

English Language in Philippine Education: Themes and Variations in Policy, Practice, Pedagogy and Research¹⁾

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Abstract

In this paper I will present a brief historical background of the educational systems in the Philippines and the language policies from the time of the Spanish Colonization to the present. This will lead to a brief analysis of the recurring themes in the perennial debates over English versus Pilipino. Then I will describe the current pedagogies of teaching English in the early grades of Philippine schools. A brief review of current research studies on bilingual education will follow. And finally, I will narrate how three generations of a Chinese-Filipino family had learned English, Chinese, and Pilipino and how they fare in the three languages.

Keywords: *Bilingualism, ESL, Culture*

Background of Language Policies in Schools at Different Periods of Philippine History

The unique case of the English language enjoying strong presence and wide popularity in an independent democratic Asian country can be understood first by taking a look at the history of Philippine educational system and the rationales and

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debates surrounding the language policies.

The Philippines was colonized by Spain for over 300 years. From 1565 to 1898 the Filipinos were not allowed to go to school for fear that they would revolt against their Spanish conquerors (Bernabe, 1978).

The Americans liberated Philippines from the Spaniards and made education an important mission. US President William McKinley in 1900 gave instruction that English be the medium of instruction. The move seemed reasonable and logical. The teachers were Americans who only spoke English. It was believed that English could unify the Filipinos who spoke many diverse dialects (Martin, 1999). The idea was also to provide access to civilization through the English language. As to the pedagogy, English was taught as the primary language (Sibayan, 1967).

The state of education, however, as observed in 1914, showed a low level of English language proficiency. It was recommended that 3 major regional languages be used together with English. The gains in English proficiency were not palpable as the 1925 Monroe Survey Commission would show. The commission, however, reaffirmed the English-only policy and recommended ways to overcome the “foreign language handicap” (Monroe, 1925).

Henceforth, the English language continued to enjoy a privileged position; and thus the Americans left this legacy of language that lasted for more than a hundred years.

When Filipinos gained their independence from American occupation in 1945, the Philippine schools continued to use English as the medium of instruction but the government allowed the use of the vernacular for Experimental Bilingual Education. There were positive results as reported: The Aguilar Study (1949-1954) indicated that school children learned better in the vernacular (Sibayan, 1967). The Prator Report (1950) recommended the introduction of teaching English as Second Language (Prator, 1950). Filipino writers were encouraged to write in English for Filipino readers. The UNESCO Study of 1953 reaffirmed the benefits of the use of the mother tongue (UNESCO, 1953).

Therefore when the Revised Philippine Education Program (RPEP) was introduced in 1957, it provided for the use of the vernacular for the first 2 primary grades

during which time English was taught as a subject, and not the medium of instruction for all subjects. From Grade 3 through college, English was the medium of instruction, while the vernacular served as an auxiliary medium of instruction (Bureau of Public Schools, 1957).

In 1974 the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) was established. The Soriano Committee recommended the use of both English and Pilipino as media of instruction in both elementary and high school, depending on the domain (or subjects). “English domain” refers to teaching in English for English Communication Arts, Mathematics, and Science. “Pilipino domain” refers to teaching in Pilipino for Pilipino Communication Arts, Social Studies and History (Department of Education, 1974).

Nevertheless, through all of these years there was a strong nationalist resistance to using English as the medium of instruction. Outspoken historian and writer Renato Constantino believed that the English language had separated Filipinos from their past, and the educated from the masses, and by teaching in the English language, education had become a tool to appreciate everything American (Constantino, 1974).

Ten years after the implementation of BEP, the 1985 evaluation did not show significant gains or losses; but there were indications of much more benefits for the Tagalog-speaking regions, and they also did better in Social Studies (Gonzalez, 1988).

The BEP was recast to refer Filipino (now spelled with an f) as the language of literacy and scholarly discourse while English is referred to as the international language and non-exclusive language of science and technology (Bernardo, 2004). EDCOM, the Congressional Commission for Education was formed in 1991. It advised for all subjects, except for English, to be taught in Filipino. This recommendation remained to be unimplemented.

Today, debates from both sides of the fence have continued for and against BEP and EDCOM. The better quality schools have always preferred the English-only policy as this is the language of power, for upward mobility reasons, for global communication and competitiveness necessities (Bernardo, 2004).

The heated debates and reluctant implementations of policies led the current President of the Philippines, Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to issue a President’s

Executive Order in 2003 to establish a policy to strengthen English as second language in the educational system. The strong reaction against this was such that a petition in April 2007 was filed with the Supreme Court to issue a restraining order to stop the implementation of the PEO.

