

LITERACY IN MULTILINGUAL COMMUNITIES

Santanina T. Rasul

Magbassa Kita Foundation, Inc.

I would like to confine my discussion on literacy in a multilingual society to the Magbassa Kita Foundation, Inc. (MKFI) experience in its literacy work, particularly Project *Magbassa Kita*, which in Tausug means "Let us read."

First, a brief background on the MKFI. This foundation is a non-profit, non-stock foundation that primarily aims to develop programs for people empowerment through functional literacy cum livelihood programs. Target clients are illiterates and neo-literates. It started as a household activity for illiterate women in the household. In time it expanded to include the illiterate women in the neighborhood. Using a basic reader I prepared for my youngest daughter who served as my "experiment" and my grade school children as my "consultants," I noted that the illiterate women easily learned to read. The primer I prepared, *Magbassa Kita*, was in Tausug. In a few weeks, the learners could write their names and simple Tausug phrases.

The experience in my experimental classes and the enthusiasm of the adult learners inspired me to start other literacy classes, initially, for women only. I utilized various venues like barangay halls, public schools after class hours, open spaces under private homes, and even structures meant for other purposes like warehouses or jails. We even utilized the law office of my husband on Saturdays and Sundays.

The value of literacy — in a community with the lowest literacy rate in the country — was easily recognized and appreciated so that soon there were demands for literacy classes from barrio heads and other sectors. I recall the well-known rebel leader Hadji Kamlon as among those who asked that his barrio be included in the literacy classes. (Incidentally Kamlon had at one time held the entire Armed Forces of the Philippines at bay when he fought the Philippine Government for an injustice done to him in the 50s.) Since there was no funding for these classes, I provided everything. Later, some generous donors like then Congressman Jose Puyat provided for the expansion of our program to include Tawi-Tawi. We had to prepare a translation of the Tausug primer into Sama — *Amasa Kitam*. When donors requested literacy classes in Cotobato, we had to prepare a primer in Maguindanao entitled *Matiya Tanu*.

The development of primers in these dialects required much of our very limited funds. We developed a Tagalog translation, *Tayo 'y Bumasa*, during our involvement in a national literacy project.

Since the late eighties, MKFI has been conducting literacy classes using the Filipino primer *Tayo 'y Bumasa*. We ceased using the Tausug, the Maguindanao, and Sama primers.

The decision to use Filipino or Tagalog in teaching basic literacy was not an easy one for the MKFI. I am sure many arguments can be raised against it. For example, in education, opinions are strong that the use of the vernacular in teaching children in the first two or three grades would facilitate learning. In the early fifties, an experiment was

conducted in Iloilo using Hiligaynon as medium of instruction. I recall that the results of the experiment indicated that while children in the experimental group seemed to learn faster initially, in the 4th and 5th grades when instruction shifted to English, the so-called advantage was no longer noted.

The use of the “regional vernacular,” I understand, has been recommended by the Philippine Commission on Educational Reform (PCER) in its report dated April 2000.

For our part, we are concerned with basic literacy. It may be noted in this regard that UNESCO has defined literacy, simple or basic literacy, as the ability of a person to read and write with understanding a simple message in any language or dialect. And functional literacy as the ability to read, write, compute, and participate fully in community activities.

I would like to underscore the portion of the definition of simple literacy as the ability of a person to read and write with understanding a simple message in any language or dialect. At this juncture, I recall a paper prepared by one of our linguistics experts, Dr. Bonifacio Sibayan, when he raised the question: Literacy in what? This question gains added significance in a situation like that of the Philippines.

Indeed, literacy in what? The Philippines has a national language, Filipino, and official languages like English and Spanish. There are eight major languages, about 57 vernaculars, and more than a hundred dialects.

But the Philippines is not alone in this regard. In fact, most countries in Asia, in Southeast Asia particularly, are multilingual. I understand that Indonesia, with a national language, has 32 major languages and a total of 2,418 dialects. Malaysia, with three languages with inter-ethnic communicative role, is also faced with a considerable number of languages used by minority groups. This in addition to several varieties of Chinese and Malay. Singapore, with four official languages, also has a variety of Chinese languages — Hokkien, Teochow, Cantonese, Hainanese, etc. Thailand, with regional Thai dialects, has approximately 49 other minority languages.

