Language Development in Papua New Guinea

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Contents:

Abstract
Introduction
History
Policy
Planning and implementation
Evaluation
Appendix
Endnotes
References

Abstract

This paper outlines the historical evolution of the recent language policy in PNG, and gives an overview of the 1989 education policy regarding initial education in the vernacular, including discussion on planning, implementation and evaluation of the policy. The bulk of the paper discusses implications of the PNG experience for sociolinguistics, language planning and education. The paper challenges some of the assumptions by some sociolinguists regarding the use of vernacular language education.
Introduction

Since the 1951 UNESCO recommendation in favor of vernacular basic education (UNESCO 1953), linguists, language planners and education policy makers have continued to discuss the issue of language and education. Bull (1954) responded to the recommendation by countering that the psychological and educational advantages of the vernacular for the child must be weighed against the possible social and economic disadvantages for the society if it does not use a language of wider communication. Three decades later, Fasold (1985) suggested that vernacular basic education is economically viable only for larger languages. Even Kozelka (1984:338), who is pro-vernacular and develops a model of community based language planning, recommends for Togo a minimum population of 10,000 for access to government assistance for language development.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) has taken a radically different approach to the use of the vernacular for literacy and basic education. It has over 850 vernacular languages (Grimes 1992), two pidgin lingua francas as national languages and English as the official language. With a population of over 4 million, the average vernacular language population is under 5,000. However, at present children are beginning their education in over 250 languages and education reform is in progress that has as one of its goals the provision of vernacular education for the child's first three years. In this paper I will give a brief history of the development of vernacular education in PNG, summarize the national language and literacy policy, describe briefly its implementation and conclude with a discussion of the implications of the PNG experience for language planning, sociolinguistics and education.

History

In the 1880s the Dutch, German and British colonial powers claimed different parts of the island of New Guinea and the nearby islands. The Dutch claimed the western half which is now part of Indonesia, the Germans the northeast, and the British the southeastern section near Australia. The Germans utilized an English-based pidgin, Tok Pisin, as the lingua franca of their territory. In the British territory a pidgin with a vernacular lexical base, Police Motu (now called Hiri Motu), was spread by the constabulary and became the lingua franca. British New Guinea was renamed Papua and became a colony of Australia in 1906. When the Australian armed forces took control of German New Guinea in 1914 and Australia assumed responsibility for it as a Mandated Territory, Tok Pisin continued as the lingua franca. After World War II the two territories were administered jointly by Australia as the Territory of Papua and New Guinea until they became the Independent State of Papua New Guinea in 1975.

Missions provided most basic education up until the 1950s when the government began to assume control. Many developed one or more vernaculars as church lingua francas for literacy and basic education. The primary purpose of their education was for religion, especially reading the Bible. This was an era of decentralized language policy, with the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) the primary providers of education. The government provided some
assistance through subsidies and began steps toward providing higher education. During this era most children served by missions became literate. Communities were primarily passive recipients of education and had little input into education decisions as these lay with expatriate mission organizations. For these organizations accountability was primarily overseas and not with the communities they served or with the government.

As the colonial government began to assume active control of education in the 1950s, their policy was determined by their perceived need to Westernize the nation through education (Gunther 1969). They made English the language of education at all levels and enforced this policy by withdrawing subsidies from missions and churches that did not use English in their education programs. The use of English also permitted a mass infusion of expatriate, English-speaking teachers to assist with the rapid expansion of education. Accountability for policy resided with the Australian government and not with the communities impacted by it. In the mid-70s there was extensive discussion of the use of local languages in the post-independence language policy (Brommall and May 1975, McElhanon 1975). Although the draft of the post-independence five year education plan included vernacular languages for basic education, the National Executive Council did not approve the plan, and PNG continued the colonial policy of English for all levels of formal education. This policy was the same as that of the colonial government; however, independence brought democracy and decentralized provincial governments which established a political environment for possible change.

The awareness of the language issue influenced a university-sponsored survey in the late 1970s in the North Solomons Province, a very politically aware province. The survey showed that parents were concerned about the social alienation of the youth, which they partially blamed on the English education system. They wanted an education that reinforced their language and culture, and at the same time helped their children perform better academically in primary school. A recommendation based on this survey was the basis for the first provincial government policy to support the use of the vernacular for initial literacy and basic education. In 1980 the North Solomons Provincial government introduced the Viles Tok Ples Skuls (Village Vernacular Schools) program in two languages with an NGO, the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), assisting with materials production and teacher training for literacy. Such was the simple beginning of the post-independence move towards vernacular education which by 1993 had grown to over 250 languages. Some policy, accountability and implementation now lay with the communities that received the education. The goal was indigenous development, not westernization (Litteral 1988:40).