Debates over Languages

To understand the unique problems of disagreement over language policies and their implementation, it would help to look at the deeper problem of disagreement on whether English should even be taught at all, and then to what extent it should be part of the school curriculum. In the last 60 years since the Philippine's liberty from US governance, these have been the recurring themes of debates (Bernardo, 2004).

For the positive acceptance of the English language, the pro-English proponents have presented their arguments that revolve around three areas of discussion:

- a) For unification purpose and social integration. There are 126 dialects in the Philippines (Ocampo, 2006). Sometimes half an hour ride across a town will bring one to a different dialect-speaking region. For this archipelago of such diverse ethnolinguistic people, the easy way for communication is English. When Pilipino (Tagalog) was named the National language, there was a strong negative reaction from the Cebuano-speaking regions, which even until today teach Tagalog half-heartedly and use it reluctantly.
- b) Advantages of English. Whether one likes it or not, English has been the most important international language. It is the language for economic advancement, for academic pursuits, and globalization.
- c) Practical problems to shift away from English. Teachers who had been educated in English lack the competence to teach in the vernacular. They had been trained in their specializations in schools that use English; many had degrees from abroad. There is also an abject lack of textbooks written in Filipino and assessments written in the vernacular are rare and in dire need of validation and reliability. Critics point to the local languages as lacking in intellectualization for academic, scholarly use. It is still a long way toward developing the

language, practice, textbooks, and the like.

As for the arguments against English as the medium of instruction and primary language, they revolve around these ideas:

- a) English language is a colonizing tool. Proficiency in the English language means buying English books, watching TV and movies in English, serving the English-speaking people, imbibing the American culture, dreaming the American dream, migrating to US, taking the US made tests, prescribing English textbooks, etc. The least likely to be benefited by the English language are those who have less education or lower quality of education. Thus opportunities for advancement are confined to those who already enjoy socio-economic advantages in society – thus the gap between the rich and the poor, and between the educated and the masses.
- b) English brings damaging effects to Filipino culture. Because of English being used so popularly, there is less chance or motivation to learn Filipino. The vernacular is losing its edge and people are not buying Filipino products. Furthermore, children from vernacular-speaking families are not learning as much as they should. Those who benefit from education in English are those who are already proficient in the language. The result is the widening gap among Filipinos of varied SES groups.

It can be observed that the debates centered more on socio-economic-cultural and politico-ideological factors, than on actual pedagogical concerns.

Pedagogy of Teaching English in the early Grades

In my interview with Dr. Fely Pado, Professor of Teaching Early Grades at the University of the Philippines, I asked for her observation on the pedagogical methods that are prevalent in teaching English at the early childhood level. She remarked that pedagogy is very different between the public and private schools, exclusive and non-exclusive schools, and further distinguished by regional situations.

Pedagogy depends on the students' language of home. The resources available for students are, however, mostly imported American textbooks locally copyrighted

and re-printed in the Philippines, with a few inserts of stories written by Filipino writers in English.

The prevalent pedagogy can be described as “Integrated Learning Approach” that goes through these 4 stages: 1) Teacher reads the story. (As to whether the students have the book or not will depend on whether the school has enough provision for all students or not). 2) The teacher discusses the story with the class. (The questions could be taken from the textbook questions or teacher-made). 3) Language portion in which the teacher focuses on the grammar. 4) Word recognition and spelling emphasis. (The purpose mainly is to build vocabulary. Sometimes the vocabulary list is already provided for by the publisher or could be created by the department coordinator).

The common practice is teaching English as primary language like teaching Pilipino. It is very rare for Filipino English teachers to have been trained in ESL.

The use of the story seems to be emphasis in pedagogy for most schools. Only in a few exclusive schools would there be a requirement to have two books for English subject – one on literature, another on grammar.

As to ESL programs that are advertised in many schools, these are what I gathered from interviews with 2 international schools. The ESL program is mainly for non-Filipino non-English speaking students. Currently in the Philippines the strongest contingent of foreign students are the South Koreans. The purpose of these ESL programs is to mainstream the students for regular classes.

In the International School of Manila, the students who are in the ESL program make up 10% of the student population. Those who teach in ESL are mostly Caucasians or English native-speakers. Some, though not all, have been trained in the ESL teaching method; they use ESL textbooks and the teachers are certified in TESOL. The assessments for the ESL students are different than from those for regular students.

In the Harvest International School in Cebu, the ESL program is named Special Immersion Program. By admitting foreign students who don't speak English, it is hoped that after staying a year or two in the Philippines, these students will pick up the language. And after such time, if the students should decide to enroll in the school

for regular education, they will be permitted to do so after passing a language assessment.

