



Rethinking Mother Tongue Instruction After RA 12027: An Ilokano-Based Translanguaging Approach for Multilingual K–3 Learners

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Leonardo D. Tejano*
College of Teacher Education, Mariano Marcos State
University, Philippines

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*Corresponding Author's Email: ldtejano@mmsu.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

Republic Act No. 12027, enacted on October 10, 2024, discontinued the mandatory implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in Philippine public schools, relegating regional languages to the status of 'auxiliary media' beginning School Year 2025–2026. Yet this legislative shift does not alter the multilingual realities of Ilokano-speaking children in the Ilocos Region. Grounded in translanguaging theory and utilizing a descriptive survey design with thematic analysis, this study examined the language backgrounds, translanguaging practices, and functional languaging roles of K–3 learners across selected schools in Ilocos Norte, involving 136 surveyed learners, 73 individual interviews, 43 teachers, and 18 parents across eight focus group discussions. Five characteristics of learner translanguaging and four distinct roles of Ilokano were identified: (1) fluidity of language use, (2) Ilokano dominance in informal interaction, (3) metalinguistic awareness, (4) translanguaging for cognitive scaffolding, and (5) identity-bound language loyalty. Four distinct roles of Ilokano were likewise established: Ilokano as (1) main language of expression, (2) consolidator of linguistic features, (3) metalinguistic comparator, and (4) organizer of ideas, with particular pedagogical significance residing in its role as a cognitive scaffold that bridges L1-based meaning-making with formal L2 academic output. Drawing on these empirical findings, the study proposes the Ilokano-Based Translanguaging Approach (IBTA)—a theoretically grounded, multi-stranded pedagogical framework that mobilizes learners' full multilingual repertoire while

positioning Ilokano as both instructional anchor and object of language revitalization. The IBTA is structured around teacher preparation, instructional materials development, and teaching strategy, offering a statutory-compliant, evidence-based model for embedding Ilokano-based multilingual pedagogy within the MATATAG Curriculum under the post-RA 12027 policy environment.

Keywords: Ilokano, K-3 learners, multilingual pedagogy, RA 12027, translanguaging

Introduction

On October 10, 2024, Republic Act No. 12027 lapsed into law, effectively dismantling the twelve-year policy architecture of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) established under RA 10533 (Republic Act No. 12027, 2024). The new legislation reverted the primary media of instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 3 back to Filipino and English, relegating regional languages to the status of ‘auxiliary media.’ This legislative pivot presents a profound paradox: it was enacted against the backdrop of a systemic educational crisis evidenced by the dismal performance of Filipino learners in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and the Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metrics (SEA-PLM) (DepEd, 2023). Policymakers dismantled a pedagogical framework possessing robust international research support, driven largely by systemic implementation failures rather than pedagogical invalidity (Metila et al., 2025). As Bustos-Orosa and Pe Symaco (2025) observe, the reversal of MTB-MLE reflects a mechanistic failure of the educational bureaucracy rather than a failure of the mother tongue as a cognitive anchor. The reversal was, in the assessment of Metila et al. (2025), fundamentally political, not pedagogical – driven by 14 intersecting factors including persistent implementation difficulties, fragmented framing, and the rising political appeal of early English immersion.

This study situates itself within this critical policy juncture, focusing on Ilocos Norte as an ideal site for examining the intersection of multilingual realities and shifting educational mandates. Ilokano serves as the mother tongue for over two million speakers in Region I and functions as the regional lingua franca across Northern Luzon, characterized by rich literary and oral traditions. Despite its demographic vitality, Ilokano faces severe school-domain displacement as Filipino and English reassert their dominance in formal instruction under the new policy. The marginalization of regional languages in education is not unique to the Philippines; it reflects a broader international pattern wherein multilingual education policies are frequently undermined by political pressures and hegemonic language ideologies rather than empirical evidence (Padchonga et al., 2025). This shift exacerbates what Tupas (2015) terms the ‘inequalities of multilingualism,’ while Abrigo et al. (2025) quantify the concrete cost as a 35–57% ‘learning tax’ imposed on students taught in a linguistically mismatched medium. As Iglesia et al. (2024) note, even major regional languages like Ilokano are vulnerable to school-domain displacement, making the stakes of this policy reversal particularly acute.

