

## **PRESS STATEMENT**

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### **LANGUAGES DO MATTER!**

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A basic weakness in Philippine education is that many pupils do not understand what their teacher is saying.

Why? Because the language in school is one they can hardly speak or understand.

In a forum in UP last February 12, I urged congress to abandon moves to install English as the sole medium of instruction especially in the primary grades. Instead, a law should be passed mandating the primary use of the learner's first language (L1) or mother tongue from pre-school to grade 6, or at least up to Grade 4. Filipino and English can be taught as separate subjects.

This change should provide learners (whose L1 is not English or Filipino) enough time to develop their cognitive and linguistic skills in their mother tongue. In the process a solid foundation can be built for learning subjects taught in the nationally prescribed languages, English and Filipino. These two languages can then be promoted to primary media in the secondary level.

What happens to L1 in high school? It can be used as auxiliary medium or as a separate subject. I define an auxiliary medium to be any language (other than the prescribed idiom) that can enrich and facilitate understanding of the content and academic language of the subject areas. This makes possible the classroom use of supplementary science and mathematics materials in the local or national language. The idea here is to extend the use of L1 as far as possible.

For multilingual based education to work, I can think of four (4) conditions that must be met (although there may be more). One, good curricula (i.e. cognitively demanding). Two, good teachers (i.e. competent in the required languages, content and methods). Three, good teaching materials (i.e. error free). And four, community support and empowerment (i.e. the community is allowed to make decisions on school matters).

The above proposal is based on numerous studies here and abroad on mother tongue education.

In a World Bank funded study, Dutcher and Tucker (1994) reviewed the international experience on the use of the first and second languages in education. They found out that:

- Children need at least 12 years to learn their L1;
- Older children and adolescents are better learners of an L2 than younger children;
- Developing the child's cognitive skills through L1 is more effective than more exposure to L2;

Will increasing the time for English improve our English? The Thomas and Colliers 1997 longitudinal study suggests otherwise. They found out that after 11 years, US children whose L1 is not English and who received an all-English education learned the least amount of English. They also had the lowest scores in standardized academic tests. On the other hand, students taught in their L1 for six years scored more than the average English native speaker in the tests. In the Philippines, the Lubuagan experiment by DEP-ED and the Summer Institute of Philippines belies the claim that using L1 as medium will adversely affect academic performance in English and Mathematics.

How about costs? Contrary to popular belief, L1-based education may actually cost less than one based in L2, that is, if we include wasted expenses due to drop-outs, repeaters and failures. The added costs, studies show, are higher in L2 than in L1 schools. A Guatemalan study, for instance, showed that it is costlier to produce a grade level passer (in Grades 1-6) in a Spanish medium school (\$6,013) than in a Mayan school (\$4,496).

Do we need to give up our ethnic languages in order to build “one nation, one language”? No.

The right to one’s own language is an inherent human right. Quoting UNESCO, languages are essential to the identity of individuals, groups, and nations and to their peaceful co-existence. Imagine the self-respect that a speaker or a community gains when their language is acknowledged in school and in government!

The Philippines ranks 10<sup>th</sup> in the world in linguistic diversity, with over 150 languages. Most Filipinos can speak three or four languages, including a regional language. In addition, they speak the national language for inter-ethnic communication. For international communication, they rely mainly on English which like Filipino is a second language to them.

Knowing more than one language is also the norm for the world’s citizens. Over 6,000 languages are packed into the world’s 200 nation-states. This means that most nations, if not all, have more than one language.

The year 2008 has been declared by UNESCO as the International Year of Languages. The year long celebration in the Philippines is being planned and coordinated by the International Year of Languages Committee-Philippines which is led by the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino and the UNESCO National Commission of the Philippines. Any one interested in joining the committee or its activities can visit its websites at [iyphilippines.wordpress.com](http://iyphilippines.wordpress.com) or [iyl.komfil.gov.ph](http://iyl.komfil.gov.ph).

It is time to foster respect for ALL languages especially endangered languages, and to promote and protect them. Let us celebrate our linguistic diversity with the peoples of the world. *Wika Mo. Wikang Filipino. Wika ng Mundo. Mahalaga!*

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