

Language and Education: Colonial Legacy and the National Imperative¹

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In pre-contact Philippines, there was no language problem. Our ancestors used their respective languages in transmitting their skills, knowledge, and wisdom to the young. Each community was unified in language and worldview.

Spanish colonial rule changed this situation radically. The Spaniards used a dual language policy in line with the objectives of their colonial project: to Hispanize and Christianize the natives.

Up until the 1890s in Davao, the Spanish priests tried to master the different local languages to facilitate the Christianization of the natives of Davao. I still have to determine up to what level the different languages were used in the schools, but for higher education, the language used was Spanish.

Observation: If the aim was to Christianize the natives, the native languages were used. If the aim was to Hispanize the natives, Spanish was used.

In 1888, the Spanish Governor General Valeriano Weyler decreed that starting that year, only Spanish would be used in all educational institutions throughout the islands.²

Observation: Whoever has the power dictates what language to use in the schools.

We know the result of Spanish colonial education. The educated Filipinos became fluent in Spanish. Rizal wrote his masterpieces in Spanish. The educated Filipinos wanted to become Spaniards but to the Spaniards, they were nothing but indios, even if they were Hispanized indios.

When the Americans came, they also problematized the use of language in education as they implemented a universal public school

system. The first teachers were the American soldiers, and naturally they used English in teaching the children. The children simply gaped at the soldiers as they could not understand English.

Said Tasker Bliss, the Governor of the Moro Province,³ on the use of English in schools in 1906:

Unless the American teacher learns the native dialect, the native must learn English in order that through it he may acquire our ideas. In the imparting of these ideas to native children, neither he nor they should be hampered by requiring that the ideas should be conveyed through the medium of English.⁴

Bliss understood how difficult it was to teach students using a foreign language, but ultimately, English triumphed. The overall colonial project was more important than the practical goals of Bliss in the choice not only of the language to use in our schools, but also the content of our education.

As happened during the Spanish colonial period, the natives who were educated during the American colonial period became Americans or dreamed of becoming Americans.

In our history, foreigners have always dictated what language to use in our schools and what to teach us.

Those old enough among us would have experienced being taught Japanese in school during the Japanese period. The Japanese also wanted to make us Japanese, but they lost in the war against the Americans, and so English has prevailed in our schools.

There are two points that struck me from our experiences in education.

The first point is that a person learns faster when his own language is used in teaching. Even our colonizers recognized this. The Spanish priests used the native languages to Christianize us. Even today, Protestant sects use the native languages in evangelization because they can easily be understood by their targets of evangelization.

All advanced educators, and I suppose, all philosophies of education and all theories of learning, agree that a person learns best in his own language.

This principle of teaching and learning is applied in all advanced countries. The British and Americans use English, the French use French, the Germans, German, the Japanese, Japanese, the Russians, Russian, and the Pinoy...

Well, we are not an advanced country. Like other former colonized countries that remain backward and poor, we Pinoy do not use our own languages in our schools. We do not apply the principle that a student learns best if he is taught in his own language.

Let me quote Tasker Bliss again on the use of English in our schools in 1906:

Even among Filipino schools taught in English by a native teacher, the visitor must be impressed by the enormous waste of time in teaching children the essential things, a knowledge of which is needed by them at once... Instead of immediately communicating the ideas to his pupils in a language common to both, (the teacher) wastes years of their time and his in attempting to get ideas into their heads through a language which is foreign to both of them...⁵

Why is it that we are not applying this important teaching and learning principle like what the advanced educators in advanced countries are doing?

That will be answered by the second point I have learned from our history. The aim of our education does not match the principle of teaching and learning. That is so because ever since we were colonized, the aim of our education had been dictated by our colonizers.

Our colonizers did not care about any principle of teaching and learning. What the Spaniards wanted was to make us Spaniards. What the Americans wanted was to make us Americans. What the Japanese wanted was to make us Japanese. Not first class Spaniards, not first class Americans, not first class Japanese, but second class Spaniards, second class Americans, and second class Japanese. Third class, even.

