Critical Gap Analysis: Current Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Model Versus Proposed Heritage Language Bilingual Education Framework in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes disparities between Bangladesh's current Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) model, introduced in 2017, and the comprehensive bilingual framework proposed in 2008. Through comparative policy analysis across ten dimensions—from philosophy to resource allocation—the research finds that the existing model constitutes weak bilingual education, providing limited indigenous language instruction (10–15%), whereas the proposed model envisions co-equal mediums (50%). The findings reveal symbolic rather than substantive inclusion, constraining educational and cultural outcomes. Evidence-based recommendations outline a six-year phased reform pathway, drawing on global best practices to advance equity and linguistic rights for indigenous communities in Bangladesh.

Keywords: mother tongue-based multilingual education, heritage language education, bilingual education policy, indigenous languages, gap analysis

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh encompasses remarkable linguistic diversity with 45 distinct languages beyond Bengali, the highest concentration residing in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), where eleven ethnic indigenous communities maintain ten unique languages (Lewis et al., 2016). This multilingual reality presents profound educational challenges, as indigenous ethnic minority children must navigate formal schooling conducted exclusively in Bengali—a language foreign to their home environments. The consequences manifest starkly: the CHT region reports the highest primary school dropout rates in Bangladesh, with literacy rates below 20% compared to the national average of 62% (Asian Development Bank, 2001; Begum et al., 2006).

The Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord of 1997 explicitly recognized indigenous peoples' rights to primary education in their mother tongues (Clause 33a), representing a historic policy breakthrough following decades of political conflict (Government of Bangladesh, 1997). Subsequently, the National Education Policy 2010 acknowledged the importance of mother tongue education and authorized textbook development in indigenous languages (Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, 2010). These policy commitments culminated in Bangladesh initiating Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) in 2012, with pilot implementation beginning in 2017 for five indigenous languages: Chakma, Marma, Tripura, Garo, and Santal (Tripura, 2025).

While this MTB-MLE initiative represents historic progress in recognizing indigenous language rights, the current model's limited scope contrasts sharply with the comprehensive heritage language bilingual education framework proposed in seminal 2008 policy research (Tripura, 2008). The current implementation treats indigenous languages as a single additional subject, allocating approximately 10-15% of instructional time while maintaining Bengali as the dominant medium for all core academic content. This "language-as-subject" approach differs fundamentally from the proposed "language-as-medium" model, which advocates for indigenous languages serving as mediums of instruction for 50% of curriculum time in a strong heritage language bilingual education framework.

This research addresses four central questions:

(i) What are the critical gaps between current MTB-MLE implementation and the proposed heritage language bilingual education framework?

(ii) How do these gaps affect educational equity and outcomes for indigenous students?

(iii) What evidence-based improvements can bridge these gaps?

(iv) What lessons from international contexts are applicable to Bangladesh?

Through systematic comparative policy analysis across ten dimensions, this study identifies critical deficiencies in the current model and proposes evidence-based pathways for transformation aligned with international best practices and research evidence on effective bilingual education.

The significance extends across multiple domains. For policy development, this analysis provides empirical foundations for MTB-MLE reform efforts currently under consideration. Theoretically, the research contributes to bilingual education scholarship by applying established theoretical frameworks to the Bangladesh context. Practically, evidence-based recommendations offer actionable guidance for improving educational outcomes for indigenous children who continue facing language barriers, high dropout rates, and cultural marginalization. From a social justice perspective, this analysis advances discourse on linguistic human rights and educational equity in multilingual societies.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Bilingual Education Theory

The theoretical foundation draws from established theories of bilingual education and second language acquisition. Cummins' (1979, 2000) linguistic interdependence hypothesis posits that well-developed first-language skills transfer to second-language learning, creating common underlying proficiency that supports academic development in both languages. This theory holds profound implications for educational policy: strong mother tongue foundations facilitate rather than impede second-language acquisition and academic achievement. Cummins (2000) distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), demonstrating that while conversational fluency develops within two years, academic language proficiency requires five to seven years of sustained instruction.

