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The Prospects for Filipino

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Forum

The Prospects for Pilipino

Dalmacio Martin:

I have often been asked the question: "Is it practical pedagogy to teach Filipino children in the first two grades of elementary school in their mother tongue?" Any European hearing such a question asked with reference to his own country would look at the questioner quizzically, inquire if the question is a joke, and reply with annoyance: "Well, can there be any other language to use?" History, however, has made the question a relevant one in the Philippines.

But before we go into that, let us take a look at the children involved. There are approximately two million seven-and eight-year olds in the Philippines who are, or ought to be, in the first two primary grades. Of every hundred of these beginners only about seventy reach third grade and only about twenty reach the first year of high school. How can it possibly be claimed that these two million children are best taught in a foreign language? There is no conceivable alternative to the mother tongue, if we are thinking of instruction that will have meaning to these children at that age.

I am reminded of a sixth-grade class in a school in Pangasinan where a science lesson was being observed by a group of visitors from Manila. The children, aged 12 to 14, were being shown some simple experiments in air pressure. The first experiment was the familiar one of a piece of paper preventing

water from spilling from an inverted glass. The questions asked by the teacher after the demonstration and the faltering answers of the pupils — all in English — left no doubt among us visitors that the children grasped the meaning of the experiment very imperfectly. The worried visitors, who were inspecting the school precisely in the interests of good science teaching, suggested that the third experiment be explained in the Pangasinan language, and the suggestion was followed. The immediate reaction of the children was like that of a group of people in a dark room as soon as the light is turned on. Hearing the questions and answering them in their tongue made them literally jump with the joy of understanding.

It is not difficult to draw up an impressive list of Filipino and American educators who have recommended that the native languages be used as the medium of instruction in the first two grades. The Monroe Educational Survey Commission (1925), while praising Filipinos for their "adeptness" in English, did not agree with certain overenthusiastic teachers that the native languages should be banned altogether from Philippine schools. On the contrary, the Commission recommended that the mother tongue be used in the Citizenship and Character classes.

Two pre-war Secretaries of Education, Dr. George C. Butte and Dr. Jorge C. Bocobo, urged the use of the native languages in the early years of school, and they did so at a time when it was somewhat of an educational heresy to speak of the native languages as a normal medium of classroom instruction. A UNESCO team of educators (two of them Americans), after studying our educational system in 1949, recommended that teachers continue "to use the local dialect to assist them in teaching". The only question in the mind of these experts was at what point in the elementary school curriculum the change should take place from the native language to English. Dr. Clifford Prator made a similar survey in 1950 and was struck by "the fundamental abnormality of attempting to learn the medium and substance of education [at the same time]". He concluded that "for reasons of the utmost gravity" the native language spoken

in each community should be the medium of instruction during the first few years of schooling. Dr. Prator later set up a center in the Philippines for the improvement of the teaching of English as a *second* language.

Soon after the war Dr. Jose V. Aguilar, formerly superintendent of schools of Iloilo, conducted experiments to determine the relative effectiveness of English and Hiligaynon as a medium of instruction in the early grades in that province. The result was conclusively in favor of the native language. It may be argued that there was hardly any need for elaborate experimentation to reach so obvious a conclusion, but the experimental data did serve to focus attention on the problem and led to a major revision in the thinking of most Filipino educators. Corroborative data in favor of the native language poured in from other provinces.

Subsequently, the Board of National Education referred the whole question to a technical committee on language problems, and the committee's recommendation was that the native language should be the medium of instruction in the first *four* grades. The Board, fearing that harmful effects might result from so radical a change in the system, decided to limit the introduction of the native language as medium to the first two grades. I think this compromise decision was wise.

As early as 1955, the Bureau of Public Schools foresaw the change and set out to prepare teaching materials in the different native languages. Selected teacher-writers from the ten principal linguistic regions of the country were assembled in the Manila office. Under the guidance of experts on children's books, and ably assisted by a staff of illustrators, they set to work on the preparation of 20 pre-primers, 10 primers, 11 first readers and 11 second readers. If the 25% margin fee had not changed the dollar-exchange value of the peso, the mutual-aid program of the National Economic Council and the International Cooperation Administration might have finished by this time the printing of the pre-primers. The project, however, has merely been delayed, not stopped. When the printing of the entire set of books planned is completed, we

shall have a total of 4.5 million books in the native languages in use throughout the country's school system—a significant step indeed in a new cultural direction.

It should be noted that Philippine law calls for the development of a national language "based on Tagalog." A "base" is a starting place, and it might help us to avoid confusion if we remember that our national language is not Tagalog but *starts* with Tagalog, the assumption being that it is still in process of development and should gradually assimilate elements from the other native languages. It was the considered judgment of a distinguished man of letters, the late Justice Manuel C. Briones, that the cultivation of the various regional languages of the Philippines will not impede but on the contrary promote the development of a single national language. This was also the opinion of many other scholars.

