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On The Medium of Instruction: English or Pilipino

TEODORO A. LLAMZON

EVERYONE realizes that the issues involved in the current controversy on the proper medium of instruction in our schools are far-reaching and crucial. Whatever be the policy finally adopted, it is bound to have repercussions on the educational formation not only of the present generation, but also of the generations to come. Hence, it is important that decisions be based on facts, not myths.

Let us go over some of the more important facts of the issue: first, on English; and then on Pilipino as medium of instruction.

When the early Americans, at the turn of the century, started the unique experiment of using English (a foreign language) as a medium of instruction in Philippine schools, they did so for the following reasons: (1) there was great linguistic diversity in the islands, and none of the languages had the necessary diffusion, prestige, and lexical adequacy to qualify as a medium of instruction; (2) there were strong feelings of regional jealousy among the different linguistic groups; (3) there were no educational materials available in any of the Philippine languages; and (4) it seemed that English was a neutral language acceptable to all, and if used as a medium of instruction, would eventually develop into a common language.

Unfortunately, this dream (of developing English into a common language) has not been completely realized. While it is true that English has become the language of government business, and education, it has not become the language of the home. Only in some families is English spoken domestically. For the average Filipino, English is distinctly a second language, artificially acquired as a part of the educational process. For the most part, Filipinos still express themselves on more intimate occasions in their own mother tongue, as they have always done.

Moreover after more than sixty-eight years of experimentation and employment as the medium of instruction in Philippine schools, English has proven to be — except in some schools — inadequate and ineffective as a channel of education. For the most part, the average school child is unable to express himself fluently in English.

The Monroe Commission in 1925 found the reading ability of a Filipino fourth year high school student about the same as that of a fifth grade pupil in the United States. More recently, in 1945-1950, Dr. Pauline Fertsch of the U.S. Educational Foundation administered some thousand tests of reading ability in various schools in the Philippines. Her conclusion was that the average disparity between American and Filipino students was even greater in 1950 than it was in 1925.

Today, it is commonly thought that the average school child's command of English has deteriorated even more. A professor at the University of California in Los Angeles recently remarked that among the foreigners on campus who could speak English (e.g. Indians, Malaysians, Singaporeans, Filipinos, etc.) the Filipinos were the most difficult to understand and the least fluent in expressing themselves.

In 1950, Clifford Prator wrote a report of his survey of the English situation in the Philippines. He listed eight fundamental changes which had occurred in the last decade and which had given rise to the current crisis in the teaching of English in the Philippines; then, he summarized the consequences of these changes as follows:

The cumulative effect of all these adverse factors... has probably not yet been fully felt. The success of the almost all Philippine education depends at present on the degree of the pupils' command of English, the medium of instruction, and yet that command, which by the very nature of things it would be impossible to develop too highly, seems to have deteriorated rapidly in recent years. *The channel through which the substance of education must flow is being blocked!*... Even in 1925, the degree of command of English was judged to be much too low. If it is still lower today, then a crisis of the first order exists. And before a crisis can be remedied, its existence must be recognized... (*Language Teaching in the Philippines*, pp. 41-42).

In 1968, Dr. G. Richard Tucker, a Ford Foundation consultant at P.N.C., reported the results of his research on the "Filipino bilingual." He wanted to know which was the more dominant (i.e. was controlled better) of the two languages which the Filipino bilingual spoke: Pilipino or English. His first test was a "self-rating", i.e. he asked the students to evaluate their control of the two languages, and state which language they thought they spoke better. He found that they rated themselves significantly more proficient in Pilipino than in English.

He then proceeded to give them a second test: a "vocabulary richness" test, i.e. he asked the students to give him the meaning of lexical items and expressions. Again the students performed better in Pilipino than in English. Finally, he tested them in oral reading. Here, the students performed better in English than in Pilipino — perhaps, because they did not read as much Pilipino written material as English.

Later, Dr. Tucker administered a variation of the "standard word association" test originally designed by Kent and Rosanoff, to a group of college students. He found that:

- (1) the students left significantly more blanks when the stimuli were English nouns than when they were Pilipino;
- (2) there were significantly more repetitive responses when the stimuli were English than when they were Pilipino words;
- (3) the responses were also classified according to their semantic correctness, and there were significantly more errors in English than in Pilipino. These findings, he pointed out "were particularly interesting since they indicated that the

various concepts had not become clearly defined for the students even after these many years of study via the language." Dr. Tucker ended his report with the following important remarks: "Filipino students — even after many years of working via English — still function less efficiently and less competently than they do in their own language. They appear to be, in effect, still *linguistic infants* in English." (Italics added.)

