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Asia

The Philippines and the English language

E for English

Jun 4th 2009 | MANILA
From *The Economist* print edition

The cost of being tongue-tied in the colonisers' tongue

Illustration by Claudio Munoz



ONCE it claimed to have more English speakers than all but two other countries, and it has exported millions of them. But these days Filipinos are less boastful. Three decades of decline in the share of Filipinos who speak the language, and the deteriorating proficiency of those who can manage some English, have eroded one of the country's advantages in the global economy.

This week children trooped back to school for the new academic year. The government-approved textbooks they will study illustrate the problem. A passage in one for eight-year-olds reads: "The dog rolled on the floor so fast and fell on the ground. There he laid yelling louder than ever. The dog yelled on top of his voice." A book for 11-year-olds advises, mysteriously: "Just remember this

acronym—DOCSiShQACNMN—to make it easy for you to remember the order of adjectives in a series."

Never mind the pupils, teachers have been flunking English for years. In 2004 only one in five teachers passed the English-proficiency test. The effect on pupils is plain to hear. Last year the country winced when the 17-year-old winner of the Miss Philippines World beauty contest failed spectacularly to answer in English the usual questions posed by judges in such events.

Call-centres complain that they reject nine-tenths of otherwise qualified job applicants, mostly college graduates, because of their poor command of English. This is lowering the chances that the outsourcing industry will succeed in its effort to employ close to 1m people, account for 8.5% of GDP and have 10% of the world market by the end of 2010.

America, as the colonial power, brought English and universal public education to the Philippines a century ago. But English as a subject has suffered from lack of money, along with public education as a whole. Some Filipinos also blame the introduction in the 1970s of Filipino, an artificial national language, as the medium of instruction.

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The government is tackling the problem by throwing money at remedial English-language instruction for teachers and making greater use of English as the medium of instruction. It says these measures are working. A recent opinion poll suggests Filipinos believe their own ability to speak English is improving. Call-centre bosses are not convinced.

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