If this view is sound, then the use of the various native languages as a medium of instruction in schools will create a more favorable climate for the acceptance of Pilipino as the national language. The bridge from Iloko to Pilipino, for instance, should be a much shorter bridge than that from a foreign language such as English to Pilipino.

Why were the native languages so late in assuming their proper role in our educational system? To begin with, it was felt soon after the establishment of the American regime that what the Philippines needed most, and quickly, was a system of state schools, and for some years the only people who could undertake the professional work of teaching in such schools were Americans. This meant English as the medium of instruction. Then, too, the restoration of peace and order and the improvement of public health required programs centrally administered and national in scope, and this meant the adoption of English as a common medium of communication.

Pilipino leaders were at first dubious and critical. Opposition to English was registered in the Philippine Assembly and the public press. But the opportunity of immediate employment for good learners of English was a practical consideration which could not lightly be set aside. Young people

who mastered English were sent to study in the United States at government expense. The widespread knowledge and use of English was often cited as an index of improvement in the general level of education and hence of readiness for political independence.

Are these arguments for English as the medium of instruction in Philippine schools necessarily true today? It would seem not. It would seem that the use of Pilipino will soon become universal throughout the country, if it has not already done so. In a recent trip to Mindanao and the Visayas I found that I could speak Tagalog with the teachers and pupils in the schools and be understood. On the other hand, most observers will admit that English will never regain its former position of dominance in our educational system. Little by little it will move upward to the higher grades until its use becomes pretty much limited to the college and university levels. Its role as the medium of instruction will be taken over by the native languages of the different regions and finally by Pilipino.

Virginia Palma-Bonifacio:

"When I travel through the provinces and talk to my people," President Quezon once said, "I need an interpreter. Did you ever hear of anything more humiliating? It is all right when I go to the Tagalog provinces because I speak Tagalog. But when I go to Ilocos Sur I am a stranger in my own country. How can I tell people what I think and feel when I must do so through an interpreter who, in the majority of cases, says what he wants to say and not what I say?"

In 1936, at President Quezon's recommendation, the Congress of the Commonwealth established the Institute of National Language composed of a director, an executive secretary, and nine members, each representing a major Philippine linguistic group. After a careful study of the language situation, the Institute recommended the adoption of a national language based on Tagalog, and this recommendation was enacted into law on 7 June 1940, to become effective upon the acquisition of a complete national independence in 1946.

Although the Institute was able to publish a dictionary and grammar of the national language before World War II, the outbreak of the war and the subsequent military occupation of the country seriously hampered the plans laid down by the Quezon Administration. Although the Japanese military government encouraged the use of the national language, the times did not permit the kind of linguistic research begun by the Institute during the Commonwealth. However, the Japanese-sponsored *Kalibapi*, under the directorship of Dr. Camilo Osias, published in 1944 a booklet entitled THE PROPAGATION OF THE NATIONAL LANGUAGE which contained 1,000 basic words and a few simple teaching directions.

The surveys conducted by the Borra-Pecson Educational Commission in 1948 and the UNESCO in 1949 pinpointed quite a number of problems in the teaching of Tagalog—problems which still exist today, for after fifteen years Tagalog remains a most unpopular subject to many parents, pupils and teachers. The fact is that many children, even in Tagalog communities, find the formal study of Tagalog difficult and distasteful. It is a deplorable attitude to take toward one's native tongue, but it exists.

An objective re-examination of existing textbooks and workbooks may help solve some of our problems. To speak frankly, I find these materials most unattractive. There is too much emphasis given to the grammatical and technical aspects of the language. Many of the lessons are mere vocabulary lists, so that the child gets the impression that his language is simply one interminable list of words to be learned whether he likes it or not.

The training of teachers of Tagalog also leaves much to be desired. It is not enough that they should have a thorough knowledge of Tagalog grammar. They must also cultivate a broad knowledge of and deep affection for Filipino culture. It is my belief that the indifference of both teachers and pupils to Tagalog is due in large part precisely to a lack of real knowledge of their own culture; to an almost complete ignorance of the rich treasure of proverbs, riddles, folk songs, nursery

rhymes, stories, legends and traditions enshrined in their native tongue. It is this tremendously varied and fascinating material that we are trying to exploit in preparing the textbooks and workbooks for the Tagalog course in the Ateneo de Manila Grade School.

We do not start the child learning English by giving him the definition (in English) of a noun. We teach him *Hickory, Dickory, Dock*. Then why not start the same way in Tagalog? Why not teach him

Akó si Palakâ
Anák ni Kondeng Mababâ
Pag nakáinóm ng tubâ
Háhagarin kitá ng tagâ.

