First Language First: Literacy Education for the Future in a Multilingual Philippine Society

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The Philippines Bilingual Education policy emphasises the need to develop literacy in Filipino as a linguistic symbol of national unity and identity and in English as a language of wider communication. However, many Filipino children begin their education in a language they do not speak or understand as well as their first language. In this setting, only the learners’ first language can provide the kind of bridge to a personal identity that incorporates both an ethnic and a national dimension. The author contends that a technical model of literacy acquisition that emphasises literacy primarily as an economic skill for use in the workplace cannot achieve the policy goals. An alternative, ideological model of literacy is proposed which develops the critical thinking skills of the students, builds cognitive and affective domains, and values their local language experience and culture. Thus, by first establishing the empowering role of language in the social system of the students’ community, groundwork is laid for the expansion of the students’ identity to include their role in the larger national and international contexts.

A Linguistically Diverse Nation

Kaplan and Baldauf (1998) describe the Philippines as ‘linguistically heterogeneous with no absolute majority of speakers of any given indigenous language’. In examining the data compiled from the Philippine national Census of Population and Housing (1995), it is clear that this is so. Grimes (1996) lists 168 living languages within the Republic of the Philippines. McFarland (1981) suggests there are 120 languages spoken in the country.

Formation of a national language policy

The national language of the Philippines is Filipino, a language in the process of development and modernisation. It is based on Tagalog, the lingua franca used in metropolitan Manila. Tagalog was named as the national language by President Manuel Quezon in 1939 and then subsequently, in 1959, the national language was renamed ‘Pilipino’ to give it a national rather than an ethnic label.

Domains of language use

The Filipino uses a variety of languages dependent upon circumstances. Code switching between languages, particularly English and Filipino, is common. Sibayan (1983) describes English as a language of distance, which is used formally and semi-formally by Filipinos, whereas the vernacular is the language of home, the neighbourhood and the marketplace. In the more rural communities, people may not have had much exposure to either Filipino or English and children may begin formal schooling at six years old with little knowledge of either Filipino or English, the major languages of education. Therefore, to
provide a relevant early school experience which will build upon pre-school experiences, requires the use of the mother tongue.

The use of language can tell us a great deal about an individual’s sense of cultural, social and ethnic identity. The debate on educational and national language use in the Philippines incorporates each of these perspectives. The goals of the 1987 Bilingual Education policy incorporate an explicit desire to develop the Filipino language as a linguistic symbol of national unity and identity (Quisumbing, 1987).

Informally, however, it seems (Gonzalez & Sibayan, 1988) that the average Filipino feels that nationalism is independent of the prescribed language of education. The use of Filipino is not necessarily seen as a measure of national loyalty. Until the mastery of Filipino becomes more necessary for livelihood rather than symbolic purposes, the importance given to the use of Filipino in the classroom will be limited outside areas in which it is the majority language or, at least, lingua franca.

Castillo (1999) also feels that English is desired by many because it is the language of power and upward social and economic mobility. It is deemed to be of economic significance and yet it is not a language used in the day-to-day lives of families. This raises questions about the model of literacy to be adopted within the education system – is it valid to adopt a technical model which sees literacy skills primarily in terms of economics and the workplace, perpetuating a utilitarian model of education? The alternative would be a model which values the critical thinking skills of students, building cognitive and affective domains, valuing the language, experiences and culture of the students. Literacy in terms of reading and writing is at the basis of education and thus, the decision regarding the language of instruction for such basic skills is crucial. Decisions on the issue of language use in education send both implicit and explicit messages to students on the value of their vernacular and the local culture and heritage associated with that language.

**Autonomous literacy**

For many years, literacy has been viewed as a learned, cognitive skill – one learned to read and write in much the same way as one learned to make a basket or build a fire. This view may be referred to as autonomous literacy, where literacy is perceived as primarily affecting the individual, unrelated to social practices. Autonomous literacy sees literacy operating independently of the process of power relations within a community, despite literacy often being viewed as a prestige-laden accomplishment.

