

# First language education in Lubuagan, Northern Philippines<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

*UNESCO has stated that a child should be educated in his or her first language for as long as possible (UNESCO Education in a Multilingual World, p 17). It appears that in many places around the world this would be an impossible goal—that it would be too costly in terms of materials production and teacher training to provide mother tongue education in countries where many languages are spoken. The Philippines, with 168 living languages is one such country.*

*Over the last five years a First Language Education project has been implemented in the Lubuagan, Kalinga language of the northern Philippines. This project has been integrated within the formal educational system, following the national curriculum set by the Department of Education. In spite of numerous constraints, including the use of three languages (the mother tongue and two National Languages, the media of instruction, English and Filipino) in the school setting, student test scores indicate greater gains when the mother tongue is used as medium of instruction for teaching content and for teaching the two national languages. This experimental project presents an interesting case study in the benefits of mother tongue education. This paper will detail the history of the program focusing on the current outcomes in two areas: student year-end test scores and community responses to the pilot project.*

## **The problem**

Lubuagan is a monolingual municipality with few outsiders. Children in Lubuagan begin school speaking Lubuagan but no other language, as the lingua franca is only spoken in the provincial capital. The languages of the classroom are Filipino and English, both new languages to the students.

The students are expected to learn to read, write and master curriculum content in Filipino and English while at the same time acquiring these languages. Very often the teacher does not overtly teach the new language, except during specific language study, but rather *uses* it in the classroom, hoping that immersion in the unknown language will eventually ensure that students learn it. The simultaneous tasks of mastering content, language and literacy skills are complex and learning is a slow process for most students.

Probing for the underlying causes of student drop out rates and low comprehension suggests that the reasons may relate to language. Unable to develop concepts with the children in a language they understand well, the teachers cannot build on the cognitive skills the children bring to the task by virtue of their ability to conceptualize in their first language. The students are delayed in fully developing their thinking skills because of the effort to acquire the second and third languages necessary for the classroom.

Comprehensible input is mandatory in order for students to learn in the classroom. If the student does not understand the language the teacher uses, s/he simply cannot learn the subject matter. Gonzalez states (1996:216) that if students do not understand the medium of instruction, a language they do understand must be used transitionally until a new medium of instruction (a second or third language) can be used with comprehension in the classroom. Communication between teacher and pupil must take place in a

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common language. Once the student has learned a second language orally, s/he can begin literacy development in the second language, as well as use it to learn new content, but not before.

Gonzalez (1996:218) goes on to say that using the mother tongue *first* for the development of efficient basic and functional literacy skills should enable learners to build on and transfer these skills to the second language. CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency)<sup>2</sup> should be developed in both languages. Numerous studies around the world<sup>3</sup> indicate that when students learn to read and write in their mother tongue before learning to read and write in a second or third language, they progress more quickly both in literacy skills and in second language acquisition.

Tucker<sup>4</sup> (1996:316) says that, “the development of the child’s first language with its related cognitive development is more important than mere length of exposure to a second language.” Furthermore, he argues (ibid) that the development of the mother tongue is important for cognitive development and as a basis for learning the second language. If the mother tongue is not sufficiently developed, the second language cannot be mastered because of the lack of cognitive skills acquired for mastery of other languages. The development and nurturing of the mother tongue facilitates transfer of skills across the languages. According to Tucker, (ibid:317) this is especially important in the Philippines where students often enter school with no knowledge whatsoever of the media of instruction. The most effective form of bilingual education is development of literacy and numeracy (as well as scientific discourse) in the mother tongue as much as possible, followed by transfer to the second language of instruction.