Baker's (2011) comprehensive typology distinguishes between "weak" and "strong" forms of bilingual education based on their linguistic goals and outcomes. Weak forms—including submersion, segregationist, and transitional programs—aim for monolingualism in the majority language through subtractive bilingualism, where the minority language is replaced. Strong forms—including maintenance, heritage language, immersion, and two-way bilingual programs—promote additive bilingualism, developing proficiency in both languages while preserving cultural identity and heritage language vitality. Research consistently demonstrates that strong bilingual education programs produce superior academic outcomes compared to weak transitional approaches (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Lambert's (1974) distinction between additive and subtractive bilingualism illuminates the cultural and cognitive dimensions of language education policy. Additive bilingualism occurs when a second language is acquired without loss of the first language and culture, resulting in enhanced cognitive flexibility and metalinguistic awareness. In contrast, subtractive bilingualism occurs when second language acquisition diminishes first language competency, often accompanied by cultural alienation and academic underachievement. Educational programs promoting additive bilingualism demonstrate consistent advantages in cognitive development, academic achievement, and cultural identity formation (Bialystok, 2001; García, 2009).

Empirical Evidence on Bilingual Education Effectiveness

Thomas and Collier's (2002) landmark longitudinal study, examining over 7.5 million student records across 36 school districts in 16 U.S. states, provides compelling evidence for bilingual education effectiveness. Their findings demonstrate that English-only and short-term transitional bilingual programs close only half the achievement gap between English learners and native speakers, while high-quality long-term bilingual programs close the entire gap after five to six years of schooling through students' first and second languages. The research establishes that the strongest predictor of second language achievement is the amount of formal first language schooling, directly supporting the linguistic interdependence hypothesis.

International meta-analyses consistently confirm bilingual education benefits across diverse contexts. UNESCO's (2016) comprehensive review of mother tongue-based multilingual education programs worldwide demonstrates positive outcomes in academic achievement, literacy development, school retention, and cultural identity. Benson and Kosonen's (2013) examination of MTB-MLE programs in Asia identifies critical success factors including sufficient instructional time in mother tongue (minimum 50%), adequate teacher training, appropriate curriculum materials, and community support. These findings establish empirical foundations for evaluating policy effectiveness.

Heritage Language Bilingual Education Models

Heritage language bilingual education represents a specific strong form of bilingual education designed for indigenous and immigrant communities whose languages face endangerment pressures in dominant-language environments (Hornberger, 2008; Valdés, 2001). Successful international examples provide relevant models for Bangladesh. New Zealand's Māori-medium education system demonstrates how indigenous language revitalization can be achieved through coordinated policy efforts, sustained resource investment, and community mobilization (May, 2012). The program allocates 51-80% of instructional time to Māori language, achieving remarkable success in language revitalization while maintaining academic standards.

Wales' bilingual education system offers insights into minority language education within dominant national language contexts (Baker, 2011). The Welsh Language Act and subsequent education policies have successfully increased Welsh language competency from 18% to 30% of the population over three decades through comprehensive bilingual education provision. Peru's intercultural bilingual education program addresses diverse indigenous communities through flexible curriculum frameworks and community-based implementation strategies (Hornberger, 2000), demonstrating that heritage language education is achievable even in resource-constrained developing country contexts.

Comparative analysis reveals common success factors: explicit policy commitments with legal frameworks; adequate resource allocation for teacher training and materials development; community involvement and ownership; flexible implementation strategies adapted to local contexts; and sustained political support across electoral cycles (García & Lin, 2017; McCarty, 2013). These international examples establish benchmarks for evaluating Bangladesh's MTB-MLE program and identifying improvement pathways.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs qualitative comparative policy analysis grounded in critical discourse analysis and social constructionist theory (Fairclough, 2003). The methodology recognizes that educational policies are socially constructed phenomena reflecting and reproducing power relationships, ideological positions, and cultural values within society.

Analytical Framework

The analysis utilizes a multi-dimensional comparative framework examining ten critical dimensions-(i) Philosophical and pedagogical approach, (ii) legal and constitutional framework, (iii) language coverage and inclusivity, (iv) curriculum design and content, (v) medium of instruction, (vi) instructional time allocation,(vii)

teacher training and professional development, (viii) administrative structure, (ix) community participation and governance, (x) resource allocation and sustainability.

