

Philippine schools adopt regional languages

PHILIPPINES – Public elementary schools in Western Mindanao will be the latest to teach children from Kindergarten to Grade 3 in their mother tongues instead of English or Filipino when classes begin in June. At least four regional languages including Cebuano, Chabacano, Tausug, and Maranao will become the medium of instruction in early elementary levels in their respective regions.

The use of local languages in teaching is part of the Department of Education's (DepEd) strategy called Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education (MTB-MLE), called for in a 2009 department order. According to a DepEd press release, there are already 104 schools nationwide implementing MTB-MLE with eight major languages being used for instruction including Tagalog, Ilokano, Pangasinan, Kapampangan, Bikol, Waray, Cebuano and Hiligaynon.

National coordinator for MTB-MLE Rosalina Villaneza said that it took several years of research before the agency finally decided to schedule its initial implementation of the programme. According to Villaneza, studies show that using the mother tongue as the language of literacy "bolsters comprehension and critical thinking skills of children and facilitates acquisition of second language such as English and Filipino."

Education Secretary Armin A. Luistro said the MTB-MLE would be enforced this coming school year both as a subject or learning area, and as a medium of teaching. Filipino and English will be introduced as separate subjects in the first and second semesters, respectively, of Grade 1.

Department of Education Undersecretary Vilma Labrador said, "When a child thinks, he naturally uses the language he grew up with. That is why the thinking process is fast and clear. But imagine if an Ilokano child has to first translate a Filipino or an English word, the thinking process is not as fluid," Labrador added, "We know of many teachers who translate Science lessons in Tagalog so that students can better understand the concepts. For young learners, it is easier for them to understand why water boils and why it turns into ice when subjected to varying temperature using the language they use at home."



Twelve of the most widely spoken Philippines languages will replace English and Filipino as the language of instruction from kindergarten to Grade 3 beginning in June. Plans are also underway to prepare lessons for members of endangered language groups such as these Ayta children of Zambales

Endangered languages

While educators are welcoming the adoption of regional languages in the nations schools, Artemio Barbosa, chief anthropologist at the Philippine National Museum, sounded the alarm for the country's endangered minor languages in an Agence France-Presse (AFP) news item. According to Barbosa, up to 50 of the country's minor languages could be lost within 20 years.

"When [people] migrate to a certain place and they are assimilated, they no longer speak their own language because their main concern is to have an intelligible language that they can speak every day," said Barbosa.

The AFP story highlighted the plight of the 3000-member Ayta Magindi tribe of Zambales whose language is among dozens that are in danger of disappearing due to the decades-long policy of banning regional and minor languages from Philippine classrooms. Until recently the main medium of education has been mainly English and, secondarily, Filipino, the national language.

Arnel Valencia, a local village council member in Porac, Pampanga, complained that his children still could not use Ayta Magindi in school, while adults had to learn Pampangan, the main local language, to get factory or plantation jobs.

"Our language is not the only thing that we stand to lose, but also our culture," said Valencia.

However, according to the report, Valencia's fellow Aytas in the hills of Zambales and the local school have taken it on their own to start mother-tongue instruction in June. Two Ayta Magindi locals have been hired to teach kindergarten at the local school, and will also help prepare mother-tongue teaching materials for the first graders.

There are approximately 175 languages and dialects in the Philippines.



LONG ODYSSEY TO SAVE PHILIPPINE LANGUAGES



An Ayta elementary student works on her assignment at the Camias Resettlement Elementary School at Porac, Pampanga, north of Manila. Picture: AFP



Ayta elementary students attend a class in a classroom at the Camias Resettlement Elementary School in Porac, north of Manila. Up to 50 of the country's minor languages could be lost within 20 years, according to anthropologist Artemio Barbosa

PORAC, PHILIPPINES

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ARNEL VALENCIA felt humiliated at school when he was barred from using the language he spoke at home, part of a decades-long pattern of linguistic destruction across the Philippines.

"Stop talking like a bird. You should use English or the national language," Valencia, now 39 and a village elder, said his first-grade teacher told him.

Valencia belongs to a small mountain tribe called Ayta Magindi that has for centuries inhabited the bone-dry, sparsely forested Zambales mountains just three hours' drive from the nation's megacity capital, Manila.

There are only 3,000 tribe members left living in and around the small sugar farming town of Porac, guardians to one of the dozens of little-known languages in the Southeast Asian archipelago that are under dire threat.

The Philippines, with 95 million people, is home to 175 languages, but some of them have just a few speakers left while others are already considered extinct because there are no more people at all who converse in them.

Up to 50 of the country's minor languages could be lost within 20 years, according to Artemio Barbosa, chief anthropologist at the Philippine National Museum.

"When they migrate to a certain place and they are assimilated, they no longer speak their own language because their main concern is to have an intelligible language that they can speak everyday," said Barbosa.