It is clear that colonial education was made to serve the general aims and policies of the colonial projects of our colonizers. In the case of the Americans, education was made a part of the counter-insurgency campaign. According to Major John Parker, the education work of eighteen American soldiers he had hired to teach in Laguna was more important than their traditional soldiering task. He believed that his wife who ran a school "tranquilized the country more than a thousand men."⁶

In short, the aim of colonial education implemented by the Americans was to make us little brown Americans. They needed civil servants to help run the colonial administration; they needed junior partners in the colonial economy; and they needed submissive and obedient colonial subjects.

The Americans succeeded completely in their colonial project and educational project. Up to now, we have not thrown into Bankerohan River the colonial educational system that was implanted by the Americans. Up to now, the content of our education and the language we are using are still colonial.⁷ And so, look at our situation as a country. Poverty and underdevelopment are the continuing effects of our still undecolonized society.

We have to understand that a colonial project is a brutal and violent project of subjugation and exploitation. In the history of mankind, there has never been a case of colonizers wishing to improve their target of colonization. The colonizers advance all justifications for their colonization projects, but the essential objectives of colonization are to exploit other communities and their resources. In order to achieve these aims, the colonizers will use both coercive and persuasive means.

During the first years of American rule, the Filipinos had deep hatred for the Americans. The atrocities of the Americans were still fresh in the minds of the people who experienced hamleting, torture, *haves de kutsiyo*, germ warfare, and other vicious means to make us their colony.⁸ And so in 1905, nine out of ten Filipinos wanted to kick the Americans out of the Philippines.⁹ But in just a generation of tranquilizing the Filipino children through the public schools, the attitudes of the Filipinos changed. How many Filipinos now want to become Americans?

Aside from winning our hearts and minds, the educational system implanted by the Americans also deepened the splits in our society. Already split vertically by ethnolinguistic differences, we were split further with the emergence of an elite within each community whose members were good in English and who became divorced from their fellow community members.

Education played a key role in this horizontal split in our society. The gap widened between the educated elite and the common people so that even if they come from the same tribe, they no longer understand each other. They have become two different people speaking two different languages. The elite who make up the political, economic, cultural, and literary leaders of the country have abandoned their respective communities. Do we still wonder why our country is in such a mess?

The Americans boast that the educational system is their most important contribution to the Philippines. The truth is that this educational system is the most vicious legacy of American colonialism.

It should already be thrown into Bankerohan River, but our leaders themselves want to retain it, especially the use of English in our schools. Even if all theories of teaching and learning attest to the truism that one's own language is the most effective means of teaching and learning, our educational system still has not adopted it.

The ideal graduate is still the one who speaks good English. The better the English, the better the graduate. The one who uses his own language is *baduy*. In school, you will be fined if you speak your own language. Your own tongue has no place in national conferences. Even the meetings of the remotest barangay councils must be conducted in English, no matter how tortured it is.

Why is English still dominant in our schools today?

Pro-English advocates advance many reasons. But in my view, the basic reason is mental inertia. Or as others put it, mental colony. It is difficult to change what one has become accustomed to. What the Americans had implanted in our brains is difficult to uproot, especially as we failed to physically kick them out of our country.

That is also the experience of other countries that underwent colonization. For example, why do the elite of Mozambique, Angola, and Timor Leste insist on using Portuguese as one of their national languages? Portuguese has no bearing at all in international affairs. Why not English? Because they are used to Portuguese. Their elite find it difficult to free themselves from the culture that shaped them, even as they struggled to kick out the Portuguese.

That is also the situation of Senegal. They want French, as they are used to it. I do not know what other sophisticated and weighty arguments the elite there advance to retain the language of their former colonial masters, but here in the Philippines we are familiar with the arguments of the pro-English advocates. Their discourse favoring English still dominates today. Let us discuss the more important ones.

English is the international language and therefore we must learn it. I have no objection to this statement. But does it mean we should throw our own language into Bankerohan River? I have no problem at all with learning English, but make it the medium of instruction in our schools?

Some say that to be world class, our "graduates should be able to write, speak, and understand English."¹⁰ It is only Filipinos who believe it. World class Japanese, French, Koreans, Germans, Russians, and even Americans sneer at the idea.

