

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

College English Teachers Association Convention

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Philippine Studies vol. 32, no. 2 (1984) 225–229

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Notes and Comments

College English Teachers Association Convention

JOSEPH A. GALDON, S.J.

The College English Teachers Association (CETA) held its annual convention at Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro City, 26-28 October 1983, as part of Xavier University's Fiftieth Anniversary celebrations. There were 246 registered delegates at the convention, from 13 regions and 83 colleges and schools. Slightly more than 80 percent of the delegates were from Mindanao (45 percent from Region X which includes Cagayan de Oro and its environs). Only 7 percent of the participants were from the Metro Manila Region, and some 13 percent from Luzon and the Visayas. Thus by the fortunate coincidence of geography, the 1983 CETA convention brought together over two hundred teachers involved in English teaching on the provincial college level. It provided a rather depressing picture of College English teaching in the Philippines outside of Metro Manila.

THE PROBLEM OF ENGLISH TEACHING

After three days of lectures, workshops, question and answer periods, and informal discussions, one was left with the inevitable conclusion: On the provincial level Philippine College English Teaching is in dire straits. Cesar Hidalgo of the University of the Philippines quoted the Commissioner on Audit, Silvestre Sarmiento, who attributed the large number of failures in the 1983 CPA exams to the "unsatisfactory command of English" and the inability of many candidates to follow instructions. "Many candidates gave definitions," Sarmiento said, "when they were required to distinguish and differentiate."

This was not new to the English teachers at the CETA convention, of course. They were aware of the performance of their students on the English portion of the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), and they had the evidence in front of them in their English classrooms. Excessively large classes, unreasonably heavy teaching loads and lack of textbooks were some of the problems reported by the convention delegates in the informal sessions and in the convention workshops. One would have to add to this list the poor training and preparation of many English teachers themselves. One Manila delegate reported in one of the Workshops that in an English Reading Test administered in Zamboanga several years ago, only 10 percent of seventy teachers were reading on a 10th grade level or higher.

Dr. Hidalgo's paper on "Teaching Writing to Filipino College Students" gave an excellent summary of the general problems in College English Teaching in the Philippines. He enumerated four problems among students as symptoms of the problem: The widespread lack of adequately prepared freshmen college students, the lack of substance in students' papers, poor English language proficiency and the lack of a sense of style. As causes of the problem of English in the Philippines he enumerated: The deteriorating quality and diminishing quantity of the teaching force, lack of comprehension and appreciation of the fact that English is a second language in the Philippines and incredibly large classes in English and the even more incredible teaching load of the teachers.

The situation, of course, is not unique to the Philippines. The *New York Times* Winter Education Section (8 January 1984) was largely devoted to the problems of English writing in the United States. In that issue Suzanne Daley reported that a survey of 1,269 American colleges and universities conducted recently by the Instructional Resource Center at CUNY showed that nine out of every ten colleges had to offer courses that concentrated on basic writing skills. "There is a perception at colleges and universities," reported Marie Jean Lederman who heads the CUNY Resource Center, "that there are problems with the basic skills, particularly writing." (*New York Times*, 8 January 1984, Section 12, p. 38.)

SOLUTIONS TO THE PROBLEM

The speakers at the Convention suggested three possible solu-

tions to the problem of poor English teaching. Two of the speakers concentrated on improvement of the College English curriculum; four of the convention speakers emphasized the improvement of teaching; and one speaker suggested a much more radical approach to the problem.

Professor William Royer of the United States International Communication Agency addressed himself to the basic issue of English as a Second Language. His talk on "Language and Culture" was based on the assumption that one's language and one's view of the world as seen through his language is essentially unique. In learning another language, then, one must appreciate the view of the world seen through that other language. One must get inside the cultural-person of that second language, to empathize, so to speak, and to see the world from the other point of view, while not necessarily accepting it. On the practical teaching level, the second language curriculum must guide the learner through varying cultural experiences by using role playing, dialogue, dramatic presentations and similar teaching techniques. This is a theoretical framework that has proved eminently successful in teaching English as a second language throughout the world. (Innumerable testimonies to the success of this approach, as well as practical teaching applications, are reported in *Forum*, the US publication on teaching English as a second language.)

