

REENGINEERING FILIPINO, ENGLISH, AND THE LINGUA FRANCA IN BASIC EDUCATION

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The 2002 Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) involves a reduction of several subjects or learning areas to five: Filipino, English, Mathematics, Science, and Makabayan. The learning competencies previously assigned to the discarded subjects have been redistributed to these five, particularly to Filipino, English, and Makabayan. At the same time, the Lingua Franca Project, which experiments on the use of regional vernaculars in selected schools, has been continued and even expanded to include the use of local vernaculars. How are language learning elements integrated into the new BEC? What lessons have been learned so far about language planning, curriculum planning, teacher training, and change management?

There is no question that the language policy of the Department of Education is a question mark. Enough emotion has been uselessly spilled by nationalistic or xenophobic and by miseducated or colonially-minded Filipinos on this issue, but the issue is not only national, but international. Let me cite only one recent study by scholars that cannot be accused of either chauvinism or neo-imperialism, the Working Group at Nagoya that studied the Philippine educational system. In trying to understand the lack of quality of Philippine education, the Japanese scholars focused, as one of only four key factors, on the use of English and Filipino as languages of instruction in the classroom, rather than the first or local languages of students. Although not conclusive because anecdotal, the Japanese study tends to show that the lingua franca when it is also the vernacular is a much more effective classroom language than either Filipino or English (www.gsid.nagoya-u.ac.jp/project/fieldwork/ofw/OFW_Report/2000/WG2.pdf).

The immediate but not the only impetus for the national use of *linguae francae* or *lingua francas* and vernaculars came from the 1998 Philippine Commission for Educational Reform (PCER), which recommended their use as one of only nine major reforms to improve Philippine education. The PCER stated: "While re-affirming the Bilingual Education Policy 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 the medium of instruction in Grade One" (*Philippine Agenda for Educational Reform: The PCER Report 2000*, p. 60).

Secretary Andrew Gonzalez's 31 March 1999 Memo (*DECS Memorandum No. 144, s. 1999*; later expanded by *DECS Memorandum No. 243, s. 2000*), entitled "Lingua Franca Education Project," locates the use of the lingua franca within the context of the literacy campaign: "The Department of Education, Culture and Sports is embarking on a pilot study called Lingua Franca Education Project in SY 1999-2000 which aims to define and implement a national bridging program from the vernacular to Filipino and later English to develop initial literacy for use in public schools. Through the bridging program, an

alternative curriculum will be used in acquiring basic literacy and numeracy skills with the local lingua franca as the language of instruction.” Gonzalez mandated the use of the regional lingua franca (limited to the three major languages of Tagalog, Ilocano, and Cebuano) in one class for each of the sixteen regions. In a subsequent memo issued on 28 July 2000, Gonzalez clarified that the lingua franca would be used in the teaching of *all* subjects; that meant that the subjects originally taught in Filipino or English according to the BEP, except for the subjects on Filipino and on English themselves, were going to be taught in the lingua franca (*DECS Order No. 51, s. 2000*). The Region 7 class conducted in Cebuano was the one observed by the Nagoya team.

On 7 May 2001, as then DECS Undersecretary for Programs and Projects, I expanded the use of the lingua franca in two ways: I added more schools and I added the major vernaculars or local languages (*DECS Memorandum No. 153, s. 2001*). To the sixteen schools identified by Gonzalez, I added all the Model Schools of Excellence of the Third Elementary Education Project (TEEP), and I added one more non-TEEP school per region. I also added more languages: “The Department will expand the project to include teaching not only in the three original Regional Lingua Franca (Cebuano, Ilocano, and Tagalog), but also teaching in the other major Philippine languages (including, but not limited to, Bikol, Capampangan, Hiligaynon, and Waray), as well as Arabic in applicable areas.” I removed the idea of control groups, ended the experimental or pilot phase of the project, renamed the involved schools “Vernacular Schools,” and thus instituted the use of the vernacular as department policy.

