

**A CASE STUDY OF THE FIRST LANGUAGE COMPONENT  
BRIDGING PROGRAM IN RURAL PHILIPPINES**

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**ABSTRACT**

Several years ago a discussion began among educators in a rural Philippine community in Kalinga Province on the difficulties of education in second languages. This discussion resulted in the experimental implementation of a First Language Component Bridging Program in the early primary grades in select classes of the public school system. The motivation behind this initiative is reviewed, as well as the adjustments currently being made. The response of the teachers and the community toward this initiative at the beginning and again, four years later, has been very encouraging.

**1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW**

The municipality of Lubuagan lies in the province of Kalinga in the Cordillera mountains of northern Philippines. Lubuagan is made up of approximately 12,000 speakers situated in parts of two different valleys, hosting one school district with 13 elementary schools. There are also two private high schools and one newly opened public high school.

The author and her husband and four children lived and worked in Lubuagan from 1987-2000 under the auspices of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). During this time they learned the language of Lilubuangan, analyzed its phonology and grammar, and began production of literature and literacy materials in the language.

This report describes a problem situation in the community schools, and the approach taken to address the problem, namely, the First Language Component Bridging Program (FLC). It presents the rationale, the progress and the results of FLC since its implementation in Lubuagan in 1999.

**2. THE PROBLEM**

**2.1 The surface problem**

When the author and her husband completed a literacy survey in 1989, it became apparent that the community perception was that anyone who had been to school for at least four months had acquired literacy skills. Through informal observation it became clear that some students were not literate until fourth or fifth grade or later. A lack of reading ability in primary grades is both an embarrassment and a discouragement to the students. Because of the slow process of acquiring literacy skills, some students were dropping out of school in

the primary grades. In addition, overall test scores in the district in reading and therefore in other subjects were dropping.

Teachers often complained to one another and to SIL personnel that their students either could not read or lacked comprehension when they could read. Students were dropping out of school because of a lack of success and teachers were frustrated over the struggle of their students.

An understanding of how bilingual education has been implemented in towns like Lubuagan is important in analyzing the problems that were observed. Lubuagan is a monolingual municipality with few outsiders residing in town. Even these newcomers have learned to use Lilubuagen. The language of wider communication, Ilocano, is primarily used when one travels outside the language area. Therefore, the children in Lubuagan begin school speaking Lilubuagen but no other language. The languages of the classroom are Filipino and English, both new languages to the students.

The students are expected to learn to read, write and master curriculum content in Filipino and English while at the same time acquiring these languages. For many students these simultaneous tasks are insurmountable and therefore they drop out due to discouragement.

Very often the teacher does not overtly teach the new language but rather uses it in the classroom, hoping that immersion in the unknown language will eventually ensure the student has a knowledge of that language. This is a very slow process of language acquisition for many students.

Some teachers speak initially in the prescribed language for the subject, either Filipino or English, and then translate into Lilubuagen in order for her/his students to comprehend. This is a very time-consuming and difficult method for the teacher. Meanwhile, because the students do not speak or understand the language of instruction, they will often learn to wait for the teacher to use Lilubuagen, ignoring the initial instruction. All tests, of course, are given in Filipino or English; the low scores reflect the students' lack of literacy skills, comprehension, and speaking ability in the languages of instruction, both still new to them.

## **2.2 The underlying problem**

Probing for the underlying causes of student failure suggested that the reasons may lie in the language barrier. Because of language issues, the teacher only has time to go over subject material briefly and is not able to develop the students' cognitive skills in the classroom. Unable to develop concepts with the children in a language they understand well, the teachers cannot build on the cognitive skills the students could bring to the task. Therefore the students may be delayed in fully developing their thinking skills.

Using a language in the classroom is very different from teaching a language as a subject in the classroom. If the student focuses on the subject matter as taught in Lilubuagen, the time spent using the official medium of instruction is not utilized. If instead the student focuses on learning the terms and forms of Filipino or English, the subject content is not given enough attention for mastery, and the student falls behind. This results in a high drop-out rate as well as unnecessarily low scores for many of those who do stay in school.

### 3. UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEM

Comprehensible input is mandatory in order for students to learn in the classroom. If the student does not understand the language the teacher uses, s/he simply cannot learn the subject matter. Gonzalez (1996, p. 216) states that if students do not understand the medium of instruction, a language they do understand must be used transitionally until a new medium of instruction (a second or third language) can be used with comprehension in the classroom. Communication between teacher and pupil must take place in a common language. Once the student has learned a second language orally, s/he can begin literacy development as well as content study in the second language, not before.

Gonzalez (1996, p. 218) goes on to say that use of the mother tongue for efficient basic and functional literacy skills first should then lead to building on and transferring these skills to the second language. CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) should be developed in both languages, starting with the mother tongue first and then transitioning to the second or third language.

