



Spotlight with NRI

Development Issues, Policies, and Trends

October 2008

Vol. 2 No. 4

The progress of vernacular and bilingual instruction in formal schooling

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Introduction

The education reform began more than ten years ago. With the education reform, changes in curricula and school structure took place. The changes in the school curricula aimed to prepare students for formal employment, as well as to prepare them with the life-skills which they may be able to use in the event that they did not succeed in obtaining formal employment.

Vernacular languages that were used in formal instruction were a bonding agent between the community and formal learning environments. This led to the formulation of the language policy that is currently being implemented at the elementary and lower primary levels of education. Although the formulation of this particular policy was based on empirical research, its implementation has not been well-received by some members of the Papua New Guinean communities.

This paper aims to clarify some of the rationale behind the formulation and implementation of the current language policy.

Reasons for the changes

Poor retention was observed in the lower levels of school before the education reform began. Empirical research found that many students dropped out of school at this level for several reasons:

- they had to travel a long way to school, which was tiring for young students;
- they could not communicate their needs to their teachers because the language of school was strictly English, and as they could only communicate in their own vernacular, they felt neglected; and
- the subjects they learned at school did not relate to their home environments, so they did not see the value in learning them.

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These findings informed the decision to establish the elementary level of schooling. This was added to the formal education structure with the aim to educate young students in their own vernacular or Tok Ples.

The present elementary curriculum was also developed to encourage the integration of indigenous/community and Western/formal knowledge in formal learning environments.

The other school curricula also had to be changed to cater for the social, environmental, political, and global changes that currently affect Papua New Guinean societies and the global world. It was acknowledged by the educational authorities that students had to be well-prepared to be able to cope with the current changes. Consequently, the new reform curriculum was tailored to cater for the current issues and changes which the former curricula did not adequately address.

The former education system

The former education system had many negative features. For example, it:

- separated children from their language, culture, and community activities;
- made students feel like failures who no longer valued village life, traditions, and obligations;
- started with a language that students did not understand very well;
- created unrealistic expectations in the students, their families, and their communities that they would all get paid jobs;
- had a curriculum which was not relevant to the lives of the people in their own communities;
- did not prepare students to use the resources available in their own communities; and
- had a system that did not allow all students to go to school and did not succeed in retaining them in school.

The new reform system

The new reform system introduces several innovative measures. For example, it:

- teaches students more about their own language, culture, and community;

- makes students feel good about themselves, and encourages them to value and respect village life, traditions, and obligations;
- prepares students to use resources in their own communities, for self-employment;
- aims to provide nine years of basic education for all children, from Prep to Grade 8, and encourages students to stay in school;
- provides vernacular and bilingual education to develop students' language skills, in their own language as well as English;
- develops sound thinking, problem-solving and decision-making skills, in vernacular languages as well as English, in familiar and similar contexts; and
- provides a sound foundation for further learning.

The purpose of the language policy

One of the aims of the education reform is to allow the use of vernacular in formal schooling. It is intended that the language of the community, together with its cultures and work practices, will form the basis for activities in schools. The decision to introduce vernacular instruction at the elementary level and bilingual instruction in the lower primary level of schooling was based on empirical research which found that:

- there are academic achievement benefits for the students for being bilingual — in Papua New Guinea's case, a Tok Ples or a lingua franca and English;
- to stop students from learning their first language and force them to learn only in a new language — in PNG's case, English — can be harmful and obstructive to their cognitive and social development;
- it usually takes an English language learner five years or more to develop the ability to use English when learning complex concepts;
- beginning schooling in the students' first language, and using this language for continued learning and development, while English is being learned, is the best way for students to develop to their full potential in schooling; and
- students can successfully transfer their literacy and numeracy skills from their first language to the new language learned.

Vernacular and bilingual instruction

The language policy states that the language of instruction at the elementary level is solely in the students' vernacular language, or the lingua franca of the community. Oral English is gradually introduced in Terms Three and Four of Grade 2. The aim is for students to graduate from elementary school, being literate and competent in their first language.

