

Language and Learning

*Patricia B. Licuanan, Ph.D.
President, Miriam College*

*CEO Forum on English
Philippine Business for Education (PBEEd)
Asian Institute of Management
January 24, 2007*

I have been asked to speak on “Language and Learning” which is a very basic and broad area of concern for a psychologist and educator. But in the light of the focus of this CEO Forum on English and present company, the sub-text is much more specific i.e. English as medium of instruction to improve the quality of English in the Philippines. So let us, to use an English language expression, “cut to the chase”.

House Bill 4701 on “Strengthening and Enhancing the Use of English as the medium of Instruction in Philippine Schools” or the Gullas Bill with Cebu First District Representative Eduardo Gullas as principal author, has been passed in the House of Representatives and is expected to be passed soon in the Senate. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has certified this bill as urgent. I personally found these developments alarming and expected much sound and fury from the educational community and other sectors. This did not exactly happen. Instead there were initial cheers of approval from the business community which had long deplored the deterioration of English in the country and the declining competitiveness of the Filipino and the Philippines in the global market and saw this bill as a step in the right direction.

The silence from the “usual suspects” was partly due to the fact that Gullas Bill does not deviate much from existing DepEd policy so what else was new? However, as former Undersecretary of Education Mike Luz pointed out in a recent column, it is a dangerous bill because it “places misleading emphasis on English as the medium of learning. As such, the young learners and their teachers will concentrate on the language, not on Science and Math and literacy (that is more fundamental to learning)”. Also I would guess there is a certain amount of fatigue surrounding the discussion of medium of instruction since much has been said on the subject by linguists, educators, psychologists, official bodies set up to study Philippine Education, officials of the Department of Education and concerned citizens. I suspect too that the well-intentioned support from the sectors, present company included, was because educators and scholars rarely speak to legislators or the business community and vice versa.

Thus the importance of today’s forum. For my remarks, I will summarize some key points on the issue before us today that I believe need to be re-emphasized and considered seriously to prevent possible piece-meal and even knee-jerk solutions that may actually do our country more harm than good.

It's not English---it's the whole educational system!

The deterioration of English must be understood in the context of the general decline in Philippine education. The problem we are facing is not simply the deterioration of Math and Science and it is this general decline that undermines the competitiveness of the Filipino and the Philippines. Undue emphasis on English may distract us from the bigger problem. Upgrading education in general should improve the quality of English as well. The emphasis on English as a medium of instruction is due in part to the suspicion that the Bilingual Education Policy (BEP) which prescribes the use of English as medium of Instruction for English, Mathematics and Science and Filipino as medium for all other subjects, is the cause for the decline in English. In fact, in 1988, an evaluation of the BEP was conducted by Bro. Andrew Gonzalez and Dr. Bonifacio Sibayan, two distinguished linguists, and one of their key findings was that after eleven years of BEP, there was indeed a clear decline in learning achievement levels of students. However, they concluded that this decline was due to overall decline in educational inputs and not to the BEP. Obviously, this decline in education continues today and the BEP is still a suspected culprit.

English as medium of instruction will not improve the quality of education and will actually have damaging effect.

Learning is primarily mediated by language. The use of English in Philippine education has been contested throughout the history of its use, beginning with the American colonial government that instituted English as medium of instruction in 1900. When the Philippine educational system was officially reviewed by the Monroe Survey Commission in 1925, the foreign language handicap was cited as the major stumbling block. Since then, the most consistent empirical evidence shows the damaging effects of English on Filipino student learning. When English is used, students do not learn well, and at times do not learn at all. Thus using English as medium of instruction in some subject areas (e.g. Math and Science) prevents students from learning as much as they could in their mother tongue.

How often, friends and colleagues referring to their own English-only educational experience, argue, "That is how we were educated and we turned out so well", expressing the perception that being educated in English developed English proficiency and expanded intellectual horizons and making them the successful and accomplished persons they are today. The fact is, the proponents of English as medium of instruction grew up at a time when English was quite widespread, when media was predominantly English, and many probably even spoke English at home. In other words, there was much support and reinforcement for the English language in the social environment. But as they say in ungrammatical American English "Them days are gone forever". Another difference is the number of years spent in school---about 14 years---and thus students were able to learn English first in order to benefit from instruction in English. Today, large numbers of students will drop out

before completing elementary or secondary school. These are the students who will suffer if they are taught in a foreign language.