In effect, I expanded the 1974 Bilingual Education Policy into a still-unnamed and unacknowledged Multilingual Education Policy. That multilingual policy has been retained in the BEC: “Filipino is a learning area and the medium of instruction for Makabayan. English is a learning area and the medium of instruction for Science and Mathematics. In some pilot schools, the medium of instruction for all the learning areas in Grade 1 will continue to be the Regional Lingua Franca (RLF) or the vernacular” (*The 2002 Basic Education Curriculum*, p. 17). The word pilot refers to the pilot year of the BEC; the use of the RLF and the vernacular is no longer in the pilot stage. The recommendation of the PCER (itself based on the 1987 Constitution), though not yet implemented in all Grade 1 classes across the country, is clearly the legal and theoretical basis for the current though unnamed multilingual policy.

Since Gonzalez tied the LFEP to the literacy campaign, I expanded the idea of literacy, specifically reading, to all classes in all public schools. This was the thrust of my 23 July 2001 Order entitled “Two Books a Year per Student” (*DECS Order No. 34, s. 2001*): “Starting this school year, all students in public elementary and secondary schools must show evidence of having read at least one (1) book in the vernacular and one (1) book in English per year before being promoted to the next grade or year level.”

To strengthen the use of the vernacular languages as languages of education, not necessarily as languages of instruction inside the classroom, but languages used in reading and, therefore, eventually research, I defined what I meant by the word “vernacular.” “For purposes of this Order, the vernacular is defined as any one of the following: a. the national language or Filipino, as defined by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino; b. the regional lingua franca, as defined by *DECS Memorandum No. 153, s. 2001*, which may be any of the following: Arabic, Bikol, Capampangan, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Ilocano, Tagalog, or Waray; c. the local language, which is the language of the community where the school is located.

You will see that I redefined the word “regional” in “regional lingua franca” to mean one government region only, rather than, as Gonzalez did it, the three main linguistic regions of the country. It is not irrelevant that then Secretary Raul Roco’s main objection to the LFEP project was that it marginalized his own native language Bikol, the speakers of which he considered as major a voting bloc as speakers of Ilocano.

I also defined the word “English,” following the worldwide trend to study Englishes, of which the most notable Filipino advocate is LSP stalwart Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista: “For purposes of this Order, English is defined as any one of the varieties of world Englishes, including Philippine English, American English, and British English.”

These steps were all done before the implementation of the Basic Education Curriculum (BEC). The BEC had been in the works for sixteen years; its authors included several Secretaries of Education, notably Lourdes Quisumbing, Isidro Cariño, and Andrew Gonzalez. It was Roco who had the political will to implement the BEC, *contra mundum* as it turned out. The current Education Secretary Edilberto De Jesus has announced publicly that he will continue the BEC. Of course, no one can predict the future, especially in this magical realist country called the Philippines, but it must certainly be a breath of fresh air that, probably for the first time in Filipino governance, politically diverse cabinet secretaries have continued essentially the same program.

Let us now talk about the BEC. At the outset, we should repeat what has not been repeated often enough: there is no basic education curriculum, if by the word “curriculum” we mean a fully-fleshed-out plan of study, complete with learning competencies, full lists of knowledge items, skills to be acquired, attitudes and values to be imbibed, not to mention individual lesson plans and even general guidelines on what to study, how to study it, and when to study it. All that we have right now is a very thin document called *The 2002 Basic Education Curriculum*. The department order that instituted the BEC is, symbolically, also extremely short, only two pages (*DECS Order No. 25, s. 2002*).

In various speeches at DECS, particularly on 25 April 2001 at the Educators Congress, I presented what I called a People Power Model of Curricular Change, a vision of how to manage and institute curricular reform. The idea was to insulate curricular change from politics, or more positively, to ensure that it is not only politicians and government bureaucrats that will control curricular change. Obviously, I was highly influenced by the reality that Roco and I were put in office because millions of Filipinos gathered around the country to remove a sitting president by moral, rather than armed or even electoral, force. By institutionalizing processes by which the curriculum can be directly molded by various sectors of society—teachers, students, parents, publishers, experts in technical panels, experts in the Commission on Higher Education’s (CHED) Technical Panel and Technical Committees in Humanities, Social Sciences, and Communications (the bulk of tertiary education’s General Education Curriculum), civil society, other government officials, including resident experts of the Department of Education, and any and every Filipino able to access either a toll-free telephone number or an interactive website; in short, everyone known as a stakeholder in public education—I hoped to set in motion an irreversible trend towards more direct public participation in government educational policies.

