



CEBUANO LANGUAGE VITALITY : THE CASE OF GENERATION Z PUPILS

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Abstract

The Cebuano, though not a minority language has manifested indications of low language vitality especially among today's new generation. These realities can be alarming these days. What could be the impact of this language decline on the endorsed Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education program by DepEd which empowers the learners' mother tongue as the primary medium in schools? This research work makes a simple assessment of the elementary pupils' level of competence in using Cebuano language in naming some basic concepts and tries to analyze what impact these competencies have to the language program. This paper may also interest certain groups who are advocates in the preservation and development of ethnic cultures, after all language and culture are closely intertwined. This is a descriptive study using survey as the main approach in obtaining the necessary data. Results revealed that the Filipino children of today especially those who are coming from the urban areas are early bilinguals. They acquire their first language almost simultaneous with their second and third languages. This is so because of the influx of technology coming from other countries which invade the home especially television and the internet.

Keywords: *descriptive survey, MTBMLE, language policy*

Introduction

The findings of various local initiatives and international studies have shown that the use of mother tongue in early education develops better and faster learners. Convinced by this overwhelming evidence, the Department of Education issued Department Order 74 in July 2009 which institutionalized the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program. The MTB-MLE empowers the first language of the learners by making it the medium of instruction from pre-school to Grades 1 to 3.

Elementary schools are now going through a period of transition. As mandated in the Order, the MTB-MLE shall be integrated gradually in all subject areas at all grade levels (starting pre-school and continuing by adding a grade level per year). In Cebu, the MTB-MLE program was launched by DepEd-7 and the Akademiyang Bisaya Inc. (ABI), Inc. in November of last year.

But the news about MTB-MLE has not rippled down to the last individuals who are supposed to be properly informed about it. The casual conversations with elementary teachers both from public and private elementary schools gave this researcher an idea that the new DepEd program seem strange to many elementary teachers. Others have heard about it but are not familiar about the whole program. Just how ready are the Philippine schools for the new change in the education policy? Talking about readiness, one very important issue must be put at hand. How ready are our school children specially those coming from the city for the mother

tongue-based instruction in schools? Are today's children proficient in their first language amidst all media exposures and the popularity of English and Filipino languages in schools?

Language specialists and experts in other disciplines alike have been expressing their deep concern about the fast extinction of many of the world's languages. The latest edition of the *Ethnologue* identifies 473 languages worldwide classified as nearly extinct. Many of these languages have speakers getting lesser and lesser in number. Some language experts made conservative estimates that the world's languages are dying at the rate of two languages each month, meaning about one-third of today's languages will disappear in the 21st century.

Some Philippine languages also share the same fate. Headland (2003), in his *Thirty Endangered Languages in the Philippines* revealed that the languages spoken by different Negrito ethnolinguistic populations scattered throughout the archipelago suffer from near extinction. His studies revealed that one of these endangered Negrito languages, the Casiguran Agta, though not at this time *moribund* (meaning the children are still speaking it), is in danger because it is changing so fast. He predicted that in 60 years the descendants of today's Casiguran Agta will probably not be able to pass an intelligibility test of Agta stories because their speech will be so heavily mixed with Tagalog, Ilokano, and English. Do these findings also bear some truths about the status of many of the minority languages with only few speakers today? This researcher believes that the favoring of the two big languages in our country as media of school instruction and the strong influence of the mass media have certainly displaced some of our minority languages.

The Cebuano, though not a minority language has manifested indications of low language vitality especially among today's new generation. These realities can be alarming these days. What could be the impact of this language decline on the recently endorsed Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education program by DepEd which empowers the learners' mother tongue as the primary medium in schools?

This research work makes a simple assessment of the Grade Five pupils' level of competence in using Cebuano language in naming some basic concepts and tries to analyze what impact these competencies have to the MTB-MLE program. This investigation may contribute some useful insights to concerned individuals and groups especially those in the education sector. This paper may also interest certain groups who are advocates in the preservation and development of ethnic cultures, after all language and culture are closely intertwined.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of the Grade Five pupils' competence in using the Cebuano language in terms of: naming body parts; naming common vegetables, fruits and other food groups and counting numbers?
2. What is the impact of the respondents' linguistic competencies to the DepEd's MTB-MLE program?

