

Chapter 2.7

English Language Instruction in the Philippines: Methods and Practices

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Introduction

The Philippine educational system is currently at a crossroads in that it is coping with the demands of the country's linguistic diversity, the pressures of the global market, and rapid advances in technology. These, along with other stumbling blocks, hamper the development of the English proficiency of both teachers and learners.

With the existence of over 170 local languages in the country, numerous researches prove that the Philippines is one good example of a country where multilingualism is practiced at its best. A significant drawback, however, is that the Philippines has been changing its language policy for decades to respond to the clamors of the different speech communities. Filipino, which is a Tagalog-based lingua franca, presumed by language planners in the past as a unifying official language, has been contested for many years now by users of other major local languages like Cebuano in the south and Ilocano in the north. This is only one stumbling block that needs urgent attention from the government. How to make each speech community satisfied with the crucial decision that the government undertakes to address the problem is another issue to be resolved. With the implementation of the mother-tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) policy in 2009 with Executive Order (EO) 209 issued by the Department of Education (DepEd), there are at least 19 languages considered by the government agency in its implementation: Tagalog, Kapampangan, Pangasinense, Ilokano, Bikol, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Waray, Tausug, Maguindanaoan, Maranao, Chavacano, Ibanag, Ivatan, Sambal, Aklanon, Kinaray-a, Yakan, and Surigaonon. That means at least 150 other languages, regional or ethnic, would be relegated to the background and the aforementioned local languages taking the front seat.

The pressures of the global market are another burden to be addressed. As it is, the industry claims that there is a mismatch between the kinds of graduates produced by Philippine schools and the pressing requirements of the workplace. For instance, there is a big demand for agricultural and manufacturing employment but such opportunities are not met since most graduates finish other degree programs. Moreover, requirements such as excellent communication skills and critical thinking are not developed among the graduates while in school. Thus, even if there is alignment between the degrees completed and the position applied for, graduates are still not hired for lack of competencies required. Some welcome employment opportunities in the business processing outsourcing (BPO) industry. But while

there is an upsurge of call center agents in the BPOs, not too many are able to get employment because of lack of proficiency in the English language. Thus, rigid training is still required for several weeks from the graduates to meet the standards set by the said industry.

Another major concern is the kind of learners at this present time who belong to Generation Z, most of whom have acquired literacy in the use of media technology and social media. While digital natives are found in urban schools, very few can be identified in rural schools especially those that are state-funded and located in remote areas separated by large bodies of water or mountainous regions. Lack of facilities, Internet access, or worse, unavailability of power are the major causes and seem to be significant deterrents in coping with the developments in instruction particularly where e-teaching and e-learning are concerned.

With the Enhanced Basic Education Program Act of 2013 or the K-12 educational reform that the Philippine government implemented last school year, it is hoped that there will indeed be a change in the landscape of basic and higher education in the country that will eventually signal a fresh set of graduates who are multi-literate, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural and able to meet the demands of the local and global markets.

Curriculum in Basic Education: A Historical Perspective

Vizconde (2006) elucidates that English instruction has remained persistent in the four programs implemented in the educational system of the country: pre-RESP (Revised Secondary Education Program), RESP, SEDP (Secondary Education Program), and the RBEC (Revised Basic Education Curriculum). For years, English was given emphasis making it the sole language of communication in schools until the implementation of the Bilingual Education Policy in 1974, which made Pilipino a language co-equal to English in schools. In 1987, Pilipino evolved into a different spelling—Filipino. As claimed by language planners, Filipino now encompasses other languages like Spanish and English, that is, apart from Tagalog.

Moreover, Vizconde (2006, 263-264) highlights the program thrusts for each of the programs stated earlier as to include the following: (1) pre-RESP emphasized English as a language to unify all the existing regional languages and dialects; (2) RESP (1973) foregrounded English and Filipino as official languages of instruction with Filipino introduced in the early grades to facilitate learning; (3) SEDP (1988) highlighted English and Filipino as the official media of instruction and promoting the Filipino language based on the regional languages all over the Philippines; and (4) BEC (2002) which was implemented due to the deteriorating performance in Asian achievement tests in science and mathematics. The new curriculum strengthened the subjects by clustering them into areas. The English program supported the teaching of mathematics and sciences by using an integrative approach to teaching.

It is quite obvious that the methodology of instruction was teacher-centered for pre-RESP since this was in the 1900s when the audio-lingual approach was still the prevailing perspective. Question-and-answer exchanges were therefore

teacher-initiated. Although writing, on one hand, was also considered in terms of instruction, reading, on the other hand, was not a priority.