### **First Language Component Bridging Program implementation and its effects on the teachers and community**

#### **Background situation of the public and private school system in Lubuagan**

Since their foundation before the Second World War by American educators and Belgian missionaries, public and private schools in Lubuagan have followed a methodology that is predominantly western in orientation. The educational system alienated students from their traditional culture and life in the Lubuagan Kalinga community, espousing the notion that, of all cultures, “the West is the Best”. The mindset of many school administrators and teachers in Lubuagan was that the old, conservative Western methodology, with its rigid memorization of English, was the only valuable and effective way to teach, and, as a result, they promoted the inculcation of Western culture and worldview. Having been comfortable for years with this teaching routine, educators and parents found it difficult to accept an alternative methodology that used the previously belittled Lubuagan vernacular. However, results on standardized tests during the 1990s showed that the old system was not working.

#### **The children’s world symbols are not the word symbols of their education**

School children in Lubuagan begin their education in a language they do not understand. Written word symbols of English and Filipino, used in public education, do not represent the world of the child. Thus, instructions are heard but not comprehended. The foreign context and the irrelevance of most English and Filipino instructional materials contribute to the inattention of the students and adversely affect comprehension.

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<sup>2</sup> This concept is developed by Jim Cummins (1984, 1986, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Dekker, 2002

<sup>4</sup> G. Richard Tucker of Carnegie Mellon University in Washington D.C. has researched language issues here in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries since the 1960s. cf: Tucker, G. Richard. 1997. *Applied Linguistics: Focus on Second Language Learning/Teaching – Selected Papers*. Linguistic Society of the Philippines, De La Salle University Press.

Most public school teachers in Lubuagan have limited access to in-service training and refresher courses. This lack eventually results in a significant loss of passion for teaching and it is a constant struggle to sustain and improve children's interest, attention, and comprehension. Moreover, the teachers' traditional teaching and discipline style and their refusal to accept the children's articulation of ideas in their vernacular, reinforces the students' role as passive receptacles instead of active participants in their learning. Teacher-pupil relationships continually deteriorate because the reality of the children's world is excluded from the classroom.

### **SIL First Language Component advocacy for educational improvements in reading comprehension in the Lubuagan District public schools**

Beginning in 1997, SIL International first conducted a series of personal consultations and meetings in Lubuagan with a few open-minded teachers and parents. A core group, the FLC Steering Committee, was formed to spearhead, deepen, and further the consciousness of the new alternative methodology. This was followed with district-wide teachers' seminars on the First Language Component (FLC) Bridging Program. Special training of FLC teacher coordinators in the methodology was also offered, including three consecutive summers at Nueva Vizcaya State Institute of Technology, Bayombong. These initiatives eventually culminated in 1998 in a district-wide consensus amongst administrators, teachers, and parents for the implementation of the FLC Bridging Program Pilot Project in the Lubuagan District Public Schools. According to the No. 6 Proposed Guideline for the Implementation of the 2002 Curriculum (DepEd Philippines), known as the Basic Education Curriculum, "...the medium of instruction for grade one will continue to be the Regional Lingua Franca or the vernacular."

Decisions about teaching methodology reached by the Steering Committee were based on the following premises:

- By using the students' mother tongue in the classroom to teach literacy skills as well as subject content, the students' cognitive skills would be developed.
- By teaching concepts in the mother tongue, the students would be exposed to comprehensible input and enabled to develop concepts further.
- Separating content learning, language learning, and acquisition of literacy skills would enable the students to focus on one discipline at a time. Thus, basic literacy skills and content was to be mastered through the mother tongue, and Filipino and English were to be taught as foreign languages, rather than used as a medium to learn subject matter or acquire literacy skills.
- In the Filipino or English language lessons, content already mastered in the mother tongue would be used in order to focus on foreign language acquisition.

