Learning English as an International Lingua Franca in a Semi-English-Speaking Country: The Philippines

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Abstract
Some people try to improve their English in a country such as the Philippines, where English is used both as an official language and as a medium of school instruction. This paper discusses whether teachers should encourage students to learn English in such an environment. Both the advantages and disadvantages were discussed based on both a review of related literature and the author’s experience of learning English in the Philippines. Several advantages were found while only a few disadvantages were identified. Moreover, the disadvantages are not very serious. In conclusion, the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. Learners can greatly benefit from learning English in the Philippines in various ways.

Keywords: the Philippines, semi-English-speaking country, native teachers, non-native teachers, international lingua-franca

Introduction
Should teachers encourage students to learn English in countries where English is used in many spheres of life as an official language, such as the Philippines, Singapore, or India? My colleagues and I recently discussed this issue because one of our students was planning to study English in one such country. Nowadays, some Japanese people go to other Asian countries in order to improve their English because both cost of living and tuition fees tend to be lower in these countries than in Britain, the U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, which are described as English-speaking countries. Kachru (1992, p. 356) described these English-speaking
countries as “the Inner Circle”, while he called the former colonies of these countries where English is used in many spheres of life as “the Outer Circle”. The purpose of this paper is to discuss whether or not learning English in the Outer-Circle countries, especially where English is the primary medium of school instruction as well as an official language, is beneficial, paying a specific attention to the Philippines.

To investigate both advantages and disadvantages of learning English in an Outer-Circle country, I visited language institutions in the Philippines and took both one-on-one lessons and group lessons with Filipino students as well as international students. I chose the Philippines for the study because the nation is geographically close to Japan, the cost of living there is much lower than in Japan, English is the primary medium of school instruction, and there are a large number of online English language programs offered for the Japanese from the Philippines.

**Background**

**English in the Philippines**

The Filipino constitution defines two official languages: Filipino and English (Bernardo, 2006). English language education was introduced to the Philippines when Spain ceded it to the U.S. in 1889, and the U.S. government made English the common medium of communication (Hayashi, 2000). Although Japan colonized the nation during the Second World War and tried to eliminate both Spanish and English, the Japanese did not have much influence on the amount of English spoken in the Philippines because Filipinos “still had to use English for propaganda movies for local consumption, as well as for other business transactions” (Viado, 2007, p. 195). English language education in the Philippines starts in the first year of elementary school, and English is used as the medium of instruction in mathematics and science-related subjects at elementary as well as secondary schools, and in all subjects at tertiary educational institutions (Nakahara, 2006). Education Secretary Jesli Lapus stated, “As the primary medium of instruction, the percentage of time allotment for learning areas conducted in the English language should not be less than
seventy percent of the total time allotment for all learning areas in all year levels” (Department of Education of the Philippines, 2010, 7). English is the dominant language in diverse areas such as education, business, politics, and the mass media (Hayashi, 2000). Nakahara (2005) investigated 121 native Tagalog speakers’ awareness of their command of English and found that they evaluated their English ability as high as 82.85 on average (Listening: 83.41, Speaking: 75.40, Reading: 90.00, Writing: 82.60), assuming that their command of Tagalog is 100. Considering the aforementioned facts, the Philippines can be described as a semi-English-speaking country if the Inner-Circle countries are known as English-speaking countries.

Recently, the necessity of having a strong command of English among Filipinos has dramatically increased due to “the development of the offshoring and outsourcing (O & O) industry,” especially “contact or call centers” (Keitel, 2009, p. 3). The Philippines is currently a leading country in the O & O industry; one of the reasons for the success of this industry there is its large English-speaking population (Keitel, 2009). “By 2010 it is estimated that the industry will have grabbed 10% of the global market share employing more than 900,000 workers….” (Keitel, 2009, p. 2). Furthermore, distance-mode English language education is an important part of the Philippines’ O & O industry (Keitel, 2009). In fact, many Philippine-based online English learning programs are available for Japanese people. English is also important for a large number of Filipinos who wish to work abroad due to the nation’s weak economy (Nakahara, 2006). For example, the total amount of money that overseas workers sent to the Philippines in the first half of the year 2002 was approximately one-third of the annual government revenue for 2004 (Nakahara, 2006). It is crucial for those who wish to work outside the nation to have a strong command of English (Kawahara, 2002). The Philippines is the leading country (48%) in Asia, after Singapore (50%), in terms of a large English-speaking population (Bolton, 2008).
Average TOEFL Score of the People of the Philippines

