

What ails Philippine education - “the language in which they are taught and tested is foreign to them”

Monday 2 August 2021, by [DAVID Randy](#) (Date first published: 11 July 2021).

"Today, we are indeed known as a country where English is widely spoken. While this is an advantage to foreign tourists, it has not exactly made us a preferred tourist destination.

Less known is what the stubborn insistence on English as the favored language of instruction has cost us. The damage is incalculable. It has distorted the learning process. Because of it, many of our people are unable to read and write, understand basic scientific concepts, or perform simple calculations. It has given us college graduates who are fluent neither in English nor in Filipino. It has widened the cultural divide between the well-off classes and the poor."

The below-average test scores of most Filipino students in Mathematics and Science that have been reported in various international assessments are all ultimately attributable to a reading comprehension problem. Our students simply can't grasp the meaning of what they're reading, or relate this to what they know, even when they may be able to utter the correct sounds.

This is so, mainly because the language in which they are taught and tested, particularly in grade school, is foreign to them. It is vastly different from the language they speak at home. I am referring here not just to English, but also to Tagalog-based Filipino, the national language. It is not uncommon to find teachers who are also not proficient in the language they use in the classroom.

This state of affairs has been repeatedly highlighted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization or Unesco. Our own educational experts have known about this for some time. But our policymakers refused to acknowledge it until just a few years ago. They thought that to drop English as the language of instruction would be tantamount to giving up the one thing that American colonialism bequeathed to us—a head start in the mastery of a global language.

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Yet this situation has been effectively concealed by the ubiquity of English as a medium of communication in our national life.

It is this problem that the Department of Education (DepEd) under then Secretary Armin Luistro sought to address with the introduction of the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education approach to learning. The MTB-MLE was the banner program of Republic Act No. 10533 or the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, which ushered in the K-to-12 Basic Education Program.

The plan was simple enough: “Learners begin their education in the language they understand best — their mother tongue — and develop a strong foundation in their mother tongue before adding additional languages... With the end goal of making Filipino children lifelong learners in their L1 (Mother Tongue), L2 (Filipino, the national language), and L3 (English, the global language), learners are more than prepared to develop the competencies in the different learning areas.”

It is the implementation that is not easy. It requires sustained investment in time, resources, and creative effort. Teaching modules and competent teachers are not produced overnight. The evaluation of outcomes needs to be undertaken at every phase of the implementation so that calibrated adjustments in the program can be promptly made.

I distinctly recall that the preparation and publication of teaching modules in the different local languages other than Filipino was one of the key challenges. This, plus the training of MTB-MLE teachers, was something that needed to be carefully planned for. I wish the DepEd concerned itself more with doing its work and issuing periodic reports on the progress of this vital experiment than with demanding apologies from multilateral institutions for not informing them beforehand whenever the latter issue reports reminding us of the enormity of the educational challenges before us.

I understand that the present plan provides for the use of the mother tongue only until Grade 3, but studies have demonstrated the advantages of using it as the basic language of instruction for at least six years. Carefully documenting the actual outcomes of this momentous shift could give us a better idea of what works best for our children.

But the theory is unassailable. It is not too difficult to understand why a child learns how to read and write faster when taught in a language that is already spoken by the child at home. The sounds of the words themselves evoke familiar meanings, making it easy to integrate them into the child’s existing fund of knowledge. Most children draw enormous delight from seeing how familiar words heard in the family are rendered in writing.

Learning is fun, and always ought to be. But one can imagine how quickly the acquisition of essential literacy is at once transformed into a traumatic process when it is burdened by the mediation of a totally strange language. It demoralizes students and prompts them to drop out. The pernicious effects often persist beyond high school; they are palpable even among graduate students, who must wrestle with courses conducted entirely in English.

Those who have the misfortune of going through the pains of this dysfunctional learning process inevitably test low in examinations that assume a certain level of reading comprehension — whether these exams are in science, mathematics, or literature. These students are not stupid. They are just miseducated, hampered by a foreign language that precludes them from making sense of the world around them and making use of their own experiences.