Soon other provinces and language communities began vernacular preparatory schools. East New Britain, a highly developed province like the North Solomons, initiated its program in 1983. Then Enga, a less developed province with the largest vernacular in PNG, began a program in 1985. Both of these provinces were also assisted by SIL personnel. In 1986 the Education Research Unit of the University of PNG began several community-based vernacular programs in Oro Province. Other community-based programs had already begun, primarily with assistance from SIL personnel: Angor in 1981 (Litteral 1986) and Barai in 1984 (Evans 1986).

The Philosophy of Education of 1986 (NDOE 1986) (a ministerial report known as the Matane report for its chairman, Sir Paulias Matane), was the first attempt to develop a concept of
education that was Papua New Guinean in perspective and not a revision of the colonial philosophy inherited from the Australians. It contained a large number of recommendations, all of which were accepted by Parliament except the one stating that the first three years of education be in the vernacular. It is the principal document giving direction to education today, especially in the area of curriculum development. It seeks to make education more culturally relevant to the student in terms of knowledge, skills and understanding of the world needed to function in PNG communities today. This means less emphasis on western culture, language and ways of knowing, and more on PNG cultural and physical environments and on the understanding and skills necessary to live effectively in them and to develop them.

In 1987 SIL hosted a vernacular education seminar to which provincial and NGO personnel responsible for literacy were invited (Malone 1987). During this seminar a committee of Papua New Guineans proposed and circulated a national language and education policy which became the working basis of the policy that was eventually adopted in 1989. In 1988 the national Parliament provided funds in the 1989 budget to establish a program in the Education Department to coordinate the growing vernacular education activities, and to provide technical and financial assistance for provincial, NGO and community initiatives. An advisory National Literacy Committee was also established. The first major activity of this committee was to recommend a National Language and Literacy policy to the Secretary of Education. On June 6, 1989 the Secretary of Education signed the recommendation of the literacy committee that set a new direction for literacy and basic education, and recognized the provincial, community and NGO efforts of a decade on behalf of vernacular education.

Later in 1989 the PNG Parliament passed a Literacy and Awareness Program that added little to the Education Department language policy, but gave more authority to literacy and awareness activities and encouraged other government departments to become involved. Because the Literacy and Awareness Program was approved by Parliament, its statement that a child should learn to read and write in his/her own language gave more authority to basic vernacular education. The program also established a coordinating body, the National Literacy and Awareness Secretariat (NLAS) under the Department of Education. The National Literacy Committee became its advisory body and was renamed the National Literacy and Awareness Committee (NLAC). The NLAS was to coordinate the literacy work of NGOs, provide literacy training, and supervise funding.

In 1991 there was a review of the education system, which led to a restructuring reform. The proposed reform was:

- to include vernacular preparatory schools in the formal system, in order to improve and increase access to initial education.
- to introduce a new village-based elementary system for preparatory through grade 2. The new elementary level would be introduced gradually beginning with pilot programs in provinces that have strong vernacular preparatory schools.
- to introduce English as a subject in grade 2, continuing the use of vernacular.
- to extend primary education to grade 8 with grades 3-5 in lower primary schools and grades 6-8 in upper primary schools.
to extend full secondary education to each province rather than the previous limit to four national high schools. Lower secondary would be grades 9 and 10, with upper secondary grades 11 and 12.

**Policy**

Vernacular initial education policy development has been incremental. The 1989 language and literacy policy was Education Department policy only and did not have the authority of Parliament. Its success depended on the initiative of communities and provincial governments in response to the encouragement of the national government. It was multilingual and focused on the changing needs of individuals by encouraging literacy first in tok ples (place/village language) with a transfer of literacy skills to one of the national languages, Tok Pisin or Hiri Motu, and to English. The community chose the language to be used for initial literacy. In most urban and some rural areas, this choice was a lingua franca, reflecting the language shift from the vernaculars to lingua francas in these areas.

Responsibility for implementing the policy was specified for three levels: national, provincial and community. The national government’s responsibilities were primarily in the areas of funding, high level training, subsidies to programs, and research. Provincial responsibilities were in the areas of administration, funding, training for teachers, and materials production and research. The community was responsible for the choice of language, recommending those who would receive training, providing buildings, and teachers' salaries. With limited resources in terms of personnel and finance, the national government was to provide assistance only to those provinces and communities that met their responsibilities. Although NGOs played an important role in vernacular education development, their responsibilities were not specified in the policy statement.