### **FLC preliminary activities: Cultural awareness and its educational implications.**

Awareness-raising for the FLC teachers focused on the following:

1. Affirming the teachers' cultural identity through shared reflection and shared insights on restoring or remembering one's lost cultural identity
2. Unlocking the rich educational resources and native wisdom of Lubuagan word symbols:
  - Writing traditional stories in the vernacular that relate to the cultural world of the community
  - Singing contests, word context contests, and riddle contests

3. Developing instructional materials/visual aids and capturing the cultural images, motifs, and natural symbols in the community life:
  - Drawings, and paintings
  - Alphabet/number cards
  - Graphs
4. Using FLC demonstration lesson activities:
  - FLC instructional materials
  - FLC bridging strategy
5. Evaluating FLC activities:
  - FLC teachers' regular monthly meetings
  - Consolidation of educational gains from FLC classroom experiences shared by individual FLC teachers
  - Reporting by FLC teachers on what they have learned about bilingual and multilingual educational theory and practice from publications

### Implementation of FLC

The FLC program was initiated in 1998 in 5 schools: Pudpud, Mabilong, Dongoy, Uma and Ag-agama. The curriculum followed the Department of Education content curriculum in subject matter with language adjustments.

	<b>Lilubuagen (first language) 4 1/2 hrs/day</b>	<b>Filipino 1 hr per day</b>	<b>English 1 hr per day</b>
First semester	Language development through study of Grammar, vocabulary, concept development – integrated into reading, writing, culture study	Listening skills in Filipino taught through TPR – 6 weeks	Listening skills in English taught through TPR – 6 weeks
	Reading 80 minutes/day	Oral Filipino continued through listening comprehension, vocabulary building, and conversational skills	Oral English continued through listening comprehension, vocabulary building, and conversational skills
	Writing 45 minutes/day		
	Study of indigenous culture including arts, music, oral language styles etc. 1 hr weekly	Oral Filipino through Grammatical comparison between Lubuagen sentence structure and Filipino	
	Math 45 minutes/day	Bridging to reading Filipino at end of sem	
	Science 45 minutes/day 3 days a week		
	social studies 45 min/twice a week		
Second semester	SAME	Reading fluency	Bridge to English reading
		Listening comprehension, speaking	Listening comprehension, speaking
		Grammar	Grammar
		Filipino oral lessons continued	Oral English continued

Simple exposure to experiences does not lead to learning. It is only when children talk about and reflect on their experiences that they learn from them. The cultural activities of the community are incorporated into the learning process, making the children aware of and involved in what is happening in the community. This cultural content is related directly to the children's real-life experiences and builds on what they know rather than on expecting them to memorize information from textbooks, which have mostly urban-based content. The teacher takes advantage of actual cultural objects when introducing cultural events or information. Or, if using actual objects is not possible, visual aids relating to the object can be used. In addition, when cultural events are incorporated into the curriculum, students and teachers can participate together in field trips rather than merely focusing on foreign concepts such as escalators, which are non-existent in Lubuagan and the entire province for that matter.

### **Effects of the FLC Bridging Program in Lubuagan**

Following are the negative and positive effects of the FLC program in Lubuagan:

#### 1. Negative effects

- Teacher's work-load is increased in the preparation of lesson plans and visual aids.
- There is not enough time to adequately cover all the subjects in the curriculum using three languages, Filipino, English and Lubuagan.
- Some parents and teachers remain skeptical of the methodology. Their presumption is that spending more time in English is the only way to learn more English (a high cultural value).

#### 2. Positive effects

- Teachers have become aware of the degree to which the educational system had alienated Lubuagan children from their own culture.
- Teachers now realize the potential of their own vernacular and culture to be a spring-board for enhancing children's reading comprehension. They have seen that, once the children are able to read with comprehension and write in their own language, the children can easily transfer those skills to the second language, to the extent that they understand and can use that language.
- Teachers have become more resourceful and creative in their teaching as a result of the varied activities involved in enhancing children's reading comprehension. Using the vernacular gives the teachers a greater breadth of ideas from which to enhance their lessons.
- Teachers have become more dynamic and are able to sustain their students' interest because of the participative classroom atmosphere. Learners who understand what the teacher is saying to them (because they understand the language) are more eager to participate in class, unlike previously when they did not understand instruction in English or Filipino.
- Teachers now continuously reconnect themselves to the community culture. The FLC Bridging Program is their alternative school—their community educational enterprise. They look for ways to use what the children already know about the world around them as they introduce new content.