Addressing this imperative requires a robust theoretical lens. Contemporary applied linguistics has moved decisively beyond the framework of ‘code-switching,’ which presupposes discrete, separable language systems in the speaker’s mind. Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015) demonstrate that ‘named languages’ – such as Ilokano, Filipino, or English – are social and political constructs rather than distinct cognitive objects. Bilinguals operate from a unitary linguistic repertoire, and translanguaging emerges from this recognition, positing that speakers draw flexibly from one integrated mental grammar to make meaning (Li Wei, 2018; Vogel & García, 2025). Grosjean’s (2010) complementarity principle explains why Ilokano K–3 learners require their mother tongue as an instructional anchor, and Genesee (2015) dismantles the myth of the ‘monolingual brain,’ demonstrating that early bilingual exposure enhances executive control and metalinguistic awareness. These perspectives ground Cummins’ (1979) Interdependence Hypothesis, which holds that strong L1 foundations provide the essential cognitive scaffolding for L2 development. To suppress this natural translingual practice in schools is, as Kramsch (2006) argues, to inflict symbolic violence upon the ‘multilingual subject’ – denying learners their ‘third place’ of identity and expression (Terc, 2008).

Within this theoretical landscape, pedagogical translanguaging (PT) has emerged as a distinct, deliberate instructional strategy. Cenoz and Gorter (2022) define PT as a teacher-planned, theoretically grounded approach aimed at specific learning objectives, utilizing the learner’s entire linguistic repertoire to improve both language and content competences. By softening the boundaries between languages, PT protects minority languages, positioning them as vital pedagogical resources rather than obstacles (Alsagoafi, 2025; Wen, 2023). Systematic and scoping reviews by Prilutskaya (2021) and Raduan and Abdul Aziz (2023) reveal, however, that PT remains markedly understudied in non-Western contexts, early childhood education (K–3), and indigenous language settings. Padchonga et al. (2025) explicitly note the underrepresentation of the Philippines in translanguaging research – a gap that directly legitimizes the present study. To the best of my knowledge, no empirical study has yet examined pedagogical translanguaging in the specific context of Ilocos Norte elementary schools operating under the post-RA 12027 policy environment, making the present investigation the first of its kind in this newly defined institutional and legislative landscape. Where PT has been studied, results are consistently positive: Kim and Weng (2022) found that translanguaging pedagogy fosters inclusive learning environments and validates cultural identities, while Macawile and Plata (2022) confirmed that Filipino teachers already draw on it spontaneously for meaning-making and knowledge construction. Parba’s (2018) ethnographic study of Cebuano MTB-MLE classrooms further illustrates that teachers who adopt heteroglossic practices witness profound cognitive benefits in their learners – a transformation that ideological preparation makes possible.

The case for an Ilokano-anchored pedagogical response is equally grounded in language revitalization scholarship. Fishman’s (1991) Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale (GIDS) posits that intergenerational home transmission (Stage 6) is the

foundational baseline for language survival, but school-domain exclusion under RA 12027 constitutes a critical Stage 4 disruption—signaling to youth that their mother tongue lacks academic and economic value. Indigenous Language Revitalization (ILR) principles emphasize community agency, cultural grounding, and identity formation (Guerrettaz & Engman, 2023), and Canagarajah’s (2013) concept of translingual practice offers a resolution to the apparent tension between multilingual flexibility and revitalization goals: codemeshing honors the full communicative repertoire without forcing assimilation. Bonifacio et al. (2021) demonstrated through the Binukid language revitalization program that institutionally supported measures to reintroduce indigenous languages can successfully enhance communicative competence and cultural pride. The IBTA, proposed in this study, draws upon these converging frameworks—translanguaging theory, pedagogical translanguaging, and language revitalization principles—positioning Ilokano not merely as a bridge to English and Filipino, but as a target of loyalty and institutional preservation in its own right (Schwieter & Benati, 2019).

