

Communication

**A Return to English for Global Competitiveness:
Monolingualizing the Bilingual Nation in
the Postcolonial Philippines**

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1. Introduction

The effect of worldwide English has permeated science and technology, international relations, business, and education. This change represents the increasing visibility of English as the “global lingua franca” (Philipson, 2008: 7). Such a “global dominance of English” (Bamgbose, 2001: 357) cannot help but affect educational and language policies. Both learning English in the early grades and introducing English as a medium of instruction (MOI) are perceptible outcomes of such policies formed in response to the growing popularity of English (Chowdhury and Kabir, 2014; Hamid, 2016). Behind this “Englishization” (Yoshino, 2014) is the shifting perception of English. It has transformed “global literacy skills” (Majhanovich, 2013: 250), which are essential for heightening global competitiveness in the knowledge economy. English proficiency has become vital for individuals seeking employability and social mobility, and an asset to augment national wealth. For this reason, non-English-speaking countries have undertaken major educational and language reforms to make themselves proficient in English (Philipson, 2008: 7).

English was introduced as the official language of the Philippines following its colonization by the United States in 1898 (Fujita, 1989; Kobari, 2019). It was also designated the MOI for public education. Even after gaining independence in 1946, English remained the MOI in the Philippines. In 2003, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo reconfirmed English as the MOI in order to increase the Philippines’ global competitiveness. From a global perspective, learning English as a second language during primary school and using English as the MOI are common features of educational reforms toward globalization in non-English speaking countries (Hamid, 2016). However, this should not lead to the loss of national, local, and/or vernacular languages in education to prioritize English. Thus, bilingual education policies using English and other

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languages have become a global undertaking to internationalize Philippine education since 1974. Arroyo's restoration of English as the MOI was in total opposition to this trend.

This paper explores Philippine educational and language policies under Arroyo's presidency (2000–2010) to monolingualize the Filipino nation at the sacrifice of national language. Although the return to English failed, it demonstrates that the Arroyo Administration camouflaged the government's intent to withdraw from the quality of education by publicizing "a hope of English" (Yul-Park, 2011: 443). Through the analysis, this paper critically examines the Philippines' ill-conceived scheme of Englishization, attributed to miscalculating linguistic instrumentalism highlighting the economic value of English, which strengthened social inequalities.

2. Rethinking Linguistic Instrumentalism

Both language and development are important streams of academic inquiry (Rassol, 1999: 2007). One of the most important arguments is whether learning English as a global lingua franca leads to more opportunities in the globalized world (Erling and Seargeant, 2013). The idea behind linguistic instrumentalism focuses on the economic side of language (Kubota, 2011; Wee, 2008). According to Wee (2008: 32), linguistic instrumentalism refers to a view of language that justifies its existence in a community in terms of its usefulness in achieving specific utilitarian goals, such as access to economic development and/or social mobility. In this context, the burgeoning of global English is understood to help improve material conditions in developing countries and to help address poverty (Pennycook, 2007). Support for this insight lies in how English allows easy access to and participation in the global economy and enhances opportunities by globalization. This discourse of linguistic instrumentalism matches the Human Capital Theory (Kubota, 2011), i.e., that acquiring knowledge and skills mediated by education boosts people's material condition, and the improvements in their lives build a solid foundation for facilitating development by fostering potential abilities.

The key to economic growth in developing countries lies in how to create talented knowledge workers for the labor market. Viewed from the paradigm of national development, nothing is more important than education, in terms of cultivating human ability; however, the policymakers in those countries, rather than focusing on improving critical thinking, creativity, and cognitive skills, tend to prioritize developing the human resources needed in the job market (Bernardo, 2004: 18; Tupas, 2007: 24). Developing countries often have limited resources to achieve this goal. They tend to depend on quick but rough reform plans with a hope that English proficiency will empower the economy. Both the introduction of English as the MOI and early learning of foreign languages are common practices heavily influenced by linguistic

instrumentalism.