Some of our officials worry that we are falling behind in many fields compared to our neighbor countries. They blame this situation to the low quality of our English. And so government will now strictly implement the use of English in our schools. This argument has no logical basis. For over one hundred years we have been the best in English in the Far East. We simply drub Japan, Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Hongkong, Malaysia, and others as far as English is concerned.

These countries are *ugok* in English. Their people even come here to learn English. But why do they drub us in terms of industrialization and development? We should understand that there is no relation at all between fluency in English and a country's development.

In his article, "Why the Crisis in Education," former Education Secretary Florencio B. Abad blamed our "poor English reading skills" for our dismal performance in science and mathematics tests compared to our Asian neighbors. According to him, fluency in English is correlated with science and mathematics skills.¹¹

The conclusion: If you are *ugok* in Math, master English! Only in the Philippines. Try teaching math to the Japanese using English. They'd become as *ugok* as we are if they will follow our system.

As Bliss had commented in 1906, so much time is wasted in learning English so that we will learn math and other skills and ideas.

We should understand that there is no relationship between your math skills and your English skills. It is only partially applicable in the Philippines because English is our medium of instruction. In other countries, this view is totally ridiculous.

The Catanduanes States Colleges (CSC) was recently featured in a newspaper because it produces many board toppers in civil engineering, geodetic engineering, and even in nursing and midwifery. According to its Dean of Engineering, Charlie Hibo, twenty-five percent of their lectures are done in the local language. Said he:

If they (the students) cannot grasp a concept in English, we say it in Tagalog. If they still do not understand, we use Bicol.¹²

I am willing to bet that if they use more Bicol in teaching, their students will become brighter. Of course, the test should also be in Bicol.

We must throw into Bankerohan River the use of English in our schools. We like to boast that we are very good in English, but nobody envies us. Nobody wants to compete with us in English. Nobody wants to copy our educational system. The competition is in the field of industrialization and productivity. The development of our industry and the increase in our productivity have nothing to do with our excellence in English. To borrow from Nora Aunor, "Walang himala sa Ingles."

Let us not allow the horizontal split in our society to persist. A country wherein the language used in school is different from the language used at home has no business becoming a country. It is only doomed to underdevelopment. Look at our country.

The national imperative is to develop an educational system that truly answers our own needs as a nation. We should not allow foreigners or foreign thinking to decide our education.

This new educational system should use our own languages as sensible educators do. Today, some people still do not understand how important this matter is. Let us discuss some of the important objections to the use of our own languages.

First, the use of the different local languages will prevent our unity as a people; second, our languages are not ripe for academic and intellectual discourse; and third, we are not prepared to use them because we lack teachers, books, etc.

For good or for ill, we were born as a country with many languages. Our leaders wracked their brains in unifying us. And their solution? Add three more languages! Our first Constitution declared that Spanish, English, and Pilipino would become our official languages. Is it not funny that we should make foreign languages our national languages? As I have argued, this was due to force of habit. The framers of our Constitution were good speakers in Spanish and English.¹³

They also made Pilipino, which is based on Tagalog, as another national language. This was supposed to be developed by borrowing from the other local languages to make it truly national. Having one national language would unify us, so the argument goes. But this argument is negated by the fact that two other languages, and foreign at that, were made as our official languages.

Instead of unifying us, Pilipino has only worsened our division because everybody knows that it is Tagalog masquerading itself as Pilipino. Even if it has now a new label of Pilipino, and has borrowed

extensively from other languages, it remains essentially Tagalog. The Bisdak¹⁴ will simply not allow Bisaya to be replaced by another tongue. In reality, there are more Bisayans than Tagalogs.

We will only reap trouble if we privilege one language and reduce the others into second class languages. We should be fair to all. Therefore, we should use our own languages in our schools. The Ilocanos use Ilocano, the Bicolans use Bicol, the Ilongos, Ilongo, Magindanaw, Magindanaw, etc.

We should not force ourselves to speak only one language. We can achieve unity by respecting each other's language, practicing equality, and striving towards a common national goal of development. If we use our own languages, it is easier to want to learn other languages.

