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## **English Language Teaching and the New Constitution: Problems and Prospects**

ANDREW GONZALEZ, F.S.C.

### **THE NEW CONSTITUTION ON THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

By way of introduction, let me focus on the pertinent provisions of the 1987 Constitution on the English language:

Sec. 7. For purposes of communication and instruction, the official languages of the Philippines are Filipino and, until otherwise provided by law, English.

Sec. 8. This Constitution shall be promulgated in Filipino and English and shall be translated into major regional languages, Arabic and Spanish.

In the interpretation of law, what is not said is often just as important as what is actually said or formally legislated. Moreover, legislation should be viewed in its larger context, in this case, the entire Article XIV, specifically, the sections on language (6 to 9). Moreover, in interpreting Constitutional law, it is good to refer to the background notes against which this provision was drafted, especially the deliberations in committee.<sup>1</sup>

The previous section (sec. 6) states that the national language of the Philippines is Filipino, which is of course Tagalog-based Pilipino, now renamed Filipino, as the language is "further developed and enriched on the basis of existing Philippine and other languages." The minutes of the Committee meetings on Education and Science and Technology, Arts,

An earlier draft of this note was given as the keynote address at the College English Teachers Association (CETA) held at Mariano Marcos State University, Batac, Ilocos Norte, on 27 October 1987.

1. A former Constitutional Commissioner, Wilfrido V. Villacorta, a colleague at my university, and I are writing a monograph on the background of the language provision in the new Constitution.

Culture and Sports indicate quite clearly that what distinguishes Tagalog-based Pilipino from Filipino is not only the name but the future *lexical* enrichment of the language; in other words, Filipino is Tagalog, renamed since 1959 Pilipino, enriched with vocabulary words from existing Philippine and 'other languages,' presumably English, Spanish, Arabic and other languages from which Tagalog has frequently borrowed.

The mind of the Constitutional Commissioners is quite clear on the future of Filipino. Section 9 states that a "national language commission composed of representatives of various regions and disciplines" is to be set up to "undertake, coordinate, and promote researches for the development, propagation, and preservation of Filipino and other languages." The last phrase is inaccurate, since preserving Filipino will not be a problem; only the 'other languages' need looking into to make sure they are preserved.

Moreover, more telling is what is said about Filipino: "The Government shall take steps to initiate and sustain the use of Filipino as a medium of official communication and as a language of instruction in the educational system." In the meantime, "for purposes of communication and instruction, the official languages are Filipino, and UNTIL OTHERWISE PROVIDED BY LAW, English" (emphasis mine).

Thus, from the point of legislation, in our Constitution now ratified by close to 80 percent of our people, the future of Filipino as the national and official language is assured. As it develops, it shall be used for official communications, not only for symbolic purposes, but in what Bonifacio P. Sibayan calls "the controlling domains" of education (language of instruction in the educational system) and in legislation. Other official domains are the judiciary, government, and of course, the day-to-day bureaucracy. In fact, had the ultranationalists in the Constitutional Commission had their way, English would not even have been included as an official language. It was the intervention of more balanced nationalists such as Ricardo J. Romulo who came up with the compromise phrase "and until otherwise provided by law, English." Hence, to remove the official status of English would require only an Act of Congress.

What this means is that gradually, the domains of Filipino are to expand in our social lives and in our education system, so that as Filipino expands its domains, English at the same time will contract its domains. To adapt a Biblical phrase, Filipino must *increase* and English must *decrease*.