The other side of linguistic instrumentalism underestimates symbolic/linguistic capital, as theorized by Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1991). Language is not only a tool of communication; it also serves as a kind of wealth (Bourdieu, 1991: 43). Such linguistic capital has not been equally distributed to all nations as a single linguistic market centered around a legitimate/dominant language, eliminating other languages or dialects. It is only within reach of the privileged and/or those well-off living in urban areas. Thus, no matter how the economic side of language turns national governments into advocates for making their citizens into “knowledge workers,” it still perpetuates the hegemonic power of a legitimate language as a social divide. Imagining a homogenous language is just an illusion (Bourdieu, 1991: 5). For this reason, any educational and language policies promoting monolingualism may involve the risk of being caught in the trap of linguistic instrumentalism.

3. Philippine Educational and Language Policy

The Philippines is a multilingual country with around 170 languages; among them, 11 have more than 1 million speakers (Dayag, 2012: 91). Meanwhile, English has permeated areas such as higher education, science and technology, the judiciary, government, and mass media, all while ideologically dominating Filipinos’ lives. Since the U.S. colonization of the Philippines, English has served 2 major functions: MOI in public instruction and an official language in the colonial system. Under U.S. rule, the Filipino elite, in search of career growth, benefitted greatly from English education. Consequently, a “linguistic hierarchy” (Rafael, 2019: 144) emerged between English learned through public education and local/vernacular languages systematically excluded from the formal education system.

The quest for a Philippine “national language” was initiated under the U.S., though the privileged status of English as an official language never wavered, largely due to the fact that a common language mutually intelligible to all Filipinos was absent. For this reason, the argument for exploring a national language as a symbol of national integration led either to Tagalog being mainly spoken in Manila and its vicinity, or any other vernacular language used elsewhere in the Philippines. The Commonwealth government (1935–1946), in preparation for political independence, finally designated Tagalog the national language. In 1959, the name of the language was changed from Tagalog to Pilipino, indicating no new national language was created. In this way, the discussion over national language largely involved the danger of dividing the Filipino nation, and the hegemonic power of English as the MOI and official language of the public sphere never diminished.

Even after independence, the linguistic hierarchical order with English supremacy remained unchanged, partly because English continued to be the sole MOI. However, what led to the reappraisal from a new perspective was the bilingual education policy (BEP) of 1974 (Fujita, 1989: 81). The policy aimed to bilingualize Filipino with English and other languages. Before the Department of Education and Culture issued Department Order No. 25, “Implementing Guidelines for the Policy in Bilingual Education,” the 1973 Constitution, which renamed Pilipino to Filipino, pledged to make all necessary efforts to create Filipino (Gonzales, 1974). Due to the growing nationalist sentiments against American neo-colonialism of the 1970s (Tollefson, 1991: 148), in addition to increasing exposure to Filipino via literature and the media, Tagalog-based Filipino as a national language began to spread and was favorably received by Filipinos (Rafael, 2000: 197).

In this way, the BEP, through a political compromise of internationalism and nationalism (Gonzales, 2004: 14), exposed 2 major problems. All local/vernacular languages (except for Tagalog) used as auxiliary languages were excluded (Fujita, 1989: 85). This removal from education added a burden to those whose mother/local dialect was not Tagalog. Contrary to expectations, the BEP had a negative impact on the Philippines, especially in rural areas where English and Filipino were not commonly spoken. Accordingly, education quality seriously declined, leading to growing education disparities between urban and rural areas (Tollefson, 1991: 149–150).

4. Fear of Declining English Proficiency

On 29 January 2003, Arroyo addressed the plan to restore English as the MOI (Tupas, 2007: 19). She said, “[O]ur English literacy, our aptitude and skills give us a competitive edge in information and communication technology. We must improve our English literacy, which we are fast losing.” She also issued Executive Order 210 (EO210), “Establishing the Policy to Strengthen the Use of the English Language as a Medium of Instruction in the Educational System,” explaining that “there is a need to develop the aptitude, competence and proficiency of our students in the English language to maintain and improve their competitive edge in emerging and fast-growing local and international industries” (Republic of the Philippines, the Office of the President of the Philippines, 2003). The primary objective was “to make our students better prepared for the job opportunities emerging in the new, technology-driven sectors of the economy,” and the goal was to create more jobs.