Some argue that our languages are not developed for academic and intellectual discourse. Don't we lack terms? My answer is another question. Was there a language that emerged fully mature? The English of today is very different from the English of Chaucer and Shakespeare. Why did English "mature?" Because it was used by the whole people. English was originally the tongue of the poor and the unwashed. Their ruling elite spoke French or Latin. Up until the 17th century, the "language of scholarship"¹⁵ was Latin. But when the English elite threw Latin into Thames River, English became a powerful language.

That was also the case with the German language. It was also considered an inferior language. But because of the efforts of intellectuals and writers like Herder and Goethe who threw Latin into Rhine River, German developed. The Finnish language also developed when the Finnish intellectuals and educators led by Elias Lonnrot decided to use the language of their peasants, servants, and workers, and throw the Swedish and Russian languages, the languages of their colonizers, into Nokia River.

We should not be daunted by the so-called lack of intellectual, philosophical, scientific, and other terms in our languages today. It is a very simple problem. All we do is just borrow or coin words, or revive old words to express new meanings. Eighty percent of the English vocabulary today comes from foreign sources.¹⁶ Tagalog is developing very fast because of the liberal infusion of other words and experimentation with spelling. That is how a language develops. We should expect heated debates about what is right or wrong usage. But in the end, the people will decide what to use and what to throw into Bankerohan River.

If we are convinced of the necessity and advantages of using our own languages, then implementing a step-by-step language shift program in our educational system becomes easy, especially for the major languages like Ilocano, Ilongo, Bisaya, Kapampangan, Tausug, etc.

Let us create committees on translation, committees on textbook development, committees on teacher training, etc. Let us begin the language shift from Grade One, progressing into Grade Two, and so on as the various components of the program do their work. By the time the first batch of students taught in the local languages reaches college, books in the various disciplines and trained teachers should be ready. There will be problems along the way, but long-term planning will solve many of the kinks.

I will bet again that our graduates who go through a teaching-learning environment using our own languages will be brighter, more skilled, more nationalistic, and more motivated to develop our country.

For so long, American colonial education has tranquilized our minds. Until now, it has continued to divide our communities, our intellectuals and academics disdaining to talk in their own languages - in the languages of their peasants and workers. When are we going to return to our own people and restore the oneness of our communities? When are we going to throw English into Bankerohan River?

Notes

¹ Translation of a paper read in Cebuano at the Seminar-Workshop on Proactive Responses to Language Issues in Education and Development in the Philippines, Cebu City, 27-28 October 2005.

² *Historical Calendar (1521-1969)* National Historical Institute, Manila. 1999, 86.

³ The Moro Province which existed from 1903 to 1913 was composed of five districts, namely, Zamboanga, Sulu, Lanao, Cotabato, and Davao.

⁴ Tasker Bliss Report August 1906. *Annual report of the Philippine Commission (ARPC)* 1906, 375.

⁵ Bliss 1906, 375.

⁶ Timothy K. Deady. "Lessons from a successful counterinsurgency: The Philippines, 1899-1902." <http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/05spring/deady.htm> September 30 2005

⁷ The colonial content of our education can be seen in the books we are using.

⁸ For details of the atrocities, see Macario D. Tiu. *Davao 1890-1910: Conquest and resistance in the garden of the gods*. University of the Philippines-Center for Integrative and Development Studies, Quezon City. 2003.

⁹ *Mindanao Herald* "Give us territorial form of government," 12 August 1905, 2.

¹⁰ "Advantages of learning English" *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (PD1), 3 July 1999.

¹¹ Florencio B. Abad. "Why the crisis in education." *Biz News Asia*, 26 July - 2 August 2005, 8-12.

¹² Juan V. Sarmiento, Jr. "Virac state college has produced many topnotchers." *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 21 July 2005, 1.

¹³ The Americans must have also insisted we include English as we were still under their rule.

¹⁴ Bisdak is short for Bisayang dako, meaning, redblooded Bisaya.

¹⁵ Margaret M. Bryant. "History of the English Language," *The New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, Vol. 1, Lexicon Publication, Inc. New York, 1988. XV.

¹⁶ Bryant 1988. XV.