To address this policy imperative, the present study pursues a threefold purpose. First, it seeks to document the actual translanguaging practices and complex language backgrounds of K–3 learners in Ilocos Norte, moving beyond monolithic assumptions of language use. Second, it aims to identify the specific, functional roles that Ilokano plays in the everyday languaging and cognitive processing of these young learners. Third, drawing upon these empirical insights, the study proposes the Ilokano-Based Translanguaging Approach (IBTA)—a comprehensive pedagogical framework designed to respond to both the cognitive needs of multilingual learners and the constraints of the post-RA 12027 policy environment. The study contributes to the growing international literature on translanguaging in Global South contexts (Kim & Weng, 2022; Padchonga et al., 2025), advances Philippine language policy discourse (Parba, 2018; Tupas, 2015), and provides an implementable framework for teachers and curriculum designers navigating RA 12027’s Implementing Rules and Regulations (DepEd Memorandum No. 059, s. 2025).

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive survey research design, integrating quantitative data gathering with rigorous qualitative thematic analysis. The methodological architecture is grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist epistemology (Creswell, 2013), which posits that reality is socially constructed and that understanding learner experiences requires deep engagement with their subjective, lived realities. The study also adopts a transformative worldview, seeking not only to describe linguistic phenomena but to propose the IBTA as a pedagogical framework that addresses structural inequalities in language education.

Participants and Sampling

The study was conducted in selected public elementary schools in Ilocos Norte, Philippines. Schools were selected to represent a range of community types: schools

situated in urban centers such as Laoag City were included alongside schools in rural and semi-rural municipalities to ensure contextual diversity and to capture the full spectrum of Ilokano language use across different sociolinguistic settings. A purposive sampling technique was utilized to select participants deeply embedded in the multilingual realities of the region. The participant pool consisted of 136 Kindergarten to Grade 3 learners who completed the survey instrument. From this group, a subset of 73 learners, selected for maximum linguistic diversity, participated in individual semi-structured interviews. Additionally, 43 experienced early grade teachers and 18 parents participated in eight focus group discussions (FGDs) to provide triangulated perspectives on classroom and home language practices. Table 1 details the participant demographics.

Research Instruments

Data were collected using four primary instruments, each subjected to a two-stage validation process: initial expert review by five language education specialists with experience in Philippine multilingual education and MTB-MLE implementation, followed by pilot testing with a separate group of eight K-3 teachers in a non-participating school in Ilocos Norte to assess clarity, appropriateness, and contextual fit. Revisions were made based on both expert feedback and pilot responses before final administration. The instruments were: (1) Learner Language Background Questionnaire (LLBQ): Administered with parental assistance, this survey mapped home languages, school language use, and family language configurations; (2) Learner Interview Guide: A semi-structured protocol featuring open-ended, age-appropriate questions exploring language choices during academic tasks, peer play, and home communication; (3) FGD Guide for Teachers: Focused on educators' perceptions of learner translanguaging, observed classroom language dynamics, and the pedagogical implications of policy shifts; and (4) FGD Guide for Parents: Explored intergenerational language transmission, home literacy practices, and attitudes toward the use of Ilokano in formal schooling.

Data Analysis

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentage distributions) to establish the linguistic baseline of the cohort. The qualitative data from interviews and FGDs were subjected to a rigorous six-phase thematic analysis protocol as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) Familiarization – verbatim transcription of all audio recordings in the language of utterance (Ilokano, Filipino, English, or mixed) and repeated reading of transcripts; (2) Initial Coding – systematic coding of the entire data corpus, focusing on functional language use, learner utterance patterns, and teacher/parent narratives; (3) Theme Searching – collating codes into broader candidate themes regarding translanguaging characteristics and the roles of Ilokano; (4) Theme Reviewing – validating candidate themes against coded extracts and the entire data set; (5) Theme Defining and Naming – refining the specifics of each theme and generating clear, analytically grounded definitions; and (6) Writing Up – weaving the analytical narrative presented in the Findings section. Methodological rigor was

ensured through data triangulation—cross-referencing learner self-reports, observed interview data, and adult perspectives from the FGDs.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional ethics clearance was secured prior to data collection. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants and the parents/guardians of the learners, alongside verbal assent from the children themselves. Pseudonyms are utilized throughout to protect participant anonymity. The researcher acknowledges their positionality as a regional educator with an Ilokano linguistic background; while this facilitated rapport and deep linguistic comprehension, potential interpretive bias was mitigated through rigorous member-checking with teacher participants and peer debriefing sessions.