The Philippines provides a cheap place for non-English speaking Asians to learn English. ESL programs sprout everywhere. Language centers have been established by Korean immigrant businessmen for Korean students. Even the Philippine Tourism Board promotes ESL among their tourism packages on their website, “Wow Philippines.”

Research Studies on Bilingual Education

For most Filipino students, bilingual education is their way of life, however, for many, learning two languages presented many problems. In recent years the Reading Department of the College of Education at the University of the Philippines has produced research studies that deal with the difficulties and effects of bilingualism.

In her study “Effects of Bilingualism on Literacy Development” (2002), Dina Ocampo (Associate Professor of Reading Education) aimed to investigate the cognitive and linguistic factors related to literacy difficulties in a bilingual population. The sample of her study consisted of 479 children aged 6 to 13 who attended school, either private or public, in regions where the dominant language is Filipino. The research instrument, consisted of tests which she adapted, pilot tested, validated, and conducted in both Filipino and English, that included measures of: a) literacy (single word reading and spelling patterned after the Wide Range Achievement Test 3 (Jastak, Wilkinson, & Jastak, 1993), b) phonological ability (phoneme tapping), c) rapid visual naming (naming of pictures and colors), d) comprehension (picture, listening and sentence comprehension), e) memory span (word span, rhythm tapping, visual shape memory), f) general problem solving ability (block design sub-test of Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children – Revised), and g) word interference (color Stroop was used to investigate the difference in the naming speed of colors when incongruent color words in Filipino or English were presented.)

Since literacy assessment tests for both English and Filipino were lacking, instrument development was an integral aspect of Ocampo’s research. Item analysis

was conducted to identify items of appropriate difficulty level and items that could discriminate between good and poor performers.

The reliability estimates for each measure were computed using Cronbach alpha.

Table 1. *Reliability Estimates of Literacy Assessment Tests*

Test	Filipino		English	
BilingualMeasures	No.ofitems	α	No.ofitems	α
1. Word reading	46	.9286	72	.9619
2. Nonword reading	17	.8638	17	.8748
3. Spelling	51	.9490	49	.9651
4. Listening comprehension	30	.6837	30	.7843
5. Sentence comprehension	9	.8355	10	.8572
6. Phoneme tapping	20	.9510	18	.8899
7. Syllable tapping	18	.9328	15	.9193
8. Word span	14	.7937	14	.7653
NonlanguageMeasures	No.ofitems		α	
9. Picture stories	16		.7846	
10. Visual shape memory	5		.6162	
11. Block desing	11		.8477	
12. Rhythm tapping	12		.7771	

Source: D. Ocampo (2002). *Effects of bilingualism on literacy development*. p.54.

Furthermore factor analysis was conducted to determine the relationships of the measures with each other. The Principal Component Analysis and Varimax with Kaiser Normalization were used. See Appendix A for the component matrix generated after seven iterations.

Ocampo's research concluded that the theories on literacy development from mono-lingual English subjects cannot explain bilingual-biliterate Filipinos. While other studies have argued that visual processes propel the early development of literacy skills, results from Ocampo's study suggest that for Filipino children phonological processing skills provide the foundation for early word reading and spelling development in both languages. This may be explained by the transparent nature of

Filipino orthography as explained by the Script Dependent Hypothesis which says that decoding is faster when the language has sound-symbol correspondence. Word reading and spelling abilities of the sample continue to be based on phonological processes throughout the six grade levels. Secondly, the central processing hypothesis complements the script dependent hypothesis to explain bilingual reading. Although the pace for progress in both languages is different, “the underlying skills in literacy show a high degree of cross-language interdependence” (Ocampo, 2002). The study also found that “literacy difficulties among bilinguals have several tiers of possible causes and manifestations and thus cannot be explained by single-word methods of investigations” (Ocampo, 2002).

Lalaine Aquino in her dissertation “Effects of Bilingual Instruction on the Literacy Skills of Preschoolers” (2005) wanted to find out 1) whether there were positive effects of a) monolingual Filipino instruction on acquisition of English literacy skills, b) monolingual English instruction on acquisition of Filipino literacy skills, and c) bilingual literacy instruction on acquisition of literacy skills in English and Filipino, 2) which particular literacy skills were affected by each of the three instructional methods, and 3) whether bilingual instruction showed superior positive effects on literacy skills. Her research involved 14 urban poor children aged four to six whose L1 is Filipino, who were non-readers and had not gone to school. They were assigned to one of the three groups: monolingual English, monolingual Filipino, or bilingual instruction for an 8-week intervention, using the Four-Pronged Approach of Teaching Beginning Reading. A pre-test post-test comparison was done and single case profiles were gathered.

