

# Languages in Education and Media

## —Cases of Three Countries

ACCU had a chance to talk over present English issues with some of the participants of ACCU's regional training course on book production conducted in October 2002. Ms. Hamidah Ahmad from Malaysia, Ms. Tito Karen Fabila from Papua New Guinea and Ms. Annaleah V. Habulan from the Philippines kindly agreed to our request. Following is a portion of this very interesting discussion.

*First of all, could you briefly describe the English situation in primary education and how children are exposed to the language in your country?*

**Ms. Tito Karen Fabila (Karen):** English is one of the national languages in Papua New Guinea along with Tokpisin and Motu. It is used in schools and businesses as a national communication tool.

Children begin formal education in mother tongues and they eventually learn English as a subject and for instruction. For many children, English is a second language. I am a teacher, and when I teach, I have to convert its content to simple language so that children will understand. I feel somewhat sorry for them because they are forced to learn in English. In order to learn the subjects, they have to master English. In my case, I was brought up in an English speaking environment so I didn't have much trouble. And in my days, the formal education started with use of English. Today, the Ministry of Education promotes the beginning of formal education in the mother tongues.

I do think it is important but in reality, many parents want to get their children out of local schools and to put them in English medium schools. They want to have their children confident in reading and writing English at an early stage, because they think English will provide them with better jobs, higher education in universities, and development in career. Right now we have this issue of balance between development and keeping our identity.



Ms. Tito Karen Fabila  
(Papua New Guinea)

**Ms. Annaleah V. Habulan (Ani):** It is a little bit different in the Philippines. We use English widely, thanks to the Education Department's curriculum and the media. In Metro Manila, English is taught as a subject and used as a tool of instruction in schools, along with the national language, Pilipino. The two languages are compulsory for learning from a very early age. Science, math and some other subjects are taught

in English. Simple instructions are given in what we call "Taglish". It is a mixture of Tagalog, the main Filipino language in Metro Manila and some major cities, and English. It is an accepted phenomenon, a linguistic device used even in formal situations. In other regions, English is also taught as a subject, but instead of Tagalog, they use their own dialects for instruction. For instance, if you live in Cebu, which is an island province in the Visayas, you are instructed in Cebuano.

According to one of my former teachers, English is the most difficult language to learn, because it has so many elements and so many transfigurations. So she says if you have survived English in grade school, you will definitely succeed anywhere from then on.

The real problem of the government, or shall I say the Department of Education and other similar institutions is not primarily the educational system, but poverty. A lot of children cannot afford to go to school because they are just too poor. So they are deprived of the opportunity to learn not only English but other subjects as well. This is a very serious problem.

**Ms. Hamidah Ahmad (Hamidah):** In Malaysia all subjects, except English, are taught in Malay language, our mother tongue, in public schools at present. Some schools, private schools or international schools, use English for all subjects but not many. In Malaysia, government agencies like Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka is promoting the Malay language. So, we produce new terminology in Malay in many fields like law, business, etc. Dewan Bahasa has a department of terminology. For textbooks, the Ministry of Education has to follow what Dewan Bahasa has produced, because it is the official version. But there are a lot of technical terms that are difficult to put into Malay language. So some terminology is in Malay but some is borrowed from English.

However, starting next year, science and math will be taught in English in primary schools. Some academic people don't like this because it may be disadvantageous to people in rural areas if these two subjects are taught in English. There will be a gap between children in rural areas and urban areas.

*How about the situation of terminology in science and math in other countries?*

**Ani:** Some academicians and scholars say that Filipinos are becoming too "American". Scholars at the University of the Philippines promote instructions in Pilipino in formal education, just like in Malaysia. They are trying to translate technical terms especially in science and math subjects into Pilipino. I think they have started to write a dictionary of terms. However, there is a lot of debate on how to translate scientific terms and until now they still have not come out with an official dictionary of scientific terms in Pilipino. What is confusing is that there are other entities doing their own different versions.

In any case, textbooks in scientific subjects are now all in English. Teachers have tried to produce Pilipino instructions but they are still compelled to use terms in English. There are also not many people who think it is important, because teachers will translate the contents of the books during discussions for children at school anyway.

**Karen:** When new concepts are introduced to us, such as ballet or computers, we don't know how to describe them in our own languages. Subjects in science and math came from developed countries and the language they used was English.

Most complex terms such as hydrogen and oxygen in equations and some basic terms in mathematics such as add, subtract, etc., and science cannot be explained or simplified in mother tongues.

When I got my teaching qualification English was a foundation course for the first year of study. This course was known as *English for Teachers*. So I studied mathematics and science as majors and also took up *English for Teachers*. This enabled me to confidently present lessons in English.

*How about media and social trends?*

**Ani:** The influence of media is also great. In the Philippines most of the programmes even advertisements on radio and TV, perhaps around 80%, are in English. As for newspapers, except for tabloids, no national daily newspaper is published in Pilipino. One major publisher tried to do it a couple of years back, but it just didn't work.

Casually and socially the language at home is still Pilipino. But Taglish is booming its way into daily life. It is English almost everywhere in the country. If you speak English, it means you have a brighter future, that's why speaking and writing it is encouraged all the time.

Books in the Philippine market produced by commercial publishers are mostly in English, more than those in Tagalog and other dialects. Because that's what people want. It is a sad fact. Everything they need to read is available mostly in English. Some books are imported but they are all in English, mostly American English.

However, there is a little niche in the Philippine book market; romance novelettes that cater to people who are not really good in English but can read Pilipino. General information books are mostly in English. Books in Pilipino for general interest are like a fad. As a publisher, we want to endorse and encourage its reading more, but fear those kinds of books might end up languishing in our warehouse.



Ms. Annaleah V. Habulan (Philippines)



Ms. Hamidah Ahmad (Malaysia)

**Hamidah:** With regard to English books, most books are imported from abroad. 90% of books published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka are in Malay language. Some of them are not original, but translated from world-known authors.

Television programmes are mostly in Malay. I think it is our policy to have 70 to 75 % programmes in Malay.

English is important because after graduation from school, those who don't speak English have difficulties to find good jobs except in the governmental sector, because the private sectors use English more than Malay. For formal occasions we use Malay, but in business, it is English. Regarding the future prospects, I think we will use English more for communication in the multi-media environment.

*How do you relate English with your mother tongue?*

**Karen:** In the past we were exposed to Dutch in some parts of our country and German as well. In wartime Australians came and took over Papua New Guinea. In a way it united our country quickly. And the language they used became our number one tongue. Now people who live far apart within the country can talk to each other in English. Another national language, Tokpisin, is a kind of dialect that is a mixture of English and mother tongues. It doesn't belong to us, but is also widely used for common communication and understanding among us.

When the Health Department embarked on a major media campaign against the spread of AIDS, the languages used were English, Tokpisin and Motu. But some people insisted that some terminologies in Tokpisin and Motu are offensive and sensitive for the general public, especially children. So we had to look for milder terms. This doesn't happen in case of English.

I think we can use our mother tongues as much as possible in chatting as well as formal discussion, and at the same time use English for wider communication.

**Ani:** All of us want to speak and think in our own language, because this is how we will be distinct from the rest of the world.

In my mother tongue, I can describe my thoughts and feelings and the words hold much more meaning to me. For example, if I say "I love you", it's OK, but if I say it in Tagalog instead, it becomes extra special. English is not mine. There is more pride in using one's mother tongue.

I think everyone will admit that English is a very convenient tool, but it's different and definitely detached from one's own language. So the practical direction will have to be to keep one's mother tongue for the preservation of one's identity and to use English as a device for communication globally.

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