

THE PROSPECTS OF MULTILINGUAL EDUCATION AND LITERACY IN THE PHILIPPINES

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1. Introduction

A basic weakness is plaguing Philippine education. It is that many pupils do not understand what their teacher is saying and therefore they cannot follow the lesson. Why? Because the language in school is one they can hardly speak and understand.

In a hearing conducted on February 27, 2008 by the committee on basic education and culture of the Philippine House of Representatives, various stakeholders in education urged Congress to abandon moves to install English as the sole medium of instruction, especially in the primary grades.

The Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino or KWF was one of these stakeholders. The KWF suggested that a law be passed mandating the primary use of the learner's first language (L1 or mother tongue) from pre-school to grade 6, or at least up to grade 4. In our proposal, Filipino and English should be taught at the elementary level but only as separate subjects, and not as media of instruction.

We explained to the committee that the plan should provide learners, whose L1 is neither English nor Filipino, enough time to develop their cognitive, academic and linguistic skills in their mother tongue. In the process, a solid foundation can be built for learning subjects taught in English and Filipino in high school. By then learners will have mastered the academic language in these two languages. The L1 can then be used as auxiliary medium and/or as a separate subject.

This paper discusses the prospects of institutionalizing mother tongue- or L1-based multilingual education (MLE) and literacy in the Philippines. It shall be divided into the following parts: a) introduction; b) the linguistic situation in the Philippines; c) the country's language-in-education policy; d) the international and local research in the use of language in education; e) support for MLE from various stakeholders; and f) conclusion.

2. The linguistic situation in the Philippines

The Philippines is a multilingual nation with more than 170 languages. According to the 2000 Philippines census, the biggest Philippine languages based on the number of native speakers are: Tagalog 21.5 million; Cebuano 18.5 million; Ilocano 7.7 million; Hiligaynon 6.9 million; Bicol 4.5 million; Waray 3.1 million;

Kapampangan 2.3 million; Pangasinan 1.5 million; Kinaray-a 1.3 million; Tausug 1 million; Meranao 1 million; and Maguindanao 1 million.

While it is true that no language enjoys a majority advantage in our country, the census shows that 65 million out of the 76 million Filipinos are able to speak the national language as a first or second language. Aside from the national lingua franca, regional lingua francas, like Ilokano, Cebuano and Hiligaynon are also widely spoken.

English is also a second language or L2 to most Filipinos. According to the Social Weather Stations, in 2008, about three fourths of Filipino adults (76%) said they could understand spoken English; another 75% said they could read English; three out of five (61%) said they could write English; close to half (46%) said they could speak English; about two fifths (38%) said they could think in English; while 8% said they were not competent in any way when it comes to the English language.

The self-assessment of Filipinos to speak and write in English and in Filipino may not be consistent with their actual proficiency in those languages.

For instance, in 1998, Guzman and her team administered proficiency tests to five separate groups in Metro Manila. The groups consisted of: a) University of the Philippines undergraduate students (UP-U); b) UP law students (UP-L); c) undergraduate students from a sectarian university (SU); d) undergraduate students from a private non-sectarian university (PNSU); and e) employees in a workplace (WP). Test items were selected on the basis of learning competencies and skills expected of high school graduates as determined by the Department of Education. The results were as follows:

Table 1. English and Filipino scores in Proficiency Tests administered to Participating Institutions

	UP- U	UP-L	SU	PNSU	WP
English	67%	77%	48%	33%	56%
Filipino	82%	83%	78%	71%	82%

Source: Guzman et. al. (1998)

Considering that students from the University of the Philippines are widely believed to represent the top 2% of all secondary school graduates, the figures indicate that English ability in other Metro Manila and provincial schools may be way below the UP average of 67% and closer to the 33% average of students from the private non-sectarian university. The data further show better mastery by students and employees of Filipino

More recent figures give a clearer picture of the actual proficiency of Filipino students in the two languages. In 2003-2007, the national achievement scores in English

of fourth year students were found to average at the 50-52% level, while their scores in Filipino were even lower.

