

# philippine studies

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## **The Local Dialects as the Medium of Instruction in the Primary Grades**

Democrita A. Cena

*Philippine Studies* vol. 6, no. 1 (1958): 115–120

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## *The Local Dialects as the Medium of Instruction in the Primary Grades*

### I

AFTER the Americans occupied the Philippines in 1898, schools were slowly established with American soldiers as teachers. These military authorities at first believed that like the natives of Cuba and Puerto Rico the majority of Filipinos could speak Spanish. But they realized that this was not the case so they ordered books printed in English instead of Spanish. The use of English was prescribed in President McKinley's Instruction to the Philippine Commission dated 7 April 1900. It stated among other things that "In view of the great number of languages by the different tribes, it is specially important to the prosperity of the islands that a common medium of communication may be established and it is obviously desirable that this medium should be the English Language." This marked the beginning of the use of English as the medium of instruction in Philippine schools.<sup>1</sup>

The use of English had obvious advantages but it has also caused a major language problem in the schools. The Monroe Commission of 1925 in its report made the interesting comment that "In adopting English as a medium of instruction the Philippines has organized a system of education unique in the world."<sup>2</sup> More recently however the UNESCO Educational Mission to the Philippines has stated the problem more strongly: "The difficulties created by the use of a foreign language as the primary medium of instruction in the schools as well as the introduction of the National Language which is also unfamiliar to all but the Tagalog-speaking pupils, have confronted educators with a most perplexing problem."<sup>3</sup> The complication becomes more serious in the high schools where Spanish, English and the Filipino national language are to be taught.

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<sup>1</sup> Benigno Aldana *The Educational System of the Philippines* (Manila 1949) pp. 10-11.

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Isidro *The Philippine Educational System* (Manila 1949) p. 427.

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO *Report of the Mission to the Philippines* (Paris 1949) p. 18.

Critical of the use of English, the Quezon Educational Survey of 1935 recommended that a controlled experiment be conducted using a local dialect as a medium of instruction in the primary grades with English as one of the subjects in the curriculum. But it was not until after the war that the experiment was undertaken.

The division of public schools in Iloilo under Mr. Jose Aguilar pioneered in conducting the experiment in 1948-1950. The pupils were divided into two sets of classes, the "experimental" group and the "control" group. The former used Hiligaynon, the local dialect, for grades one and two; the control group used English. For the experimental group, English was gradually used beginning with grade three.

The experimental group numbered 960 pupils; their control counterpart numbered 1,368. Pairs of control and experimental groups were found in an urban, a farming, or a fishing area of Iloilo. Before the children were assigned to a group a mental ability test was administered and the children equated.

For the experimental class, thirteen textbooks, supplementary readers and teachers' manuals currently used in the primary grades were translated from English to Hiligaynon. Most of these materials in English were to be used for four years by the children in the control group, but most of the children studying in the experimental group finished the matter in Hiligaynon in two years' time. The result of the experiment was encouraging as noted by Dr. Tito Clemente of the division of measurement and research of the Bureau of Public Schools. He concluded that the local vernacular was a more effective medium of instruction than English for reading, arithmetic and social studies in Grade One.<sup>4</sup>

Encouraged by the favorable results of the Iloilo experiment, the public schools division of Laguna followed. The reactions of the teachers toward the experiment are worth mentioning here. In a canvass of teachers' opinions among the public schools of Laguna in 1954, the following points were reported to be commonly held: (1) the vernacular had simplified the language problem; (2) it had promoted spontaneous expression among the pupils; (3) it could be an instrument for effective reduction of illiteracy;

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<sup>4</sup> V. A. Rañola "The Mother Tongue, Basic Tool of the Community School" *Philippine Journal of Education* August 1956 pp. 150-151.

(4) it had reduced some serious teaching difficulties; (5) it had served as an effective bridge of understanding between the school and the home.<sup>5</sup>

The reaction of parents and laymen was likewise encouraging. At first they looked down upon the procedure as unwholesome. But after the advantageous results were noticed, they showed appreciation for the undertaking.

During the school year 1956-1957 almost all of the public school divisions of the Philippines took up the experiment. A master plan of the Board of National Education was issued to the schools. This master plan was later embodied in a department order issued by the then secretary of education, the late Gregorio Hernandez Jr.<sup>6</sup>

## II

The division of Misamis Oriental, like other divisions, started on the experiment that same school year. A majority of the teachers using the vernacular in Grades One and Two express agreement with the results of the Iloilo and Laguna experiments.

The present writer is head teacher of the Kauswagan Primary School in the small town of Lagonlong, Misamis Oriental. This school has an enrollment of one hundred and fifteen pupils, sixty-five of whom are in Grades One and Two where the vernacular is used. The majority of these children come from poor families whose parents can neither read nor write. The children cannot study at home as there are no printed books and the mimeographed reading material may not be brought home as they are easily destructible. All their studying is done during school hours in the morning and in the afternoon.

