

# English in the Philippines

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It has often been said that in the Philippines, America was able to do in 50 years what Spain was never able to accomplish in 300 - make the Filipinos understand and eventually accept, with affection, their masters. Right from the start, when Spain claimed the Philippines as its colony in 1521, it was clear how the Spaniards thought of their mission. They called the natives indios or Indians, and set out to redeem their savage and ignorant souls with religion - Roman Catholicism.

More than three centuries and a bloody revolution later, the indios had wholeheartedly embraced Catholicism, but just as wholeheartedly rejected Spanish rule. By this time, only the Filipino rich and educated elite were literate in Spanish. Ironically, from this same exclusive set came the founders of a secret society that pushed for reform and independence.

In 1898, after a mock battle at Manila Bay, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States. Although there was also a bloody but short-lived Philippine-American Revolution, it took a shorter time for the Americans to pacify and befriend the Filipinos. Unlike Spain's strategy, America's means of attack and assimilation was not religion. It was mass education.

Thus, less than half a century later, the Filipinos had adopted the American form of government, embraced the American dream, spoke the American language, and were content to be called "little brown Americans". Decades after the US granted the Philippines its independence in 1946, many Filipinos still believed in and actively campaigned for the Philippines becoming the 51st state of the United States.

The Philippine-American connection has undergone considerable changes since then. Today, English - the means the Americans used to teach us via the mass media, the arts, social, business and political interaction - continues to be a strong thread that binds the two nations. The Spanish language, meanwhile, has been relegated to a college elective and to private gatherings of wealthy clans of Spanish descent.

Why has English become so easy to learn and so easy to use in the Philippines? A major reason is that the Americans were once our colonizers and continue to influence our everyday lives in many ways. Another reason is that for most Filipinos, English is not seen as a foreign language. In a country of 60 million people who speak no less than 8 languages, English is a second language. In some areas, English is more popular than our official national language. For a select few, it is even a first language.

It is not unusual to see Filipino children responding to and speaking English words long before they learn these in school. Adults are constantly cooing to kids such baby talk as "close-open" (opening and closing of the child's hands) or "beautiful eyes" (fluttering the eyelashes in what is supposed to be a cute manner). Parents prod kids to exhibit their intelligence by correctly answering simple questions like "Where's your nose, mouth, cheek, etc.?" or "Where's the dog, cat, moon, etc.?"

Usually, by the time the child enters elementary school, he or she has built a vocabulary of English that includes body parts, names of animals and objects, action verbs, simple adjectives (dirty, good, bad), polite expressions (please, thank you, I'm sorry), nursery rhymes, and simple questions (What's your name? How old are you?)

For most middle and upper class Filipino children, English begins at home with adults who use English or through snatches of English words and phrases heard over the radio and on TV. To the Filipino child or, at least, one who has grown up in a home where English is often heard and spoken, English is not an alien tongue. Filipino children may not understand the nuances of the English language, but it's there and it's theirs to manipulate. English is familiar and, better yet, user-friendly. Anybody can use it and once you get the hang of it, there's really nothing to it.

The fact that the Philippine education system has been using English as a medium of instruction from elementary to university level for decades has also reinforced the notion that English is easy - even a child can do it - and available. It is a tool for learning and a medium of communication.

More than this, English is the language of power and progress. In the Philippines, it is highly valued not only because it is functional and practical and washes over us constantly, but more importantly, because it is an affordable item, a skill that can be used to increase one's position, respectability and marketability. In most cases, the better one's ability to understand and use English, the better one's chances of career advancement. This is true for both extremes of the socio-economic ladder. English is as important to the Harvard-educated Filipino working in Manila's cosmopolitan business district as it is to the overseas contract worker working as a domestic helper in Saudi Arabia.

In fact, now, more than ever, English is important to the Filipino masses seeking employment abroad. The Filipinos' skill and cheap labor are in demand, yes, but so is their command and comprehension of English which makes it easy for foreign employers to tell them what to do. English, after all, is a global language and, luckily - some say unluckily - Filipinos managed to unravel this code quite early and easily.

In recent years, serious questions have been asked about the appropriateness of English as a medium of communication for a people searching for a clear-cut identity. Filipinos are not Americans, our nationalists cried. Why then do we continue to dream their dreams and speak their language?

Much as our purists and nationalists wanted to erase all traces of American colonial influence, they knew that the language, rather than the dreams, was less difficult to delete. Or so, they thought. Like the US military bases in the Philippines, English had become a symbol of the subtle but strong dominance of America. It took a strong-willed Philippine Senate and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo to figuratively and literally bury the US bases in ashes. Obliterating English is another matter.

Despite presidential orders to require government offices to communicate in our national language, and requiring all schools to use it as a medium of instruction, the campaign to Filipinize our information and communication highways and networks has not met with much enthusiasm or success.

Although most Filipinos understand and are literate in the national language, it is not their mother tongue. Many of us have little use for it except when travelling to other areas in the country, watching local movies made in Manila, reading comics and tabloids published in Manila, watching local TV programs produced in Manila, and listening to the pronouncements of national officials, most of whom come from the capital region.

Filipino, our national language, is 95% Tagalog, a dialect (or language, some scholars insist) spoken by those who live in Manila and its outlying areas. The rest of the country speak their own dialects or languages and many see the "use-Filipino" campaign as nothing more than another form of domination by those who reside in the seat of economic and political power.

Meanwhile, the education system, long used to English textbooks and instruction, had to scramble for Filipino books and qualified teachers who could speak Filipino. Unfortunately, the government failed to consider the difficulties - and the huge amount of money needed - in transforming centers of learning from English to Filipino.

In a setting where education is one of the lowest budget priorities, where teachers are among the lowest paid professionals, and where the systematic translation of English to Filipino has never been given serious thought or considered important, the shift from English to Filipino ended in confusion and frustration. Perhaps, the best lesson we can learn from that experience is that language grows. Slowly. It cannot be transplanted and expected to blossom quickly by a mere presidential decree.

This is not to say that Filipinos will never be able to feel a sense of who and what they are because they do not speak the same indigenous language. They were united enough when they came out in the streets and put an end to the Marcos dictatorship. English and Filipino had very little to do with it. It had to do with knowing they nurtured a common dream in whatever language they happened to be fluent in.

While other Asian countries are riding the Third Wave, the Filipinos are paddling in opposite directions because many of them are afraid the wave will engulf them and drown their sense of nationhood. While others keep trying to find ways to increase their English proficiency in the light of international relations, global cooperation and rapid developments in computers and telecommunications, we have been engaged in finding a voice we can truly call our own.

One day, we may find that voice and speak in unison, but until then, I believe that English can do it for us, too. That is, if we stop thinking of it as a colonial instrument that broke our spirit, but as the code that helped us break through other worlds.

Language, they say, is the key to understanding others. What many Filipinos miss is that English can also be used as a key to understanding ourselves. English, after all, does not belong to America. If we accept it with grace and use it with wisdom, it can belong to the rest of the world.

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