Findings

Language Background of K-3 Learners

The survey data revealed a highly multilingual, yet distinctly Ilokano-anchored, demographic profile among the K-3 learners. As detailed in Table 2, an overwhelming majority (86.7%) reported Ilokano as their primary home language. However, this dominance does not equate to monolingualism. A significant proportion of learners reported regular exposure to Filipino and English within the home environment, mediated through television, digital media, older siblings, and parents. The data indicate complex multilingual household configurations, primarily Ilokano-Filipino and Ilokano-Filipino-English matrices. While mothers and primary caregivers predominantly communicated in Ilokano, language input from fathers and older siblings showed greater variation, frequently incorporating Filipino.

Table 2. Summary of Learner Language Background (n = 136)

Language Domain / Practice	Primary Language(s) Reported	Percentage (%)
Primary Home Language	Ilokano	86.7%
	Filipino / Tagalog	10.3%
	English / Others	3.0%
Language of Peer Play (School)	Ilokano (often mixed)	92.5%
Language with Teachers (Formal Instruction)	Filipino / English	78.0%

Interview data vividly corroborated these findings. Learners described fluid home environments where languages intersect daily. As one Grade 2 learner articulated: *“Kasarsaritak ni Mama ti Ilokano, tapos ni Kuya ag-E-English sa cellphone, ngem inton ag-playkami, ag-Ilokano-kami met lang”* [I talk to Mama in Ilokano, then my older brother speaks English on his cellphone, but when we play, we just speak Ilokano anyway]. This illustrates that while English and Filipino permeate the digital environment, Ilokano remains the bedrock of intimate and peer communication.

Five Characteristics of Translanguaging Among K-3 Learners

Thematic analysis of the interview and FGD data yielded five overarching characteristics that define how Ilokano K-3 learners engage in translanguaging.

Theme 1: Fluidity of Language Use. Learners do not enforce rigid boundaries between Ilokano, Filipino, and English, shifting fluidly mid-utterance and mid-task. A Grade 3 learner explained a math problem: *“I-add-ko ‘yung numbers, tapos in-subtract-ko idia’y baba”* [I added the numbers, then I subtracted it down there] – English verb roots conjugated with Filipino affixes, spatial direction delivered in Ilokano. Drawing on Otheguy et al. (2015) and Li Wei (2018), this fluidity is not linguistic confusion but the natural manifestation of a unitary multilingual repertoire.

Theme 2: Ilokano Dominance in Informal Interaction. Table 2 documents that 92.5% of learners reported using Ilokano during peer play at school, a figure that anchors and gives quantitative weight to the qualitative patterns observed across interview sessions. Ilokano overwhelmingly dominates informal spaces – peer interaction, recess, and unstructured classroom moments. Children consciously shift to Filipino or English only when addressing teachers or engaging in formal recitation. This ‘diglossia-in-practice’ exemplifies Grosjean’s (2010) complementarity principle.

Theme 3: Metalinguistic Awareness. Young learners demonstrated a striking capacity to reflect on language as an object of thought. A Grade 1 student noted: *“Sabi ni teacher ‘aklat,’ ngem ti ammok ket ‘libro’”* [Teacher said ‘aklat’ (Filipino), but what I know is ‘libro’ (Ilokano/Spanish loan)]. This confirms Genesee’s (2015) assertion on the cognitive advantages of early bilingualism and aligns with Cenoz and Gorter’s (2022) identification of metalinguistic awareness as a core mechanism of PT.

Theme 4: Translanguaging for Cognitive Scaffolding. Learners consistently use Ilokano as a private cognitive scaffold, processing complex academic content in Ilokano first before rendering understanding in the target classroom language. This validates Cummins’ (1979) interdependence hypothesis, demonstrating that strong L1 foundations actively support L2 academic comprehension.

Theme 5: Identity-Bound Language Loyalty. Children expressed profound affective connection to Ilokano. As one learner said: *“Mas mayat ti ag-Ilokano, kasla addaak lang idia’y balay”* [It’s better to speak Ilokano, it’s like I’m just at home]. This echoes Kramsch’s (2006) ‘third place’ and supports Creese and Blackledge’s (2015) view of translanguaging as an act of identity performance.