Numerous studies around the world indicate that when students learn to read and write in their mother tongue before learning to read and write in a second or third language, they progress both in literacy skills and second language acquisition more quickly. Baker (1996, p. 227) cites Swain and Lapkin who found in their research that students who were literate in their mother tongue advanced significantly more in written and oral skills in their second language than those without mother-tongue literacy skills. Mother-tongue literacy skills enable students to more quickly learn a second or third language and learn through their second language by the transfer of knowledge, language abilities and learning processes from one language to the other.

Baker also cites Dawes' study of Punjabi, Mirpuri and Jamaican children ages 11 and 13. He found that mother-tongue programs, allowing a child to operate in a language they know best, result in superior performance (Baker, 1996, p. 150). He also noted that as competency in both languages increased, deductive reasoning skills in mathematics also increased.

Furthermore, "experiments in the US, Canada and Europe with minority language children who are allowed to use their mother tongue for part or much of their elementary schooling, show that such children do not show retardation in school achievement or in majority language proficiency" (Baker, 1996, p. 155). It is often a fear of parents in Lubuagan that the less time a student spends in English and the more time he spends in the mother tongue will ultimately slow down his progress in English. The above quote addresses that myth.

In fact, Cummins states that poorly developed first language and intensive exposure to a second language impedes further development of the first language and consequently places a limit on second language development. Becoming literate in one's first language is much easier than acquiring literacy in a language one is simultaneously trying to learn. With literacy skills acquired in the first language, bridging to any other language is simplified once learners have acquired the other language (Baker, 2001, p. 169).

Cummins states that the development of second language competence is a function of the level of the child's first language competence already attained at the time when intensive

exposure to the second language begins. The more proficient one is in her/his first language, the easier it will be to become proficient in a second or third language. In other words, those children in Lubuagan who continue to develop their own language will be most able to learn and use new languages such as Filipino and English (Baker, 2001, p. 169).

A recent publication by Thomas and Collier (2000, pp. 48-52) shows that an 11-year study covering 70,000 students in five school districts in the U.S. indicates that those immigrant students (or non-mother-tongue English speakers) who spent more time studying in their mother tongue achieved significantly higher scores in both English language skills and subject matter than those students who spent less or no time in their mother tongue. In fact the students who spent significant amounts of time in their mother tongue went on to surpass their mother-tongue English-speaking classmates in all subject matter.

Mother-tongue literacy does not only affect other-language literacy skills but also overall cognitive development. According to Acuña (1994, pp. 111ff), the use of a foreign language as medium of instruction will delay cognitive development. Thinking must be taught first in the strong language (mother tongue) and then the nuances of all languages studied can be mastered. This might imply that studying in two languages is detrimental to one's development in thinking. The point, rather, is the importance of one's own language development before the development of a second language.

Tucker<sup>1</sup> says (1996, p. 316) "the development of the child's first language with its related cognitive development is more important than mere length of exposure to a second language." Furthermore, he states (ibid.) that the development of the mother tongue is encouraged for cognitive development and as a basis for learning the second language. If the mother tongue is not sufficiently developed, the second language cannot be mastered because of the lack of cognitive skills acquired for mastery of other languages. The development and nurturing of the mother tongue facilitates transfer of skills across the languages. According to Tucker, (1996, p. 317) this is especially important in the Philippines where students often enter school with no knowledge whatsoever of the medium of instruction. The most effective form of bilingual education is development of literacy and numeracy as well as scientific discourse in the mother tongue as much as possible followed by transfer to the language of instruction.

## **4. PROGRAM OUTLINE**

### **4.1 The basic outline**

In Lubuagan, a steering committee, comprised of respected Lubuagan leaders and educators and the SIL linguists, was established to address the issue. The need was clear to the community that students in the local schools needed help in acquiring literacy skills but that current strategies for addressing the need were under question. Requests for help from teachers who had reflected on these issues led to consideration of the possibility of introducing a First Language Component (FLC) in the school system.

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<sup>1</sup> G. Richard Tucker of Carnegie Mellon University in Washington D.C. has researched language issues here in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries since the 1960s. (cf. Tucker, G. Richard. (1997). *Applied Linguistics: Focus on Second Language Learning/Teaching (Selected Papers)*. Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines.

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By using the students' mother tongue in the classroom to teach literacy skills as well as subject content, the students' cognitive skills would be developed. By teaching concepts in the mother tongue the students would be exposed to comprehensible input and enabled to develop concepts further. In addition, separating content learning from the language learning task would enable the students to focus on one discipline at a time. Thus, content was to be mastered through the mother tongue, and Filipino and English were to be taught as foreign languages rather than used as a medium to learn subject matter. In the Filipino or English language lessons, content already mastered in the mother tongue would be used in order to focus on language acquisition.