The language policy also states that, at the lower primary level, learning and teaching are conducted in two languages — a vernacular language or lingua franca, and English. During this situation, there is a deliberate plan to gradually bridge from vernacular or lingua franca to English. Oral and written vernacular or lingua franca language development continues throughout lower primary. Oral and written English development is gradually introduced and established as the dominant language of instruction by the end of Grade 5, using the Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) teaching strategy.

The dominant language of instruction at this level should be the same language that the students used as the language of instruction in elementary school. In a situation where a number of active languages exist in particular communities, then the main language of interaction between the various groups of people, and of commerce, should be the language selected as the language of formal instruction — a lingua franca such as Tok Pisin or Hiri Motu.

Current research

The implementation of the language policy at the elementary and lower primary levels of schooling is a great challenge. This policy has been interpreted by different groups in different ways and implemented according to how they view this policy and the various influences regarding this policy. Its purpose is also generally misunderstood by some of Papua New Guinea's population.

A recent study conducted in eight provinces and 124 elementary schools found that some parents and elementary teachers have accepted vernacu-

lar/lingua franca language as the formal language of instruction, as well as the integration of indigenous/community and Western/formal knowledge in formal learning environments at the elementary level. It is already a norm in many elementary schools. It was also found that the teachers in the site schools have embraced this teaching strategy, as it encouraged the integration of indigenous and Western knowledge, the sharing of knowledge between teachers and students, and the exploration and application of knowledge in similar situations.

Enjoyable classroom activities and caring teachers encouraged students to attend school regularly at this level.

Another recent, small-scale study also found that vernacular instruction at the elementary level, and bilingual instruction at the lower primary level, and the integration of indigenous and Western knowledge in formal learning environment are now being accepted by some parents and elementary teachers.

The particular community in this study acknowledged that students learn better and progress faster, using a language that they know best. They acknowledged the fact that building on, or 'bridging' from, existing knowledge assists students to advance faster in their learning.

For example, the particular group of lower primary teachers in the study realised (for the first time) that their indigenous counting system is similar to the Western multiplication system of $\times 2$, $\times 4$, $\times 6$, $\times 10$, $\times 12$, $\times 20$, and $\times 40$, and measurement concepts.

It was found that, similar to the elementary teachers in the bigger study, the elementary teachers in this community are now integrating indigenous and Western number concept in their formal teaching. It was also found that some parents and lower primary teachers in this particular community are now recognising and accepting the value of this teaching strategy.

It was also found that the students are applying their number and measurement skills at the lower primary level and are far more advanced in mathematics than expected.

The students better understood the concepts of multiplication, measurement, and other knowledge because these exist in their indigenous knowledge, and their practical applications in their home environments are already known. The study also found that the lower primary teachers were not well-prepared professionally to implement the bilingual education teaching strategy. Consequently, they resisted its implementation. However, during the course of the study they began to acknowledge the value of bilingual teaching and were willing to implement the teaching strategy.

It was also found that students were able to competently apply their vernacular or Tok Pisin literacy skills and experiences when learning English at the lower primary level. Initially, they did not know the difference between the English, vernacular, and Tok Pisin literacy skills in relation to spelling and word formation. However, as the teachers gained more confidence using the bridging and bilingual teaching strategy they were better able to assist the students.

Some people have expressed concern that the students have not mastered the English spelling of words in lower primary school. It should be pointed out that students will master the English spelling of words in due course, as English spelling mistakes usually occur at a progressive stage of the learning process.

Conclusion

This analysis shows that the formulation of the present language policy, which is being

implemented at the elementary and lower primary levels, was based on empirical evidence. The current implementation of this policy is challenging because it has been interpreted in different ways by various stakeholders in education, and implemented accordingly.

The training of teachers in preparation for the implementation of the language policy, and the awareness for the rationale of the language policy are issues that need to be addressed by the relevant educational authorities. Training and awareness concerning the application of the language policy plays a vital role in its successful implementation.

The current study found that student research participants were not disadvantaged cognitively, and were able to advance faster when they learned in a language that they knew best. They were also able to transfer and apply their literacy and numeracy skills when learning English in the lower primary level.

The lower level teachers have not been adequately well-prepared with appropriate skills to enable them to competently implement the bridging and bilingual teaching strategy. This is the greatest challenge facing the implementation of the bilingual teaching strategy.

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