**Ideological literacy**

In an ideological approach to literacy, literacy is what society does with literacy. A social system is defined in part by literacy, which is one of its constituent parts. In this view, it is emphasised that literacy cannot be neutral. ‘Literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures. The very emphasis on the “neutrality” and “autonomy” of literacy by many writers is ideological in the sense of disguising this power dimension’ (Street, 1995: 161).

This approach requires that we view literacy as more than the ability to decipher or encode messages on paper – we must approach literacy in a dynamic
context of politics, social change, development and other aspects of the community life. One aspect of the ideological approach to literacy is ‘critical thinking’.

**Critical literacy**

Critical literacy highlights the empowering role of language within the social system of a community, emphasising the external context of the learner and the learner’s relationship to that context and incorporating an ideological approach to literacy.

Critical literacy is language use that questions the social construction of the self. When we are critically literate, we examine our on-going development, to reveal the subjective positions from which we make sense of the world and act in it. (Schor, 1999: 2)

The context in which we live shapes our lives, but literacy can potentially cause individuals and communities to discover what Schor calls ‘oppositional discourses’ in order to remake or redesign themselves and the culture in which they are based.

Freire and others have suggested that most learning is accomplished by critically analysing experience. They have spoken of a learning cycle starting with experience, proceeding through reflection and leading to action, which in its turn becomes the concrete experience for more reflection and thus the next stage of the cycle. (Rogers, 1992: 13)

Freire called this process conscientisation, through which learners become active participants in shaping their own education.

**An integrated view**

However, the autonomous and ideological views of literacy education are not mutually exclusive and may be seen as points on a continuum between literacy as a purely personal skill and as a primary element in the construction of reality, intertwined with social and political history of the community, economic development, social equity structures and the nature of the communication process. Literacy is one element of the societal development process and affects many different avenues of life. It involves instrumental knowledge and skills related to words or numbers through print which the individual has mastered, but it also incorporates the manipulation of ideas, ideologies and principles in order to influence and impact both the local and national context.

Alangu (1997) points out that most approaches to the understanding of the learning process take the view that life can be segmented into stages in a somewhat rigid set of rules and boundaries. However, this does not appear to take account of cultural variables in the ways in which communities view knowledge and train their young people to take their place in society. If learning is to have meaning, people’s total culture and ethnicity must be studied holistically. Literacy curriculum should be based on the multiple literacy needs of the community members rather than simply on the autonomous skills of decoding and comprehension.
Language Use in Elementary Curriculum in the Philippines

The report of the Philippine Commission on Educational Reform (2000) states that,

In a country divided by geography of more than seven thousand islands and more than 171 languages, there is clearly a need for a national language that would foster national consciousness, facilitate communications across language boundaries and thus foster understanding, a sense of national community and identity. (Philippine Commission on Educational Reform, 2000: 61)

However, appropriate education for the cultural communities, for whom the national language is their second (or even third or fourth) language, incorporates many challenges.

The language problem of the Philippines, according to most Filipino socio-linguists, is the problem of reconciling the competing demands of ethnicity (embodied in an individual’s mother tongue or vernacular), nationalism (manifested in having and propagating a national language) and modernisation (seen to be synonymous with using an international language). (Bautista, 1999: 113)

In addition to linguistic consideration, the worldview of the child affects his or her interaction with the curriculum as it is presented in formal schooling. Hohulin was a consultant for a First Language Component-bridging Programme among the Ifugao of North-central Luzon. She says,

Besides the language problems encountered by these barrio children, they also face the problem of being unfamiliar with the cultural environments in which these two languages are embedded and used because they have little access to media such as books, magazines, radio, TV and videos. (Hohulin, 1993: 1)

Dekker (1999), in her paper on the education of children from Kalinga, an ethnolinguistic community in Northern Luzon, comments on the many different experiences and artefacts that confront children as they enter school.