Vizconde (2006, 265-269) gives a description of the colonial history of the Philippines as regards the educational system:

- In 1925, the Monroe Commission conducted a survey that reviewed the educational system in the country, yielding some of the following results: (1) English should be maintained as the language of instruction to provide uniformity in communication and that dialects should be used only in the promotion of conduct and good manners; (2) textbooks should be suited to the learners, that is, they should be culture-bound; (3) more than adequate training should be given to teachers; and (4) instruction should correct inaccuracies of the students, should go beyond memory work, and should require students to think.
- In the 1950s, the Board of National Education in its report on the state of Philippine education made the following recommendations as to include the following: (1) that secondary education curriculum should offer rigid training in the languages and literature, mathematics, sciences, social studies, and other subjects calculated to meet the requirements of the university; (2) the use of the vernacular should be adopted in the elementary level as the exclusive use of English in the elementary level was determined to have contributed to the deficiencies of elementary education; (3) the new unit requirement for English became four from five; (4) English would continue as a language subject and as a medium of instruction for all subjects in all years in high school except social studies.
- In 1972, the Board of National Education came out with the provision regarding the use of Filipino and English as languages of instruction in some subjects in the secondary level in its effort to make the Filipino learner bilingual. Thus, the Bilingual Education Policy was created in 1974. With this, second language methodologies were introduced replacing the structured drills and memorization of the audio-lingual approach.
- In the Secondary Education Development Program (SEDP), reports were made that among the tiers of education, it is the secondary education that was the weakest. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) funded the program paving the way for the improvement of facilities and equipment in selected schools, development of staff and instructional materials, assistance to improve private secondary education, to name a few.
- In the New Secondary Education Curriculum (NSEC), English remained part of the integral subjects and additional 20 minutes per day had been added to its former 40 minute per day allotment. The Desired Learning Competencies (DLC) such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing were given emphasis along with literature as a content area.
- With the Congressional Committee on Education (EDCOM), it reviewed the state of Philippine education, which revealed the following results: unsatisfactory competencies of teachers, short period of schooling, and lack of emphasis on the natural sciences and mathematics.
- With the Revised Basic Education Curriculum of 2002, secondary English language curriculum sought to develop citizenship and address the

communication needs of Filipino students for English. Learning had been contextualized, interactive, and integrated. The communicative approach that gave rise to communicative language teaching (CLT) and content-based (CBI) approach which gave rise to content-based instruction (CBI) were underscored and assigned a 1.5 unit equivalent, conducted for an hour each day. To this day, teachers complain about the lack and unavailability of materials for both CLT and CBI and the lack of collaboration between content teachers and language teachers for the CBI approach.

A milestone in the Philippine educational system occurred with the K-12 educational reform introduced in 2009, which advocates not only the use of English and Filipino but also the major local languages in the country. Mother tongue based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) veers away from the Bilingual Education Policy. While it serves as a challenge, certainly, numerous pitfalls are encountered in the process. With this innovation, it is hoped that the Filipino learner will find education to be more relevant with the use of the local vernacular with which he/she is most comfortable.

However, the English language, up to this day, continues to enjoy prestige and while the K-12 educational reform sees fit the importance of MTB-MLE, it does not completely abrogate the use of English, for such reform recognizes English as the language of wider communication. President Aquino himself believes in the concept of MTB-MLE when he stated: “We use English to connect ourselves to the world, Filipino to connect ourselves to our country, and our mother tongue to connect ourselves to our heritage.”

Teachers’ English Language Proficiency

The performance of grades 1 and 2 teachers in the Test of English Proficiency for Teachers (TEPT) and the Process Skills Test (PST) in science and mathematics was a good way of monitoring the proficiency level of English and the level of the process skills of public elementary school teachers. The National Education Testing and Research Center of the Department of Education released the results in July 2012 that in terms of English proficiency, the teachers were rated to have low proficiency in both structure and written expression and moderate in reading comprehension yielding an over-all result of low for the total test. The number of takers was pegged at 117,728, which revealed a result of 50.5 percent. While process skills such as observing, measuring/quantifying, interpreting data, and making models were evaluated as moderate, classifying, predicting, communicating, analyzing data, evaluating, experimenting, making conclusions, and defining operationally were rated as low. Inferring was found to be very low. Thus, the process skills were given a mean performance score of 46.0 percent with a descriptive equivalent of low.

Students' English Language Proficiency

Based on the Department of Education website (www.deped.gov.ph), the national performance of grade 3 pupils in the National Achievement Test (NAT) showed, that on the average, the grade 3 children in public schools obtained a mean performance score (MPS) of 56.7 percent in the 2012 NAT which is a retrogression when compared with the results of the previous years.

As for the high school students, their national performance in the NAT, on the average, showed that fourth year students obtained a mean performance score of 48.9 percent in the 2012 NAT, which was an improved performance when compared with the previous years (2005 and 2006).

According to DepEd 2002 Basic Education Curriculum (BEC), secondary students had a poor performance in the National Secondary Achievement Test (NSAT) over the last four years. Overcrowded curriculum was one of the main reasons for the poor test results.

It is to be noted that the TIMSS (Trends in Math and Science Survey) test is administered in the country in English instead of in the language spoken at home by the test-takers. This makes the Philippines one of the very few countries that take the test in a second language. The Philippines rated poorly in TIMSS. However, when the Department of Science and Technology conducted the test in Filipino, results yielded were the same. It appears then that children do not learn science and math concepts well enough to solve problems.