EO210 includes 4 major policies: (1) English shall be taught as a second language from Grade 1; (2) English shall be used as the MOI for English, mathematics, and science from at

least Grade 3; (3) English shall be used as the MOI in all public and private secondary schools; and (4) in secondary schools, the percentage of time allotted for learning conducted in English should be no less than 70% of all instructional time. As it remained unclear whether Filipino or other languages could be used, we cannot fully determine the effect of Arroyo's return to English on the entire Philippine educational system. According to the BEP, Filipino was the MOI in humanities subjects, while English was the MOI for science, mathematics, and English. Class discussions could use any language in Grades 1 and 2, and Filipino was allowed in Grades 3 and above. Still, EO210 implicitly suggests that Filipino would be eliminated as the MOI, as there is no reference to it as an auxiliary language.

Major reactions to EO210, though limited to educators and the media, can be divided into 2 groups. Those who disliked EO210 were mainly educators and linguists (*The Manila Times*, 2003). Almost all held a negative view of English as the MOI, especially for the early grades. They insisted on the importance of laying a solid academic foundation in the mother tongue, arguing that English as the MOI would be more effective later. They warned it would not improve the quality of Philippine education. Some domestic experiments had proven the positive effect of mother tongue education compared to English (Kawahara, 2002: 125). They considered improving English proficiency to increase students' science and mathematics skills, and therefore achieving economic development, to be a pipe dream.

By contrast, some prominent national news columnists generally favored EO210 (*Philippine Star*, 2003). They argued that no one could survive without English. Among them, the most influential daily newspaper, *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, published an editorial on 3 February 2003 in support of Arroyo's decision, asserting, "[i]t isn't only a question of commerce, although as the number of call center job vacancies proves, there is certainly money to be made in English. It is also and chiefly a question of survival, because like it or not we still live in the English era." These voices matched the idea behind linguistic instrumentalism, as both consider the economic side of English. Interestingly, these contrasting opinions shared a sense of fear that declining English proficiency and deteriorating education quality would damage the Philippines' economic competitiveness. In 2006, a discouraging public poll by Social Weather Stations indicated that Filipinos' English proficiency had declined compared to data from 1993 and 2000, and political steps to legislate English as MOI gained further momentum.

5. Major Characteristics of English Bills

Bills related to English as the MOI ("English Bills") were drafted between 2006 and 2010. Let us consider their objectives in detail. House Bill (HB) 4701 of 2006 aimed "to make

the education of the young aligned with the requirements and realities of business life and competitive in the global environment” (Republic of the Philippines, House of Representatives, House Bill 4701, n.d.). Moreover, the MOI for schools was described as follows: (1) English, Filipino, regional/native languages may be used as the MOI for all subjects until Grade 2; (2) English and Filipino are taught as separate subjects in all primary and secondary schools; (3) English is the MOI for all subjects in primary school from Grades 3 and 4, and in secondary schools at all levels; and (4) at the tertiary level, the current language policy is maintained. It is remarkable that HB4701 strongly calls for the use of English as a language of daily interaction in schools. For example, it specifically promotes the organization of English clubs, such as book, oratorical, debating, and writing groups, and the use of English in school publications.

Unlike the BEP, HB4701 differed greatly from Grade 3 in primary schools: English was to be the sole MOI for all subjects. One of the bill’s hidden objectives was to exclude Filipino and vernacular languages from all schools. The de facto “English-only policy” absent in the 1974 BEP was also striking for its attempts to standardize schools’ use of English. Despite its radical content, 138 lawmakers supported the bill, and only 7 voted against it (Republic of the Philippines, House of Representatives, Congressional Records, 2006). Some who voted against HB4701 claimed that improving English proficiency as a second language was highly recommended, and based on experimental data, mother-tongue teaching had already proven more effective. Representative Raul T. Gonzales, Jr., further expressed his concern that, if English-as-MOI was enforced, many students would drop out. One representative, Rafael V. Mariano, harshly criticized HB4701 for bringing about neither economic development nor global competitiveness (Republic of the Philippines, House of Representatives, Congressional Records, 2006).