Table 2. National Achievement Scores in English and Filipino of 4th Year High School Students in the Philippines for 2003-2007

	2003-04	2005- 06	2004-05	2006-07
English	50.08%	51.33%	47.73%	51.78%
Filipino	na	42.48%	40.51%	48.89%

Source: Department of Education

These data raise serious doubts about the capability of our high school students to handle content in either English and Filipino.

3. Language-in-education policy in the Philippines

Article XIV of the 1987 constitution provides that:

For purposes of communication and instruction, the official languages of the Philippines are Filipino and, until otherwise provided by law, English. The regional languages are the auxiliary official languages in the regions and shall serve as auxiliary media of instruction therein.

In pursuit thereof, the Aquino government laid down in 1987 the Bilingual Education policy which called for:

- the use of English and Pilipino (changed to Filipino) as media of instruction from Grade 1 onwards: English, in Science, Mathematics and English; and Filipino in Social Studies, Character Education, Work Education, Health Education and Physical Education;
- the use of regional languages as auxiliary media of instruction as well as initial languages for literacy (as spelled out in DECS Order No. 52)

In 2003, the Arroyo government issued Executive Order No. 210 with the avowed purpose of “(E)stablishing the Policy to Strengthen the Use of the English Language as a Medium of Instruction.” The order directed the following:

- English shall be taught as a second language, starting with Grade 1;
- English shall be the medium of instruction for English, Mathematics and Science from at least Grade 3;
- English shall be the primary MOI in the secondary level, which means that the time allotted for English in all learning areas shall not be less than 70%;
- Filipino shall continue to be the MOI for Filipino and social studies;

Acting on the perceived desire of the president for a legislated return of English as the MOI, several representatives from the lower house filed three separate bills invoking similar purposes.

In his explanatory note to House Bill No. 4701, Representative Gullas said that as a result of the bilingual policy, the learning of the English language suffered a setback. He cited two reasons for this: one is what he refers to as language interference (i.e. “targeting the learning of two languages [English and Filipino] is too much for the Filipino learners, especially in the lower grades.” Two, is the use of Pilipino “which is actually Tagalog” as medium of instruction as “having limited the exposure of the learner to English, and since exposure is basic to language learning, mastery of the language is not attained.”

According to Representative Del Mar, a co-author of the English bill, the key to better jobs here and abroad is English because “it is the language of research, science and technology, areas which global business and employment are very much into.” He pointed out that the teaching of English should start “at the pre-school and elementary levels” because “the language proficiency must start at the childhood stage, the formative years” and “it would be more difficult to do so in older years.”

Representative Villafuerte, another proponent, mentions other reasons. He said that compared to its Asian neighbors, Filipinos find it easier to learn English because Philippine languages are “phonetics-based” and therefore can easily learn “phonics-based” English. He poses a second argument in that because “the best quality educational and reading materials are in English,” the non-native Tagalog speaker has “to translate the reading material into Tagalog first before (s)he can discuss the material intelligently with the teacher and among fellow learners.”

House Bill No. 4701, the original bill, was approved on third and final reading during the 13th Congress in 2006, with the support of 206 signatories. The measure provided that:

- English, Filipino or the regional/native language may be used as the MOI in all subjects from preschool until Grade II;
- English and Filipino shall be taught as separate subjects in all levels in the elementary and secondary;
- In all academic subjects in the elementary grades from Grade III to Grade VI and in all levels in the secondary, the MOI shall be English;

The bill however failed to materialize into law because there was no corresponding approval from the Senate. In the present 14th Congress, the English bill is now known as House Bill 850 which has been consolidated with the two other versions, House Bills 305 and 446.

There was another language-in-education bill filed by Representative Liza Maza which pushed for the use of the national language as the primary medium of instruction. Not surprisingly, this bill didn't survive through the committee level.

3. International and local research in language in education

International and local studies on the use of first and second languages in education all contradict the arguments presented by the authors of the English bill.

