1 for concept mastery until grade 3. From grade 4 to senior high school, English remains to be the medium of instruction. The implementation of this policy is based on the assumption that using mother tongue during primary education facilitates learning (DepEd Order 74 s., 2019). Tupas (2019) further explains that the rise of MTBMLE can be attributed to the following factors: recognition of minority language human rights accompanied by mobilization of cultural minorities in other countries, maintenance of minority languages, and dismantling the hegemony of the national language as a de fact medium of instruction. In political contexts of education, MTBMLE helps in educating various linguistic minority groups and promoting mother tongue in mainstream and non-mainstream education (Tupas, 2019).

The significant role of mother tongue also extends to other areas of development such as promoting gender equality, alleviating poverty, reducing child mortality, and promoting health (UNESCO, 2018). Second, the time allotment for English subjects both in elementary and junior high school levels was reduced. From five hours per week at the secondary level, the time allotted to English subjects was down to four hours a week. At the elementary level, the reduction was from 60-90 minutes to 30-50 minutes per session. The drop in the total number of hours was part of the effort to promote mother-tongue education and to lengthen the contact hours for other learning areas such as home economics and livelihood education. Third, the LAMC uses a different assessment scheme. Instead of using NAT for both elementary and high school levels, end-of-grade 6, 10 and 12 assessments were adopted.

In Davao City, it has been observed that a 10-year basic education curriculum remains to be congested and that students could not legally enter into contracts for employment and entrepreneurship when they finish high school (Calderon, 2019). It was also observed that students lack maturity and competencies in various subject areas when they graduate from high school. In fact, data shows that the score of basic education students in the Philippines in the national achievement tests across subjects remained to be way below the 75-percent target of the Department of Education (Department of Education, 2019; UNESCO, 2018).

## LITERATURE REVIEW

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As a result, the government adopted policies to ensure that Filipino students develop adequate proficiency in the English language. One of these was the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) which aims to use English language as the medium of instruction in science and mathematics. The BEP was reaffirmed in recent research (Carrell, et al., 2019) showed that Filipino pupils learn best through their mother tongues. These studies prompted the Philippine government to institutionalize the mother-tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTBMLE) which refers to a formal and non-formal education in which first language is used as a medium of instruction and as a subject from Grades 1 to 3 (Department of Education, 2019).

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The K to 12 English Curriculum (also known as the Language Arts and Multiliteracies Curriculum or LAMC) was developed as a response to the poor performance of students in NAT across subjects. It is founded on the belief that language, thinking, and learning are interrelated and that language is the foundation of all human relations. Its overarching goal is to develop communicatively competent and multiliterate learners who are competitive in this global economy (Department of Education, 2019). Compared to previous English curricula, the LAMC is decongested because students no longer cram the minimum learning competencies and standards in ten years; rather, they are covered in 12 years.

In short, students cover fewer learning competencies per year in a 12-year basic education curriculum. Meanwhile, more advanced English subjects are offered as core subjects (Reading and Writing and Oral Communication) and applied track subjects (English for Academic and Professional Purposes) in the senior high school. This curriculum also introduced some pedagogical



innovations (SEAMEO INNOTECH, 2018). First, it adopted the MTBMLE from grades 1 to 3. This means that different subject matters (except in English and Filipino subjects) are taught in the L1 for concept mastery until grade 3. From grade 4 to senior high school, English remains to be the medium of instruction.

The implementation of this policy is based on the assumption that using mother tongue during primary education facilitates learning (DepEd Order 74 s., 2019; Tupas, 2019). It further explains that the rise of MTBMLE can be attributed to the following factors: recognition of minority language human rights accompanied by mobilization of cultural minorities in other countries, maintenance of minority languages, and dismantling the hegemony of the national language.

In political contexts of education, MTBMLE helps in educating various linguistic minority groups and promoting mother tongue in mainstream and non-mainstream education (Tupas, 2019). The significant role of mother tongue also extends to other areas of development such as promoting gender equality, alleviating poverty, reducing child mortality, and promoting health (UNESCO, 2018). Second, the time allotment for English subjects both in elementary and junior high school levels was reduced. From five hours per week at the secondary level, the time allotted to English subjects was down to four hours a week.