The first grader is confronted with many things in the school situation that are unfamiliar: the classroom with desks, the flag ceremony, the pictures on the wall representing children from the city and different lifestyles and the textbooks depicting other cultures and, most crucially, even the language used is foreign. (Dekker, 1999: 103)

Early experiences are fundamental in building a foundation for cognitive development. Development is a function of the child’s interaction with all the structures of the environment in which he or she lives. Acuna (1994) says that language, as well as being critical for communicative competence, plays an important role in the development of critical thinking skills, ‘higher mental functions and self-regulation’. Cummins (Baker, 1996) adds to this. He believes that students, particularly minority-language students, are empowered or disabled
by four major characteristics of school. These are the extent to which the student’s home language and culture are incorporated into the curriculum;

- smaller communities are encouraged to participate in their children’s education;
- education promotes the inner desire for the children to become active seekers of knowledge and not just passive receptacles; and
- the assessment of minority-language students avoids locating problems in the student and seeks to find the root of the problem in the social and educational system or curriculum.

Education in a multilingual context requires an ethnolinguistic study, developing awareness of extra-linguistic variables which identify the social basis of communication and interaction. Where a language has become dominant, questions about the way in which it became predominant need to be asked by both the deliverers of literacy and the participants in the education process. The community and school environment, as well as the power and status relationships within the cultural milieu, must be taken into consideration. Macro-level, flexible thinking is necessary in order to implement an approach which takes into account the physical, social and emotional needs of the whole child.

For years, it has been argued that traditional Western approaches to education are not appropriate in the Philippine setting. Often, the use of Western paradigms has only resulted in teaching-learning models that are mismatched in terms of meaning, purposes and goals of education. (Alangui, 1997: 1)

At a presentation to the Congressional Oversight Committee on Education in 1994, Acuna and Miranda confirmed that the children from the poorer areas of the country are those less well served by the educational system. More recently, the *Philippine Education for All* (Department of Education and Sports, 1999b) report stated that, although the Philippines has had few problems or deficiencies with respect to access and participation in the primary education level, ‘the children who have been left out are precisely those in the hard-to-reach areas and marginalised communities’.

The report continues by suggesting a curriculum review, involving stakeholders within and outside education. In addition to teacher performance, the 1998 Education Sector report cited a number of factors, including relevance and coherence of the curriculum, school readiness and language of instruction as crucial variables in students, learning.

**Indigenisation of The Curriculum**

Alangui (1997) notes that the things any individual needs to learn to function well as a member of the community are learned in the community as well as in school. In fact, the knowledge, attitudes, skills and values necessary to be a successful member of the Bagnet community (a northern Philippine Kankana-ey mountain community) are derived from within the community itself. Gurnah (1994) talks of the potential problems created when programme design, delivery system and the teaching strategies do not reflect the realities of life for the participants. He says,
The acquisition of the first language by a child ... is inextricably linked to 
the decoding of customs, acquiring of class and gender identities and 
appropriating of morals and epistemic frameworks of a community ... 
Should these fundamental factors that define and give a people a handle on 
their lived world be ignored in the learning of reading and writing ... (that 
is) to stock up for later identity and learning difficulties. (Gurnah, 1994:2)

An initial study in 1994 by the University of the Philippines (Baguio) and a 
follow-up pilot programme in 1998 (Curameng, 2000) found that students could 
understand concepts and ideas more easily when they are integrated with 
community practices. For example, students could write a letter better inviting a 
friend to a harvest celebration than they could to a party, or could actively participate 
in a class discussion on cross pollination when the teacher used local rice 
plant varieties as examples.

Alangui’s (1997) outlines a set of goals for education which will prepare chil-
dren and young people to function well in Philippine society. These are

- being proud of cultural identity and nationalist in outlook;
- upholding deeply held values and beliefs;
- being critically active in community affairs; and
- being willing to serve the majority.