* * *

Buwán, Buwán sa lañgit
Hinila ko'y napunit
Buwán, Buwán sa lupà
Hinila ko'y nasirà.

* * *

Ale, aleng namámangkâ
Isakáy mo yaring bata
Pagdatíng mo sa Maynilà
Ipalít mo ng kutsintâ.

* * *

Meme na ang batang muntí
Isísilid ko sa gusi
Pagdaraán ng pari
Ipápalít ko ng salapí.

* * *

Násaan ang alitaptáp
Nasa puno ng dayap
Bakit hindi makálipád
Balí-balí ang pakpák.

Many of our riddles make excellent sound patterns for teaching Tagalog in the kindergarten classes, although we may have to edit an occasional earthy phrase. For instance:

Isda ko sa Maribeles
Nasa loób ang kaliskis. (sili)

Oo ngâ at sili
Nasa loób ang aligí. (alimañgo)

Oo ngâ at alimañgo
Nasa loób ang ulo. (pagóng)

Oo nga at manggá
Nasa loób ang matá (pinyá)

Oo ngâ at niyóg
Nasa loób ang bunót (manggá)

Oo nga at mangga
Nasa loob ang mata (pinyá)

Oo ngâ at pinyá
Nag-alís ng saya (labóng)

Akó'y may kaibigan
Kasama ko saán man
Mápatubig di-nalúlunod
Mápaapóy di-nasúsunog. (anino)

A third class of materials are our proverbs, which are not only easy to learn but useful to remember:

Nasa Diyós ang awa
Nasa tao ang gawâ.

And dilà ay hindi patalím
Nguni't kung sumugat ay mariín.

Ang lumálakad nang matulin
Kung mátinik ay malalim.
Ang lumálakad nang marahan
Mátinik man ay mababaw.

Ang kawayan kung likó't buktot
Hutukin habang malambót
Pagká't kung lumakí na at tumayog
Mahirap na ang paghutok.

Kung ang bahay man ay bató
At ang nakátirá ay kuwago
Mabuti pa ang kubo
Na ang nakátirá ay tao.

There are rich possibilities for language teaching in our verse dialogues and tournaments: the *duplo*, the *karagatan*, and their modern equivalent, the *balagtasán*. And why may we not make use of our traditional pageants and mimes: the *santacrusan*, the *pangangaluluwa*, the *panunuluyan*? All are familiar with the *santacrusan* or Santa Cruz de Mayo pageant which reenacts the search for the wood of the true Cross by the Empress Helena and her son, the Emperor Constantine. A procession is formed with children dressed as Aetas (representing the pagan world) in the van, then acolytes carrying cross and candles, then the Empress and Emperor with their court, and finally the people. The excavation of seven hills is played out in pantomime, the seventh hill yielding the true Cross. The procession then goes to the church where all chant the rosary and flowers are laid at the foot of the crucifix. The complete pageant will be more appropriate in the upper grades, but a simpler version could well be taught in the lower. The *pangangaluluwa* is a Hallowe'en observance in which children play the part of the holy souls who are released from purgatory on that one night in order to go singing from house to house, asking for alms. Both words and music of the begging songs are traditional. The *panunuluyan*, a Christmas Eve pageant, portrays Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, seeking lodgings where the Christ Child may be born. They knock at seven inns

and are turned away. Then Joseph engages in a poetry joust with the seven innkeepers, who finally lead him and Mary to a nearby stable. The stable is of course the *belen* or crib which has been set up in the parish church, and Midnight Mass provides a fitting climax to the pageant. These and many other traditional observances can easily provide dramatic material for our Tagalog classrooms.

The future of Tagalog teaching, then, is full of promise, provided we are willing to discard methods which have been found to be ineffective in practice, and experiment boldly with new techniques which will impart not only a knowledge of the languages but of our rich cultural heritage along with it. The tragedy of the long eclipse of Tagalog was compressed by Rizal in the two quatrains of *Sa Aking Mga Kababata*:

Ang wikang Tagalog tulad din sa Latin
sa Inglés, Kastilà ay salitang Anghél,
sapagká't ang Poóng maalam tumingín
ay siyáng naggawad, nagbigáy sa atin.

Ang salita nati'y tulad din sa ibá
na may alpabeto at sariling letra,
na kaya nawalá'y dinatnan ng sigwâ
ang lundáy sa lawa noong dakong una.

But the time should not be far distant when the prophecy uttered by Rizal in another piece of verse shall be fulfilled:

Magbabalik mandin
at muling iiral
ang ngalang Tagalog
sa sangdaigdigan.