These facts, it seems to me, should suffice to alert the educators of this country to the stark realities of the English situation in our schools.

It is true that in some schools, English has been and continues to be an effective teaching medium. It is also true that some Filipinos have even gained sufficient mastery of English to develop a Philippine literature in English. However, as Dr. S. P. Lopez, President of the University of the Philippines, recently pointed out: "...this limited achievement of the few hardly compensates for the miseducation of the many."

It is common knowledge that one of the chief causes of dropouts in our schools is English. A survey, conducted recently by the Ateneo Language Center, showed that in the dropout figures in twenty-one (21) public high schools in the Manila area over a period of three years (1964-1967), English was ranked second in the percentage of failures (5%) as against other subjects. In six private schools in the same area over the same period, .42% of the dropouts were due to poor grades in English and/or poor command of English.

Some have suggested that, perhaps, what should be done to solve the problem is to upgrade the teaching of English in our schools. It is clear, however, that this state of affairs cannot be ameliorated by merely improving the methods and materials currently used in teaching English. The problem lies deeper. For example, it used to be the case that an "English rule" would be enforced in certain schools to give the students opportunities to speak English outside the classroom; and this rule would be considered reasonable. To-

day, this rule would not only be considered unreasonable, but even ridiculous, and "colonially" motivated. In other words, times have changed — and not in favor of English, but of Pilipino. The signs of the times demand the propagation and use of the national language.

Consider the statistical trends. Not only is Pilipino now spoken in all the cities and provinces of the Philippines; the numerical growth of its speakers has also been spectacular. The following are the figures in the last twenty-one (21) years as reported by the Bureau of Census:

	<i>Pilipino</i>	<i>English</i>
1939 Total speaker	4,068,565	4,259,549
Percent of population	25.4	26.4
1948 Total speakers	7,126,913	7,156,420
Percent of population	37.1	37.2
1960 Total speakers	12,019,193	10,689,171
Percent of population	44.4	39.5

While the growth in the number of Pilipino speakers in the last twenty-one (21) years was 19%, that of English speakers in the same period was only 13%. If factors do not change, statisticians predict that this year (1970), a census year, the number of Pilipino speakers will reach the figure of 54% of the population.

However, this has recently been shown to be a conservative estimate. Last year (1969), the CEAP conducted a survey of the parents who sent their child(ren) to Catholic Schools. The question was asked: "What language (s) did they speak at home?" The answer was 64% spoke Pilipino, while 51% spoke English (and 23% spoke Visayan).

We have just compared Pilipino with English; now let us compare Pilipino with the other Philippine vernaculars. The 1949 census makes it possible for us to determine how many learned the various vernaculars as a second language, because it lists both the number of mother-tongue speakers of the language and the total number of those who are able to speak the various major Philippine languages:

Language	Percent of Po.	Mother Tongue	Non-Mother Tongue	Percent of Total who are non- Mother Tongue Speakers
Tagalog	37.1	3,730,028	3,396,885	47.7
Cebuano	25.2	4,759,772	80,936	1.7
Hiligaynon	12.7	2,373,566	62,824	2.6
Iloko	14.0	2,340,221	347,640	12.9
Bikol	8.0	1,467,874	67,537	4.4
Samar-Leyte	6.4	1,203,936	22,351	1.8
Pampangan	3.7	641,795	65,496	9.3
Pangasinan	3.5	515,158	150,184	22.6

The outstanding figures of 47% for Tagalog or Pilipino as against 22% for Pangasinan, and 1.7% for Cebuano indicates the tremendous prestige that Pilipino enjoys against all the other Philippine languages. The 1960 Census does not allow us to continue this comparison, since it gives the total number of speakers only of Pilipino, English and Spanish. At any rate, the total number of those who learned Tagalog as a second language in 1960 rose to 50%, i.e. six (6) million of the twelve (12) million who could speak Pilipino learned it as a second language.

If this trend continues, and the factors which are responsible for this spectacular growth in the number of Pilipino speakers remain stable, then it is safe to predict that in ten or fifteen years the country as a whole would already be speaking Pilipino.

When this happens, the better and more enlightened language policy would be to adopt Pilipino as a medium of instruction. By then, Pilipino will not only have the advantage over English of greater diffusion and of being the language of the home; it will also press its greatest asset over English as medium of instruction, namely, the fact that it is a Philippine language.

