

Making the Unknown Obvious: Why English Education Sets the Conditions for the OFW

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When it was discussed in our class how Filipinos are easily hired as workers and employees abroad, in large part due to their ability to speak in English, I remembered the situation of my family. My grandmother and all five of her remaining siblings (out of 10 if I remember correctly) have lived in the United States for more than 40 years. They first moved there in the 1980s. My mom's siblings, five out of eight, have also moved to the States a bit later, during the late 1990s. In search of a better life—one that would remove the burden of material need—many of them took jobs either outside of their college degree (I had aunts who graduated as medical technologists but took domestic care jobs to get into the US) or ones that they had to go to school again to have (many went back to school again in the US in order to get nursing degrees since nursing was a high-paying and in-demand job in the States at that time). Moreover, a lot of them found huge favor from their bosses because they were hardworking (for their families that they need to feed), they were easily able to communicate in the workplace (given that they have already completed their college degrees here in the country), and that they can be hired at a lower market salary (my relatives would take any job just to earn money, no matter how small the amount they would be compensated). I have a cousin-in-law there who I believe let go of his high-paying corporate job here in the Philippines to be a salesperson at a jewelry store because it simply pays more.

Looking at this situation at first, it may just actually seem to make sense to many that my family was willing to sacrifice their comfort of living here in the country to be able to provide a better life for their family. But there is more to this than just “making sense.”

Borrowing Pierre Bourdieu's theory of the habitus, much of the idea of going abroad for a better life is a conditioned response against the poverty, the corruption and the subpar economic status of the country in comparison to other countries. This conditioning happens through two channels: (1) our country's education system, which is focused on training would-be employees that, ideally, can be exported abroad so that these overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) will be able to send remittances, the largest form of government revenue; and (2) the government's messaging, which also promotes overseas employment of Filipinos, which would require proficiency in English.

There is little to no motivation to improve our local industries, and little is done to promote liberal education such as arts, history, linguistics, anthropology, and so on. Let me explain.

On the first point let me quote a report published by Asian Development Bank in 2009 where they said that

As one of the world's largest recipients of remittances, the Philippines received remittances roughly 12% of its gross domestic product in 2008. Remittances have become the single most important source of foreign exchange to the economy and a significant source of income for recipient families. (para. 1)

Given the overwhelming portion of the GDP of the country being that of remittances, there is much motivation for the government to cultivate more workers to be sent abroad. This has been happening since the late 1970s with the Marcos government's Labor Code of 1974, which established the Overseas Employment Development Board, which undertook the task of promoting overseas employment of Filipino. It was further reinforced by Corazon Aquino dubbing the migrant Filipino workers as *bagong bayani* 'new heroes' (Rodriguez, 2010). You might be thinking, "well that was 30 years ago, and 2009 was more than 13 years ago." However, there is still evidence which shows that not much has changed in our current situation. Nikkei Asia reported that in just the last year, "(" (Venzon, 2022) Filipinos working overseas sent home a record \$31.4 billion cash remittances, providing strong backing to the Philippines' economic recovery from the pandemic). Even at the onset of the pandemic, much of what saved our economy from collapsing was due to the remittances by Filipino workers abroad.

Local industries now suffer because of this focus on overseas employment. Industries, particularly agriculture (which made the Philippines famous in the 1970s as exemplified by the establishment of the International Rice Research Institute in UP Los Baños) has been facing a steady decline in produce quality and in the working and living conditions of farmers throughout the country (Philippine Senate, 2019).

When we look at our current situation, we can see how the government, through our education system, use different means to to train future workers for export. One important aspect of it is language, particularly that of English. With the Philippines ranking 18 out of 112 in the 2021 EF English Proficiency Index (Education First, 2021), and with the country still recognizing English as the official language of law and a main medium of instruction in our schools (along with Filipino), we can see the relative success of the continuous inculcation of Filipinos. Partner this with the negative attitudes that Filipino carry towards homegrown variations of English, and the prominence of English-based media mostly coming from the US, you now have produced a people whose cultural, linguistic, political, and economic aspirations are geared towards the Western part of the world and thus, the perfect *pambala sa kanyon* of the Philippine economy is born.

To be honest with you, I really feel saddened for many of our fellow Filipinos who must leave everything here to provide for a family, which they do not fully know when they would see again, and if the family will still be whole upon their return. My mother

was an OFW for a certain time and many problems arose—both personal and emotional, as well as relating to our education—in which my siblings and I had to face ourselves.

English in the Philippines is more than a language. It has sustained the large gaps between the powerful and the masses, and the discrepancies between our ideals of nationhood and our dreams of living abroad. I cannot imagine a world without English nor explain my whole being without it. But we, as those who are aware of this fact, have a responsibility to deal with this problem in the country. Do not get me wrong, yearning for a better life for your family or loving the English language is by no means a bad thing. But, when you understand that these things have been deliberately inculcated into people, which make them vulnerable to being taken advantage of, then you realize that it is an important issue that should be dealt with.

Until now, I still yearn for the day when no Filipino ever needs to go out of the country again because they feel that they cannot build a good life here. However, I do believe that I can do something about it. And this is the first step: making the unknown obvious.

Acknowledgments

To my mother, who gave every bit of her being just to give my siblings and I a life to live. We never deserved your love, yet you gave it to us unconditionally.

To my family, who left everything they know and care about to let their loved ones live the best they can. You showed me that love knows no bounds.

To my professor, whose little requirement paved way for me to share a bit of my heart. I cannot be ever more grateful.

To the reader, may you find hope in the most hopeless of times.

My heart goes out to you all.

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