Randy David

• Philippine Daily Inquirer / 05:06 AM July 11, 2021:
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/141939/what-ails-philippine-education>

The teacher factor

In last week's column, I focused on the role that language of instruction plays in determining learning outcomes, especially in the early years of formal schooling. Numerous studies have shown that learners are doubly burdened when the language used in teaching, say, math or science, is totally different from what they use at home. If learning happens when students are able to comprehend the language in which they are taught, then it seems logical to use the mother tongue, at least in the early grades.

There is clearly still no consensus on this issue. Children from Filipino middle-class families appear to have no problem with English as the sole medium of instruction—not just in grade school but in all levels of the educational system. Most of them are born and raised in bilingual homes. To them, using the mother tongue in the classroom is a regression, akin to forcing students to learn something new with a language that is unsuited to the task.

This point of view is rooted in the belief that unlike any of our local languages, English is a global language, the embodiment of everything modern. And that among all the nations that became independent after World War II, we had the advantage of an early start in modern nation-building because of English, which the American colonizers introduced through the public educational system. We raised an entire generation of educated Filipinos who spoke English. Our neighbors sent their children to our schools to learn English. Why give up that advantage now?

This belief seems to be shared by lower-income families that regard proficiency in English as their children's main passport to a better life. They think that the real problem of Philippine education lies elsewhere—in the overcrowded and dimly-lit classrooms, in our overworked and undertrained teachers, in the paucity of quality teaching materials and textbooks, and in the hunger and malnutrition that continue to impair the learning capacity of many Filipino children.

These conditions, no doubt, contribute immensely to the alarming outcomes that have been noted among the vast majority of our students in various international assessments. To address them would require substantially increasing the current budget for education to acceptable levels.

But, in addition, I would argue that a large part of that investment must go to continuing teacher education. In the years immediately following the end of the war, much attention was given to the training of Filipino specialists in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Many of them became principals and supervisors of public schools. They trained their fellow teachers in the use of this modern language as the primary medium of instruction.

I studied in a public elementary school in Pampanga. I can still name all my teachers from grade one to grade six, and distinctly remember all their faces. I believe that the one thing that made them effective in the classroom, more than anything else, was the enthusiasm they exuded as teachers. They had no problem switching from English to Kapampangan as the need arose.

They made learning not just worthwhile but interesting. I saw them as inspiring examples of the educated person. That is also how I feel about all the professors who made an enduring impression on me throughout my college and graduate school years.

Such teachers, as the Chilean cognitive biologist Humberto Maturana described them, "... do not simply transmit some content; they acquaint their pupils with a way of living. In the process, the rules of arithmetic, the laws of physics, or the grammar of a language will be acquired... Pupils learn teachers."

"Children are quite ready to become enthusiastically involved in anything provided of course there are no people around who keep signaling and saying, 'mathematics is tedious, grammar is dull, biology is uninteresting.'" It's important, Maturana says, for teachers "to listen to their pupils intensely, and to listen to their listening." Teachers need to continually ask what their students are actually hearing when they're talking to them. Patience is what is most needed, particularly when dealing with those who appear to be lagging behind.

This last point is of crucial importance — because it is what spells the difference between an educational system that reproduces the inequalities of society and that which aims to rectify them.

There's an ongoing debate within my family (two of my children are full-time faculty members of UP) concerning the proper role of a teacher, which touches precisely on the question of inequality. One of them thinks of this role as that of a "shepherd" who devotes time to making sure the slower ones among the flock do not fall so far behind the fastest. The other insists on the primacy of the "gatekeeper" role, which is to ensure that the minimum standards of excellence are upheld and that the needs of the more advanced students are not forgotten or sacrificed.

My own view, as a teacher of more than four decades, is that both roles are needed, and that they don't have to clash with one another. The problem arises when, in the name of compassion, shepherding takes the form of automatic promotion even of those who do not qualify. Instead of actively assisting them, teachers allow underperforming students to get by on the misplaced charity of a dysfunctional school system. It also arises when gatekeeping puts primacy on the unbending enforcement of standards, ignoring the unequal circumstances in which students pursue the quest for education.

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- Philippine Daily Inquirer / 04:06 AM July 18, 2021:
<https://opinion.inquirer.net/142173/the-teacher-factor>

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