Adherence to the policy was voluntary, not mandatory. The policy statement used the term "encourage" when it specified its strategies. The strategies encouraged were:

1. Vernacular preparatory schools for children before they enter grade one;
2. Vernacular literacy in grade one where there are no vernacular preparatory schools;
3. Grade one bridging classes where there are vernacular preparatory classes in which vernacular literacy continues and English is introduced;
4. The use of the vernacular in non-core subjects in grades one to six. (Core subjects are English, math, science and social studies);
5. Vernacular literacy maintenance through grade 6;
6. Vernacular activities in secondary and tertiary education; and
7. Vernacular literacy and basic education for adults and out-of-school youth.

Most activity was in the first strategy, vernacular preparatory schools. Only a few provinces developed grade one bridging classes. There was little use of the vernacular for either non-core subjects or literacy maintenance in primary education, nor was there much vernacular activity in higher education. Communities and NGOs cooperated to provide most adult literacy, with provincial governments serving primarily for coordination. Much adult literacy was in Tok Pisin because of the availability of training programs and materials.
There has been no extensive formal evaluation of the policy after nine years. However, the rapid growth of vernacular preparatory schools and the move to make vernacular education a part of the formal education system are informal indicators that the policy met a felt need and was partially effective in developing provincial and community participation.

**Planning and implementation**

Formal planning to introduce the benefits of vernacular literacy and basic education was difficult at the national level when acceptance of the policy depended primarily on agreement at the provincial or community level. Consequently, as it was with the policy, planning and implementation were gradual and decentralized. Originally there was no Western-style, national master plan for the introduction of vernacular education throughout PNG that included dates and numerical goals. Vernacular literacy planning had been primarily the responsibility of the provinces. In 1989 the Department of Education organized a literacy planning workshop to which provincial governments and NGOs active in literacy were invited. Participation was voluntary and not all provinces sent representatives. Those who did attend developed five year plan proposals, but their acceptance and implementation depended on the commitment of their respective provinces.

Implementation of the literacy policy depended primarily on existing governmental and NGO infrastructures. In some provinces, the number of provincially-supported provincial, district or language level personnel seemed to indicate a significant commitment to vernacular literacy and basic education. In other provinces, the only official involved in vernacular literacy was the Nonformal Education Officer who shared literacy with other responsibilities such as vocational training. East New Britain Province was one of the provinces most committed to vernacular education, evidenced by having a plan in place since 1983, vernacular education included in the provincial education act and yearly budget, and ten literacy staff in 1992.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) played a significant role in implementing the vernacular literacy policy. NGO personnel were seconded to work with some provincial governments in advisory and training roles. In other situations the NGOs worked with provincial governments and communities to assist in the development of literacy programs. In some provinces where a government program was nonexistent or minimal, NGOs have helped communities to start programs.

The importance of the community in implementation cannot be over-emphasized. In the English language system, the community had very little input into education responsibilities such as selection of students for teacher training, curriculum development, materials production and supervision. Such matters were in the hands of education professionals outside the community. Most education personnel also came from outside the community. In contrast, with vernacular literacy and basic education, most responsibilities rested with the community. The community was active, the active producers of education, rather than passive consumers.
Evaluation

The most important evaluation of the policy has been informal rather than formal, coming from the communities and participants rather than from professional educational researchers. Objective, external research will be necessary, however, to inform the outside world of what is happening and to show accountability for funding. An objective evaluation will also confirm that the support for the program initially grew from the positive comments of parents, teachers and supervisors. An example of this comes from an experienced teacher observing grade one students in Angor Community School, who had previously attended a vernacular preparatory school. This teacher said that the students were like third and fourth grade students formerly in his classes who had started their education in English (Litteral 1986). When these same students took the national grade 6 exams in 1988, 48% were selected for positions in high schools, versus approximately 15% for other rural schools in the area. This equaled or surpassed many government or mission center schools in the area. These results influenced the provincial government decision to initiate a vernacular program.