It is not yet clear to me that the history of English in the Philippines follows that of Moag's putative cycle, cited by Llamzon, and that English is now in its decline after its peak and is undergoing the process of being relegated from a second language to a foreign language.<sup>2</sup> However, there is no doubt that the domains of a competing language, Filipino, are expanding, and that the domains of the former colonial language, English, never a language of the masses, are decreasing, at least in official legislation and certainly in Philippine life, based on our impressions, observations, and more scientifically, on our surveys.<sup>3</sup>

The Policy on Bilingual Education of 1987, known as DECS Order No. 52, series 1987, recognizes this Constitutional provision and based on the demands of the nationalists now states that the Philippines will continue to have a bilingual education policy, that regional languages can be used as languages of transition (to Filipino and English), that English will continue as a language of instruction for mathematics and science, but that it will no longer be an *exclusive* language of science and mathematics in the Philippine educational system. This means that the door is open in the future for a revision of the current policy and the possibility that mathematics and science can be taught in Filipino rather than in English at least at some level of the system. This latter provision in the Department Order was included at the insistence mainly of the Surian ng Wikang Pambansa (Institute of National Language).

Moreover, the presence of grade school graduates of Grade 6 who have attained practically no basic communicative competence in English has forced some members of the Technical Committee which wrote the initial draft of the 1987 Bilingual Education Policy to recommend that for these students an alternative track entirely in Filipino (with English as a subject) should be offered so that these students will at least learn some content in a language they know better than English. We have salved our social consciences by saying that if and when the students can carry on basic communication in English, they can move to the regular bilingual stream. I am not sure if this proposal will be approved; it is only at the discussion stage. Our teaching experience, however, indicates that if a

2. Rodney F. Moag and Louisa B. Moag, "English in Fiji: Some Perspectives on the Need for Language Planning," *Fiji English Teacher's Journal* 13 (1977): 26 as cited by Teodoro Llamzon, "The Status of English in Metro Manila Today," in *PANAGANI Essays in honor of Bonifacio P. Sibayan on his sixty-seventh birthday*, Andrew Gonzalez, F.S.C., ed. (Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1984), pp. 106-21.

3. Andrew Gonzalez, F.S.C. and Ma. Lourdes S. Bautista, *Language Surveys in the Philippines (1966-1984)*, (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1986).

student has not acquired basic communicative competence in English after six years of schooling, the chances of his acquiring such competence during high school are dubious, given our system. He will then be wasting his time for the next four years trying to learn content at the secondary level without the requisite language skills. That is why our high school results are so poor. For such students, several language educators and I are advocating a properly prepared and staffed secondary school program in Filipino with English as a subject.

As far as English is concerned, then, 'until otherwise provided by law,' English shall continue to be an official language; in the Bilingual Education Policy of 1987, English will be used for science and mathematics at all levels.

The experience of other countries shows quite clearly that a language cannot be acquired in a school system unless it is used as a medium of instruction at least for some subjects; conversely when a former colonial language in a postcolonial situation is taught only as a subject and ceases to be a medium of instruction, then that language will disappear soon from the system since acquisition will be limited. The first observation is dramatically shown in the case of Indonesia and Thailand at present. The latter case is shown in the situation of Malaysia. The Philippines will go the way of Malaysia if she drops English as a medium of instruction and relegates it to a subject for study as a language.

Hence assuming we want to maintain English—and all the surveys indicate that we do want to maintain English and that we want to continue as a bilingual nation, NOT a monolingual nation—then we must continue to use English as a medium of instruction especially at the secondary and tertiary level.

## THE PROBLEMS

Given the above legislation and the sociolinguistic situation already described, what are the problems brought about by the new policy and the sociolinguistic realities in the Philippines?

The first problem is what I have elsewhere called 'linguistic dissonance,' borrowing from the term in psychology called 'cognitive dissonance,' when a person's feelings do not agree with what he knows is right, or when there is a lack of harmony or dissonance between feeling and thought. The Filipino, unless he is an ultranationalist—and ultranationalists are mostly young people in college—is ambivalent or two-minded about the linguistic question. On the one hand, he sees the need

for Filipino and its dissemination and widening of domain; on the other hand, he sees the economic need for English. In his mind, if he is idealistic, he opts for Filipino; in his pocketbook, he opts for English. And the younger nationalists won't leave him alone—they keep demanding that he take a position. Verbally, he is committed; in actuality, at the level of action, he is not. He therefore votes with his feet, to use the French phrase—says something but does something else.

