

LANGUAGE RELATED RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMISSION ON EDUCATIONAL REFORM

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1. INTRODUCTION

Mandates on which language to use as medium of instruction began to be covered by executive orders from relevant authorities only from the independence period onwards. During the earlier periods (from the Hispanic to pre World War II era), language policies were decisions simply handed down by the authorities.

It will be recalled that the medium of instruction issue has constantly been a subject of controversy, which fortunately might have been the main reason why research on it has been triggered. In earlier days, particularly during Hispanic times, the authorities decided a language policy. No consultation was ever held. The public simply received it; there was not much disagreement, if any existed at all. For instance, during the Spanish regime, the Filipinos in general did not learn the colonial language (Spanish) as they were not encouraged to do so. Only the few rich ones, the *ilustrados*, so to speak, were allowed access to (learn) the language. Many historical books say that the invading Spaniards thought that hiding their language from the invaded Filipinos was an effective conquest strategy. It ought to be said though that today, the Philippines shares friendly relations with Spain.

The Americans came and allowed the Filipinos to learn their language in addition to things larger and more significant, i.e. their educational system and their democratic ideology, among others. The famous Monroe Educational Survey was conducted in 1925, well within the American regime. That survey could be said to be the start of formal educational surveys in the Philippines. A notable result of this survey was that English was 'pushed.' It became the main medium of instruction in the schools, despite the clamor for vernacularization which even an American colonial ruler claimed should be fostered.

The Americans' occupation of the country was briefly disturbed by the onslaught of World War II, when the Japanese reigned supreme over most of Asia. They launched their co-prosperity sphere program, of which an aim was to eliminate English and to introduce the Japanese language to the Filipinos. During this period, Tagalog received much support from the ruling Japanese and was made the main medium of instruction in the schools.

The Americans came again and liberated the country from the Japanese. English then continued its propagation on Philippine soil. Characteristically, what was followed in the schools was an all-English curriculum. That was so until the Revised Educational Act of 1957, when vernacular instruction in Grades I and II was made a policy. Transition to English starting only in Grade III was another provision of that policy. Continued use of the language as medium of instruction till high school and the tertiary level was a further policy.

The next major language policy change was that of the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) announced through Department Order No. 9, s. 1973 which was issued on March 16, 1973. Supplemental guidelines for its implementation were issued via Department Order No. 25, series 1974, issued on June 19, 1974 by the Department of Education (DEC). The 1974 BEP was slightly revised and a new Bilingual Policy was announced in DECS (Department of Education, Culture and Sports) No. 52, series 1987, issued on May 21, 1987. From that time on, there has been no change of language policy. The BEP provided for the use of English and Pilipino (then spelled as Filipino after 1987) in specified subject areas, thus: English as the medium of instruction for Science, English language, and Mathematics, and Pilipino for the rest (Social Studies/Social Science, Character Education, Work Education, Health Education, and Physical Education).

2. BACKGROUND OF THE PCER RECOMMENDATIONS

Literature on language acquisition, bilingual education/bilingualism/multilingualism, vernacular education, educational language surveys and the like was considered in drawing up the recommendation. The Philippine Education Sector Study (PESS), which was jointly sponsored by the World Bank (WB) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), particularly that done by Brigham and Castillo (1999) was a very timely springboard for the language recommendations of PCER.

The 1974 and 1987 BEP had as its goal that of making the country bilingual, competent in both Filipino and English. Furthermore, the BEP was intended to advance learning in all aspects – that with a socio-cultural dimension as well as that which is academic in nature. Early studies on bilingualism have shown that “bilinguals have a more diversified structure of intelligence and have more flexibility of thought” (Lambert, 1977); and therefore, can be expected to have greater cognitive flexibility.

However, implementation of the BEP has been flawed by what Brigham and Castillo (1999) cited:

- Instructional materials in Filipino were insufficient.
- There was a dearth of instructional materials (books, resources, references, etc.) so that even though the regional languages were allowed as auxiliary media of teaching and learning, this was hampered by said inadequacy. The teachers of subjects using Filipino as medium of instruction even had had to rely on English materials. (WB-ADB, 1998:33-34)
- Language teaching in the Philippines had emphasized mechanics, structures and rules of languages neglecting important functional creative and communication skills.