The Four Roles of Ilokano in K-3 Learner Linguaging

The four roles described below emerged inductively from the thematic analysis and formed the empirical core around which the IBTA framework was subsequently built. As visualized in Figure 1, these roles occupy a central structural position in the IBTA, flanking the Ilokano K-3 multilingual learner alongside the Five Guiding Principles and informing each of the Three Implementation Strands.

Role 1: Main Language of Expression. Ilokano is the primary, default language through which K-3 learners articulate thoughts, emotions, and foundational ideas. As one teacher noted in the FGD: *“Even if I ask the question in Tagalog, their eyes light up and they answer in Ilokano because that is where their true voice is.”* This affirms Otheguy et al.’s (2015) assertion that ‘named languages’ are mere social overlays on a unitary mental grammar.

Role 2: Consolidator of Linguistic Features. Learners anchor novel Filipino or English vocabulary within familiar Ilokano morphological structures. A learner said: *“Ag-run-kami idia’y field” [We will run in the field]*, using the Ilokano actor-focus prefix ‘ag-’ with the English root ‘run.’ This demonstrates sophisticated cross-linguistic integration (Blommaert & Backus, 2012; Cenoz & Gorter, 2022).

Role 3: Metalinguistic Comparator. Ilokano serves as a stable reference point for analyzing Filipino and English. A Grade 3 learner: *“Kung sa Tagalog ‘aso,’ sa Ilokano ‘aso’ met lang, pero sa English ‘dog’”* –spontaneously exercising the metalinguistic awareness Genesee (2015) and Cenoz and Gorter (2022) identify as a core cognitive benefit of bilingualism.

Role 4: Organizer of Ideas. During complex cognitive tasks, learners rely on Ilokano to organize thoughts before formal expression in the target language. A teacher observed: *“When I give a math word problem, I hear them whispering the steps to each other in Ilokano. Once they solve it, they write the answer in English.”* This directly manifests Cummins’ (1979) Interdependence Hypothesis, showing that cognitive-academic language proficiency is processed in the L1 and transferred to the L2 (Wang, 2022).

Discussion

Redefining “Mother Tongue” in the Post-RA 12027 Era

The enactment of RA 12027 forces a critical theoretical reckoning: What does ‘mother tongue’ actually mean when the law demotes regional languages to ‘auxiliary media’? For a child in Ilocos Norte whose primary cognitive, emotional, and expressive medium is Ilokano, this statutory label represents a profound cognitive dissonance. Engaging with Otheguy, García, and Reid (2015), we must recognize that legislation governs ‘named languages’ as social constructs, but it cannot legislate the architecture of a child’s mental grammar. The law may declare Filipino and English as the ‘primary media,’ but the learners’ cognitive reality remains anchored in Ilokano.

The privileging of Filipino and English over regional mother tongues reproduces colonial power hierarchies. As Li Wei (2022) argues, translanguaging must be viewed as a decolonizing project. The systemic marginalization of Ilokano perpetuates what Tupas (2015) identifies as the ‘colonial contempt for mother tongues.’ Furthermore, suppressing the mother tongue constitutes an act of symbolic violence against the multilingual subject (Kramsch, 2006). This creates the ‘Mother Tongue Paradox’ under RA 12027: the law permits optional MTB-MLE in ‘monolingual classes,’ yet the Implementing Rules and

Regulations (DepEd Memo 059, s. 2025) define eligible conditions so restrictively that most classrooms may be excluded. The empirical cost is stark: Abrigo et al. (2025) quantify a 35-57% ‘learning tax’ imposed on students taught in a linguistically mismatched medium. The IBTA responds directly to this crisis by operationalizing the ‘auxiliary medium’ pathway to maximize Ilokano’s presence within the letter of the law.

The IBTA as a Translanguaging-Revitalization Nexus

The IBTA transcends the apparent binary opposition between translanguaging and language revitalization through the application of strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988): it utilizes translanguaging pedagogy to achieve revitalization goals simultaneously. Viewed through Fishman’s (1991) GIDS framework, securing the school domain (Stage 4a) for Ilokano is critical. The IBTA achieves this not by banning Filipino and English, but by firmly positioning Ilokano as the pedagogical anchor, aligning with Guerrettaz and Engman’s (2023) principle that revitalization must balance identity anchoring with community access to dominant-language resources.