That vision is the bedrock of the BEC. As Roco himself put it, “Curriculum development is a dynamic process, and thus the restructured curriculum will continue to develop” (*DepEd Order 25, s. 2002*). As Officer-in-Charge in the short period that DepEd

lacked a Secretary after Roco resigned, Undersecretary Ramon C. Bacani announced on 29 August 2002 that “schools are encouraged to contextualize/localize the curriculum to respond to their specific teaching-learning needs. They are also given flexibility to modify or enrich the curriculum to suit the particular needs/mission thrusts of special schools” (*DepEd Order No. 43, s. 2002 Inclosure 2*).

In theory, therefore, the BEC is applied in a unique way in every school. The framework presented in various DepEd papers is merely a blueprint or a world map; it is not a handbook nor is it a street map. There can, in other words, not be any generalizations applicable to each and every one of the forty thousand or so public schools in the country. Given this caveat, let me sketch nevertheless the general outlines of the use of Filipino, English, and the vernaculars in the BEC.

The curriculum before BEC had at least eight periods during which at least a dozen subjects or learning areas were taught, such as Filipino, English, Mathematics, Science, Sibika (Civics), Kultura (Culture), Heograpiya (Geography), Kasaysayan (History), Musika (Music), Sining (Art), Edukasyong Pangkatawan at Pangkalusugan (Physical Education), Edukasyon sa Pagpapahalaga (Values Education), Teknolohiya (Technology, including Information Technology), Edukasyong Pantahanan at Pangkabuhayan (Home Economics), and/or Araling Panlipunan (Social Studies). In the BEC, these subjects or learning areas were reduced to five: Filipino, English, Mathematics, Science, and a fifth one called *Pagkamakabayan*, generally known by its shortened name *Makabayan*.

It is a common misconception to think that the four tool or core subjects of Filipino, English, Mathematics, and Science cover exactly the same grounds that they covered in the pre-BEC curriculum, and that the fifth learning area of *Makabayan* covers the multitude of other subjects left over. On hindsight, it was probably wrong to just use the old labels *Filipino*, *English*, *Mathematics*, and *Science*, because these were widely misunderstood, sometimes even by DepEd personnel themselves. It is better to think in terms of the competencies listed in the Philippine Elementary Learning Competencies (PELC) and the Philippine Secondary School Learning Competencies (PSSLC), which have all remained in the new curriculum (therefore, nothing has been changed in terms of the number and the kind of competencies expected of every basic education graduate). These competencies, however, have been reassigned to or reapportioned among the five new learning areas.

For instance, most of the competencies once required in the English subjects are now still with English, but added to these requirements in the English class are several competencies from the “discarded” subjects. A good example of this can be found in the competencies in PELC for science and health for Grades 1 and 2; these are now found in English for Grades 1 and 2: “Science and Health concepts will be used as content in English for Grades 1 and 2 but not to the extent of neglecting the content in the English books for the grades. The learners shall be taught appropriate literary materials such as jingles, rhymes, poems, dialogues, stories, etc., suited to their grade level and interest” (*DepEd Order No. 43, s. 2002, Inclosure 1*). (The mention of the word “literary” should also be remarked; the BEC has added a number of literary competencies only implicitly but not given much attention in the old curriculum. In fact, a whole two years of Filipino in high school are now devoted to literature, rather than to language nor to a combination of language and literature. Familiarity with literary theories is also now a requirement in both Filipino and English high school classes.) In National Models of Excellence Schools, which are elementary schools equipped with 15,000-book libraries and at least twenty wired computers for student use, Grade 2

students are already expected to use computers to do simple word processing using the English language (students in Grade 4 up actually email their counterparts in the United States as part of their English lessons); thus a competency previously assigned to Technology is now assigned to English.