Curriculum content

The report of the Philippine Commission on Educational Reform (2000) 
recommends that Local Government Units (LGUs) and the Indigenous Cultural 
Communities (ICCs) of ethnolinguistic areas could be encouraged to carry out 
programmes and projects such that they could develop the necessary resources 
to be able to implement vernacular teaching in the primary grades in their 
respective areas. Some programmes have already been piloted in the Cordillera 
by the University of the Philippines, Baguio (Curameng, 2000). Vernacularisa-
tion is seen to support the goal of functional literacy in marginal Philippine 
communities. However, community-based, indigenous education should 
involve more than a centralised education system delivered in the vernacular – 
curriculum content should reflect the needs of participants and empower learn-
ers to act within the dominant culture as well as preserve their unique 
sociocultural identity. In everyday situations, the child learns how to be, through 
gendered, ethnic, class and other historical, sociocultural identities. Bourdieu’s 
notion of cultural capital is pertinent here (Lehrman, 2000; Zarate, 1999). He 
discusses how the access to linguistic and other cultural competencies are 
distributed differently among social groups and these competencies give the 
ability to make informed choices and adopt certain social stances. Critical liter-
acy involves the children in the process of recognising within themselves the 
ability to modify or to maintain their position in the culture from which they 
capital, where individuals are living in situations where multiple cultures touch 
their lives through the media and ‘multimodal multiliteracies’. Alangui (1997), 
examining the Philippines context, says that community life must find expres-
sion in the formal education process. In this way, children will begin their educa-
tion based upon a foundation of their home culture and be able to successfully
link into those areas of the national curriculum which deal with unfamiliar contexts. This could be described as an integrative approach where

- difference is not deficiency;
- co-operation is valued rather than competition;
- cultural respect is a priority;
- options are increased; and
- stakeholders are involved.

**Regional lingua franca experimental programme**

In school year 1999/2000 the then Department of Education, Culture and Sports Under-secretary Gonzalez began a programme of vernacular education on an experimental basis in grades 1 and 2 using the three major linguae francae – Tagalog-based Filipino in Tagalog speaking areas, Cebuano and Ilokano. These pilot programmes were conducted in 15 regions of the country (all regions except the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), due to peace and order problems in ARMM which hampered teacher training and potential programme evaluation). The Bureau of Elementary Education defined careful criteria for schools that would participate in the experimental project (Department of Education, Culture and Sports, 1999a) and the school officials were given the option to select the language of instruction. However,

> there are experimental schools that do not use the lingua franca of the community because its language is not identified as one of those to be used as medium of instruction. It is for this reason that Western Visayas, Central and Southern Mindanao and CARAGA opted to use Tagalog. The languages of their communities are neither Cebuano nor Ilokano but are linguistically similar to Tagalog. (Inciong, 2001: 3)

Thus, in some areas, even in the lingua franca experimental programme, students entering school were not being educated in their mother tongue (for example, Manobo or Hilagaynon) nor in the regional lingua franca (Cebuano) but in Tagalog, the national language, even though it may not be regularly spoken in the community.

Once again, the intent of the programme was to increase the proficiency of pupils in their use of Filipino and English (the national and international languages of education) by using the regional lingua franca as a ‘bridge’. The results were described (Gonzalez, 2001) as ‘encouraging’. When compared to control classes, the achievement in all subjects was slightly better and, additionally, observations suggested an increased vitality and enthusiasm in the classes. The processes of conceptualisation were said to begin almost from the first few weeks of school rather than the traditional focus on rote learning and memorisation.