This comprehensive framework enables systematic comparison identifying gaps, contradictions, and inconsistencies between current implementation and proposed model.Gap identification follows four criteria- (i) alignment with international best practices documented in comparative bilingual education research, (ii) consistency with research evidence on effective bilingual education, (iii) adequacy for achieving stated policy goals articulated in the cht peace accord and national education policy (2010); and (iv) equity and human rights considerations grounded in international frameworks including the universal declaration of linguistic rights (1996) and convention on the rights of the child (1989).

Data Sources and Analysis

Primary data sources include key policy documents: the Chittagong Hill Tracts Peace Accord (1997), National Education Policy (2010), government orders and circulars related to MTB-MLE implementation, and indigenous language textbooks and curriculum materials. Research literature comprises Tripura's (2008) master's thesis proposing the comprehensive bilingual education framework, Tripura's (2025) recent article analyzing current MTB-MLE challenges, academic literature on bilingual education theory and practice, and international program evaluations. Secondary sources include NGO reports from UNDP, Save the Children, and UNICEF, media coverage of MTB-MLE implementation, and government education statistics.

Document analysis procedures involve systematic coding of policy documents identifying key provisions, mandates, and resource allocations; critical discourse analysis examining policy language and underlying assumptions; and comparative analysis conducting side-by-side comparison across ten dimensions. Synthesis and interpretation identify patterns across dimensions, analyze cross-cutting themes, and develop evidence-based recommendations grounded in international best practices.

Findings: Critical Gap Analysis

Gap 1: Philosophical and Pedagogical Approach

The current MTB-MLE model embodies a "language-as-subject" approach, treating indigenous languages as an additional subject rather than as mediums of instruction (Tripura, 2025). This model allocates indigenous languages to one subject period, approximately 10-15% of total instructional time, while maintaining Bengali as the dominant medium for all core academic content including mathematics, science, social studies, and Bengali language arts. The textbooks developed focus primarily on basic literacy skills and cultural content specific to each language community.

This approach aligns with what Baker (2011) characterizes as "weak bilingual education," which may preserve languages symbolically but does not provide sufficient exposure for cognitive and academic development. The underlying philosophy reflects what might be termed a "preservationist" orientation—recognizing indigenous languages' cultural value while maintaining the primacy of Bengali-medium education. The model essentially adds indigenous language content to an otherwise unchanged Bengali-medium curriculum without fundamentally reconceptualizing pedagogical approaches or power relationships.

In contrast, the proposed heritage language bilingual education model advocates a "language-as-medium" approach, establishing indigenous languages as co-equal mediums of instruction alongside Bengali (Tripura, 2008). The framework allocates instructional time as follows:

Pre-primary (100% indigenous language),

Grade 1 (80% indigenous, 10% Bengali, 10% English),

Grade 2 (70% indigenous, 15% Bengali, 15% English),

Grade 3 (60% indigenous, 25% Bengali, 15% English),

Grade 4 (55% indigenous, 30% Bengali, 15% English), and

Grade 5 (50% indigenous, 35% Bengali, 15% English).

This gradual transition model follows the "developmental bilingual education" approach validated by longitudinal research (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

The philosophical difference extends beyond instructional time to encompass educational goals. The proposed model embodies a "developmental" orientation, recognizing that indigenous children require substantial mother tongue instruction—typically 50% or more—to develop the cognitive and linguistic foundations that facilitate academic achievement and second language acquisition (Cummins, 2000). The model aims for additive bilingualism, developing full proficiency in heritage languages, Bengali, and English, rather than transitional replacement of indigenous languages with Bengali.

Gap Implications: Research consistently demonstrates that bilingual programs allocating less than 30% of instructional time to minority languages fail to produce the cognitive, academic, and linguistic benefits associated with bilingual education (Baker, 2011; García, 2009). The current 10-15% allocation falls significantly below this threshold, limiting potential for cognitive development benefits, academic language proficiency in heritage languages, and effective transfer of skills to Bengali. The symbolic recognition provided by the current model, while historically significant, cannot address the fundamental language barriers and educational disadvantages facing indigenous students.