Aquino’s study showed the following results: 1) All of the three treatments had generally positive effects on the children’s literacy skills on both English and Filipino languages; 2) Strongest effects were noted in alphabet knowledge skills and phonological awareness, except for phoneme tapping. Moderate effects were observed for book and print knowledge, vocabulary and for listening comprehension. The weakest effects were on phoneme segmentation, decoding and spelling in either language. 3) Monolingual Filipino instruction had the most number of highest gains in the aforementioned measures in either Filipino or English, followed by the monolingual

English instruction. The bilingual instruction had the lowest achievement.

Similar results were found in Ocampo and Villanueva's study "Development of the Reading and Language Programs in Filipino and English in a School for Children with Dyslexia" (2004). While Filipino students with dyslexia could decode very well in both English and Filipino, there were significant differences in comprehension of the two languages. Children comprehended better in Filipino texts than in English texts. The researchers then devised the Communication Arts Program in English by adding a direct-multi-sensory instruction of decoding and spelling. Two years later, there were marked improvements in English reading of Math and Science subjects.

With these research results, debates continue about whether to hold bilingual instruction in schools and whether teaching both languages like primary languages would serve the whole population of students in the Philippines.

Ocampo and her colleagues presented a proposal to the Basic Education Sector Reform Agenda in a paper titled, "Formulation of the National Learning Strategies for the Filipino and English Languages" (2006). It calls for national reform to "implement a developmentally and culturally sound programming of language and literacy development in schools." By this, the proponents advocate giving stronger importance and acknowledgement of the child's life experiences, including the language he brings to school. Programming of language development must begin with the use of the child's language as the medium of instruction. Among the proposal is a call for environmental support for a transitional process from mother tongue to the language of learning.

Socio-economic-cultural Realities in Learning and Teaching English

How would observation around my community inform me of the realities of exposure to and use of the English language in the daily life?

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model of Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) places the individual inside concentric circles of a microsystem, mesosystem, exo-

system, and macro-system. Other than the personal demographic factors of an individual's development (personality, IQ, for example), his development is affected directly by his family and school (microsystem), the interaction among these immediate influences (mesosystem), his sub-culture and events happening around him (exosystem), and the macrosystem (culture, media, economics of the country where he lives). The Philippine experience is a case where these factors certainly explain why certain sectors of the society achieve high proficiency in the English language and why other sectors do not.

English proficiency today in a country marked by poverty is understood as a factor of economics that causes differences in access to books, availability of quality literary materials, affordability to use cable television and internet (access to global information and knowledge), parental language models (differentiated by SES), affordability and accessibility to quality schools and good English teachers, opportunity to learn, practice, and use the English language (differentiated by types of work, demand for English, facilities for communication).

These factors may turn out to be more salient in understanding the differences of proficiency than whether the languages policies have been on this side or that, or whether policies have been implemented.

A Case Narrative: English Proficiency in 3 Generations of a Chinese-filipino Family

My mother, age 89, came from China to Manila as an infant. She went to school during the American occupation. The language policy then was English only. Not only was the language used all English, the textbooks were American imports, and American history and geography were taught. My mother remembers memorizing all the capitals of all American states and singing the US National Anthem.

Alongside her education in the "English school", she also attended a school established by the Chinese with full curriculum on the Chinese classics. She learned Filipino more from every day life than from formal education on the language.

How does she fare in the three languages? Good in English (correct grammar too), good in Chinese (less facility than mainland Chinese), but poor Filipino (grammatical errors, simple vocabulary).

I was a teen during the Martial Law years (beginning 1972). It was the time when the policy was to use the vernacular in the early grades and English from grade 3 onward. In actual practice, I cannot remember English not being the medium of instruction. It was more 90% English instruction and 10% Filipino. Filipino was confined as a subject matter. It should be noted that I went to a private sectarian school established by the Filipino-Chinese (how Chinese born in the Philippines were called then). We were instructed on two curricula – Filipino prescribed curriculum for all schools (with textbooks open to school's selections) and a second full curriculum of the Taiwanese books in the afternoon – in Mandarin.

I would say that I have high English proficiency – fluent in speaking, reading, writing and listening, satisfactory rate in Chinese (if compared with China or Taiwan or even countries with Chinese majority in population.) I would rate myself as only passable in Filipino.

Crystal, my daughter, age 22, was born a year before the People Power Revolution (1986), the event that grabbed world attention. Media had become part of daily life. CNN was established 6 years earlier, and accessibility to it on cable TV in the metropolis gave us an hour by hour development of this event as history unfolded.