In a World Bank funded study, Dutcher in collaboration with R. Tucker (1994) reviewed the international experience on this subject and found that:

- Children need at least 12 years to learn their L1.
- Older children and adolescents are better learners of an L2 than younger children. This is because of the greater amount of experience and cognitive maturity that older children and adolescents have over younger children.
- Developing the child's cognitive skills thorough L1 is more effective than more exposure to L2. Knowledge and skills learned through the L1 need not be relearned but simply transferred and re-encoded in the L2.
- Conversational language in an L2 can be attained within 1 to 3 years but success in school depends on the child's mastery of the academic language which may take from four to seven years).
- Individuals easily develop cognitive skills and master content material when they are taught in a familiar language. They can immediately add new concepts to what they already know. They need not postpone the learning of content before mastering an L2.

Will increasing the time for English improve our English? Two longitudinal studies in the United States suggest otherwise.

Ramirez, Yuen and Ramey (1991) studied the effects on language minority children of the immersion strategy (all English curriculum), early-exit (1 to 3 years of L1) and late-exit (3 to 6 years) bilingual programs. Their report showed that "providing substantial instruction in the child's primary language does not impede the learning of English language or reading skills." In fact, Latino students who received sustained instruction in their home language fared academically better than those who studied under an all-English program. The report also indicated that as far as helping them (Latino students) acquire mathematics, English language, and reading skills was concerned, there was no substantial difference between providing a limited-English-proficient student with English-only instruction through grade three and providing them with L1 support for three years.

The 1997 Thomas and Collier's study also arrived at similar findings. They found out that after 11 years, US children whose L1 is not English and who received an all English education learned the least amount of English. They also had the lowest scores in the standardized tests and could only finish between the 11th and 22nd NCE¹. Those receiving one to three years of L1 instruction turned out scores which were good between the 24th and 33rd NCEs. On the other hand, students taught in their L1 for six years scored more than the average English native speaker in the English and academic tests. They ranked above the national norms at the 54th NCE.

Hassana Alidou and her companions (2006) studied mother tongue and bilingual education in Africa. They underscored the crucial role played by the quality and timing of L2 instruction. They found out that:

- It takes six to eight years of strong L2 teaching before L2 can be used as a medium. By then the learner has learned the academic language in the L2 sufficiently enough for this purpose.
- L1 literacy from Grades 1 to 3 helps but is not sufficient to sustain the learning momentum. As in the Ramirez et al. and the Thomas and Colliers studies, the first three years of the child's education shows a jumpstart in the learning of L2 and academic content, with or without L1 support. This apparent progress is what deceives educators into falsely concluding that the learners are making it. The beneficial effects of short term mother tongue instruction begin wearing off after the fifth year.
- The full benefits of long term L1 instruction (6 to 8 years) will only be evident after the tenth year. By then, knowledge in the L1 would have been transferred to the L2 and would have promoted academic learning in an L2.
- L1 education when interrupted adversely affects the cognitive and academic development of the child. The Ramirez report also came out with the same conclusion: “(W)hen limited-English-proficient students receive most of their instruction in their home language, they should not be abruptly transferred into a program that uses only English.”
- The premature use of L2 can lead to low achievement in literacy, mathematics and science.

What does local research say about these matters?

Since the 1940s language-in-education studies were being conducted in the country precisely to provide a sound empirical basis for crafting policy.

¹ NCE = Normal Curve Equivalent, a statistical analysis used in comparing test scores (similar to but different than “percentile”).

The First Iloilo Experiment was undertaken from 1948-1954 by Jose D. Aguilar who pioneered in the use of Hiligaynon as medium of instruction in Grades 1 and 2. The tests showed Hiligaynon-taught children outperforming English-taught children in reading, math and the social studies. The study not only showed L1 students being able to transfer the knowledge learned in their L1 to English. It also found the L1 students catching up with the L2 students in their knowledge of English within six months after being exposed to English as medium of instruction.

Other related programs that can be mentioned are: the Second Iloilo Language Experiment (1961-1964); the Rizal experiment (1960-1966); the six-year First Language Component-Bridging program (FLC-BP) on “transitional” education in Ifugao province; and the literacy projects of the Translators Association of the Philippines (TAP), responsible for developing literacy materials in more than thirty languages.