- Many Filipino teachers were ill-prepared to teach in either of the two languages as manifested in language tests given to teachers in 1985; average scores in Filipino and English were 68 percent and below 60 percent, respectively (WB-ADB, 1999:33-34). In some instances, their scores were even lower than those of their own pupils (EDCOM, 1991).
- The gap between BEP program planning and program implementation was evident. Some 2.9% of the schools had not yet begun implementation (as of the target completion year of the first cohort of students schooled under the policy) and 1.5% had begun only within the last two years (Gonzalez, 1995).
- Many teachers, students and administrators resisted the use of Filipino; for example, the cases in Cebu City, Zamboanga City, Butuan City, and Iloilo City can be cited in which the preference was for an all English-curriculum. Their reason: English is the language of international communication, power, and upward social mobility.
- There was a lack of qualified people who could do necessary translations.

An indicator of learning performance by school children using English and Filipino may be seen from the results of the National Secondary Achievement Test (NSAT) and the country's performance at the TIMSS (Third International Mathematics and Science Study). In 1999, the average NSAT scores in English and Filipino were only 44.19% and 62.5% (DECS Fact Sheet 1999) respectively while in the TIMSS the country ranked 38th in Math and 40th in Science out of 41 countries that participated. These give evidence of the lackluster achievement in the schools. The alarming dropout rate in the primary grades has been noted; according to Sec. Andrew Gonzalez, one-fourth of rural children quit school before reaching the third grade (Asiaweek 1999).

The above indicators are partly attributed to the choice of medium of instruction. A study, *Evaluating Bilingual Education in the Philippines (1974-1985)* (Gonzalez and Sibayan 1988), convincingly presents findings that there are factors other than BEP that cause the poor quality of Philippine education. It revealed that in schools that had good administrators, good teachers, programs, facilities and teaching and learning materials, Filipino children learned well both English and Pilipino and the subjects taught in them.

The use of the vernacular either as auxiliary medium of instruction or as the MOI itself is not new anymore. As early as the 1930's, there already were attempts at pushing for vernacular use (by Gov. Gen. George Butte). Kalaw (as cited in Bernabe, 1987) shared the belief that literates would be better citizens since they would know more about their duties and responsibilities and would get better acquainted with the community's problems. The vernacular was the language that, to him, would ensure the development of literacy.

The significant role of the vernacular was played up since shortly before World War II when Jorge Bocobo, then Secretary of the Department of Public Instruction, authorized the use of the regional languages as auxiliary media of instruction. Whether there was wide consultation and comprehensive preparation made before the policy took effect could not be determined (Sibayan, 1978). But what was known was that the move intended "to facilitate teaching, economize time, and make instruction more effective" further stating that "whenever public school teachers would find that their pupil or class was unable to understand their question, direction, or explanation, they could use the local dialect" (Sibayan 1999:37-86). The succeeding language policy also authorized the use of the regional languages, this time as medium of instruction in Grades 1 and 2. It read: "The

Board adopts a policy on the use of the native language as the medium of instruction in Grades 1 and 2 in all public and private schools and urges the school authorities to take practicable steps toward its implementation" (Sibayan, 1999:60-61). The findings of the Iloilo Vernacular experiments which favored the experimental group (which was instructed in the vernacular in Grades 1 and 2) over the control group (which used English instead) gave impetus to this policy. Moreover, there seemed to be an effective transfer of learning from the vernacular to English (Castillo, 1998). While the results were encouraging, the wide implementation of said policy left a lot to be desired. There was sheer lack of detailed planning and strong support in terms of financing and instructional materials. The teachers were unprepared due to lack of training in the pre/in-service level. They thus stood in the way of successful policy implementation. As summarily described by Sibayan (1999), the vernacularization of the means of instruction in the public schools (many private schools have not gone into vernacular teaching in spite of the Department Order) is a microcosmic presentation of how most changes taking place in Philippine education during the past several years have been carried out: (i) the great haste to execute a change notwithstanding the lack of detailed planning, preparation, and experimentation on the part of the educators; (ii) the seeming indifference or lack of interest of teacher education institutions to keep in step with progress, or their seeming inability to provide leadership in the important and needed changes in education; and (iii) the utter dependence on the classroom teacher, who often does not have the necessary training and who is often overworked, to put these changes into effect.