When Crystal went to school, the bilingual education policy was still in effect as during her mother's time. However, a change in every day conversations in school had become more "Filipinized", even as she was enrolled in a Chinese-Filipino school, as her mother was. Teachers used more Filipino phrases in teaching. In actual practice, however, the bilingual instruction was more of 80% English and 20% Filipino.

Crystal's Chinese education was reduced to two subjects. Her education outside of school was daily long hours on the internet, including chat rooms and blogs, cable TV and a deluge of the latest bestsellers listed in the New York Times.

Crystal speaks and writes excellent English (of native-English speakers' level). Her college education in English literature at the University of the Philippines got

excellent ratings and her MA in Creative Writing assignments surpassed many native Aussies. However, her Chinese proficiency pales in comparison to her mother's and grandmother's. This was remedied by a year of a Mandarin immersion program in Beijing after her college education. She speaks better Filipino than her mother and grandmother, but still lags behind her classmates and friends of Filipino ethnicity.

It should be observed, however, that in this family, as English language proficiency increases, the Chinese language proficiency becomes inversely related. Chinese proficiency is also inversely related to Filipino proficiency.

Thus, in this family, at least, our English proficiency does have very little to do with the Language policy concerning English at the time of our schooling. It has something to do with pedagogy, as more and more teachers are required to be trained in Teacher Institutions. It has much to do with exposure to media (internet and cable TV particularly). And definitely, it has very much to do with the attitude toward the language, particularly about whether the English is important in the global world.

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Appendix A: Rotated Component Matrix of Measures of Literacy (Source: D. Ocampo, 2002, p. 56)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	Literacy/ Phonological	Age-related	Syllable segmentation	Rapid visual naming	Memory span	Phoneme segmentation	Word interference
Age	6.772E-02	.659	2.748E-02	.108	.255	2.731E-03	-.143
English word reading	.779	.168	.214	.317	.152	.137	7.374E-03
Filipino word reading	.791	.162	.153	.132	9.655E-02	6.643E-02	-3.941E-02
English spelling	.587	.428	.259	.259	.165	.205	5.672E-02
Filipino spelling	.718	.382	9.694E-02	.198	3.320E-02	.174	3.724E-02
English nonword reading	.731	.177	.243	.162	.284	.126	-7.439E-02
Filipino nonword reading	.760	1.023E-02	3.864E-02	7.872E-02	.129	-3.121E-03	-.278
English phoneme tapping	7.598E-02	.147	9.252E-02	.127	8.920E-02	.842	-.101
Filipino phoneme tapping	.251	5.645E-02	.117	8.061E-02	.162	.778	-7.432E-02
English syllable tapping	.159	.146	.836	.160	7.928E-02	9.193E-02	1.337E-02
Filipino syllable tapping	.255	.130	.826	3.799E-02	5.138E-02	6.466E-02	-8.966E-02
English sentence comprehension	.385	.371	.420	.304	.295	.204	-5.936E-02
Filipino sentence comprehension	.527	.228	.408	.238	.209	.196	-2.605E-02
English listening comprehension	.258	.576	.204	8.962E-02	.234	.173	4.765E-04
Filipino listening comprehension	.350	.700	-2.611E-02	-7.609E-02	-.119	.156	7.506E-02
Picture stories	.188	.459	.433	.291	.164	.123	4.442E-03
English word span	.240	.176	3.736E-02	.140	.795	6.729E-02	4.349E-02
Filipino word span	.155	.275	7.977E-02	6.703E-03	.763	.176	6.001E-02
Rhythm tapping	.135	.377	.237	.107	.518	9.050E-02	-.191
Visual shape memory	.143	.637	.158	.104	.230	8.002E-03	-.125
Block Design	4.105E-02	.643	.209	.260	.254	2.750E-02	-.139
English rapid visual naming of pictures	-.264	-8.307E-02	-.201	-.787	-6.935E-02	-.141	3.430E-02
Filipino rapid visual naming of pictures	-.400	-.369	-.103	-.514	3.215E-02	-.159	1.716E-02
English rapid visual naming of colours	-.230	-.155	-6.270E-02	-.790	-.135	-3.406E-02	.140
Filipino rapid visual naming of colours	-.372	-.435	-.186	-.323	-.166	-7.022E-02	-.167
English word interference	-1.452E-02	-9.915E-02	-2.775E-02	-8.551E-02	-2.468E-02	-.156	.721
Filipino word interference	-.133	-5.251E-02	-3.291E-02	-2.246E-02	3.276E-02	1.151E-02	.830