Former Education Secretary Gonzalez commented, ‘the programme will improve even more as the materials are subjected to critiquing and improvement’ (Gonzalez, 2001: 6). He continued that rigorous controls were not applied to the pilot schools (he emphasised that this was not a formal experimental programme) but that the Regional Lingua Franca (RLF) programme was an attempt to demonstrate that:
the child is most comfortable learning ... in his home language and begins to conceptualise rather than merely memorise formulae and codes as he does in the control classes when the language he is using is not familiar’. (Gonzalez, 2001: 6)

However, Baguingan (1999), an advocate of the First Language Bridging approach, sounds a note of warning regarding the *Lingua Franca* approach. She says:

Filipino, the national language, is a second language among the students who speak vernacular languages. The other medium of instruction, English, is the third language. To add a *lingua franca*, rather than the local vernacular to the school system ..... will not help but hinder learning. Few students, if any, will gain mastery of any of the three languages that will equal the skills that they have in the first. (Baguingan, 1999: 7)

**Materials development**

The support of appropriate materials is a constraint often identified in the development of a localised curriculum. Sibayan (1985) notes that some of the problems of bilingual education among the linguistic minorities in the Philippines are related to the lack of materials in the language. The Council for the Welfare of Children Report (1999) states that schools must change to serve the Filipino child – locally developed learning materials using vernacular language are suggested in order to maintain the pupil’s interest in the curriculum. This would serve to build the child’s perception of the value of their language and increase their self-esteem and promote continuing involvement in the education process. Baguingan (1999) highlights the significant investment in financial resources and teacher training required to prepare instructional materials for the many languages of the Philippines. However, Baguingan has been conducting a programme for training teachers from the indigenous communities at a provincial state university to produce quality instructional materials and visual aids at limited cost and to train teachers in their appropriate use. A similar programme is also in progress at Benguet State University in the Cordillera. Instructional materials that have been prepared for different cultural communities reflect the need for a creative approach to educational materials for indigenous peoples.

**Igorot health books**

A series of six health books and teachers’ guides were prepared for the elementary grades (1–6) of the Bontoc area schools in the Mountain Province of Northern Luzon. These are trilingual\(^5\), incorporating the vernacular as well as the official languages of education – Filipino and English. Thus, the teacher can use the vernacular sections to introduce the content and bridge into the other languages. (Babaran *et al.*, 1992; Hohulin, 1993) The topics in the books for each grade level are identical but developing in complexity, reflecting the health needs of the community.

The illustrations of this series are appropriate to the context in which they will be used. For example, there is a child ‘taking a bath’ (p. 6), using water from a drum inside a half-concrete/half-wooden house. In another picture, a child is bathing from a large bucket, using a tin can as a dipper (p. 9). This reflects reality
for the children. In a lesson on care for the sick, the child is shown lying on the floor on a coconut palm sleeping mat (p. 68). Food that is readily available in the remote Mountain Province is emphasised in the section on nutrition (p. 88).

These health lessons are taught using creative learning strategies, such as music, drama, role plays and practical activities to encourage the critical involvement of the student. In grade one, the children are encouraged to ask their parents about vaccinations that they have had and take action if there are any of the ‘standard set’ that they are missing. In a lesson on community health, the children are encouraged to evaluate their sitio’s in terms of appropriate places for burning rubbish and the disposal of non-burnable rubbish. Then, the sources of clean water are assessed and potable water is identified.

The grade 2 book includes suggestions that the class develop a project to install hand-washing facilities in the classroom. Activities include

- providing a basin with water and soap;
- encouraging the barangay official to put a water pipe to the school;
- visit the municipal mayor with a resolution from the barangay officials to install a water pipe for the school; and
- write to the Congressman/Governor etc.

The intention is that the students should see themselves as participants in the development of their school and community. In this series of books, literacy and other learning competencies are planned to empower the pupils to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of their neighbours.

**Lubuagan Kalinga**

The teachers of Lubuagan Kalinga prepared a series of bilingual traditional stories of Lubuagan for use as a reader by pupils in the elementary school. These stories reflect the culture and lifestyle of the students and encourage comprehension development and reflection on the content by including familiar situations and increased contextual clues. These books have been successfully used with both early elementary children and non-readers in the upper grades of elementary school to motivate and interest the students.