The average TOEFL iBT score of Filipino people was 88 out of 120 between January and December 2008, which ranked number two in Asia: This figure is very high compared to 66 for the Japanese (ETS, 2009, p. 10). Although the English ability of people from these two nations should not be compared merely on the basis of their average TOEFL scores because differences exist in various factors, such as the number of test takers and their level of motivation (Nakahara, 2006; Suzuki, 1999), their average TOEFL score strongly suggests that their English competency is very high (Nakahara, 2006). This also implies that Filipino English teachers have an excellent command of English because they need to teach English to those whose English ability is very high.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Learning English in the Philippines

This section discusses the advantages and disadvantages of learning English in the Philippines, comparing it to learning English in the Inner-Circle countries.

Advantages

1. **Cost is much less:** Both tuition fees and cost of living in the Philippines are much lower than in the Inner-Circle countries, which enables students to take more lessons or study for a longer period of time. Even one-on-one lessons are inexpensive there. I randomly selected five language schools located in Manila and in Sydney, Australia and investigated the tuitions for their one-on-one lessons. The result showed that the average cost for an hour one-one-one lesson at the former schools was only US$7.25, while US$87.93 at the latter. The low rates for private lessons enable students to learn English intensively and efficiently even when they remain in the country for only a short period.

2. **Japanese students can make friends with the local people easily because both the Japanese and Filipinos are Asian.** Therefore, they are able to speak English frequently in their daily lives. A large number of Japanese students who have studied in White-dominant Inner-Circle
countries have told me that it was difficult for them to make friends with the local people, and consequently, they did not have much chance to speak English with the locals except for their teachers and host families. Although this does not necessarily occur due to racial prejudice, it can be difficult to talk to someone who looks different from oneself. For example, the more racial diversity exists, the more teenagers in the U.S self-segregate by race and ethnicity at school (Bronson & Merryman, 2009, p. 5).

However, some discrimination against Japanese people could be expected in the Philippines because Japan colonized that country during the Second World War. However, I generally felt that Filipinos were quite friendly toward Japanese people.

3. Filipino English teachers in general have characteristics that offer advantages of both non-native and native teachers due to the way in which they develop their own English ability. The three components of language teachers’ expertise are “skills in the target language,” “explicit knowledge about the language,” and “pedagogic skills” (Medgyes, 1994, p. 57). The advantages of being non-native teachers are that they have obtained explicit knowledge about the target language and they know how to help learners effectively and efficiently due to their own (systematic) learning experience. On the other hand, their disadvantage is that their own English competency can be lower than that of native English teachers to some extent. However, Filipino teachers improve their own English competency through not only systematic study of the language but also immersion environments. Consequently, their command of English can be very high: They can therefore be good models for language learners, which is another advantage of non-native teachers (Medgyes, 1994). In summary, they can help their students through both their own experience as learners and their high English competency. Needless to say, there are both native and non-native English teachers in the Philippines: It depends on the school.

4. Students can experience using English as an international lingua franca when talking to Filipinos. English is spoken as the most common lingua franca all over the world by many more non-native speakers than
native speakers, which is why English is considered to be important and is studied throughout the world. A multilingual country, such as the Philippines, is an example of a country where English is used as an international language because it is used across linguistic and cultural borders, although there is no national border (McKay, 2002). According to Kachru (1992, p. 28), the number of native English speakers is approximately “350 million”. On the other hand, the number of English users is around “1.5 billion” (Ibid.). Therefore, learners “should be aware of the existence of the different varieties of the language used by speakers outside the Inner Circle” (Yang, 2004, p. 65). They should also be able to understand the culture of countries other than the Inner-Circle countries when using English as an intercultural communication tool. Although Filipinos are non-native speakers of English, many of them have a strong command of English. Thus, students can have a valuable experience both linguistically and culturally at a very high level.