Similarly, since Mathematics is taught in English, competencies previously in English can now be handled by the Mathematics teacher. Spreadsheet software can now be used in Mathematics classes, with practical applications in Science now taken up during the Mathematics period. The BEC Mathematics is a richer version of the old Mathematics, just as the BEC Science is now denser or fuller in terms of competencies than the Science of the old curriculum. Because of integrative and thematic teaching, competencies previously assigned to various subjects can now be found in Science. Even translating names of trees and fruits from local languages to English are now done by Science teachers, thus developing both Filipino and English vocabularies of students.

Like the other tool subjects, Filipino now covers a multitude of competencies. Adopting many of the principles of Language for Specific Purposes (LSP), particularly the kind of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) popularized in the Philippines by De La Salle University Center for English for Specific Purposes, DepEd specialists in Filipino have widened their text base to include content from various fields.

This means that the “discarded” subjects have not all been incorporated into *Makabayan*. The objectives of *Makabayan* in the BEC are fairly explicit and limited: socio-cultural and politico-economic literacy, development of multiple intelligences other than logical-mathematical and linguistic, and synthesis of cultural, aesthetic, athletic, vocational, and ethical values.

Where are the language components now located in the BEC?

Clearly, Filipino is mainly where Filipino is taught and English is mainly where English is taught, but these languages are now not taught as languages (in other words, their structure or grammar is not very important in the classroom), but are always used as tools to learn something else.

The change in Filipino is particularly dramatic: “In contrast to the previous curriculum, time allotment for Filipino in Grades 1-3 and First to Fourth Year has been increased to enable adequate understanding of every lesson and to include a variety of literary and non-literary texts in the reading and comprehension activities. After Grade 3, every learner should be able to read and understand at least simple paragraphs of varied texts in Filipino.” Literacy workers will recognize the allusion to functional literacy, now an explicit objective of public basic education, as found in the published Vision of the Department: “The Department of Education envisions every learner to be functionally literate, equipped with life skills, appreciative of the arts and sports, and imbued with the desirable values of a person who is *makabayan, makatao, makakalikasan, at makaDiyos*.” It might help to recall the definition of functional literacy as formulated by the Literacy Coordinating Council: “a range of skills and competencies—cognitive, affective and behavioral—which enables individuals to live and work as human persons, develop their potentials, make critical and informed decisions, and function effectively in society within the context of their environment and that of the wider community (local, regional, national and global) in order to improve the quality of their lives and that of society.”

The change in English is less dramatic, because most English teachers have long discarded structural approaches to language teaching (the equivalent of Filipino's *balarila*) and experimented with EFL, ESL, and ESP, among others. The Department has adopted Content-Based Instruction (CBI), and the example given in the BEC is typical: "A lesson in English designed to develop the ability to locate and synthesize information may use content in Science (essay/article) such as 'The Ecological System,' which is a topic in the First Year of Science under 'Living Things and their Environment.'

What lessons have we learned so far? I will leave the formal evaluation of English in the BEC to Dinah Mindo and the formal evaluation of Filipino to the DepEd experts that are continuously monitoring the situation within public schools. Instead, allow me to impose on your patience by citing impressions from the top of my head, given, of course, that I am extremely biased for the BEC because I am one of its godparents, the real parents being the past and present giants in the Department of Education.

First, while in theory school-based training makes perfect sense, because it enhances democratization, decentralization, and principal/teacher empowerment, not to mention efficiency and anti-corruption, and cascade training has very little to recommend it in terms of logic and experience, the urgency of instituting reforms in the curriculum necessitates shortcuts, particularly in terms of political will (such as in implementing the BEC across the country and across all grade levels, rather than one year at a time and only in pilot schools as happened in previous curricular reforms) and in terms of saving costs (the costs of school-based training spread out over a longer period of time being much more than grouped regional or even national training). In plain terms, *santong paspasan* is most likely a better course of action than *santong dasalan* when it comes to a humongous organization like the Department of Education, a department whose total personnel (about 500,000) exceeds that of most major multinational corporations.