The use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction also has a negative repercussions on national identity, love of country and pride of being Filipino which cannot be underestimated and ignored.

Student achievement is positively related to use of mother tongue as medium of instruction.

In the 1950s, UNESCO pronounced the necessity of beginning schooling in the students' mother tongue because this was the language they understood and early school experience in the mother tongue would help ease the transition from home to school. Studies in the Philippines comparing the use of the vernacular to that of English revealed that students learn better when mother tongue is used. They were better able to apply what they learned in school to their home and community. The importance of mother tongue education was recognized by EDCOM (1993) and PCER (2000).

The Philippine language context has more than 150 languages spoken with the major languages being Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, Waray, Bicol, Kapampangan, Pangasinan. According to census data, 99% of Philippine households speak Filipino or Tagalog as a first or second language. SWS in a 1994 survey showed 56% of Filipinos able to speak English as a second or third language. Reports estimate a very small number (approximately 30,000), speak English as a first language, mostly Americans living in the country.

English as medium of instruction will widen the gap between the rich and poor in our country.

The use of English as medium of instruction will not improve the quality of English in the country nor will it present the opportunities for intellectual and economic advancement as claimed. The ones who benefit most from education in English are those who have high levels of proficiency in English to start with and those who belong to environments where English language inputs, materials and resources are available. The overwhelming majority of Filipinos will forever struggle with English as a foreign language and will feel alienated in the classroom where they are required to speak in English. They are likely to learn very little and enjoy the so-called learning process even less. They will fail examinations and eventually drop out. The use of English as medium of instruction in our schools may also explain the lapse into illiteracy among school dropouts who were taught to be literate in English through rote memorization. English therefore, is not the solution to poverty in the country but may actually be part of the cause of poverty.

The use of mother tongue will not only improve the quality of education but may actually be the tool to learning and improving English.

The use of mother tongue will not only improve the quality of education but may actually be the tool to learning and improving English.

Bi-lingual or multi-lingual competence which already exists in the Philippines, with most Filipinos speaking at least two or three languages, should be positively developed. Research shows that children's language skills in two or more languages develop well when bi-lingual skills are valued, when the child's first language is used as a tool for learning, when the child is motivated and needs to communicate in the target/new language, when there are relevant and diverse opportunities to use language for real purposes, and when there is present in the learning environment a good role model of the target language who can understand one of the child's languages. There is considerable evidence on the cross-linguistic transfer of literacy i.e. transfer from one language to the other because the child who has mastered language and literacy in the most familiar language has the basis for future language and literacy training.

In the push for English as the medium of instruction, how often do we hear the argument "Now that our Asian neighbors are learning English, we are giving up English as our competitive edge." This argument is seriously flawed because these countries embarking on the road to English---Japan, China, Korea, and others---are also countries that attained high levels of quality education through use of their native languages, not English. They would never sacrifice their native language. Nor should we.

A language policy should be developed and implemented based on the above principles, using the appropriate and effective combination of mother tongue, Filipino and English.

Appropriate and effective strategies for improving English competence should be pursued, developed and applied.

These final two action statements will not be discussed in this presentation as they will require much more time and input. More stakeholder discussions such as these should be held. The voluminous research on Philippine education as well as the medium of instruction issue should be reviewed. The late Bro. Andrew Gonzalez used to remark that ours was the most studied educational system in the world. Yet one may rightly wonder whether these studies and their recommendations have any impact on policy. We share the concerns about the state of Philippine education and the commitment to contribute to solutions. We support the goal of improving English communication skills across the school system and encourage appropriate and effective strategies to achieve this. Indeed, we must improve the quality of English in the Philippines. But this cannot be achieved if we sacrifice the learning process itself. It must never be achieved at the sacrifice of our native and national language.