This feature of Pilipino should neither be underestimated nor lightly dismissed by thoughtful educators on the grounds that it smacks of misguided nationalism. As Clifford Prator, an American linguist quoted above, pointed out:

If a man borrows a strange language to express himself, at least part of his thought is also borrowed and vital elements of his individuality are sacrificed. Yet true creativeness involves the fullest possible expression of self. The goodness of a thing is measured by the extent to which it realizes its own specific nature, as was pointed out by no less a personage as Aristotle. Inevitably, four centuries of colonialism have reduced Philippine cultural individuality to a low ebb. Much of the art, architecture, music, and literature of the islands is unmistakably derivative. There can be no doubt that this cultural eclipse is due partly to the long-continued neglect of the local languages in which the native culture found expression. (*Language Teaching in the Philippines*, p. 14).

If the Philippines were to persist in using English as medium of instruction even when the vast majority (if not all) of its people have already become Pilipino speakers, then a dichotomy could arise between the home and the school in the students' process of education: in the morning, he would go to the "ivory tower" (the school), where he would speak a strange tongue and talk about strange ideas; at the end of the day he would return to the "world of reality" (the home), where he would speak his own language and talk about things which are down to earth.

The point that should not be missed here is this: Pilipino is well on its way to becoming the common language of the Philippines; hence, its diffusion should be encouraged, and its eventual use as the instructional language should be prepared for and programmed.

This means that plans should be made as soon as possible for teacher training and materials production. Certain professors who have command of Pilipino should be encouraged to teach experimental classes in Pilipino, in order to develop the vocabulary necessary to teach their subjects. These professors should then write textbooks on their subjects in Pilipino. Finally, they should conduct summer teacher training sessions to prepare other teachers to teach their subjects in Pilipino.

There should also be instituted as soon as possible a translation project to render good English textbooks into Pilipino. This appears to be an intermediate and necessary stage to the

actual composition of textbooks for school use by certain professors who are capable both in their subject and in Pilipino.

There should be a gradual shift in the medium of instruction from English to Pilipino. The shift should be programmed not only from the grade school to the university levels of education, but also from the Pilipino-speaking regions to the non-Pilipino-speaking regions (when they start to speak Pilipino). In the meantime, in those regions where Pilipino is not yet spoken, English should continue to be used as the instructional language.

Now, there are those who object to the use of Pilipino as the language of education on the grounds that it is lexically inadequate for the various school subjects, especially the physical sciences. The answer to this objection is that Pilipino will surely come up with the needed technical terms *as soon as* it is employed as instructional medium; not before. It is a myth that because Pilipino now lacks these terms, it can never develop them.

Language has, by nature a built-in mechanism for referring to any object whatsoever. It may employ loanwords, or use *calques* (i.e. translations of terms in the foreign language, e.g. con-sonant = ka-tinig), or simply coin new words by either using word bases from other related languages, or using its own word bases and deriving the new term by the proper use of affixes, e.g. *dalubtauhan*, 'anthropology'.

Nor does this process of "modernization" need a century to accomplish, as some maintain. This is a myth. The case histories of modern Hebrew, and more recently of Bahasa Indonesia have demonstrated the opposite.

When Ben Yehouda landed in Palestine less than a century ago, the Hebrew language not only lacked modern technical terms for the schools, it lacked even the ordinary words necessary for everyday modern living. In fact, as a language, Hebrew was dead. Nobody spoke it. But Ben Yehouda was determined to revive it. So, he began with his immediate circle of friends and family. He refused to talk to them except

in Hebrew. They had first to decide which of the two varieties of Hebrew — the Sephardic (once spoken by the Spanish Jews) or the Ashkenazic (once spoken by the Jews from central and northern Europe) — they should adopt as the language of Israel.

The next step was to make up terms for everyday use. Ben Yehouda and his friends did pretty much what the Institute of National Language is doing today: combining roots from Hebrew or the other Semitic languages, using calques or loanwords. To help popularize the use of these terms, he published a daily newspaper in Hebrew. In those days, it was not uncommon to see sellers and buyers in the market place looking up what the new words meant in Ben Yehouda's pocket dictionary. By the time the great leader died, the language was not only used in everyday life, it was the medium of instruction from the early grades to the university level. Today, Israelites use Hebrew in government, commerce, education, and industry.