Second, the language policies of the government cannot be held solely responsible for the admitted deteriorating quality of public education. The Department explicitly recognizes this and does not apologize for it: "The DepEd recognizes that an overcrowded curriculum and its insufficient relevance do not constitute the sole cause of the unsatisfactory achievements of Filipino learners" (*The 2002 Basic Education Curriculum*, p. 7). Nevertheless, what the PCER realized after its reviews and interviews, namely, that there is something wrong with a purely bilingual education policy, has to be taken very seriously. We have tried for almost thirty years to use both Filipino and English in basic education. We have tried for more than a century now to use English with Filipino teachers and Filipino students. Surely, thirty years, not to mention a hundred years, is enough time for us to give up trying and to try something else. To judge harshly the Lingua Franca Education Project after only three years and to refuse to judge as harshly something that has been around for thirty or a hundred years is surely a failure of reason, not to mention of heart. If we were to be fair, we should allow the present multilingual policy and practice to stay for thirty years, if not a hundred, before we can pronounce on its advantages or disadvantages. I am being facetious, but the point is simply that there is more than reason that is at stake here. The management of change in the Department of Education has to be complemented by the management of change in all the stakeholders of public education. Very often, as we know from family life, it is easier to convince children than it is to convince parents. As the older and dying generation, we should listen to what our children are saying. Are they speaking today in English? In Filipino? In the local vernacular? In a combination of two or more of

these? Do they care at all in which language they get educated? Or have they gone, as the phenomenologists used to dream about back in the good old days, beyond language?

Third, the rise of Englishes, the increasing dominance in the international market of the non-English-speaking country that is China, the Arabic lingua franca of terrorists (the lingua franca as well, of course, of non-violent believers in one of the world's greatest religions—these are just some signs that the English language is not going to be the one exception to the historical pattern of language rise and language fall, seen in the loss of world-stature by languages such as Alexander the Great's Greek, the Holy Roman Empire's Latin, and the Spanish language of the empire where the sun never set. You do not have to recite Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias" or read a science-fiction fantasy novel or even watch *Planet of the Apes* to realize that no great empire has remained forever an empire. With the loss of economic and military power comes the loss of the imperial language. I am not saying that English will disappear, since Spanish is still with us and some schismatic priests still say Mass in Latin; I am saying that we should rise above our petty generation or generations and see that our children may have to live in a world not dominated by one world language. A multilingual educational system may be more in tune with our children's future than a monolingual or even bilingual one.

Finally, the word "reengineering," more politely known as "downsizing" or "rightsizing," is often used in business circles as a rough translation of "firing everyone you can't afford to have in the corporation." Reengineering Filipino, English, the lingua francas, and the vernacular languages does not mean getting rid of them. It does mean getting rid of something even more difficult to get rid of—the unquestioned public perception that to know English is to be global, to know Filipino is to be nationalistic, to know both Filipino and English is better than to know only one of them, to know more than two or three languages is to be a linguist, and to know a lot of languages is to be more intelligent than those poor hapless souls who speak only in their native tongue. None of these sociolinguistic—I prefer to call them ideological, after the manner of literary critics—half-truths and even untruths can help us in the everyday running of a department that has to teach eleven million grade school children and four million high school children every single weekday what it means to be a human being and a lifelong learner.

In the end, it is individuals such as Quisumbing with her values education reform, Cariño with his stress on civic responsibility, Erlinda Pefianco with her drive to popularize innovative teaching strategies and methods, Gonzalez with a confidence born of being a linguist pushing through a lingua franca program, Roco with his passion for patriotism, and now De Jesus with his no-nonsense continuation of the curricular reform started by his predecessors, who will make the difference between a nation that can speak two or three languages no matter how badly or perhaps very well and a nation that cannot speak at all.