Gap 2: Medium of Instruction

The current MTB-MLE model maintains what Baker (2006) terms "submersion education"where minority children are "thrown into the deep end" of majority language instruction without adequate linguistic scaffolding. Despite introducing indigenous language textbooks for one subject, Bengali remains the medium of instruction for all core academic content. Students must comprehend complex concepts in mathematics, understand scientific principles, analyze social studies content, and develop Bengali literacy—all through a language most do not speak fluently upon entering school.

The proposed model establishes indigenous languages as co-equal mediums of instruction through subject-specific allocation (Tripura, 2008). Indigenous languages serve as mediums for literature and language arts (developing reading, writing, and oracy in heritage language), social studies (incorporating indigenous history, political structures, traditional knowledge), and health education (including traditional healing practices and community health approaches). Bengali serves as medium for mathematics and science, with English taught as a subject rather than as medium of instruction. This dual-medium approach follows the "heritage language bilingual education" model demonstrating success in maintaining endangered languages while ensuring academic achievement (Hornberger, 2008; McCarty, 2013).

Gap Implications: The medium of instruction gap represents a fundamental difference in educational philosophy and practice. Research on language-in-education policy implementation demonstrates that treating minority languages merely as subjects rather than mediums of instruction fails to address the cognitive and academic barriers faced by linguistic minority students (Benson, 2005; García, 2009). The current submersion approach places indigenous children at immediate disadvantage, requiring them to learn complex academic content simultaneously with learning the language of instruction—a double burden not faced by Bengali-speaking peers. The proposed dual-medium approach provides comprehensible input and linguistic scaffolding necessary for academic success while developing bilingualism and biliteracy.

Gap 3: Legal and Constitutional Framework

The current MTB-MLE program operates under the CHT Peace Accord (1997) Clause 33(a)2 and National Education Policy (2010) provisions but lacks specific enabling legislation or constitutional recognition (Tripura, 2025). This weak legal foundation creates implementation vulnerabilities. The ten-year delay between Peace Accord signing and actual program initiation illustrates this weakness. Without explicit constitutional protection

or legislative mandates, MTB-MLE remains vulnerable to political changes, budget cuts, and administrative neglect. Research participants consistently note that "No one gives importance to any program that does not have legal recognition" (cited in Tripura, 2008, p. 87).

The proposed model advocates comprehensive legal architecture including constitutional amendment recognizing linguistic diversity and minority language rights; Indigenous Education Act establishing clear mandates, timelines, and accountability mechanisms; Regional Council Act amendments transferring full educational authority to Hill District Councils; and government orders authorizing specific budget allocations and administrative structures (Tripura, 2008). This legal framework mirrors successful minority language education provisions in India (Constitutional Articles 29a, 30, 350A), New Zealand (Te Aho Matua principles for Māori education), and Wales (Welsh Language Acts).

Gap Implications: International experience demonstrates that minority language education programs without explicit constitutional protection and legislative mandates remain vulnerable to political instability (May, 2012; Hornberger & Johnson, 2011). The 1984 Marma language initiative in Banderban District, which collapsed due to lack of legal foundation, illustrates this vulnerability within the Bangladesh context (Tripura, 2008). Comprehensive legal architecture is essential for long-term program sustainability, resource allocation predictability, and governmental accountability. Without such foundations, even well-designed programs face existential threats with each political transition or budget crisis.

Gap 4: Teacher Training and Professional Development

The current MTB-MLE program relies on minimal, ad-hoc teacher training without systematic professional development frameworks (Tripura, 2025). Most teachers receive brief orientations on using indigenous language textbooks but lack comprehensive training in bilingual pedagogical methodologies, cultural competency, or second language acquisition theory. Many teachers, while fluent in indigenous languages, lack training in literacy instruction, curriculum adaptation, or bilingual classroom management. This training deficit represents a critical implementation barrier consistently identified in research (García & Lin, 2017).