It is my impression that the children in these classes conducted in Visayan (Cebuano) are more active in answering questions than children who are taught in English. The children can express the ideas in their minds without fear of being misunderstood. The result is that in the classroom there is a free exchange

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<sup>5</sup> R. G. Costes "The Vernacular as a Medium of Instruction in the Lower Primary Grades" *Philippine Journal of Education* February 1957 pp. 554-555.

<sup>6</sup> G. Hernandez Jr. "Revised Philippine Educational System" Department Order No. 1 s. 1957.

of ideas between teacher and pupils. When the teacher asks, *Unsa kini?* (What is this?), the pupils readily answer, *Kana bola* (That is a ball). If the teaching were done in English, the teacher would have to repeat "This is a ball" many times for the children to repeat after her.

One noticeable effect of instruction in Visayan is the rapid progress in the reading ability of the children. Children upon entering school for the first time have already a sufficient stock of speaking vocabulary in the mother tongue whereas they hardly know a word of English. Thus after only one year in school the child has a large reading vocabulary in Visayan far in excess of what he would have in English.

A typical example might be cited. The writer was surprised during the noon recess to find three little girls reading and giggling over a magazine. These girls had taken a local Visayan magazine from the teacher's table and had begun opening the pages. What they read amused them. They understood what they read. Yet these girls were only in Grade One. It has been observed too, that many of these children who have first learned to read in Visayan attempt also to read English and Tagalog material that is within their reach.

A second outstanding advantage of instruction in the local dialect is observed in the writing ability of the child. In the old system where the medium of instruction was English, the child could write from dictation only those English words the spelling of which he had learned by heart. But with the new system, the children can write from dictation Visayan words which contain *syllables* which have been mastered. Thus, as early as the end of the first grade, children will be writing words that come to their fancy and could write childish comments about anything within their view.

The writer has observed this difference at first hand. In the grades where English was the medium of instruction, children in Grade One learned to spell by copying words as wholes. But this group of children who have been taught in the vernacular can write almost any word that comes to their minds. For instance, one morning these children noticed that their teacher had a new hair curl. Some of these children ran to the board and wrote comments about the teacher: "*Ang maistra nagpakulot.*" "*Guwapa na ang maistra.*" (The teacher has had her hair curled. She is now

beautiful.) It is true that not all children in Grade One show the same proficiency in writing. But it is a fact that on the whole their writing ability is better than that of children trained in English.

### III

During the years following the war, the public schools were criticized as diploma mills. It is an admitted fact that those years were chaotic. The schoolrooms were crowded and very much shorter time was allotted to school work. The products of these schools were considered illiterates by many educators.

There is still a bit of truth in the charge. Statistics show that big drop-outs of children occur during the primary grades. Only about seventy per cent of school beginners go through Grade Four. Only fifty per cent go beyond the elementary grades and only twenty per cent get beyond the high school.<sup>7</sup>

Now, with English as the medium of instruction, the time spent in the primary grades is generally devoted to the study and learning of English. But since fifty per cent of the students never get beyond the elementary grades, the amount of English learned is inadequate.

The problem therefore of the system was to find a means whereby the children could learn the most fundamental education within a short period of four years. The use of the vernacular as a medium seems a promising answer.

### IV

The use of the vernacular, it has been pointed out, rests on the following psychological bases: (1) Effective teaching is best attained through the use of one language understood by the child. (2) Development of skills and abilities in a foreign language requires time and effort if it is to be used as the medium of instruction. (3) Like other people, the Filipino will hold fast to his native tongue because of its intimate emotional associations. (4) It is good pedagogy to make the child learn by going from the known to the related unknown.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> R. G. Costes *op. cit.* p. 151.

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Isidro "The Language Problem and the Board of National Education" *Philippine Journal of Education* December 1955 pp. 420-421.

The use of the vernacular is not easy. Major problems are inherent in its application. The vernacular teachers in the division of Misamis Oriental (like those in other divisions) feel the lack of reading material for classroom use. The new system means a discarding of the old material printed in English and using the vernacular texts, manuals and the like. This is a big financial problem to the already overtaxed citizens. Imagine the cost of printing books in all the eighty-seven dialects of the Philippines!

A second difficulty is the lack of trained teachers to handle the local dialects. Almost all of the teachers in the field have been trained in English as a medium. The teachers find difficulty in translating some of the technical terms into the vernacular.

The third problem is the transition from reading in the vernacular to the reading of English (for eventually English should be learned). Everyone notices the big difference. In the local dialect the words are pronounced as they are spelled, but everyone knows that in English many words are not pronounced as they are spelled.

These are problems which remain to be solved. But as things now stand, Department Order No. 1 series 1957 issued by Secretary Hernandez on 17 January 1957 (two months before his death) is the controlling document. Section 10 of Article 2 of the said order says: "The board adopts as a policy the use of the native language as the medium of instruction in Grades I and II in all public and private schools and urges the school authorities to take practicable steps towards its implementation."<sup>9</sup>

DEMOCRITA A. CENA

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<sup>9</sup> *Editor's Note:* The problem discussed by Mrs. Cena in this article is both interesting and important. The Editor invites further discussion of this problem.