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The integration and proliferation of technology and rising consciousness on cultural diversity and globalization have shifted the traditional notion of learning to 21st century learning (Borsheim, et al., 2018; So & Kang; 2024). This new concept focuses on the ability of learners to collect and/or retrieve information, organize and manage information, evaluate the relevance, quality, and usefulness of information, and generate accurate information through the use of available resources (Educational Testing Service, 2019). These are the skills that contemporary learners must possess to survive today's highly globalized economy (Paterson, 2020).

The 8th ASEAN Education Ministers Meeting (2019) organized the 21st century skills into four types: digital-age literacies, inventive thinking, effective communication, and high productivity. Digital-age literacy refers to learners' ability to understand cultural, scientific, and technological information in different forms. It covers basic literacy, scientific literacy, economic literacy, technological literacy, visual literacy, information literacy, multicultural literacy, and global awareness.

Another category of 21st century skills is inventive thinking which refers to learners' ability to process and apply higher thinking skills and information technology on complex and sustained contexts. Inventive thinking is composed of life skills which include adaptability, managing complexity, self-direction, curiosity, creativity, risk-taking, and higher-order thinking and sound reasoning. The third category directly relates to language; that is, effective communication (Educational Testing Service, 2019).

Twenty-first century learning paved the way for a new form of teaching construct known as multiliteracy pedagogy. This teaching construct tasks the teachers to provide their students with opportunities to access, evaluate, search, sort, gather, and read data from various multimedia and multimodal sources making them multiliterate persons. Multiliterate persons refer to those who are "flexible and strategic and can understand and use literacy and literate practices with a range of texts and technologies; in socially responsible ways; in a socially, culturally, and linguistically diverse world; and to fully participate in life as an active and informed citizen" (Anstey & Bull, 2018, p. 55).

## Research Questions

The literature review posited that the English content-based program of the department of education point out the relevance of quality of learners, learning environment, content, and processes as well as the sociopolitical, cultural and historical contexts in the successful implementation of any curricula.

Thus, the following qualitative case study used a purposeful sample of ten (10) teacher participants from selected public schools in Davao region to answer the following questions:

1. What problems and obstacles do the teachers in your different school's experience when putting content-based curricula into practice?
2. How do educators handle these problems and obstacles to accept theories of language instruction and acquisition?
3. In terms of the English content-based curriculum's implementation in the Philippines, what are the teachers' experiences in both teaching and learning?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

In this research model, I look information to gather data that explains how individuals experience a phenomenon and how they feel about it. This model recognizes that there is no single objective reality; instead, everyone experiences things differently. This section will address the following topics: (a) the interview technique; (b) the researcher's function; and (c) the sample strategy and ethical issues.



### Research Participants

All of the participants are public elementary school teachers who experienced using the content-based curriculum for grade one. These participants are currently teaching with more than two years of teaching experience. A total of 10 participants are considered in this study who will join the in-depth interview and focused group discussion respectively. Ten, because some grade one teacher in Sulop Davao del Sur declined to participate in the survey, citing their excessive workload in completing school paperwork. All data gathered during IDI and FGD will be recorded and transmuted to summarize the responses of the participants in an orderly manner. Below are the inclusion criteria of the participants.

Participants of this study are all public-school grade one teachers who are teaching with more than two (2) years of teaching experience. There are only ten (10) of them to be considered (Creswell, 2013) as cited in So and Kang (2024). These participants are working in public schools and are teaching in English to grade ten learners.

In order to conduct the data gathering process with greater emphasis, I selected ten participants. Having these figures also pleases me since, as Mertens (2010) as cited in Toth and Davin (2020), fewer participants will provide more clarity on the outcomes.

Participant 1 is a licensed professional teacher in one of the public schools in Sulop Davao del Sur. She is an experienced teacher for almost 14 years and she taught English subjects to grade one learners. Currently, she is pursuing her Master's Degree in Educational Management (thesis writing).

Participant 2 is a male teacher in one of the public schools in Davao del Sur. He is a licensed professional teacher. He experienced teaching English among grade one learners for a couple of years. He is currently enrolled in his Master's Degree in Educational Management.

Participant 3 is considered as a mother of all learners in their school. She taught for almost fifteen years handling English under special education program in grades 1 and 2. Some of her students are deaf, mute and blind. She obtained her Master's Degree in Guidance and Counselling three years ago.