In his paper entitled "*The Impact Of Government Policies On The Indigenous Languages Of The Philippines*" presented at the Ludabi Convention in January 2008, Atty. Manuel Lino G. Faelnar, Director, LUDABI - Lubas sa Dagang Bisaya (Core of Visayan Writers), the former DLSU professor presented the 2000 census data from the NSO showing the decline of the number of speakers of many Philippine languages including Cebuano. The reason for this according to Faelnar can be attributed to the

promotion of the Tagalog or Filipino in schools and the strong influence of the mass media. Faelnar quoted Dr. Jose V. Abueva and Dr, Francisco Nemenzo, two former Presidents of the University of the Philippines, "Until about 1970 there were more Filipinos who spoke Sugboanon or Cebuano-Visayan and its various dialects, than those of Tagalog. Since then more and more Filipinos have learned to understand and speak Tagalog or Cebuano-Visayan, because of the teaching and use of Tagalog or Filipino in our schools and their daily use by radio, cinema and television."

Senator Pimentel, during his Privilege Speech at the Senate, also shared his concern about the danger besetting our languages including Cebuano. He said that unless we take pains to protect our own indigenous languages, they would eventually disappear completely from our consciousness and from use in our verbal and written communications. He made a call to his colleagues in the government to do something to preserve our languages to enhance our cultures and strengthen the nation.

Balitapinoy contributor Satur P. Apoyon (2008), in his article entitled "Is Lapu-Lapu's Language Dying?" expressed his disappointment on those Cebuano-speaking Visayans who shun speaking the endangered tongue of Lapulapu as well as that of Padriga, Ranudo, Sotto and Bacalso. These people, according to him, are perhaps driven by the wrong notion that their mother dialect is inferior to Tagalog and English.

Maria Isabel Garcia, Philippine Star columnist also lamented about the fate of the endangered languages. In her article "The Death of a Language" of the August 2006 issue, she expressed her concern about how our languages have evolved while gradually losing our mother tongues which are testimonies of our past. She revealed that the places where biodiversity (more kinds of habitats, genes pools, and species of plants and animals) is highest are also the places where more languages exist. This means that these languages and the natural histories associated with them are on parallel courses toward death.

In order to combat this inevitable phenomenon of language death, both government and non-government institutions undertake certain programs to preserve language and culture. At the local level, there are municipal legislations promoting the use of indigenous languages through staging cultural presentations showcasing local songs, poems, debate and dances. In the Cagayan province, Board Member Olivia Pascual of the province's 1st district said it is inevitable that the young, especially, today, tend to embrace the modern trends, and so steps have to be taken to preserve the various cultures and tradition of the province and the region. "Let's not allow our native songs, dances, poems and even the manner by which we debate be brought to oblivion," Pascual said adding that the children today should be exposed to indigenous songs and dances during programs and other cultural activities.

At the national level, the endorsement of the MTB-MLE does not only have pedagogical implication but of cultural as well. It empowers the languages of the local people thereby empowering their local culture.

Methodology

This is a descriptive study using survey as the main approach in obtaining the necessary data. The participants of this study are the grade five pupils during the SY 2014-2015 whose first language is Cebuano. They are from Saint Columban College

Grade School Department, a religious school run by diocesan priests. There were 35 of them who answered the test questionnaires. These children come from affluent families in the city.

This study uses a self-made test questionnaire to assess the respondents' level of the Cebuano language competence. The test comes in three sets: parts of the human anatomy, kinds of vegetables, fruits and other food groups and numbers. They were administered to the respondents after seeking necessary approval from the school principal. Simple percentage distribution is utilized to analyze the scores.

Results and Discussions

The results revealed, as shown in Table 1, that the respondents' levels of competence in naming the parts of the human body vary from *Fair*, *Poor* to *Very Poor* with percentage distributions of 6%, 57% and 37 % respectively. This means that more than one-half or 6 out of 10 respondents can hardly name the parts of the human body and more than one-third or 3 to 4 out of 10 respondents almost cannot name the parts of the human body using the Cebuano language. This clearly shows that 94% or 9 out of 10 respondents whose first language is Cebuano are not proficient in the use of their mother tongue in naming the parts of the body.

Table 1. Level of pupils' Cebuano language competence in naming body Parts. N = 35

No. of pupils	Percentage Distribution	Interpretation
2	6%	Fair
20	57%	Poor
13	37%	Very Poor
Total 35	100%	

The next set of questions, naming different kinds of vegetables, fruits and other food groups, shows more encouraging results. As shown in Table 2, the level of competence goes higher with 14% of the respondents can readily name vegetables, fruits and other food groups and they fall under the category *Good* in the interpretation of results. Almost half or 43% of them or 4 to 5 out of 10 fall under the category *Fair*. This means that this group can use the Cebuano language to name different kinds of vegetables, fruits and other food groups fairly enough. But the same number fall under the category *Poor*. Still almost half of the pupils can hardly name the food groups using the Cebuano language. In this particular test, their Cebuano competence is far from good.

