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# Why Spanish?

## DIPLOMATIC POUCH

*Jorge Domecq*

*Dispatches from Philippine-based foreign missions*

ON WEDNESDAY, Nov. 23, language teachers and experts from all over the region will assemble in the Instituto Cervantes de Manila for the Second Conference of Spanish as a Foreign Language in Asia and the Pacific which will be inaugurated by Speaker Feliciano Belmonte. Many will remember the common heritage and the historical bonds between our two countries but wonder why reviving the Spanish language is an issue of interest in the Philippines as we enter the second decade of the 21st century.

Way back in 1937, President Manuel L. Quezon, referring to Spanish, said that “the Latin-American people believe and feel that we Filipinos form part of that vast family, the children of Spain. Thus, although Spain ceased to govern those countries many years ago and although another nation is sovereign in the Philippines, those Latin-American peoples feel themselves as brothers to the people of the Philippines. It is the Spanish language that still binds us to those peoples eternally if we have the wisdom and patriotism of preserving it.”

However, the 1987 Philippine Constitution abolished Spanish as an official language of this country. Although this decision could have been avoided, the truth of the matter is that the majority of Filipinos then no longer used Spanish in their daily lives and therefore the constitutional reform only represented a statement of fact.

It makes no sense to look back on the Spanish language just as an element of our common past, which is no longer there in our efforts to enhance our bilateral relations, to get to know each other better and to better understand our history and culture. We must admit, and we would be foolish not to do so, that there is so much about the Filipino culture that can only be understood fully if we have knowledge of the Spanish language.

Without forgetting Rizal, we can affirm that the “Golden Age” of Philippine literature (which paradoxically coincided with the American period in the Philippines and as Spanish began to disappear from all official communications) produced first-class writers like Pedro Paterno, Isabelo de los Reyes, Apolinario Mabini, José Palma and Fernando Ma. Guerrero, who wrote all their works in Spanish. We must note that more than 20 percent of Tagalog words are of Spanish origin, although many of the popular expressions have a slightly different meaning. The oldest and some of the most important documents found in the National Archives of the Philippines or in the archives of the University of Santo Tomás can on-

ly be best understood and interpreted if one is fluent in Spanish. I am happy to say that we are working closely with Filipino authorities and some private institutions in the country to reverse this situation, among other things, by providing language training to the archivist who will have to ensure that the history that is there will continue to benefit future generations. All these efforts are commendable and need to be continued.

However, that is not the real reason why we are obliged to preserve and promote Spanish among the young and future generations of Filipinos.

Spanish must not be viewed as some archaic and dead language like Latin, that most Filipinos above the age of 50 remember as a compulsory subject in school, which they did not like and which for them was just a waste of time. Spanish should not be regarded either as a language of the elite spoken among Spanish *mestizo* families or as a legacy of a past that no longer exists. Spanish, along with the English language, is one of the only two global means that exist for communication

(even if Chinese is the largest spoken language in the world). Today, more than 500 million people speak Spanish. It is also the second most studied language and the third most used on the Internet.

Furthermore, as far as the Philippines is concerned, Spanish can be a fundamental tool for many young Filipinos seeking employment in call centers or BPO businesses in this country or trying to get a better employment abroad as seafarers, nurses, social workers, etc. The United States is the main land of promise for the citizens of this country, and there are nearly 50 million North Americans who speak Spanish as their mother tongue. In addition, many Latin-American countries are notably increasing their trade and investment relations with Southeast Asian countries, gradually shifting their economic focus toward the Pacific.

If only Spanish were commonly spoken in the Philippines, along with the English language, the Philippines would become the next unbeatable business hub in Asia.

Since I arrived in Manila less than a year ago, I have been constantly asked about the relevance of Spanish in the Philippines of today. I would always reply by saying that I am very confident that Spanish is under no threat of disappearing. Manila has the third biggest Instituto Cervantes in the world in terms of number of students (an annual enrolment of 6,500) and at present, it can hardly take in more students. The real issue is whether we are ready to face the challenge of



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providing the young generations of Filipinos with the necessary academic backing that will enable them to study Spanish as a language of choice that will open for them a wealth of opportunities in employment. To this end, I hope to work closely with the Department of Education and the Commission on Higher Education.

*Jorge Domecq is the Spanish ambassador to the Philippines.*