5. Even highly advanced learners can greatly benefit from participating in an English language program in the Philippines. Language institutions there offer two types of English language programs: those for international students and those for Filipinos. The level of the students who participate in the latter type of program is extremely high because they have learned and used English as both an official language and a medium of school instruction for a number of years, and now they are seeking to improve their English to the level of a native speaker for their current or prospective jobs. Therefore, I would recommend highly advanced students to enroll in a program catering to Filipinos.

Disadvantages

1. Filipino English has distinctive features in terms of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary (refer to Trudgill & Hannah, 1994 for details). Due to such distinctive features, some people might consider Filipino English to be nonstandard. However, teachers in the Philippines use Standard English, although this statement is not based on any systematic research but rather solely on my own impression.
The definition of Standard English is the type of English used in writing and speaking by educated speakers of the language or taught in formal ESL or EFL instruction (Trudgill & Hannah, 1994). It also “refers to grammar and vocabulary (dialect) but not to pronunciation (accent)” (Trudgill & Hannah, 1994, p. 1). In addition, misunderstanding and occasional unintelligibility occurs even among people from different Inner-Circle countries because there exist differences among their varieties of English, and this sometimes causes them to criticize each other’s language. There are also individual differences among people from the same Inner-Circle country. Consequently, “the intuitions and judgments supplied by even the most educated native speakers are not always reliable” (Medgyes, 1994, p. 11). “And they [native speakers] seldom agree amongst themselves…” (Medgyes, 1994, p. 11). Therefore, this is not a problem unique to learning English in the Philippines only.

2. Filipino host family members are likely to speak (a) language(s) other than English to each other. Consequently, there is a fear that the amount of input at home might be insufficient for students. However, this problem can be solved if host families agree to speak only English while they are with the students.

**Conclusion**

This article has discussed both the advantages and disadvantages of learning English in an Outer-Circle country, especially where English is the primary medium of school instruction as well as an official language, which can be described as a semi-English-speaking country such as the Philippines. All things being considered, the advantages are found to outweigh the disadvantages, and therefore, teachers can encourage their students to learn English in such a country. The most important advantage is the great potential for exposure to the target language, which is definitely the most crucial element in successful language acquisition. When we learn English in a place where we are exposed to the language for long hours both at school and in our daily lives, we can improve our target language rapidly and dramatically. This is the most significant aspect of learning.
English in English-speaking countries. Semi-English-speaking countries also provide learners with opportunity to contact English, especially as an international lingua franca, for long hours.

This article has discussed learning English only in the Philippines, although both the advantages and disadvantages discussed in this article seem to be common for other Asian Outer-Circle countries. Therefore, learning English in those countries, especially countries where English is not the primary medium of school instruction, should be investigated as well because the average English competency of people there may not be as high as that of Filipinos. Furthermore, to validate the effectiveness of learning English in semi-English-speaking countries, including the Philippines, experimental research should be conducted. The objective would be to examine whether the Japanese can really improve their English in Asian semi-English-speaking countries as much or even more than they can in the Inner-Circle countries.

Acknowledgments

I wish to thank Ms. Glenda Capati of Advanced Speech and Academic Professionals Inc., Dr. Leonisa Mojica and Dr. Robert Keitel of De La Salle University, Ms. Faye Liong of International Language Academy Manila, and Mr. Christopher Delacruz of The American Institute for English Proficiency, for their insightful comments, information, and cooperation. My gratitude also goes to all teachers, staff, and students of the institutions I visited in the Philippines.

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Asian EFL Journal Professional Teaching Articles Volume 53 July 2011