Table 2. Level of pupils' Cebuano language competence in naming different kinds of vegetables, fruits and other food groups N = 35

No. of pupils	Percentage Distribution	Interpretation
5	14%	Good
15	43%	Fair
15	43%	Poor

Total	35	100%
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Table 3 shows the results for the pupils' Cebuano language competence in counting numbers. The results are distributed among the five level categories with almost 50% fall under *Good*. There are also three pupils who are in the highest level, *Very Good*. But more than 20 % fall under *Poor* and *Very Poor*. The results indicate that the respondents greatly vary in their levels of competence in using the Cebuano language in counting numbers.

Table 3. Level of pupils' Cebuano language competence in counting numbers N = 35

No. of pupils	Percentage Distribution	Interpretation
3	8.5%	Very Good
15	43%	Good
9	26%	Fair
3	8.5%	Poor
5	14%	Very Poor
Total	35	100%

The above findings show that many of these children hardly, if not, understand the Cebuano terms *lapa-lapa, tangkugo, tikod, ubol-ubol, kumagko, bungot, gusok* and many other terms referring to the different parts of the human body. Similarly, most of these children do not have in their Cebuano language repertoire the terms *siling atsal, bombay, paliya, balatung/batung, boongon, kamoteng-kahoy/ kamanting, talong* and many other Cebuano terms referring to vegetables, fruits and other food groups. And here's more. At least one fourth or 8 out of the 35 pupils have the difficulty counting numbers from 1 to over 100. Some of those who were able to answer correctly are more familiar with the Spanish variety *uno, dos, tres...* not the *usa, duha, tulo, upat...*

In order to address the problem on poor student performance in schools, the Department of Education institutionalized in July 2009 the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program which seeks to teach children using the language that they understand. This program replaces the Bilingual Policy which has governed the Philippine schools for more than three decades now. Though not yet in full implementation, there have been few elementary schools that are implementing the program. The very popular case in the Lubuagan in Kalinga became the turning point to finally reconsider the use of the mother tongue in teaching children.

The success stories of the MLE in foreign countries have strengthened its impact in the Philippine Educational system. DepEd said the use of mother tongue from pre-school to grade three is called bridge program because the mother tongue or first language of the learner is being used as a bridge to learn a second or third language, like Filipino or English. "If a child fully understands what is being talked about, he can make sense of things and participate intelligently in discussions because a familiar language is used, thus, his thinking process is unencumbered," the then DepEd Undersecretary Vilma Labrador explained.

The above findings on the 35 grade five children in one of the private schools in Pagadian City who were tested in their level of competence in the use of Cebuano language surely can

catch any educator's attention. How can a child make sense of things and participate intelligently in discussions if he does not fully understand what is being talked about despite the use of his first language? In this case, the purpose of the MTB-MLE may be defeated. Teachers should not assume that all children can speak and understand their first language the way they, the teachers, do.

Children of today are products of the Bilingual Education policy which limits the use of the mother tongue in schools. They grow up with parents telling them "No, that's dirty!", "What is your name? My name is...", "Wash your hands", "Eat your food", "Go take a bath", etcetera, etcetera. These parents talk to their children in English either to prepare them for school or they simply take pleasure listening to their children speak a foreign language. At home, there is cable television with Cartoon Network, MTV, Star Sports, HBO, AXN, Discovery Channel, Cinemax, CNN, BBC, National Geographic – all English channels. Children living in the city usually know how to use computers. Their parents buy them Ipods, Ipads, Play Station Portable (PSP) and other gadgets—all operate using the English language. Seldom can these children watch cultural shows and events that make use of their vernacular. They prefer to listen to FM stations with English-speaking DJs. Generally city children are heavily exposed to the English language. This exposure to English from early age limits their competence in their mother tongue.

Will the MLE still be more effective? Will it provide solution to the problem on poor student performance? The group investigated cannot represent all the graders especially those coming from the rural areas where exposure to English is quite limited. But this sample cannot be ignored.

Conclusions

The Filipino children of today especially those who are coming from the urban areas are early bilinguals. They acquire their first language almost simultaneous with their second and third languages. This is so because of the influx of technology coming from other countries which invade the home especially television. Another reason is that, these children are products of the Bilingual Policy that govern our schools. Because of these reasons, the first language of these children has suffered to some extent. In their everyday experiences, there is interplay of three or more languages with respective domains. In the case of the respondents of this study, they have not yet mastered their first language.

This reality creates a major concern vis a vis the implementation of the Mother Tongue-based Multilingual Education program which is to popularize in different schools nationwide soon. Educators specially the elementary teachers might discover soon that teaching in the mother tongue would be as challenging, if not more challenging than teaching in English.

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