### **4.2 Implementation**

An initial introductory workshop took place in Lubuagan in October 1997, with 63 teachers attending. The focus was exposure to the concept with an invitation to all to pursue studies (cost free) on FLC at Nueva Vizcaya State Institute of Technology (NVSIT) under Dr. Gloria Baguingan in the summer of 1998. Only three teachers availed of that opportunity. The next year more workshops were offered discussing the FLC approach with its supporting theory and again the invitation was extended to participate in the NVSIT course. Four more teachers joined the NVSIT course in 1999 and the school opening saw several FLC classes begun in the Lubuagan district. Eight teachers (Mrs. Teresita Padilla, Mrs. Clementina Bulawit, Mrs. Angelita Calsiw, Mrs. Narcissa Sabian, Miss Rose Dumatog, Miss Leah Osdeg, Mrs. Basilia Wansi and Mrs. Leah Gawon) are using the FLC approach with such success that the other teachers are now willing to learn how to use it in the classroom.

In August 2002 fifty-four teachers attended the FLC workshop to gain skills in using the FLC approach. Their desire was primarily due to their observation of the participation of students in the FLC classes as well as the test scores that demonstrate that teaching through the mother tongue is more effective.

The FLC teachers have hosted a reading contest during fiestas the last three years. During this time community members have been amazed at the fluency in first grade readers who learned to read in the mother tongue before learning to read in Filipino or English. One man said of all his grandchildren the only one who learned to read in grade one is the one who studied in the mother tongue and that child is a more fluent reader than the older children who have been in school much longer.

## **5. PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED**

There have been several difficulties faced by the teachers. Two problems were most significant. The attitude of the parents against the use of Lilubuagen put the teachers under a great deal of pressure. The private schools have not used FLC in the classroom; some parents of the students enrolled there have indicated that if FLC were implemented there, they would take their children out of school and send them to the capital.

Parents expected that less time spent in English would result in lower English scores. When this began to be disproved, attitudes began changing. Parents in one barrio where there is no FLC class, have requested FLC for their children. They are asking for more teachers to be trained in the FLC approach.

## **DEKKER**

Another difficulty was available materials. The teachers had primer lessons with some reading stories included for mother-tongue literacy along with three readers. Easy-reading material was minimal and teachers had to write stories and put them on flip charts to give the students ~~more opportunity to read. Currently, they have a number of big books to use in the~~ classroom and two easy readers are in press.

The local Lubuagan teachers are all multilingual in Filipino, English and of course, Llubuagen. The FLC trainers found that bridging them back to their mother tongue was relatively easy in reading. An initial orthography was already in use by the community, being tested and adjusted as needed. Helping the students develop writing skills in their mother tongue took more work. They needed practice writing in Llubuagen and learning to write their thoughts. They were helped to practice writing their thoughts in Llubuagen and to write other materials. The educational system had taught them to write in English but writing creatively in another language was more difficult.

## **6. RESULTS**

To date, the test scores of Lubuagan students have improved in reading and language. Reading scores have improved by up to 40%, Filipino scores have improved by up to 38% and English scores improved by up to 31%. Students are more able to learn to read and write in Filipino and English even in grade one because of their new mother-tongue literacy skills.

Student participation in class is greatly improved. Instead of passive, lethargic students, the students are eager to participate and keen to answer questions. Not only are students eager, but younger siblings and even parents come and watch the class through the windows. The end result is that parents are asking for more FLC classes and teachers are interested in being trained in this approach. Education has taken on a new meaning.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

The original theory that students in Lubuagan are encumbered by a language barrier that hinders their education, often ending it prematurely, is accurate. When Lubuagan students are allowed to learn in their own language with rigorous bridging into the languages of Filipino and English, they are enabled to succeed in school. Their success creates a love of learning and a hunger for more.

Language is a key factor in any educational program. Without comprehension on the part of the learner, schooling is useless. Without understanding of the real needs and desires of the community on the part of educators, schooling may be useless; time, effort and money are wasted. In order for children to succeed in school, language factors must be a primary consideration.

The question for the reader to consider is whether there might be similar situations in other parts of the Philippines, Asia and the world. Might some of the need in other areas be met in a similar way? Using the first language of the student and bridging rigorously into the languages of the classroom enables the students to master both curriculum content and the languages of the classroom. In order for Filipino children of minority language communities to succeed in school, to reach their God-given potential, and actively participate in the wider community, initial schooling must realize the value of their mother tongue and begin the cognitive skill development there, following immediately with systematic bridging into

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Filipino and English. Initial literacy as well as language development in the mother tongue enables cognitive development that likewise contributes to the mastery of a second and third language. This small investment in the education of children could change the course of the nation.

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