The proposed framework establishes comprehensive teacher training architecture including pre-service bilingual education curriculum integrated into Primary Teacher Training Institute (PTTI) programs; alternative certification pathways for community members with indigenous language expertise but lacking formal teacher credentials; in-service professional development focused on bilingual pedagogical techniques, cultural competency, content knowledge in both languages, and assessment strategies for bilingual learners; mentoring systems pairing experienced bilingual teachers with new educators; and transfer of PTTI to Regional Council authority enabling localized curriculum control and culturally responsive training (Tripura, 2008).

Gap Implications: International research consistently identifies inadequate teacher preparation as a primary barrier to successful bilingual education implementation (de Jong, 2011; Benson, 2005). Teachers require specialized knowledge and skills beyond simple language proficiency, including understanding of bilingual cognitive development, strategies for scaffolding content learning through two languages, culturally responsive pedagogical approaches, and techniques for developing academic language proficiency. The current minimal training approach cannot develop these competencies. Research demonstrates that effective bilingual teachers require both linguistic proficiency and pedagogical expertise specifically focused on bilingual contexts— competencies developed only through systematic, comprehensive professional development (García, 2009).

Gap 5: Curriculum Design and Content

The current model provides one textbook per indigenous language, focusing primarily on basic literacy and cultural content (Tripura, 2025). This single-subject approach limits curriculum integration and fails to incorporate indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and community values across the broader curriculum. Current Bengali-medium textbooks predominantly reflect Bengali culture while marginalizing indigenous cultural perspectives, creating what research participants describe as "cultural discontinuity" between home and school environments (Tripura, 2008).

The proposed framework requires full curriculum redesign incorporating subject-specific textbooks in indigenous languages for literature, social studies, and health education; Bengali-medium textbooks for mathematics and science incorporating culturally relevant examples and contexts; English language textbooks appropriate for indigenous learners; cultural content integration across all subjects ensuring indigenous knowledge systems, historical narratives, and cultural practices permeate the curriculum; and community involvement in curriculum development ensuring cultural authenticity and relevance (Tripura, 2008). This comprehensive approach follows models established in successful indigenous education programs including New Zealand's Te Marautanga o Aotearoa (Māori-medium curriculum) and Native American language immersion programs (McCarty, 2013).

Gap Implications: Single-subject curriculum approaches cannot provide the breadth and depth of linguistic exposure necessary for academic language development, nor can they adequately represent the richness and complexity of indigenous knowledge systems (Hornberger, 2008). Research demonstrates that comprehensive bilingual curricula integrating indigenous content across subject areas produce superior outcomes in cultural identity development, academic achievement, and bilingual competency development compared to supplementary single-subject models (García, 2009). The curriculum gap limits both language acquisition effectiveness and cultural preservation goals central to MTB-MLE's stated purposes.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Three fundamental tensions underline the identified gaps.

Firstly, assimilationist versus pluralist ideology: the current model's limitations reflect governmental assimilationist stance viewing linguistic diversity as obstacle to national unity, while the proposed model embodies pluralist vision celebrating multilingualism as national asset (Tripura, 2008). As Cope and Kalantzis (1997) argue, "Those nations that are able to adapt and facilitate these differences are the ones that will go forward without blood on the streets" (p. 262).

Secondly, rights-based versus charity-based approach: the current model treats indigenous language education as governmental concession or favor, while the proposed model adopts rights-based framework grounded in Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights, Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNESCO Guidelines for Language Policies, and CHT Peace Accord commitments (UNESCO, 2003). This distinction fundamentally changes the nature of government responsibility and accountability.

Thirdly, symbolic versus substantive change: the current MTB-MLE program represents what Shohamy (2006) characterizes as "symbolic policy"—government actions creating appearance of addressing indigenous language issues without substantively changing power relationships or educational outcomes. The proposed model demands substantive transformation of educational structures, resource allocations, and governance arrangements.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interpretation of Findings

The ten gaps collectively illustrate the difference between peripheral recognition of indigenous languages (current model) and central integration of indigenous languages into educational systems (proposed model). This fundamental distinction determines whether MTB-MLE serves primarily symbolic purposes or generates meaningful educational, cognitive, cultural, and political benefits for indigenous communities. The current approach maintains the status quo of Bengali-medium education with token recognition, while the proposed framework demands fundamental reconceptualization of educational philosophy, structures, and practices.