- Illiterate parents' concern for their children's education has been enhanced. Now, parents are proud that they learn with their children because, as speakers of the language, they become daily consultants for their children's inquiry rather than being shamed by their lack of knowledge of English and Filipino.
- Parents' relationships with teachers have been enhanced as they are called in regularly for the teacher's evaluation of their children's development.
- Parents are becoming more responsive to and cooperative with school activities as their involvement is regularly solicited.
- More pupils now participate in class, because all students have a common tool—their vernacular—to express their ideas, thus doing away with the teachers' pattern of giving exclusive attention to those students who understand English or Filipino.
- Pupils' sense of classroom belonging is now enhanced because they have the opportunity to participate meaningfully and to develop a foundation of mutual interest that leads to positive peer relations.
- Pupils' attendance has greatly improved. Classes are pleasant, dynamic and interactive. FLC is functional and sufficiently relevant to the diverse contexts of the learners because the students are able to participate in the classroom activities.
- Pupils' receptiveness has likewise improved because lessons build on their comprehensive knowledge of their own vernacular language and culture.

Does FLC Work? The following graph indicates that yes, the FLC is achieving its aims:

**Achievement of DepEd Pupils in Lubuagan  
FLC Comprehension Reading Test – March, 2001**

School/Grade	Groups	Levels	Lubuagan	Filipino	English
Lubuagan Central Grade 1	Exper.	Mean	21.13	22.24	19.07
		Achievement	60.37	64.00	54.48
	Control	Mean	7.63	9.18	8.15
		Achievement	21.80	26.23	23.29
Mabilong Grade 1	Exper	Mean	25.54	16.20	15.80
		Achievement	72.97	46.29	45.14
	Control	Mean	15.33	12.63	13.05
		Achievement	43.81	36.09	37.27
Uma elementary Grade 1	Exper	Mean	19.90	21.40	20.75
		Achievement	56.86	61.00	59.29
	Control	Mean	14.05	12.74	13.84
		Achievement	40.15	36.40	39.54
Ag-agama elementary Grade 1	Exper	Mean	16.00	16.20	15.80
		Achievement	45.71	46.29	45.14
	Control	Mean	17.56	13.38	15.63
		Achievement	50.18	38.23	44.64
<b>Grade 1 Test average</b>	Exper	Mean	19.48	19.09	19.13
		Achievement	56.69	54.32	54.65
	Control	Mean	13.94	12.28	12.82
		Achievement	39.83	35.08	36.63

As this table shows, FLC children had higher results on test scores in three of the four classes that are listed. However, in the fourth school (Ag-agama), children in the FLC classroom performed poorly in comparison to the control group. The FLC teacher's circumstances help to explain this: she was pregnant during that school year and often missed class because of the long hike from her home up the mountain to the classroom. After giving birth, she again missed class for some time. When there was a substitute teacher available, the substitute was not an experienced teacher and knew nothing of the FLC methodology. Thus, the students in that class were not able to attend class on a regular basis, did not have a consistent teacher, and the methodology was used inconsistently.

### **Is it worth it or not?**

The success of the FLC to date encourages the FLC Steering Committee to expect its continued implementation to yield even more positive results. The program is valued because:

- Children develop new knowledge and skills based on what they already know from their community and culture.
- Teachers become more dynamic and purposeful in their instruction by developing/providing learning experiences based on the children's world, presented in a language they all understand.
- Learning is kept interesting.
- Parents can contribute their knowledge, expertise and language resources to their children's educational experiences. Such parental involvement promotes constructive home-school relationships and helps all parents, even those who are illiterate, feel more a part of their children's education.

The premise that students in Lubuagan are encumbered by a language barrier that hinders or slows their education, sometimes ending it prematurely, is accurate. When Lubuagan students are enabled to learn in their own language with rigorous bridging into the national media of instruction, they are enabled to succeed in school. Their success creates a love of learning and a hunger for more learning. That in itself accomplishes a key goal of multilingual and life-long education.

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