The Regional Lingua Franca (RLF) Pilot Project was launched by the Department of Education under the leadership of Secretary Andrew B. Gonzales. It began in 1999 in 16 regions and uses one of the three largest lingua francae—Tagalog, Cebuano and Ilocano—as media of instruction in grades one and two, after which the children are mainstreamed into the regular bilingual program. The general objective of the program was to “define and implement a national bridging program for use in Philippine schools.”

A total of 32 schools participated in the project, half (16) of which belonged to the experimental class and the other half (16) to the control class. There were five (5) schools which employed Cebuano as a medium, four (4) which used Ilocano and seven (7), Tagalog. The control schools implemented the bilingual scheme.

The experimental and control schools were tested in mathematics, science, *wika at pagbasa* (language and reading), and *sibika* (civics/social studies) for year 1999-2000 and 2000-2001. The test results are as follows:

Table 3. Mean scores for Grade 1 under RLF project, SY 1999-2000

Subject Area Tested	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Cebuano N= 183	Ilocano N= 115	Tagalog N=264	Cebuano N=186	Ilocano N=109	Tagalog N=253
Mathematics	16.26	15.26	19.32	14.62	12.96	14.74
Science	16.56	17.02	20.90	12.74	12.94	14.75
Wika at Pagbasa	25.57	25.21	31.53	26.07	26.00	27.83
Sibika	22.01	21.69	28.78	22.76	21.53	24.80

Source: Department of Education

Table 4. Mean scores for Grades 1 and 2 under RLF project, SY 2000-2001

Subject Area Tested	Grade 1		Grade 2	
	Experimental	Control	Experimental	Control
Mathematics	16.25	12.32	18.31	15.28

Science	14.28	11.43	15.82	14.22
Wika at Pagbasa	21.16	20.84	24.82	23.20
Sibika			15.08	16.32

Source: Department of Education

For the first year of implementation of the RLF project, as shown in Table 3, the experimental group obtained numerically higher scores than the control groups in all learning areas and in all lingua francae, except in *wika at pagbasa* in Ilocano and Cebuano. For the second year of implementation, Table 4 shows the experimental classes in both grades performing better in all subject areas, except in English where the Grade 2 pupils in the control classes were exposed to English since Grade 1.

Based on the three year pilot implementation of the lingua franca project, Dep-Ed concluded that: “(The) Lingua franca has effectively helped children adjust to the school setting and learning tasks such as being able to read and write, solve math problems, understanding science concepts and principles using the first language at home and eventually English as a second language.”

It added: “They (the pupils) became more interested in their day-to-day learning activities. Comprehension was very evident as shown in (the) daily evaluation done. (With) the use of the mother tongue, the language the pupils have, the problem of communicating and expressing themselves freely had been overcome.”

The most compelling L1-based educational program so far has been the Lubuagan Kalinga MLE program. This is being carried out by the Summer Institute of Linguistics-Philippines, the Department of Education and the local community of Lubuagan, Kalinga province. Already in its tenth year, the program covers three (3) experimental class schools implementing the mother tongue-based MLE approach and three control class schools implementing the traditional method of immersion in English and Filipino. Schools are of the same SES (Social Economic Status).

Walter and Dekker (2008) and Walter, Dekker and Duguiang (to appear) reported and analyzed the test results from grades one to three in these schools and sections for school years 2006-07 and 2007-2008. The testing of the experimental classes and control classes were done under the following conditions: a) all experimental and control class students were tested; b) experimental classes were tested in MT for all subjects, except for English and Filipino; and c) control classes were tested in the prescribed language of instruction for each subject, i.e. English for Math, Filipino for Social Studies etc.

Only the test results for SY 2007-2008 will be discussed in this paper. The summary test results for grades one to three can be seen in Tables 5, 6 and 7.

The over-all results of the testing show the experimental classes consistently doing better than control classes with significantly higher composite scores in ALL of the subjects. The experimental class scored nearly 80 percent mastery of the curriculum

while the control class showed just over 50 percent knowledge of the curriculum. The results provide crucial evidence that mother tongue instruction strengthens the learning of English and Filipino and does not hinder the learning of content, contrary to claims by the advocates of pro-English bill in Congress.

