

# The Good and the Bad: The Social Role and Position of English in the Philippines

Nicko Enrique L. Manalastas

English is a relatively new institutionalized language in the Philippines. It has only been around since the 1900s with its introduction by our American colonizers. Through the Americans' implementation of a mass education program throughout the Philippines, English came to be used by Filipinos in all levels of their schooling as the sole medium of instruction up until the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gonzalez, 1998). This led English to permeate through every aspect of Filipino life. From education, mass media, and the sciences, English came to be *the* medium of communication in the Philippines. Even to this day, English has a socially privileged status as it enables Filipinos to participate in an increasingly competitive global market (Bolton, 2020).

Despite these benefits, we can observe that some Filipinos still fall under the poverty line because they are not able to enter the workforce which places a premium on English language skills and proficiency. It may be said that this problem stems from the unequal quality of education across the archipelago, with urban centers such as Metro Manila having the most prestigious institutions that have complete access to quality learning materials. So, pervasive and prestigious as English may be, it is also a problematic marker of Filipino social mobility, for its use and the prevailing attitudes towards its use are among the factors that perpetuate the systematic social inequalities that hinder most Filipinos from ever rising above their socioeconomic class.

How problematic is the English-centric perspective in Philippine society? First and foremost, having a high-level of proficiency in English in the Philippines is largely pre-determined by one's birth. I say this because, more often than not, middle- and upper-class Filipinos—who are themselves exposed to and have high-level proficiencies in English—produce offspring who are then similarly exposed to the English language. This comes from the fact that people from these segments of society have more financial means to educate their children in institutions which unsurprisingly privileges English and inculcates in them the social value placed on English.

Moreover, because children from these socioeconomic classes have immediate access to Western, Anglophone media way before they start school, they immediately have a significant advantage over those who do not. As numerous sociolinguists such as Bernardo (2008) point out: “those who benefit most from education in the English language are those with good levels of proficiency in English to start with and/or those who grow up in environments that abound with English language inputs, materials,

and resources.” In the Philippines, these fortunate segments of society are the middle- and upper-class.

I, for one, admit that I have benefited from such a system, as I was fortunate enough to be born into a family who has immediate access to Western, Anglophone media. This exposure essentially paved the way for my competence in English at an early age. I would not exactly say that I was completely proficient in English, but it was enough for me to be accepted in a private school that, in turn, further improved my English language skills. This, however, is not without its faults. I was so exposed to English that my proficiency in Filipino was neglected. It was only in senior high school that I was able to sufficiently write well in Filipino. Even until now, in college, I still sometimes find it hard to articulate what I want to say in Filipino. While I have had the advantage of having quality education and access to Anglophone media, I also acknowledge that I and anyone from a similar educational background have the obligation to advocate for those who do not have the same privileges as we do.

Second, throughout the years, there has been a small but vocal community in our country who advocates for English to be the sole medium of instruction in all levels of schooling (Tupas, 2004). One of their reasons is that continuous use of English in education produces children who would be able to develop a high-level of English language proficiency through their prolonged exposure to the said language. While this may seem like a logical conclusion to make, it is not. This espouses a *maximum exposure fallacy*, which claims that “a more sustained and extensive education using English develop[s] better English language skills in students” (Bernardo, 2008). Even if we suggest that English should be replaced as the sole medium of instruction in favor of Filipino, the case would just be the same; the difference being that the roles of English and Filipino are merely reversed. It goes without saying then that favoring Tagalog-based Filipino disadvantages those whose mother tongue is a non-Tagalog Philippine language. Even though putting a premium on Filipino seems patriotic or even counter-colonial, the real crux of the matter is that such a linguistic system is still biased towards one language and one people. Without a doubt, it is an inadequate and elitist approach in dealing with a multilingual country such as ours.

It is my belief that any language, colonial or native, should not be imposed as the only medium of instruction in the Philippines. Instead, we should use the language that is already available to the student, that is, their mother language or L1, alongside Filipino, the national language. English, then, is relegated as a foreign language. This scheme, to a certain extent, reflects the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) system already in place, and it is the very system that I advocate for. It acknowledges, for one, the diverse ethnolinguistic background of the Philippines, that not all students have the same L1 to begin with, and, among other things, it enables those who hail from minority ethnolinguistic communities to use and develop their language so that it may not be a victim of language death. The same goes with the idea of using English as our lingua franca. In my experience of going to different places in the country, people always talk to you in Filipino after finding out that you are a local tourist. It seems to me that Filipinos are more inclined to use Filipino as a lingua franca than English. The reason why this is so may be different for everyone. Personally, I find

it more friendly and courteous to speak to other Filipinos from different provinces in Filipino since speaking in English—particularly to other Filipinos—may often be seen as snobbish or *mayabang*.

All of these, of course, would not be effective if our attitude towards English does not change. Information drives are not enough to exact change. There must be systematic and institutional changes from within and without the educational setting. We can, as a start, include Filipino as a language in all institutions, public or private. This means that documents, proceedings, and road signages are written in both English and Filipino, much like in New Zealand where English and Maori are used side-by-side (Holmes, 2013). This essentially puts both languages on equal terms and equally represents them in the written aspects of our everyday lives. Aside from educational reforms, it is through simple steps such as these that we can truly change our collective attitude towards English.

All things considered, Filipinos should not deify English since the very act of privileging it in society perpetuates the very system which is not only socially unequal but also exclusionary. Educational and governmental institutions should therefore start the trend of advancing Filipino into the same status as English—if, of course, English cannot be ‘downgraded’ in terms of social prestige. While this endeavor may be challenging since proficiency in English is viewed as socially as well as economically advantageous, it is not entirely impossible. Through the right mindset and institutional reforms, we might just enable Filipino to compete with English on equal footing. And as someone who directly benefited from such a system, it is our collective job to break the cycle by being active advocates of change.

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