Experts say another big part of the problem is that the only two languages taught at school in the former US colony are English and Filipino, which is based on Tagalog that is natively spoken by people in and around Manila.

Valencia, who is a local village council member, complained that his children still could not use Ayta Magindi in school, while adults had to learn Pampangan, the main local language, to get factory or plantation jobs.

"Our language is not the only thing that we stand to lose, but also our culture," he told AFP.

"The discrimination that we suffer has not abated."

But there is some hope, according to Catherine Young, an endangered languages expert at the US-based Summer Institute of Linguistics who has spent a lot of time studying many of the little-known languages of the Philippines.

"There's a growing awareness of the value of languages in the Philippines, if you compare it with other countries in Asia where (some minority) languages are publicly discouraged," Young said on a recent visit to Manila.

She highlighted a national government decision to implement mother-tongue education from this year as an important step in that direction.

From the start of the new academic year in June, 12 of the most widely used languages will replace English and Filipino as the language of instruction from kindergarten to third grade.

The 12 languages have a combined base of more than 63 million speakers, or two-thirds of the national population.

The Department of Education said the new policy was the result of a Summer Institute of Linguistics-backed project in the 1990s to train local teachers in using Lilubugan, spoken by 14,000 members of a northern mountain tribe.

American linguist Diane Dekker went to live with her husband and four children in the Cordillera highlands in 1987 to launch the programme, initially to local scepticism.

"The parents were apprehensive that this was going to affect negatively their acquisition of English. That is very important for parents because they know that that's crucial for getting a job," said Dekker.

But she said the Lilubugan-taught children actually became better students because they did not have English and Filipino rammed down their throats as soon as they entered school.

"They were learning to decode a language that they didn't yet speak, so of course they had no comprehension of the written form of the language," Dekker said of the problems having to study in English and Filipino.

Manuel Faelnar, vice president for the non-government group Defenders for Indigenous Languages of the Archipelago, agreed that force-feeding new languages on children when they first learnt to read and write was wrong.

"That's why many of our kids are considered dull, slow. The teachers speak to them in Tagalog (Filipino), and if you're not Tagalog or English-speaking, you're lost," said Faelnar.

One obvious problem with the government's new programme is that it covers only the most widely spoken languages, and thus continues to leave the less common ones neglected.

However the hope is that, once the programme is implemented and succeeds, the government will start introducing mother-tongue instruction for the most endangered languages.

Meanwhile, the hill-dwelling Ayta Magindi in the Zambales ranges and the local government school have taken it on their own to start mother-tongue instruction from June, said the community's Protestant pastor Benny Capuno.

Two Ayta Magindi locals have been hired to teach kindergarten at the local school, and will also help prepare mother-tongue teaching materials for the first graders.

"This should restore our young people's pride and make them treasure our own music, our own language and our unique culture," said Capuno. AFP

Living Languages

a cyberbreath for language life

Local languages make headway against Filipino, English

The Ethnologue lists 175 languages for the [Philippines](#), including English (3.4 mil speakers in 2000) and [Filipino \(fil\)](#), the modified form of Tagalog used as an official language alongside English.

According to “[Long odyssey to save Philippine languages](#),” one of the many languages struggling in the island nation is Ayta Magindi or [Mag-indi \(blx\)](#), a language reported by the Ethnologue as having 5,000 speakers and rising as of 1998. The article claims a mere 3,000 tribal members. Elder Arnel Valencia tells how he was humiliated as a child in school, where only English and Filipino were acceptable.

With the new school year beginning next month, 12 local languages will be taught in schools, as a result of a program launched by linguist Diane Dekker in 1987. The results of that program showed that children performed better in students if they were provided with instruction in their native tongue.

According to “[Good or not? DepEd to use 12 languages for June classes](#),” this move by the Department of Education is part of the Mother Tongue-Based Multi-Lingual Education program, and the languages are:

- [Bikol \(bcl\)](#) – 2.5 mil. speakers,
- [Cebuano \(ceb\)](#) – 15.8 mil. speakers,
- Chabacano or [Chavacano \(cbk\)](#) – 293K speakers,
- [Hiligaynon \(hil\)](#) 5.8 mil. speakers,
- Iloko or [Ilokano \(ilo\)](#) – 7 mil. speakers,
- [Kapampangan \(pam\)](#) – 1.9 mil. speakers,
- [Maranao \(mrw\)](#) – 776K speakers,
- Maguindanaoan or [Maguindanao \(mdh\)](#) – 1 mil. speakers,
- Pangasinense or [Pangasinan \(pag\)](#) – 1.2 mil. speakers
- [Tagalog \(tgl\)](#) – 21.5 mil. speakers,
- [Tausug \(tsg\)](#) – 1.1 mil. speakers, and
- Waray or [Waray-Waray \(war\)](#) – 2.8 mil speakers.

The hope is that implementation of this program will be successful and lead to implementation in more languages.