Implications of the PNG experience for sociolinguistics, language planning and education

Fasold (1985) as an academic sociolinguist asks three questions about vernacular language education to which the PNG experience might offer relevant answers. The questions are:

1. Is it possible?,
2. Does it work?, and
3. Is it worth it?

Most of these he answers either in the negative or with ambivalence. Fasold's first question is stated in this way:

If the question is, 'is it possible to provide every child in the world with initial education in her mother tongue?', the answer is quite clearly 'no'. Some countries are so diverse linguistically that to carry out the Unesco suggestion literally would imply developing materials and training teachers in scores or hundreds of languages. (ibid. 297)

With over 850 languages, PNG would certainly fit his category of linguistically diverse, but in 1993 programs were operating in over 250 languages. The assumption of his question is essentially top-down in perspective; i.e., that the national government unilaterally plans language development and is responsible to be the provider. PNG assumes that the language communities should be the main providers of initial vernacular education for their people and that the government's role is that of enabler, not provider. From a PNG perspective, the question might be asked as, "Is it possible for every language community in the world, with the aid of governments and NGOs, to provide initial education for every child in their mother tongue?" The answer is, "Yes, if they are committed to it." With the language community viewed as active rather than passive in the process of providing initial education, it is possible to train teachers and produce education programs in hundreds of languages with assistance from the government(s) and NGOs.
Fasold further states that the limitations of vocabulary in some languages make it very difficult to use the vernacular for education. This assumes that valuable knowledge for initial education comes from the western or national culture and that the vernacular is inadequate to communicate concepts essential for education. The PNG perspective is that initial education should relate to the child's own culture. Thus, the vernacular vocabulary is not only adequate, but the best for communicating all concepts, including scientific, that the child needs for at least the first three years of education. Most foreign and national languages are inadequate for this contextualization. The local language and culture are the biggest assets for initial education and not the major hindrances.

To the question, "Does it work?" Fasold concludes, "... it is possible that mother tongue medium instruction is really not a substantial advantage to children." (ibid. 303) His conclusions are based on the results of western formal research which were generally inconclusive. For the PNG teachers and inspectors who have had the opportunity to compare the two groups (those who started their education in English and those who started it in their mother tongue), their answer to Fasold's does-it-work question would most likely be positive -- vernacular education does work. According to preliminary research by the author, scores on grade six exams were generally better for those students who begun their education in vernacular prep schools than for those who began their education in English. An additional benefit was the improvement in retention rates.

For example, in 1985, 42 students began grade one at Amanab Community School, a government center school in Sandaun Province. Some students came from two villages with vernacular prep schools, whereas the remainder came from villages without them or from the government center. In 1990, 14 students took the national grade 6 exam. Twelve of those 14 students had attended vernacular prep schools. The other two were the children of public servants at the government center. Every village child who began grade one without the benefit of vernacular preparatory school dropped out before the end of grade 6. Papua New Guineans might answer Fasold's question by saying it works because 1) communication is so important for initial education, and 2) the learning of reading and writing skills, one of the best predictors of academic accomplishment, is best learned in the language of the child. The alternative question that Papua New Guineans might ask is, "Is initial education in the LWC or English effective for most PNG students?" The answer would be, "No."

The third question that Fasold asks is "Is it worth it?" He says that even if vernacular education does work, we still have to ask if it is worth the costs involved. He concludes that "The use of vernacular mother tongues in education in the majority of the countries of the world is quite simply outside the realm of the possible" (ibid. 305). However, he does recommend several criteria for choosing an indigenous language. They are: 1) its use as a language of wider communication, 2) number of speakers, suggesting as minimum 10% of the population, 3) language development, 4) group preference, and 5) the dropout factor (ibid. 305-6). He recommends that if the dropout rate is not too high, the use of a language of wider communication is preferred to switching to the mother tongue.

He proposes the use of cost-benefit analysis as a means of deciding the language in education issue. He mentions the opposition proposed by Bull (1955) between the good of the individual from the use of the vernacular versus the good of the society from the use of a language of wider
communication. To Fasold the two are in conflict and the decision depends on the values of the society. Because the use of the vernacular is so expensive, "the benefits would have to be considerable to justify the cost" (ibid, 303).

The PNG experience would challenge several of the conflicts suggested above. One is that between the good of the individual and the good of society. Should not what is good for individuals also be good for society? The PNG Philosophy of Education assumes that such is the case. It proposes that the advantage of the vernacular for initial education will produce not only better educated, but also less alienated youth. This is good for society. Enabling the parents to understand and participate in the education of their children because the language of the community is used is good both for the student and for the society.

Another assumed conflict that the PNG language and literacy policy does not accept is that between the vernaculars and languages of wider communication. The vernaculars, lingua francas and English are viewed primarily as complementary in their roles in society. Literacy, a skill best learned in the mother tongue, can and should be transferred to any language a member of society learns to speak. It is the task of education to make this transfer possible.