The case of Bahasa Indonesia is even more impressive. The language was proclaimed as Indonesia's national language as recently as December 1949. Since then, it has been developed into a medium, not only on all levels of education, but also on all levels of government, commerce, and industry. It took Indonesia only twenty years to achieve this goal.

The reason why Pilipino is lexically inadequate right now is that we have not been using it for educational purposes during all this time. We have been leaning on English, and have relegated Pilipino to the home, the restaurant, the street, etc. The result is that Pilipino is rich in vocabulary for these domains of activity, but not for school purposes.

A recent experiment by Dr. Paul A. Kohlers of Harvard University has shown that a person is able to talk about a subject matter only in that language in which he learned it. This is undoubtedly the reason why Pilipino speakers immediately switch to English when the topic of conversation becomes even slightly academic. They have learned these acade-

mic matters only in English, and consequently they can express themselves only in English with regard to such matters.

This does not mean, however, as some persons have immediately concluded that Pilipino is by its nature lexically inadequate. No; we need only use it in the domains of education, government, commerce, and industry; it will soon develop the necessary words for activities in these domains.

There are people who think that unless we hold on to English as instructional language in our schools, the academic standards of our country will plummet down. The opposite is true. Unless English is relieved of its role as the language of instruction in our schools, the education of the great majority of our students will continue to be deficient.

This does not mean, of course, that English should be banished from our schools. English is far too important a language to be neglected. It is, after all, today's international language, and the language in which significant findings of research in the arts and sciences are reported.

However, we must distinguish these two issues clearly—namely: (a) the retention of English in our schools, and (b) its use as a medium of instruction. With the use of modern techniques of second language to teaching, we can give our students the competence they need in English; but the use of English as a medium of instruction is another matter: it demands of the students complete (i.e. native or near-native) control of the language. We have already seen that more than half a century of using English as an instructional language has failed; we have no assurance that its use in the next decade or two will be more successful.

At present, there seems to be no factor or condition which could change the situation in favor of English. If anything, one can only see new factors which will make the learning of English more difficult in the next decade or two.

We should not think that unless English is used as the medium of instruction in our schools our academic standards would automatically go down. This is a myth. The Japanese

and German schools are not inferior academically to the English-speaking schools of the world.

Nor should we think that unless we begin studying English from Grade I, we shall never gain competence in it. This is another myth. With proper motivation on the part of the pupil, and the proper technique of teaching on the part of the mentor, the student should learn to speak, read, and write English well within a year or two.

Thus, those schools whose students must have an excellent command of English should continue to *emphasize* this subject—by giving it more time than the other subjects, by putting on plays and other activities in English, etc.; but these schools should not feel that the only way for them to give their students competence in English is by using English as a medium of instruction. Once again we must remember that it is one thing to learn English well as a second language, and another to use it as a medium of instruction. Ideally, the medium of instruction should be the student's home language, since this is the language he controls completely, and the language through which he will imbibe knowledge.

It is possible, of course, that the shift to Pilipino as medium of instruction will cause us some initial inconveniences: (a) the teachers who cannot handle the Pilipino language will have to learn it; (b) Pilipino itself needs modernization and technical terms, and those who teach the various subjects in it will have to develop the terms they need; (c) there are only a few Pilipino text and reference books for classroom use. However, if we begin now, there is no reason why these initial drawbacks cannot be overcome.

It is part of our profession as teachers to be willing to learn new ideas and skills. We should not, therefore, recoil at the prospect of spending one or two summers learning how to teach in Pilipino. Moreover, those who are more competent in their subjects and in Pilipino should consider the possibility of writing text and reference books in Pilipino.

At this time of writing, I know of several professors who are teaching their college classes in Pilipino. One of them is teaching philosophy at the Ateneo, and another one is teaching logic at the University of the Philippines. Both report that as the result of their using Pilipino in class, the students have achieved a deeper understanding of the key notions of their subjects, and display enthusiasm and lack of inhibition during discussion periods.

By way of illustration, the professor of logic brings up the "law of permutation". What does "permutation" mean to most students? It's a big word; and they have little or no idea what it connotes. However, when they hear the Tagalog word *salisihan*, immediately they understand what the rule involves. This is true also with regard to the "law of substitution", which this professor translates as *halinhinan*. The term itself gives the student an insight into the logical operations involved in these laws.

Perhaps, we could end by saying that although there should be a gradual shift in the instructional language of our schools from English to Pilipino, English should not be banished from our classrooms. We should learn English and use it as a second language. Moreover, the use of Pilipino as medium of instruction will not necessarily solve all our educational problems; but it can be a good start.