Until the implementation of the BEP in 1974, currently being continued by DECS, the same problems hinder the successful implementation of the policy, further aggravated by resistance on the part of administrators, teachers, and parents alike who prefer an all-English curriculum. As mentioned earlier, English is perceived as a language of power, upward, mobility and global competitiveness.

3. THE USE OF THE VERNACULAR

The linguistic diversity of the Philippines should be a cause to unify the country; however, it is itself the cause of difficulty in achieving unification. Various sources of heterogeneity characterize the Philippine multilingual situation, as they do other nations. These are ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity, different levels of economic development, different social structures, availability and quality of education, etc. Mixed with issues of nationalism/nationhood and economic development, the language situation in the country has become complex (Castillo, 1998).

There is an overwhelming number of languages in the Philippines, about 110 (McFarland, 1994). It is close to impossible to adopt all of them as the medium of instruction in localities where they are spoken. Until these communities are ready, i.e. at least there are qualified teachers and quality instructional materials, vernacular instruction should not be carried out. The Local Government Units (LGUs) and the Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) could be encouraged to carry out programs and projects such that necessary resources could be developed; then vernacularization of instruction, at least in Grade 1, can be started. Vernacularization will support the goal of functional literacy in marginal Philippine communities (Castillo and Ruda, 1994).

Pushing for vernacular use in the primary grades, at least in Grade 1, seems the practical thing to do. UNESCO's stand in favor of the use of Mother Tongue instruction is worth mentioning, thus:

1. Pupils should begin their schooling through the medium of the mother tongue because they understand it best, and to begin with their school life in the mother tongue will make the break between the home and school as small as possible.
2. With the use of the vernacular, what the child learned in school would be easily applied in the home.
3. It is necessary that the child or adult who could read or write his vernacular be provided with continued incentive to read by being supplied with reading materials.
4. Early and effective training in the mother tongue should serve as a bridge for learning other languages such as, the national language, and the world language." (cf. Bernabe, 1987:54)

Ordoñez (1998:38-41) has stated "it is part of our [UNESCO's] task to protect and celebrate the diversity ... between cultures and not homogenize it to the point that we lose our individual identities". UNESCO has been known to be a staunch supporter of the idea of developing functional literacy through the vernacular.

Even while the push for vernacular instruction was too great to ignore, still the importance of keeping English continued its stronghold. The following pronouncements bring this to bear:

- "Since we have that comparative advantage in English, by all means, let us maintain the advantage so that we can be more competitive in business and production and perhaps in education in this part of the globe." (A statement attributed to then Pres. Fidel V. Ramos in his speech at the Baguio Educators' Congress in 1994.)
- "...The use of English as the medium of instruction in all institutions of learning is relevant and meets the demand of the times." (This was stated in House Bill No. 9513, sponsored by Cong. Maria Clara V. Lobregat.)
- Otanes & Sibayan (1968) report the following:
 1. English is preferred as medium of instruction for all levels-primary, intermediate and high school. Only a small percentage would send their children to schools using Pilipino (now Filipino) as medium;
 2. English is associated with certain personal goals directly or indirectly contributing to the individual's economic and social advancement. Pilipino is associated with citizenship and participation in national affairs but not with economic development;
- "... English has become the Universal language, the lingua franca of our shrinking planet, the language of commerce, of science, of education, of literature, of art...." (This was said by Hilarion Henares, in his article in *Isyu*, dated May 15, 1995.)

- Not only is English good for 'global competitiveness', it is more importantly the tool for modernization. Besides, many are of the opinion that curriculum alternatives should be provided such that those capable are encouraged to go beyond the minimum, to learn via English, a second/foreign language, an LWC, in fact, the global language.
- It may be true that only a small percentage of the Filipino population will benefit from pursuing jobs abroad and therefore will need English. Integration with a foreign culture through English may not be a reality for most Filipinos and their children. A much greater majority of our population will not need to be literate in English as they are engaged in occupations that do not need English, e.g., farmers, fishermen, vendors, housewives, etc. However, on-the-spot street interviews revealed that people who belong to this category still want English for their children. They do not want their children to be like them in the future, and believe that English will elevate their status in society. Besides, these farmers, fishermen and the like who are desirous of modernization think that they or their children have to be able to read high technological developments in their respective fields which are written in English, e.g., English is the language of computers and of some, if not all, of the literature on how modern gadgets operate, e.g. for modern farming, modern breeding and fishing techniques, etc.