Professor Royer's talk raised significant questions about English teaching in the Philippines which has traditionally paid lip service to the second language approach, while actually teaching English as a first language. A number of these questions emerged in the open forum which followed Professor Royer's talk. Should, for example, the second language be used as a medium of instruction? Should a "colonial language" be used in Philippine classrooms? Is there any justification for using English simply because it is a "prestigious language"? Is bilingualism really a practical solution to the problem? Professor Royer neatly sidestepped most of these questions and diplomatically referred them back to Philippine teachers and educators, where, of course, the solutions properly belong. Philippine education must clarify its own language policy.

The second suggestion towards English curriculum reform in the Philippines was offered by Graham Millington, the English Language Officer of the British Council in the Philippines, who spoke on "Current Trends in ESP" (English for Special Purposes).

Mr. Millington's talk was an excellent summary of what ESP really is, what it attempts to do, and how it can be done in the English classroom. He outlined a number of practical approaches and indicated a number of textbooks that can be used in the implementation of ESP in the classroom. The ESP approach has been championed by the ESP Center at De La Salle University in the Philippines and has been used with considerable success in many colleges and technical schools throughout the Philippines. English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) and English for Science and Technology (EST) have met with considerable success in the Philippines in the areas where they have been applied. What needs a good deal more study and experimentation is English for Academic Purposes (EAP) for basic reading, writing, listening and speaking skills. An unfortunate misunderstanding in Philippine educational circles has limited the application of ESP to English for Occupational Purposes and to English for Science and Technology, and has neglected the application of English for Special Purposes to the basic academic skills. Once again, Mr. Millington's talk, and the very lively open forum that followed it, underlined the necessity of the clarification of English teaching goals in the Philippines.

The second approach to the problem of College English teaching in the Philippines was outlined in the talks of Dr. Edna Manlapaz and Fr. Joseph Galdon, S.J., of the Ateneo de Manila, Dr. Isagani Cruz of De La Salle University, and Dr. Cesar Hidalgo of the University of the Philippines. All four centered on the improvement of teaching techniques within the classroom. The underlying assumption of all these speakers was that English in Philippine colleges could be improved by improving the educational background of the English teachers themselves, and by equipping these teachers with improved teaching skills. Dr. Manlapaz discussed "Integrating the Teaching of Language and Literature"; Fr. Galdon spoke on how "Literature Still Works: Reading Skills for College"; Dr. Cruz gave a very practical demonstration of "Teaching Drama Inside the Classroom"; and Dr. Hidalgo's talk was entitled "The Teaching of Writing Skills." The basic message of all of these speakers was: We can keep the traditional curriculum in Philippine college English, but we must improve the teacher and the teaching.

A final, more radical, approach to the teaching of English was

offered by Dr. Hidalgo in his paper, "The Teaching of Writing Skills."

Philippine higher education needs upgrading. It must be available only to a well-prepared brilliant minority. There must be a national policy that includes passing a truly discriminating selective process (including mastery of the English language) and a quota system based on carefully projected national needs.

Certain implications would follow, it seems, from Dr. Hidalgo's view. Firstly, you solve the problem of English in the college by NOT teaching English, except to those who have mastered it. This, of course, merely transfers the problem of College English Teaching to the high schools and the grade schools. Secondly, Dr. Hidalgo's proposal seems to imply an educational policy that is prevalent in many other countries. At some point before college, you divide the student population into two groups—those who are to go on to college and those who are to go on to vocational schools. Philippine higher education would be available only to a small percentage of the population. Consequently, English would be limited (for the most part) to this small minority. It was a provocative insight, but unfortunately, it passed without notice and without comment by the delegates to the convention.

CONCLUSION

The CETA Convention was a very rewarding experience. It brought together grassroots teachers and some very talented and perceptive speakers. It gave a very good cross section of English College Teaching in the Philippines in the 1980s and raised a number of significant questions that will have to be solved if English teaching in the Philippines is to improve. The basic questions are theoretical, but they must be solved before applications can be made in the provincial classrooms of the Philippines. The University of the Philippines Committee to Study Admissions to the University reported that "competence in English is the single most important factor that determines success in the University." If that is true, something must be done about English competence in the Philippines, or we are doomed to deteriorating standards on the college level, with consequent effects upon the nation as a whole.