Table 5. Summary results of the Grade 1 testing in Lubuagan, SY 2007-2008:

	Controls				Experimentals			Statistics	
	N	Mean	Percent		N	Mean	Percent	T-test	P
Reading	73	8.97	52.76		69	12.83	75.47	6.86	0.000
Math	73	8.32	48.94		70	13.76	82.12	9.19	0.000
Filipino	73	6.85	57.08		70	8.21	68.42	3.42	0.001
Makabayan	73	6.95	57.92		70	9.77	81.42	8.12	0.000
English	73	8.97	52.76		70	12.31	72.41	5.88	0.000
Overall	73	40.10	53.47		69	56.90	75.87	7.89	0.000

Table 6. Summary results of the Grade 2 testing in Lubuagan, SY 2007-2008

	Controls				Experimentals			Statistics	
	N	Mean	Percent		N	Mean	Percent	T-test	P
Reading	94	12.63	54.9		42	18.00	78.3	9.22	0.000
Math	94	13.00	61.9		42	16.86	80.3	7.79	0.000
Filipino	94	7.79	51.9		42	12.21	81.4	14.88	0.000
Makabayan	94	9.14	60.9		42	12.12	80.8	9.35	0.000
English	94	12.63	54.9		42	14.29	62.1	4.89	0.000
Overall	94	55.20	56.9		42	75.48	77.8	10.98	0.000

Table 7. Summary results of the Grade 3 testing in Lubuagan, SY 2007-2008

	Controls			Experimentals			Statistics	
	N	Mean	Percent	N	Mean	Percent	T-test	P
Reading	60	7.47	53.4	56	11.09	79.2	7.16	0.000
Math	60	7.42	49.5	56	11.43	76.2	7.25	0.000
Filipino	60	12.39	62.9	56	14.12	70.6	2.32	0.022
Makabayan	60	9.50	50.0	56	14.20	74.7	6.95	0.000
English	60	7.47	53.4	56	10.80	77.1	6.92	0.000
Overall	60	44.23	53.9	56	61.64	75.1	7.08	0.000

4. Support from various stakeholders to mother-tongue based MLE

Many events in the campaign for mother tongue-based multilingual education in the Philippines have unfolded –and continue to unfold – in 2008.

On March 6, a historical bill was filed by Representative Magtanggol Gunigundo entitled “The Multilingual Education and Literacy Act of 2008”. The bill incorporated most of the suggestions that stakeholders put forward in the February hearing in congress. It called for the use of the first language as primary medium from pre-school to Grade VI. It also advocated the strong teaching of English and Filipino in the elementary grades but only as separate subjects and not as media of instruction.

Representative Gunigundo explained that “the strategy was to develop the children’s cognitive, academic and linguistic skills in their L1 and gradually transfer this knowledge in the nationally prescribed languages, English and Filipino.” The strong teaching of English and Filipino as separate subjects in the elementary grades will prepare the Filipino for the use of these two languages as primary media in high school, Gunigundo said.

Shortly thereafter, on May 19, Senator Mar Roxas filed Senate Bill No. 2294 which agreed with the rationale and provisions of the house version except one, that the

L1 shall be used as medium of instruction only up to grade 3. Senator Roxas blamed the worsening competency of the youth in English, Science and Math to “our bias for English as a medium of learning.”

It is noteworthy that the biggest stakeholders in education have come out openly in support of L1-based MLE.

In a position paper, the Philippine Business for Education, one of the largest association of businessmen in the country, assailed the English bills as running counter to current expert findings. It adopted the UNESCO position that mother tongue is essential for initial instruction and should be extended to as late a stage in education as possible. It favored the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda (BESRA) of the Department of Education for the formulation of national strategies in learning English and Filipino. PBED asserted that English and Filipino are languages “foreign” to most children and “legislating either as medium of instruction will do more harm to an already ailing system of education.”

The KWF was the first to issue a statement endorsing the Gunigundo bill. The statement was signed by its board of commissioners representing the various Philippine languages. The KWF is the official language agency in charge of propagating, preserving and developing the national and local languages of the Philippines. It agreed with the bill’s intention of developing the cognitive skills of the children in their first language instead of exposing the children to more English. It also affirmed the existence of only one national language called Filipino which it believes should be promoted as a language in education, together with English.