In one of his columns in the *Philippine Star* (9 November 1987), Max Soliven quoted the great French statesman Georges Clemenceau (1841-1929): "If a man is under 30 and is not a radical, he has no heart. If he is over 30 and is still a radical, then he has no head."

Most Filipinos, I have observed, place a premium on their pocketbook more than on their nationalism. We have been described as a country and a people whose sense of nationalism is still weak. As long as English is economically rewarding, English will be maintained in the country. When it ceases to be economically rewarding, it will undergo attrition or what sociolinguistics call 'linguistic death.' This is a sociolinguistic rule in the language competencies of nations. Right now, English is still economically profitable and hence will be maintained.

What I am afraid will happen—as it already has in Manila—is that there will be a social stratification reinforced by language. That is, the economic and intellectual elites will continue to learn and maintain English; the economically and intellectually poor will be left with Filipino. I am not for a moment saying that I am happy with such a situation; as far as I am concerned, I shall be happy when rich and poor have mastered Filipino first and then English second. But the realities of life are not like that. The rich and the smart have always mastered the needed foreign language in this society, first Spanish, then English. They will continue to do so. What we have to ensure is that the not so rich, if smart enough, will also have access to an international language and use it for their social mobility while gaining competence in their national language, Filipino.

The problem then is how to make the English language accessible to the poor, given the realities of the Philippine educational system. Our latest evaluation of the bilingual education policy and its implementation after eleven years, 1974-85 indicates that in good schools, students can continue to master Filipino AND English.<sup>4</sup> Poor schools do a poor job of teaching both!

4. See Andrew Gonzalez, F.S.C. and Bonifacio P. Sibayan, eds., *Evaluating Bilingual Education in the Philippines (1974-1985)* (Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 1987).

The key problem then is the maintenance of English in the face of the onslaught of Filipino in both political and nationalistic terms but NOT in economic terms. The problem is that the policies will be dictated by politicians and nationalists, not by economists. Hence policies will be made favoring Filipino (with which we all agree) but disfavoring English (with which some of us disagree). Our response is: Why can't we have both? But of course, to use an idiom, we can't have our cake and eat it, too.

### THE PROSPECTS

Given these realities and these problems, which are already with us, what are the prospects?

The Department of Education, Culture and Sports, through the Secretary, had designated a Bilingual Education Committee under Secretary Minda Sutaria. This committee is charged with the implementation of the bilingual education scheme for both English and Filipino.

Contrary to the past, in this year's budget hearings, the DECS representatives included an explicit item for the bilingual education program. In other words, DECS is putting its money where its mouth is—the program will be funded.

One of the things we are asking for so far as English is concerned is a streamlining of the syllabus for the entire schooling system, what we call the learning continuum, to avoid needless duplication between language skills in Filipino and in English. For example, we need to teach outlining in only one language since the skills are clearly transferrable. We have evidence from good correlational studies on achievement between English and Filipino that there is transfer of skills, at present, mostly from English to Filipino. The good student in English is also a good student in Filipino; the contrary is not true, at present. At least we have no evidence for it since in our present system if a young person is good in English he is also good in Filipino; we have few cases in the school system of Filipinos good in English but poor in Filipino. Thus we must use our time well, optimally, and avoid duplication and teach skills needed at the higher cognitive levels, in only one language. I would suggest that even in literary appreciation, skills are transferrable; thus we can teach the love of literature and appreciation skills in either the Filipino or English class.

If plans materialize on the new secondary school curriculum, then we should be able to enrich the English program so that we have more time

for enrichment in reading including the reading of special registers of English through English for Specific Purposes (ESP), literature, speaking and writing, the productive skills where many of our students are deficient especially those from outside Manila.

As far as I can see, independently of any policy, the sociolinguistic trend is clear and probably irreversible (the policy only reinforces it): More and more Philippine colleges and universities will have entering freshmen with less-than-adequate skills of communication in English making it difficult for them to handle materials suited to tertiary education by international standards.