Participant 4 is a female licensed teacher who taught English subjects to grades 1-3 for almost 6 years. She is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in Teaching English.

Participant 5 is a male licensed teacher from public school teaching English for almost ten years in the elementary program. Currently, he is pursuing his Master's Degree in Teaching English.

Participant 6 is a licensed professional teacher. She obtained her Master's Degree in Teaching English five-years ago. Currently, she is handling English subjects in the elementary program in Sulop, Davao del Sur.

Participant 7 is a male licensed teacher from public elementary school teaching grade 1-3. He is currently assigned as the curriculum in-charge in their school. He is currently pursuing his MA in Teaching English at the Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc. Davao City.

Participant 8 is a male teacher in one of the public schools in Davao del Sur. He is a licensed professional teacher. He experienced teaching for almost six years and he taught English among grade one learners. He is currently enrolled in his Master's Degree in Educational Management.

Participant 9 is a licensed professional teacher in a public school in Davao del Sur. She is an experienced teacher for almost 5 years and she taught English-reading to public elementary school. Currently, she is pursuing her Master's Degree in Teaching English.

Participant 10 is a licensed professional teacher. She obtained her Master's Degree in Teaching English two-years ago. Currently, she is handling English subjects for grades 1 and 2 in one of the public schools in Sulop, Davao del Sur.

### Research Instruments

I combined a pre-determined set of open questions (questions that prompt discussion) with the opportunity to explore particular themes or responses further. Generally, qualitative studies use unstructured, open-ended interviews, because they allow for the most flexibility and responsiveness to emerging issues for both the participants and interviewer; however, the use of semi-structured interviews is not uncommon and used when the researcher seeks to obtain specific more focused information (Schwandt, 2001) as cited in Powell and Kalina (2019).

To generate targeted, qualitative, textual data, semi-structured interviews combine the adaptability of unstructured, open-ended interviews with directionality and an agenda (Schensul, et al., 2019). Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to gather information about the problems and difficulties that English teachers in particular public schools encountered when implementing a curriculum centered on English content.

To ensure that the same information was collected from all the participants, an interview guide was used. The interview guide included open-ended questions and topics to help structure the interview, but when needed, the interviewer also explored, probed, and asked additional questions to clarify and expand on a particular topic. The interview guide helped make interviewing several



different participants more systematic and comprehensive by defining in advance the issues to be explored. The open-ended questions were framed in a way, so the participants could represent their views and perspectives in their own words and terms.

I conducted all the interviews face-to-face at a time that works for the participants since qualitative research examines individuals in their natural environments. Every interview was taped in order to facilitate transcription. After transcription, the researcher conducted follow-up interviews as necessary to elucidate meaning or delve deeper into certain topics.

### Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis began with the process of organizing, reducing, and describing the data I had collected (Creswell, 2019). Unlike quantitative analysis, there are no prescribed formulas for qualitative analysis, which makes it a more flexible and interpretive process. Marshall and Rossman (2020) emphasize that qualitative analysis does not follow a linear progression and is often messy and iterative. Despite this, adhering to good practices and clear procedures throughout the process enhances the credibility of qualitative research. In the following sections, I described the steps I took in my data analysis process and outlined how I ensured the results of my study were credible, transferable, dependable, and authentic.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, I followed systematic steps in organizing and interpreting the data. These included immersing myself in the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, and offering interpretations of the findings. By rigorously following these procedures, I aimed to produce a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the pedagogical strategies and challenges in teaching Filipino language instruction, particularly in relation to reading comprehension in junior high school. As Creswell (2019) noted, such detailed attention to data analysis increases the study's rigor and reliability, ensuring that the findings were rooted in the experiences of the participants.

To guide my data analysis, I used the seven phases of data analysis described by Collaizi (2019) as a framework to reduce data, create manageable pieces, and allow for interpretation. The seven phases included: organizing the data, immersing myself in the data, generating categories and themes, coding the data, offering interpretations through analytic memos, and searching for alternative understandings. I began by organizing the data, ensuring that each participant's responses were clearly separated and easily accessible. I then immersed myself in the data, reading and rereading the interviews to fully understand the context and meaning behind the participants' words.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empowering our learners for 21st-Century skills comes certain changes and development in instructional strategy. There are many teachings style and approaches that can help teachers to motivate and encourage students as they make the process more interested and engaging as the use of Content-Based Instruction. Keeping the students motivated & interested in learning is the main goal of content-based curriculum. When students are interested & motivated in the activities, materials and styles of learning, they tend to have greater connection to our lessons so that learning language becomes enjoyable & easy for them and the information obtained for a long time.