But to return to the Philippine situation with special reference to literacy efforts in a multilingual situation. Earlier, I indicated that MKFI initially used Tausug to teach literacy in Jolo, Sama in Tawi-Tawi, and Maguindanao in Cotabato. We realized that perhaps we were not doing the best thing. For learners may gain basic literacy, say in Tausug, but if there is no opportunity for them to practice their literacy skills because there are no reading materials in Tausug, then after a few months, they could lapse into illiteracy.

In an evaluation conducted of our program, our facilitators raised the question: After basic literacy, what? It is a painful fact that while we have set the eradication of illiteracy as a national goal, we really have not undertaken the development of reading materials for neo-literates in the vernacular. Literacy as a skill and an ability can only be sustained if there is opportunity for its frequent use.

That is why I believe the MKFI’s decision to teach to various sectors in Mindanao using Filipino or Tagalog is a good one.

This decision of the MKFI runs counter to the UNESCO view that, ideally, the mother tongue is best for literacy purposes.

But the MKFI experience has shown that using the vernacular for literacy purposes could be wasteful both of time and limited resources. What reading materials could be available in Sama, Tausug, or Maguindanao for neo-literates? It is a fact that reading materials prepared by NGOs or government offices intended for the masses are in Filipino or in English and at a level far beyond the comprehension of the neo-literates. I am referring to

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materials on health, nutrition, agriculture, and certain livelihood activities. Much of the effort of offices or agencies preparing such publications is wasted if the sectors that such agencies hope to reach are literate only in the vernacular.

English and Filipino are used in government and in the domains of business and media. So, I believe that instead of wasting time and effort in making illiterates literate in the vernacular, we should make them literate immediately in the national or official languages. I do not subscribe to the idea that we need vernacular or transitional instruments for literacy in the official languages. Let us start literacy in the language of government, business, industry, or education and that means English or Filipino.

For those who might think this is not quite a sound practice, let me call to mind the unique case of the Filipinos at the start of the 20th century. They were taught in English immediately — and in many cases by soldier teachers who had no knowledge of effective teaching methods for language teaching.

The prevailing view here, of course, is contrary to our belief. In fact, in a paper written in the 80s, Brother Andrew Gonzalez stated:

Based on classroom inspections and surveys, the immediate use of Pilipino and English in non-Tagalog areas and the use of English, especially in the rural areas, is not feasible. Non-Tagalogs cannot be taught in Pilipino immediately. Most Filipino children do not know enough English to be taught in English from the first day of school.

Contrary to this view is the decision made by Americans in the early 1900s to make English the language of the schools. I would like to quote an excerpt from the second annual report of the Secretary of Public Instruction in 1903:

With the advent of civil government came the creation of a system of public instruction and to Prof. Moses and Dr. Atkinson is due great credit of giving to the islands an educational organization, which, all prophecies to the contrary, has met with a success beyond expectation. After a careful canvas of the situation, Prof. Moses and Dr. Atkinson cut loose from all established traditions and made English the language of the schools.

The report further stressed that teachers from the United States without understanding a word of Spanish or the local vernaculars set to work to impart information in a language unknown to pupils. The developments that followed are history.

If I cite the experience of early American teachers in teaching Filipinos, it is to support our view that for greater economy, the official or national language should be used in teaching literacy in all areas of the country.

If we take our task of eradicating illiteracy seriously, we should take steps to develop and produce reading materials for new literates.

MKFI has developed materials on legends and folklore from eight tribal communities. The volume is entitled *Mga Katutubong Kwento*. It has also developed a volume on native recipes, *Mga Sari-Saring Lutuin*, and a third volume on *Iba't Ibang Kaugalian*.

Finally, lest I be misunderstood, I am not entirely against the use of the vernacular in teaching literacy. I would support that position if there would be the assurance of post-literacy materials in the vernacular available to learners. But as we all know this is not possible.

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Since this is the case let us teach literacy in the official or national language. Let us dispel our hesitation and fear that children or illiterate adults will find difficulty in being literate in a language not their mother tongue. Let us be guided by the experience of American teachers whose effort proved to be successful despite prognostications of prophets of failure. Let us teach literacy not in the vernacular but in the national or official language.