The third assumption to be challenged is that a cost-benefit analysis of vernacular versus a language of wider communication (such as English) will produce a result that favors the LWC. When considering both human and financial costs, the PNG experience would suggest that developing initial vernacular language programs in hundreds of languages is cheaper than continuing initial education in English. As for human costs, the high dropout rate for students educated in English results in disillusioned students and lost potential for communities. The use of a language not known by the students produces both inefficiency and ineffectiveness in the teaching-learning process (Litteral 1975). It has been estimated that in initial education, more learning takes place in a half day of vernacular classroom interaction than in a whole day of English interaction. Many students in English classrooms have been classified as 'mute' students. No one who has observed a vernacular preparatory school would consider the students mute.

In terms of financial costs, initial education in the vernacular in PNG was much less expensive than initial education in English. A vernacular preparatory school teacher was typically a grade 6 to 10 school leaver who had received short training courses and in-service training. An English teacher must complete at least grade 10 and receive three additional years of teachers’ college training. The cost of training just one English teacher was more than enough to train several preparatory school teachers, pay their salaries for several years, and produce all the vernacular teacher materials they needed. The cost differential became even greater when one considered salaries, which were generally five to ten times higher for the English teacher. It is safe to conclude that in financial terms, for initial education in PNG, it was cheaper to teach in hundreds of languages than to teach in English in the formal system.

The PNG experience may lead us to challenge some of the prevailing wisdom concerning vernacular initial education by concluding:
1. that there is no essential conflict between what is good for the child in terms of educational benefits and what is good for society in terms of economic and social benefits;
2. that the languages used in society are generally complementary and their complementary use can be utilized in education;
3. that a cost-benefit analysis comparison between vernacular and English for initial education can come down on the side of the vernacular in terms of both human and financial costs when the appropriate system is established. However, with vernacular education in PNG coming under the formal system with national pay scales and training systems, vernacular education will be more expensive to the national government than the English system since it will essentially bear all the costs. On the other hand, the benefits should outweigh the increased costs.

The PNG non-formal vernacular initial education system appeared to work well where it operated. However, the transition to becoming part of the formal system under the education reform introduced many unknowns, as is typical of creative innovations. The challenge now is to develop an effective system that maximally involves students, communities, provinces and the nation in both the benefits and the responsibilities of vernacular education. [1]

Appendix

NATIONAL LANGUAGE AND LITERACY POLICY

PREAMBLE

In order to improve the quality of education, to strengthen traditional cultures and values, to facilitate participation by all citizens in national life, to promote national unity and to raise the level of literacy in tokples, Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu and English, we recommend the development of education programmes to ensure that children, out of school youth and adults become literate in tokples, transfer their skills to Tok Pisin, Hiri Motu or English and maintain and expand their literacy skills in these languages.

(Tokples refers to vernaculars and/or lingua francas.)

RESPONSIBILITIES

That the responsibilities for these programmes be shared among communities, provincial governments, the national government, government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as well as by other agencies such as University Centres and CODE where these exist.

COMMUNITY responsibilities shall include:

- planning and management
- providing and maintaining a venue for activities
• funding/fund raising
• providing teachers’ salaries
• producing materials
• identifying and providing teachers
• developing criteria for enrollment

PROVINCIAL government responsibilities shall include:

• planning and management
• training and in-service of teachers, writers, supervisors and coordinators at local or language level
• training community members in literature production
• recommending personnel for training at national level
• staffing and salaries
• collecting information about external funding and international literacy efforts and disseminating this information to communities
• sensitizing local communities to possible benefits of tokples literacy
• monitoring and evaluation of programmes.

NATIONAL government responsibilities shall include:

• curriculum guidelines
• subsidies
• training trainers and coordinators
• collecting information about external funding and international literacy efforts and disseminating this information to provinces
• sensitizing provinces and communities to possible benefits of tokples literacy
• monitoring and evaluation research

STRATEGIES

That the following strategies be implemented:

1. Encourage tok ples preparatory classes for children before they enter Grade One of Community Schools.
2. Encourage initial vernacular literacy in Grade One where there are no prep schools at the option of the province.
3. Encourage tok ples bridging classes in Grade One of Community Schools where students have attended preparatory tok ples classes.
4. Encourage maintenance of tok ples literacy in Community Schools.
5. Encourage the use of tok ples in non-core subjects in Community Schools.
6. Encourage vernacular language maintenance and development through creative writing and the production of literature in tok ples at the secondary and tertiary levels.
7. Encourage tok ples adult and out-of-school youth programmes. These programmes will include literacy, numeracy and functional literacy subjects.
The choice of language and the names of these programmes are to be determined by the respective communities in which the efforts are located.

Endnotes


References


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