The IBTA is constructed upon four robust theoretical pillars: (1) Unitary Repertoire—Ilokano K-3 learners possess one integrated mental grammar, not three isolated language systems (Otheguy et al., 2015; Li Wei, 2018); (2) Pedagogical Intentionality—the IBTA is a teacher-planned, objective-driven methodology, not haphazard code-switching (Cenoz & Gorter, 2022; Alsagoafi, 2025); (3) Cross-Linguistic Transfer—strong academic foundations built in Ilokano transfer to Filipino and English literacy development (Cummins, 1979); and (4) Revitalization Commitment—the IBTA secures Ilokano’s institutional prestige within the critical school domain (Fishman, 1991; Guerrettaz & Engman, 2023). A dual mandate drives its implementation: UTILIZE the learners’ full multilingual repertoire (Ilokano-Filipino-English) to maximize academic learning; and PROMOTE Ilokano language loyalty and revitalization as a cultural and identity imperative.

The IBTA Framework: Design and Implementation Strands

The IBTA’s five core principles—Repertoire Recognition, Ilokano Centrality, Metalinguistic Development, Scaffolded Intentionality, and Revitalization Commitment—are operationalized through three interconnected strands. Strand 1 (Teacher Preparation) embeds IBTA modules in pre-service and in-service training, fostering a heteroglossic pedagogical stance through ideological transformation (Parba, 2018; Tupas, 2015). Strand 2 (Instructional Materials Development) produces trilingual materials with Ilokano as the primary language of explanation, featuring multilingual glosses and culture-anchored content compliant with KWF orthographic standards. Strand 3 (Teaching Strategy) adapts García and Kleyn’s (2016) ‘stance, design, shift’ framework, enabling teachers to execute planned, purposeful translanguaging moves guided by the four empirically identified Roles of Ilokano.

Figure 1 presents a hierarchical visualization of the IBTA, centering the Ilokano K-3 multilingual learner as the focal point. At the apex, the Dual Mandate establishes the framework’s overarching objectives. The Four Roles of Ilokano and Five Guiding

Principles flank the central learner, while the Three Implementation Strands provide actionable pathways for classroom practice. The entire model is grounded in a Policy Context and Implications frame, contextualizing the IBTA as a statutory and evidence-based response to RA 12027 and the MATATAG curriculum.