The next bill, 2008’s HB5619, had a different objective, aiming “to improve the employability of the Filipino graduates,” and to “correct the defects of the concurrent Bilingual Education Program of the Department of Education” (Republic of the Philippines, House of Representatives, Congressional Records, 2009). Following HB5619, 4 additional bills (Republic of the Philippines, House of Representatives, House Bills 66, 93, 191, 1245, Explanatory Notes, n.d.) introduced in 2010 had the same title, but they included different explanatory notes. They explained, from varying perspectives, why English Bills were urgently needed, but all mentioned the fear of a possible loss of economic competitiveness.

When English was the sole MOI, the Philippines had maintained the best English proficiency in Asia. However, English proficiency declined after the introduction of the BEP. Its goal had been to make all Filipinos proficient in English and Filipino, but the result was the opposite. Philippine English, or “Taglish,” emerged and was the primary cause of declining

proficiency. One lawmaker, Eduardo R. Gullas, put it as follows: the bilingual policy weakened English since the subjects that were supposed to be taught in English were actually done in “Taglish,” or a blend of English and the local dialect (ABS-CBN, 2009). Even the Department of Education admitted that the declining English proficiency was due to Taglish (*Philippine Star*, 2006). Further, some lawmakers, referring to the difficult position of those living outside the Manila area, noted that learning English and Filipino as new languages was a huge handicap, especially in the early primary school years; this highlighted long-overlooked fundamental defects in the BEP. HB5619 was justified as a means of overcoming the structural problems pertaining to Philippine educational and language policies. In sum, Taglish, an impure element detrimental to the Philippines’ economic competitiveness, needed to be eliminated.

6. Evaluation to Arroyo’s Policy

The English Bills were intended to correct the defects of the 1974 BEP, and especially to exclude Filipino as a national language, and discarded past studies’ findings that had demonstrated the positive effect of mother-tongue education compared to English (Kawahara, 2002: 125). Despite these valuable insights, most lawmakers in the House justified Filipino’s elimination by foregrounding the efficiency of English education from an early age and its economic value—a manifestation of linguistic instrumentalism.

For this reason, regardless of how hard less-privileged, academically motivated, and/or English-proficient students work to learn English, the results may not be positive. English as the MOI might facilitate some students’ deprivation of educational opportunity, especially those living in non-Tagalog-speaking areas or whose mother tongue is not Tagalog. The English MOI policy suggests the loss of a learning environment through Filipino and local/vernacular languages. For the less privileged, the dream of becoming a knowledge worker, as Arroyo promised, was a “false hope” (Hamid et al., 2018: 881).

Arroyo’s proposed national development agenda was predicated on the basic premise that improving English proficiency would transform the Philippines into a nation of competitive knowledge workers in the global economy. However, the idea that fighting declining English proficiency would help make the economy more globally competitive was problematic. This scenario was far removed from the ideal state of contributing to national education. At that time, the Philippines was facing chronic problems, such as a classroom shortage and declining teacher quality. Despite these structural problems, the motives behind the drafting of the English Bills lay in the legislature’s enthusiasm to meet growing global market needs. As education quality declined, prioritizing the English Bills to focus on English proficiency would have led to a supply

of English-proficient workers with limited academic ability.

Undoubtedly, the pathway above was certainly one channel that allowed the Philippines to participate in the global economy, but it represented the gradual withdrawal of the state from national education. In the short run, though Arroyo's intended reforms could enhance job creation through high proficiency in English, its benefits may come at the cost of national educational development. This dilemma represents a lack of general long-term educational plans for addressing the global economy.

7. Conclusion

Arroyo's educational and language reforms aimed to restore English as the MOI in hopes of making Filipinos employable in the knowledge economy. The plan tried to minimize the state's role as a national education provider. Behind the scenes, some hoped that high proficiency in English would drive the economy. Arroyo convinced Filipinos to grab the chance to benefit from English as a global language; however, those who responded affirmatively to her call were limited to lawmakers and the media, not the majority of Filipino people. Arroyo miscalculated linguistic instrumentalism by underestimating the quality of education. The intent to eliminate Filipino in the classroom stirred fears that less privileged and academically motivated students would ultimately be abandoned. In this sense, Arroyo's "return to English," aimed at promoting English-proficient Filipinos as knowledge workers, strengthened social inequalities. Arroyo herself fell victim to linguistic instrumentalism. Monolingualizing Philippine educational and language policy at the cost of national language turned out to be a false hope.

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