Whereas in 1998 and 2003, the Philippines was in the bottom five among the participating countries in terms of achievement, in 2007 TIMSS results showed that students who spoke the language of the test at home had higher mathematics and science achievement scores and that achievement was highest among schools where the language of the test was 90 percent or more in the student's first language.

According to Dr. Milagros Ibe of the National Institute of Science and Math Education:

Testing in English does not significantly disadvantage pupils who are taught in "Sine'skwela," using Filipino as a medium. Understanding of the concepts in Filipino appears to facilitate transfer of learning to English. These children, however, are not fluent in English. In fact, [they] find it hard to communicate and express themselves in English during recitations and discussion.

Pupils in grades 2 and 3 who watch "Sine'skwela" attain master-level in 50-67 percent of the concepts learned, while those not exposed to the program master only 20-33 percent of the same . . . Pupils in the lower grades are capable of responding to four-option multiple choice questions . . . Longer tests (i.e. more than 30 items) can also be used for them.

According to the DepEd 2002 Basic Education Curriculum (BEC), secondary students had a poor performance in the NSAT over the last four years. One of the main reasons for the poor test results is overcrowded curriculum.

To resolve the problem, DepEd released Order No. 37, which contained the following solutions: (a) the curriculum was revised, the goal of which was functional literacy defined as self-directed learning; (b) it addresses the communicative needs of the students through an interactive, collaborative approach to learning as well as reflection and introspection with the aim in view of developing autonomous language learners aware of and able to cope with global trends; and (c) the Department of Education through the Bureau of Secondary Education created an Operations Handbook in English in 2002 in time for the series of training for superintendents and division heads in the same year. This handbook is divided into ten parts: Introduction, Description, Unit Credit, Time Allotment, Expectancies, Scope and Sequence, Suggested Strategies and Materials, Grading System, Learning Competencies, and Sample Lesson Plans. More policies on assessment were drafted from 2003 to 2004.

The government likewise continuously provide teacher training and established linkage with non-government organizations (NGOs) to provide retooling and retraining to public school teachers to upgrade their English proficiency.

Methods and Practices in Philippine English Classrooms

In all tiers of education, the four language macro-skills are taught: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Recently, a new skill, viewing, was added to the learning agenda. While teachers are able to harmonize all four macro-skills in the language class, not all are able to integrate viewing. Nevertheless, the attempt to incorporate viewing as a language skill has entered the mainstream of urban schools, especially the private school sector. To support acquisition or development of language, movie excerpts or filmstrips are injected, making it more appealing to young learners who belong to Generation Z, most of whom have acquired good proficiency in the use of media technology and social media. Unfortunately, digital natives are not found in the rural schools, particularly in areas that are geographically separated by large bodies of water or mountainous regions. This is caused by lack of facilities, Internet access, or worse, unavailability of power. To make up for such lack of infrastructure, teachers in these areas try to achieve the viewing objective in the classroom through picture presentations and illustrations. As intended, viewing is able to combine all four macro-skills and considers the learning context in relation to where the learners are.

The 1950s to the 1980s, referred to as the “The Age of Methods” by Richards and Rogers (2001), exposed English language teachers to various frameworks and methods. The audio-lingual approach, which was well accepted in the field of language teaching, still permeates many Philippine English classrooms even if the more interactive communicative approach has long replaced it. Other methods which gained prominence in the last 30 years are those of content and

language integrated learning (CLIL), more commonly known in the Philippines as content-based instruction (CBI), and task-based language teaching (TBLT).

While most teachers in the Philippines are currently moving away from the well-accepted audio-lingual method in favor of CLT, it is still not clear if the objectives of communicative language teaching are, indeed, achieved considering the large language classes handled by teachers in all levels, most especially in the public schools. Some questions worth pondering are: “*How do teachers execute the teaching strategies in class?*” and “*To what extent are these approaches effective?*” What complicates the situation even more is that every time new government officials assume leadership in the Department of Education (DepEd), a new framework is introduced. In 2010, for instance, the Understanding by Design (UBD) framework was introduced and recommended for adoption by DepEd as it was believed to resolve the problem of alignment among content standards, instruction, and assessment. After the teachers had become more accustomed to the framework, a new one has again been introduced in light of the K-12 educational reform—Outcomes-based Education (OBE). Moreover, in light of the Enhanced Basic Education Program Act of 2013 or the K-12, Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) is now being required, meaning that instruction in kindergarten to grade 3 is in the native language of the learners. As regards OBE or Outcomes-Based Teaching and Learning (OBTL) for some education analysts, Philippine schools are now in the process of adopting this framework, engaging in curriculum critical reviews and overhauling syllabi, thus veering away from the competency-based type of learning in favor of the outcomes-based.

Conclusion

With all these developments, it became essential for Filipino educators to look at language from a historical perspective, with practitioners considering language first and foremost as a code. In time, though, this perspective changed so that language became more of a tool for communication. But perhaps the more critical issue that needs to be addressed is: *Where are the learners now and what are their needs?* Asking this question shifts the focus from the methods to the learner. Hence, after moving to this New Age or post-methods era, it has become increasingly important for teachers to first assess how all the language methods can be integrated and where the old methods can come into play.

References

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