Hornby (1977) states that the development and nurturing of multiple languages is never a liability but always an asset. This significantly impacts bilingualism and justifies the adoption of a bilingual education policy. All of the studies on cognition and bilingualism (in the West) indicate that "bilingual children, relative to monolingual controls, show definite advantages on measures of cognitive flexibility, creativity or divergent thought". (Lambert, in Hornby 1977:16).

Gonzalez (1995) suggests that the status quo be maintained; the principle of Hippocrates can be invoked, "*primum non nocere* – first of all, do not do harm, the status quo is sometimes better than a change if one is not sure of the beneficial effects of the change." He believes it is important not to allow mere public opinion or the trend of the times to sway any decision. Economic realities more than just nationalistic sentiments should govern the choice of language. Language has been closely linked to economic development. It will be recalled how progressive nations, like Japan, now realize the value of learning English, the acknowledged language of world trade. Indonesia had also had to choose as its national language one which was not spoken natively by even at least 10% of its population. The choice of Bahasa Malay was one based on 'economic realities.' At the time, this language was used in commerce and trade between Indonesia and Malaysia.

Recognition of the economic, cognitive, and social advantage of bilingualism/multilingualism further supports the continued push for bilingual/ multilingual education. These are advantages denied to minority students who are forced by circumstances to abandon their first language as they learn a second (Arias and Casanova, 1993).

Based on the assessment of the status of the BEP and various studies on the progress of its implementation; studies done by educators on the impact of language of instruction on performance of students in certain subjects; and studies done by psychologists on the impact of language of instruction on cognitive learning, following are the PCER-MOI (Presidential Commission on Educational Reform - Medium of Instruction)

Committee's recommended reforms with specific reference to language as excerpted from PCER (2000).

Recommendation No. 7

Expanding the options for medium of instruction in Grade One through the use of the Regional Lingua Franca or the vernacular

While re-affirming the BEP and the improvement in the teaching of English and Filipino, this proposal aims to introduce the use of the regional lingua franca or vernacular as a medium of instruction in Grade One. Studies have shown that this change will make students stay in, rather than drop out, of school, learn better, quicker and more permanently, and will in fact be able to use the first language as a bridge to more effective learning in English and Filipino as well as facilitate the development of their cognitive maturity.

PCER's general recommendation, which has particular relevance to language, is likewise invoked.

1. Medium of Instruction for Tertiary/Post Secondary Schools

Tertiary/Post Secondary Schools shall be given freedom to choose their medium of instruction. However, it is emphasized that tertiary institutions must lead in the intellectualization of Filipino.

2. The teacher education curriculum should be strengthened to include language proficiency and subject matter proficiency.

- *Language proficiency should be included in the teacher education curriculum.*
- *Teacher education institutions (TEIs) should emphasize knowledge of subject matter.*
- *Teachers should be proficient in teaching in English/Filipino in subjects to be taught in either language.*

3. Teachers cannot take the LET unless they pass the language proficiency test.

- *A recommendation should be endorsed to the Professional Regulation Commission (PRC) to develop a language proficiency test.*
- *The PRC must also develop an appropriate certification system for competency to teach a particular subject in Filipino or English.*

As regards implementing strategy, PCER sets the following conditions.

- A. English teaching must be strengthened.
- B. The Teacher Education curriculum must increase current language requirements to ensure the language proficiency of teachers.
- C. On the Professional Licensure Examination for Teachers

Within the first two years of implementation of these proposals, the language proficiency of teachers should be tested according to their subject specializations. Passing said examination would be a requisite before taking the LET.

CHED and DECS should coordinate with the Professional Regulation Commission on the implementation of the requirement on language proficiency testing and certification proposals.

4. CONCLUSION

Language has continued to be a controversial issue in education in the country. It seems that despite many efforts to improve language teaching and learning in the country, the quality of (English) language use within and outside the school environment has remained poor and in fact, as many observe, has declined. There is hope that perhaps with the new thrust, that of using native language instruction in a bilingual education context, the situation will improve.

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