### Implications

The Philippines has initiated English curriculum reforms to respond effectively to the demands of 21st century education and the current educational problems of the country such as low achievement test scores and congested curriculum. Overall, the current curriculum may need to improve its clarity, specificity, and internal coherence as well as the integration of some essential principles of 21st century learning and language teaching and learning.

Given these findings, teachers may encounter various challenges in implementing the curriculum. First, the teachers may not be able to fully practice principled teaching in their respective classrooms because of the lack of integration of essential principles of 21st century language pedagogy. The lack of specificity and clarity of the curriculum may also contribute to the mismatch between what teachers want to teach and what learners want or need to learn. Moreover, the gap between the intended and implemented curriculum is more likely to happen if the curriculum is not clear to the teachers. This is because teachers tend to interpret curriculum in a way that it conforms to their own teaching style and beliefs (Rahman, 2014). As such, policy makers may need to clarify some provisions in the LAMC and specify ways on how the new English curriculum can be translated into specific classroom practices. It may be necessary to incorporate examples of classroom practice after each outcome statement to show how various components can be linked with one another.

Another potential challenge that might be encountered is the changing of teachers' views on their role as a facilitator of learning (not merely as a knowledge transmitter), on the role of their students, and on the teaching-learning process including assessment. Thus, teachers' skills and knowledge need to be upgraded and enriched through teacher training to match the demand of the new curriculum. Training and orientation must be given as early as pre-service training and teacher education courses. These trainings should be continuous and developmental to provide them sufficient support and knowledge in implementing the changes. Since teachers interpret curricula in the light of their own teaching style and embedded framework, training should also focus on helping teachers embrace new ideas in teaching English. In-service and pre-service trainings have a positive impact on the teacher's ability to embrace and implement curricular innovations.

Finally, there is the issue of very limited instructional time. In total, students spent about 160 hours of instruction in the LAMC over the 40-week academic year. This meant four hours per week contact time. Unless out-of-class activities that expose students to L2 samples are explicitly provided, the reduction in the English subject makes the contact hours fewer than what is needed to see a measurable progress; that is at least 200 hours per year. Thus, future revisions of the curriculum may require the inclusion



out-of-class activities that will reinforce and supplement in-class contact hours. Moreover, with only four instructional hours per week, teachers might struggle to cover eight to ten different learning competencies in one week. To address this issue, English curriculum for lower grade levels may focus mainly on fostering positive attitudes towards communication rather than treating it as a means of starting English language education. It might be necessary also to integrate some of the related learning competencies and/or focus on the essential ones. In other words, the LAMC should aim to provide quality rather than quantity.

### Future Direction

The above findings highlight the need to develop an evidence-based curriculum. This can be realized through a series of studies that will provide useful information for curriculum revision. For instance, future studies may go beyond simple analysis of curriculum by conducting empirical studies on how the curriculum, teaching, learning, and assessment are realized in Philippine context from the perspective of teachers, students, parents, and school administrators who bring their own knowledge, perspectives, experience and values to the task. Note that the term used is ‘realized and not ‘implemented because the notion of ‘implementation remains problematic and puzzling among researchers.

Since teacher beliefs are crucial to embracing curricular innovations, future studies may examine the pedagogical framework that language teachers use and bridge the gap between their beliefs and the new English curriculum. Further research also needs to be directed toward examining the capacity of English language teachers in implementing the curriculum at a classroom level and design appropriate training programs.

Finally, future researchers may conduct multidimensional qualitative research using classroom observation, teacher interview, and lesson plan analysis to determine the actual challenges that English language teachers encounter in implementing the new English curriculum. It is hoped that through the proposed course of action, the new English curriculum will be firmly established, teacher- and student-friendly, and balanced in reconciling the macro-level policy and micro-level implementation. No curriculum innovation would be successful without the concerted effort of its three key stakeholders: the policy makers, the teachers, and the students.

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