This calls for what management experts call STRATEGIC PLANNING among college English teachers. We have to think of creative ways of making maximal use of the eighteen-unit requirement for college and where possible, because English is the learning tool for other subjects, perhaps increase the units. However, both research findings and our experience indicate that one masters a language only by using it, not by practising it or taking part in activities to create skills. People are rediscovering, in Australia, for example, the merits of learning English through subject content. We have to have something to talk and write and read about and the best way to do this is by using content materials in other fields for our language use. Thus, more and more, there has to be cooperation between content teachers in the general education courses in college (the first two years) and English teachers, so that both can reinforce each other and help each other. Already this is happening in the study of special registers of English called English for Specific Purposes. It should happen in other areas, too.

Part of strategic planning will call for localizing textbooks, by gearing them to the reading and comprehension level of our freshmen and sophomores, at the same time keeping in mind Krashen's still unproven though attractive hypothesis of  $i+1$ , that is to say, if we want language growth, we must expose students to a level of language (through what they hear and read) at least one level higher than their present level; otherwise there will be no growth.<sup>5</sup>

As is already being done in other colleges, for example, at Ateneo de Manila University, we should open zero-level courses or noncredit courses as preliminaries to regular English courses. We have tried this

5. Stephen D. Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982).



also in my institution. In general, such courses, although accepted, are not welcomed. An alternative would be to meet six hours a week (daily) instead of three hours a week, but be credited only three units. Or one can credit the students for six but require twenty-four units instead of eighteen; this alternative may be more palatable and acceptable. The units and crediting are secondary; the important consideration is what happens in these special classes. They should be input-rich, to use Krashen's term, and provide opportunities for communication about real subject matter—there might even be an integration of communication arts with humanities subjects such as history, other social sciences, and even science and mathematics. The important thing is concentration of work, an intensive immersion type experience which is input-rich and provides a genuine opportunity to share information and to interact with someone. And above all, if the students will need writing skills, then there should be daily writing at least of a paragraph and weekly a short essay. The present practice of four themes a year in high schools is one of the biggest mistakes we have ever made; in high school classes which I have taught, I have insisted on weekly themes, not quarterly ones. The most important skill in college is reading—we should have study skills activities, mostly reading and outlining, to help our students do better in their content subjects, including literature, and then we should have graded exercises in reading, using college level materials, to provide students with necessary practice in these areas. I would recommend that freshman and sophomore English, done within two years or for culturally disadvantaged students, within one year in double sessions, concentrate on communication in reading and writing, with discussions about what is read. So-called 'remedial' courses if grammar-based turn off students, make motivation suffer, and from my experience, have very little long-lasting effect. This experience of yours and mine is borne out by studies done abroad and reported regularly in journals such as *Language Learning* and *Teaching English as a Second Language*.

## CONCLUSION

As long as English is reinforced in the society as the language of social mobility and aspiration, then the capable ones of Philippine society will learn it with or without college teachers.

The people one need not have to worry about are the Manilans and the rich—in the history of all societies, urban dwellers and the affluent have always been able to meet their language needs, first or second. The

*ilustrados* learned Spanish without difficulty, in school and out of school.

It is the poor and the rural children whom we have to worry about, since for the bright ones, for their social mobility, English somehow has to be available, without in any way denigrating or diminishing our concern for the development of Filipino. I am convinced, based on historical studies and my own experience in trying to intellectualize and translate into Pilipino, that it will take us at least a generation before we can use Filipino with ease as a language of scholarly discourse and for modern science, probably two generations. Hence, as we go up the educational ladder, as in ALL societies—not just the Philippines—our intellectual elites must master a second language which will give them access to the knowledge of the world. And it is this access that I would not want to deprive the poor Filipino of, especially the bright one who has the chance to get out of his mire of poverty to be something better, even if it means going to the Middle East, or worse, migrating to another country. I just do not feel that I have the power to make decisions for people about their future. My job is to provide them the skills they need no matter what decision they will take!