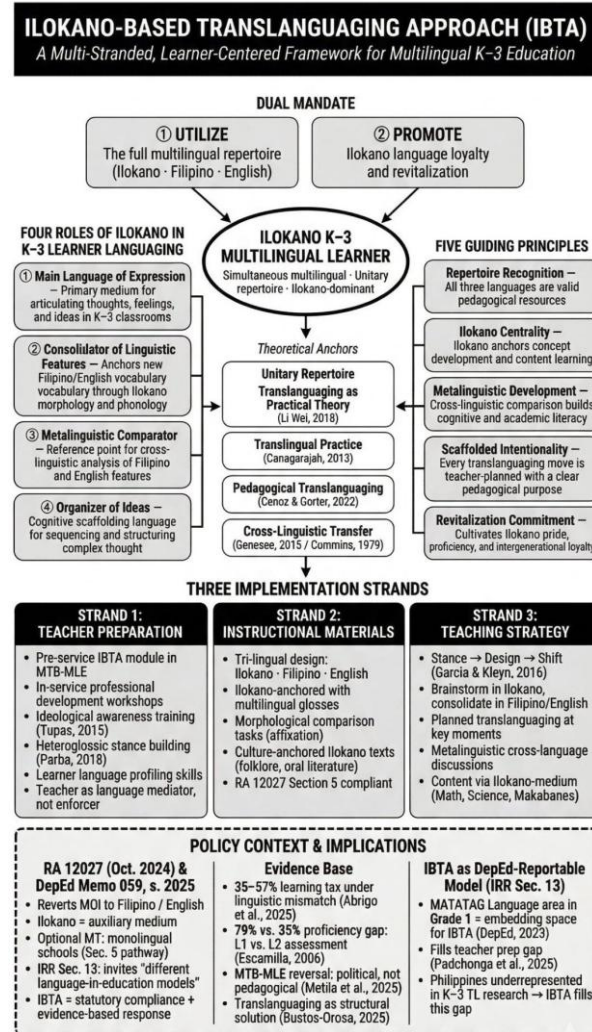


Figure 1. The Ilokano-Based Translanguaging Approach (IBTA): Framework Overview

The IBTA in the Landscape of Philippine Language Policy Reform

The IBTA is not merely a localized classroom intervention; it is a comprehensive policy response. It serves as a concrete contribution to the 'different language-in-education models' that the IRR of RA 12027 (DepEd Memo 059, s. 2025) explicitly invites the Department of Education to consider in its mandated five-year review. The IBTA occupies a unique, strategically defensible policy position: it is (a) compliant with RA 12027 by respecting Filipino and English as primary media while robustly utilizing Ilokano as the authorized 'auxiliary medium'; (b) responsive to the MATATAG curriculum priorities (DepEd, 2023), embedding specifically within the new Language

and Reading and Literacy learning areas; and (c) advancing the equity and cognitive goals that the original MTB-MLE policy sought to achieve.

That said, I recognize that implementing the IBTA within the MATATAG curriculum will not be without practical tension. Teachers will need to navigate a careful balance between using Ilokano as an 'auxiliary medium' and adhering to the mandated primacy of Filipino and English across instructional activities. In classrooms where the MATATAG curriculum's language and literacy targets are assessed primarily in Filipino or English, there is a genuine risk that Ilokano use, however pedagogically strategic, may be perceived by school administrators as non-compliant or as encroaching on the primary media. Professional development under Strand 1 of the IBTA must therefore explicitly prepare teachers to document and articulate the evidence-based rationale for translanguaging moves, to distinguish between haphazard code-switching and planned pedagogical translanguaging, and to negotiate institutional resistance with reference to both the IRR's auxiliary-medium provisions and the cognitive learning benefits documented in this study.

Critically, the IBTA advocates for assessment reform: Escamilla (2006) demonstrated that monolingual assessments drastically underestimate bilingual learners' academic competence, showing 79% proficiency in L1 versus only 35% in L2 on identical content. To evaluate IBTA learners solely in English or Filipino would be to measure their language deficit rather than their content knowledge.

Conclusion

This study offers a critical threefold contribution to the discourse on multilingual education in the Philippines. Empirically, it documents the complex, fluid language backgrounds and translanguaging practices of Ilokano K-3 learners, proving that their linguistic reality is far from monolingual. Analytically, through rigorous thematic analysis, it identifies four distinct, functional roles that Ilokano plays in learner languaging: as the main language of expression, a consolidator of linguistic features, a metalinguistic comparator, and an organizer of ideas. Theoretically and practically, it synthesizes these findings to propose the IBTA—a comprehensive, multi-stranded framework for Ilokano-based translanguaging pedagogy that responds directly to the post-RA 12027 policy landscape.

Situated within this challenging policy environment, the IBTA emerges as a timely, evidence-based, and rights-respecting response to a regressive legislative shift. The IBTA does not represent a rejection of Filipino or English; rather, it is a pedagogical affirmation that Ilokano K-3 learners learn more effectively, engage in deeper cognitive processing, and retain vital language loyalty when their mother tongue serves as the instructional anchor. By operationalizing the 'auxiliary medium' provision of the new law, the IBTA prevents the imposition of a devastating learning tax on linguistically mismatched learners (Abrigo et al., 2025).

Future research must build upon this foundation. Longitudinal studies are required to measure the academic outcomes of IBTA implementation over time. Collaborative curriculum development with DepEd Region I is necessary to institutionalize the framework's materials and training strands. Research should further explore adoption of the IBTA in other Ilokano-speaking provinces (Ilocos Sur, La Union, Abra, Cagayan Valley), its potential extension to Grades 4-6, and the development of parallel translanguaging frameworks for Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Kapampangan, and Bikolano. As Li Wei (2022) envisions, translanguaging must be embraced as a profoundly decolonizing project. The Ilokano language is not merely a transitional bridge; it is the cognitive and cultural lifeblood of the children who bring it into the classroom every day. In the pursuit of genuine educational equity, the mother tongue deserves not merely to be 'auxiliary,' but to remain central.

Declaration of AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used AI-assisted writing tools in order to support structural revision, language editing, and academic enhancement. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The author declares that there are no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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