On July 25, the Department of Education through Secretary Jesli A. Lapus wrote to the Presidential Legislative Liaison Officer to express full support for the passage of House Bill No. 3719. Dep-Ed found the bill to be consistent with the BESRA recommendations and the bridging model proposed by the Bureau of Elementary Education where pupils were found to perform better and comprehend better the lessons in class. While Dep-Ed favored the use of the vernacular as primary medium of instruction from pre-school to grade 3 only, it recommended the primary use of English from grades IV to VI subject to the learning levels of the child and to guidelines prescribed by Dep-Ed.

The Gunigundo bill received a similar boost from the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) when the top economic agency gave its support. In a letter dated August 12 to Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, NEDA Director General Ralph Recto emphasized that the bill was urgent because “it would put in place a very critical basic education reform – students will have the best learning tool for Science, Mathematics, English, and other subjects.” NEDA also cited the bill’s harmony with the goals of the Philippine Education for All (EFA) 2015 Plan and the Updated Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP) 2004-2010. It also expressed the belief that this education policy, in the final analysis, is cost-effective, as it will address the

learning inefficiencies in basic education like high repetition rate, high drop-out rate, poor retention, and low achievement rate.

The latest to make its stand in favor of the multilingual education bill is the Linguistic Society of the Philippines, the oldest and most prestigious association of linguists and language educators in the country. In its statement, the LSP said that its commitment to the advancement of Philippine languages research compels it to support the Gunigundo bill. LSP noted that the use of the mother tongue (first language) is the best option for literacy and education in multilingual societies such as the Philippines, as shown by past research and more recent studies. These studies, including those made by LSP's founders, cannot be ignored, the statement said. LSP's support is doubly significant because it draws most of its members from the English departments of private and public schools and universities throughout the country.

5. Conclusion

These events auger well for the use of the local languages in education but may not be enough to influence policy. According to Presidential Adviser Mona Valisno of the Task Force on Education, the President “has taken cognizance of the preponderance of evidence which shows that learning is enhanced with the use of the learner’s language in the home.” Consequently, Valisno reported that the President has agreed to “the use of the lingua franca or vernacular **for grade one**, but emphasized the need to intensify efforts of all concerned **to make the pupils learn more English, math and science.**” (emphasis supplied)

The struggle for L1 based-multilingual education suffered a temporary setback when the joint committee on basic education and culture and the committee on higher education in its September 16 meeting approved the English bill for plenary discussion. It has become abundantly clear that much of the research on the use of the first and second language in education have not made its mark on lawmakers and the general public.

For MLE to succeed in the Philippines, it is not enough that we change the media of instruction. I can think of four other conditions that must be met (although there may be more.) One, there has to be good curriculum, one that is cognitively demanding. Two, we will need good teachers who are competent in the required language, content and methods. Three, there must be good teaching materials (i.e. error free). Four, community support and empowerment must be present.

Inspired by the Lubuagan experience, we do not have to wait for legislation to begin an MLE program. There are enough policies and local resources for communities to set up their own school-based managed program. MLE can start where the conditions are most favorable. For instance, last March 10, the provincial board of Pangasinan created and empowered an ad hoc committee to do research, make recommendations and initiate action on the conduct of experimental classes in Pangasinan in the elementary grades. The committee consisted of members of the provincial government, local school

boards, university officials, writers and other stakeholders. One million pesos was allotted for the committee's activities.

These local initiatives can be replicated on a district or regional basis and eventually on a national scale. Meanwhile, advocates of multilingual education and people who are knowledgeable on L1-based MLE research must make its case known before the central government, before Congress, before the local government, before the mass media and before the entire nation.

To be sure, the road to multi-literacy and multi-lingual education in the Philippines will be a difficult and tortuous one. In fact, there is still no road to speak of, because all we have are paths created by our predecessors in the grassy field, so to speak. But once we get our message across and get more people on our side, there will be more than enough hands to build that road.

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