TOP ASIAN ENGLISH SPEAKING COUNTRY NO MORE: FACTORS ON THE DETERIORATION OF FILIPINOS’ PROFICIENCY IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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“Ma’am ano po ang English ng ‘masaya’?”
“Ma’am ano po yung ‘noun’?”
Teacher: “Please copy this.”
Student: “Ma’am kokopyahin po ba?”

These are some of my day-to-day conversations with my students in Grade 10 English, and believe me, I’ve seen and heard worse. I wouldn’t know if I would want to laugh or cry in exasperation. Is this the kind of students we have today? The deterioration of English is an understatement if you would witness first-hand the various manifestations that students show in terms of the second language. They do not know the basic parts of speech, what more would you expect if you ask them to construct a simple sentence in English?

In the not so distant past, Filipinos were envied in Asia for their proficiency in the English language. Filipinos were always chosen presiding officers or speakers at international conferences in Asia. Furthermore, Filipinos were considered no.1 on the recruitment list for overseas jobs that require good command and knowledge of English. And now, we stand to lose this reputation.

One factor that I consider for Filipinos’ bad English nowadays is their negative attitude toward the language. Students often say, “Mag-Tagalog tayo, Pinoy tayo eh.” Or: “Bakit ba pa-English-English ka pa?” These statements give the impression that they consider it unpatriotic to be talking in English. Saying “Makabayan ako, magpi-Filipino ako” is, in many cases, just an excuse not to learn English, a way to cover up insecurities about speaking the language. But even when they do not say anything, you can sense there is something wrong about how students regard English. Whenever I ask someone to speak in front of the class, some of the students give one another meaningful looks, or make faces at their classmate who is speaking. Others simply do not listen.
They don’t realize that whenever they sneer by words or facial expressions—“Pa-Ingles-Ingles pa!” “Nosebleed!”—they discourage their classmates from using the language for fear of being bullied.

English is taught as early as Kindergarten in most schools, so it is shocking for me to find some high school students who cannot even construct a sentence. What happened during their six years of elementary school education? I think English is not taught clearly and adequately in grade school, particularly the parts of speech. If students acquire the necessary knowledge and skills in the language in their formative years, they will not have a hard time in high school. As we know, the older a student gets, the harder it is for a student to learn a new language. (Senobio, 2015)

A second problem is that many Filipinos feel intimidated by someone who speaks fluent English. This should not be the case. No language should be viewed as superior to others. We need to actively teach our students the value of English as a second language and the benefits they can derive from being able to write and speak it fluently. (Senobio, 2015)

I always tell my students that being able to speak English doesn’t necessarily mean that a person is intelligent, it only implies that they are educated. If we are fluent in the language, there will be no feeling of intimidation. English does not make one better; it makes one equal to others.

Lack of practice is another problem. Students have so little time to speak and write English. At home, many students spend hours playing computer games and logging on to Facebook and other social networking sites. The games are hardly verbal and the language in social media is often faulty. Where is the opportunity for the young to learn correct English? (Senobio, 2015)

If there is lack of practice, there is also malpractice. News reports tell us of errors in textbooks, especially those to be used in K-12 (Kindergarten to Grade 12). The errors can be corrected, but what is beyond our control is the students’ choice of reading materials when they are on their own. Inside the books that our students are reading these days are comma-spliced and run-on phrases, instances of incorrect subject-verb agreement and sentences that end not just with one but a whole set of punctuation marks (!?!?!…?!). I find it disturbing that anyone can publish books in the Philippines without having them checked by good editors, and even sell them through
reputable bookstores. We learn to write by reading. So, let us not expect our students to write well if the books they are reading are full of errors. (Senobio, 2015)

What students hear also affects how they learn English. What we hear most of the time, we tend to say unconsciously. Even if I say “se-re-MOW-nee” (stress on the third syllable, mow) in class, my students still put the stress on the second syllable because other teachers keep pronouncing “ceremony” that way (“se-RE-moh-ni’). If there is one English teacher who uses the right pronunciation but there are seven or eight others who do not, there will be no transfer of learning in a one-hour English class. The truth is, all of us using the language in school are indirectly teaching English. (Senobio, 2015)

All teachers, even those who do not teach English, have to participate in the task of changing our students’ attitude toward the language. We should give them more opportunities to use English, to correct improper usage and to be proficient in the language. Whatever we do before our students is what we teach them. And hopefully, when all of these factors are considered, there will be a chance for us to regain our language advantage.