**Tagakaulo Kalagan**

Trilingual readers have also been used among the Tagakaulo Kalagan people of southern Mindanao, where the materials reflect the cultural context of the lives of the Kalagan and the interests of the readers.

**Tagabawa/Ayta Mag-Anchi atlas**

Although used mostly in non-formal education, the atlases produced by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), an educational and linguistic non-governmental organisation, for the Ayta Mag-Anchi, Tagabawa and other groups of minority-language students, reflect a student-centred approach to curriculum development. These geography textbooks begin by focusing initially on the part of the Philippines in which the community is based and move step-by-step away from the world with which the student is familiar.

Comparisons are made with natural features with which the community can relate in order to introduce ideas of mountain height, sea depth and other geographical concepts. The atlases use the vernacular as the primary language.
and, in the case of the Ayta Mag-Anchi, the atlas is published in Ayta/English diglot to promote the use of the textbook in the formal school system.

Conclusion

Baker (1996) cites a number of significant factors which influence multilingual education. These originate in a study by Lucas et al. which examines the success of language-minority students in schools in California and Arizona in the United States. These factors include:

- the value and status given to the student’s first language and culture;
- the expectations the students have of themselves and the expectations of others;
- the priority given to L1 education by school leaders.

Neither Filipino nor English is the mother tongue of the majority of children entering school in the Philippines and yet they are the primary languages of education. Literacy in these major languages does equip the children for the languages used for major functions within the country. However, such a pattern of language use often excludes the vernacular in education and limits the use of the first language of the student to the home and other community activities. This sends a message to the child and community about the value of their mother tongue and the validity of its use, both in the classroom and beyond. A constraint in the implementation of a localised curriculum using the mother tongue is certainly the attitude of pupils, parents and other stakeholders to their language and culture.

The marginalisation of the students’ mother tongue and home culture has been seen to affect students in the cognitive realm (Dekker, 1999; Hohulin, 1993) and also in other non-cognitive areas (Baker, 1996; Dekker, 1999; Saxena, 1994) such as school attendance, self-concept, self-esteem, social and emotional adjustment, employment prospects and moral development. The implementation of a curriculum that honours the vernacular and the community culture should raise the self-esteem and motivation of the student, encouraging regular school attendance, and promote interaction and critical appraisal of all aspects of the curriculum content.

Street (1995) denounces the desire to preserve tradition as a way to resist change, to ‘fossilise’ a minority language and culture. However, indigenisation of the curriculum is not a romantic ideal to preserve communities in such a fossilised state and reduce their ability to interact nationally and globally, but rather an approach which bases the curriculum in the life and experience of the child in order to build strong foundations for on-going effective learning which will empower young people to influence the world in which they live. Attempts to integrate traditional/localised knowledge with the mainstream curriculum are seen in areas of the Philippine education system as being for ‘the explicit political purpose of transforming [the people] themselves in order to enter the mainstream which they hope to also transform in the process’ (Doronila, 1996).

Whether or not the language and culture will continue as components of a dynamic, viable society is a complex process of which education is a potentially significant factor. Goh Chi Lan (2000), of the Regional Language Center in Singapore, suggests that the only route towards preservation of both national and
cultural identity within multilingual and multicultural societies is to prepare a localised curriculum for empowerment, equipping students for lifelong learning.

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**Notes**

1. Lingua franca is a sociolinguistic term used to refer to any language used to enable routine conversation between groups of people who speak different native languages (Crystal, 1991).
2. Small residential grouping (village or parish).
3. The official languages of education are English and Filipino, in accordance with the 1987 Bilingual Education Policy.
4. Typically, the school day begins with a flag-raising ceremony held in the school grounds, singing of the national anthem and recitation of the Philippine pledge of allegiance.
5. The published books actually contain four languages – two related vernaculars, Filipino and English – so that the materials have wider geographical application.
6. Village or area of town.
7. The barangay is the basic level of local government.

**References**