Implications for Educational Outcomes

The gap between current and proposed models carries profound implications for indigenous students' educational trajectories. Research consistently demonstrates that children beginning formal education in their mother tongue

demonstrate superior cognitive development, academic performance, and school engagement compared to those forced into immediate second-language instruction (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Cummins, 2000). The cognitive advantages extend beyond language development to encompass enhanced executive function, problem-solving abilities, and metalinguistic awareness (Bialystok, 2001).

The current minimal model cannot provide sufficient exposure for these benefits. International research establishes that effective bilingual education requires 50% or more instructional time in minority languages, typically four to seven years—to develop the linguistic and cognitive foundations supporting academic achievement (Thomas & Collier, 2002). The current 10-15% allocation falls dramatically below this evidence-based threshold, limiting program effectiveness.

Phased Implementation Roadmap

Recognizing that immediate transition from current to comprehensive model would overwhelm existing capacity, evidence-based recommendations propose a six-year phased approach:

Phase 1: Immediate Actions (Years 1-2) focuses on legal foundations, capacity building, and expansion. Critical actions include drafting and enacting Indigenous Education Act; establishing bilingual education cells in relevant ministries; transferring PTTI to Regional Council authority (in the case of the CHT); extending MTB-MLE to remaining indigenous languages; and initiating comprehensive teacher training programs.

Phase 2: Institutional Development (Years 2-4) emphasizes instructional time expansion and curriculum development. Key activities include increasing indigenous language instructional time from 15% to 30-40%; introducing heritage languages as medium for social studies; completing full curriculum development in all ten languages; establishing community curriculum committees; and implementing monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

Phase 3: Full Implementation (Years 4-6) achieves complete transition to heritage language bilingual education. Activities include reaching 50% instructional time in heritage languages; implementing full dual-medium instruction in all CHT primary schools; achieving constitutional recognition of linguistic diversity; establishing Regional Council full authority; and developing continuous improvement mechanisms based on evaluation data.

This phased approach allows for systematic capacity development while demonstrating early successes building political support and community confidence. International experience demonstrates that successful bilingual education transformation requires sustained commitment over multiple years, with patience for program maturation before expecting full outcomes (García & Lin, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive gap analysis demonstrates profound disparities between Bangladesh's current MTB-MLE model and the evidence-based heritage language bilingual education framework. The current model represents minimal intervention—adding indigenous language as single subject while maintaining Bengali-dominant submersion education—providing symbolic recognition without substantive transformation. This "language-as-subject" approach cannot deliver cognitive, academic, cultural, and political benefits documented in international bilingual education research.

The proposed heritage language bilingual education model offers comprehensive framework for transformative change. By allocating 50% instructional time to indigenous languages as mediums of instruction, establishing robust legal foundations, developing comprehensive bilingual curricula, empowering communities, and securing sustainable funding, the proposed model aligns with international best practices and can generate meaningful educational outcomes while preserving endangered indigenous languages.

Bridging the identified gaps requires political will, sustained resources, and systematic implementation following the phased roadmap outlined. International experience demonstrates that heritage-language-bilingual education is achievable even in resource-constrained contexts when governments demonstrate genuine

commitment to linguistic diversity and educational equity. The stakes are high: indigenous children in the Chittagong Hill Tracts continue facing educational barriers, high dropout rates, and cultural marginalization. Only comprehensive heritage language bilingual education, implemented with fidelity to evidence-based practices, can fulfill the promises of the CHT Peace Accord and create equitable, culturally responsive education for Bangladesh's indigenous peoples.

Bangladesh can become a regional leader in indigenous language education, demonstrating that linguistic diversity strengthens rather than threatens national unity. The path forward is clear, the research evidence overwhelming, and international models proven. What remains is political courage to embrace pluralism, allocate necessary resources, and empower communities to shape their educational futures. The time for transformative action is now.

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