

# **The decline of the standard of English in schools and universities in Papua New Guinea**

**Helen Vetunawa**

**University of Goroka, Papua New Guinea**

**Abstract:** English is one of the three official languages in Papua New Guinea (PNG), widely used in national and international telecommunications, Government, trade and industry, and is the main medium of instruction in schools and universities. For so many years in the development of the Papua New Guinea Education system and the various English Language curriculums, there has been speculations about a decline in the standard of English used in schools and universities in PNG. Many critics and ordinary English-speaking Papua New Guineans have formed views based on their own observations, experiences or from research conducted in some institutions in the past. However, whose standard of English has declined: is it the teachers or the students? What factors have contributed to the decline of the standard of English in PNG schools and universities? This paper briefly discusses language problems of PNG learners as reported by some researchers in the 70s and language problems of students at the University of Goroka, which may indicate some decline in the standard of English used by students. It is recommended that the PNG Government and the Education System should seriously address the issue of the decline of the standard of English in PNG schools and Universities today through its language curriculum development and the training and recruitment of teachers in PNG or overseas.

**Key words:** decline, standard, English, schools / universities, Papua New Guinea

## **1. Introduction**

In the era of pre-independence in PNG, English teachers most of whom were expatriates and whose first language was English, strictly enforced the 'Speak only English' rule in schools. For example, from the 1960s to 1980s at Asitavi High School on Bougainville, the Marist Missionaries put this rule as priority. Class prefects were required to implement this rule to the extent of writing down names of students who uttered even a word in their mother tongue / tok ples or Tok Pisin. Three hours of punishment was given to offenders of this language rule. The strict implementation and monitoring of the 'speak only English' rule tremendously encouraged students to speak English despite the errors made in relation to wrong verb tense, word choice and even speaking with the intonation of their mother

tongues being transferred to their spoken English. Many students had to overcome their shyness and began to speak English for fear of being punished. Without fully realizing the benefits of such a rule then, students gained confidence in the gradual mastery of this language through listening, reading, speaking and writing activities. From my own experience of such a formation, this policy definitely helped in the development of spoken English of the students at the time.

Teachers also facilitated for the development of oral skills and critical thinking of the learners through inter-class and inter-high school debates and quizzes, the success of which depended on the encouragement and very good coaching given by the teachers. In addition, teachers facilitated well for reading skills and vocabulary development through carefully designed exercises and by making it compulsory for the students to borrow fiction and non-fiction books on a daily basis. Book reviews had to be done on books read. New words learnt had to be correctly spelled, pronounced with the right stress and used in correct context. Good and informative essay writing was taught well and every error was corrected.

Many students were encouraged to participate in essay competitions, some of which were conducted by the school and on a national basis. In those days, some themes were on unity and nation-building. Teachers of English played very important roles in getting students to listen, speak, read and correctly write the English language. All language errors from pronunciation to writing, grammar and vocabulary were the focus of remedial work. Teachers and students used the English language as a medium of instruction to teach and learn English as a subject and they were very dedicated to ensure that students learnt the English language correctly and effectively used it in their daily communication. You may say that this case is one of the past, but there is a lesson to be learnt here for both teachers and students concerned about falling standards of the English language in PNG schools and universities.

The decline of the standard of English in Papua New Guinea is not a new debate. Language teachers who have taught in PNG before and after its independence have identified and discussed problems faced by learners in schools and universities in Papua New Guinea. But what solutions have been sought and put into action to alleviate the English language problems of Papua New Guineans in our Education system? Has the Papua New Guinea Government and the Education system seriously addressed the standard of English in this country? What and whose standards of English are we dealing with: students or teachers or both?

## 2. What are standards?

“Standards” are statements of what students should know and be able to do in school subjects such as English, by the time they reach a specific grade / level. The standards should specify what all schools should be teaching and define the language skills and linguistic knowledge that students should learn. In the new outcome-based Language Curriculum for Grades 9 and 10, there are students performance standards set for each term. These performance standards are linked to what the teachers are supposed to teach and the outcomes achieved by the learners in each unit. For example, there are specified standards for oral competence, competence in writing, competence in listening, grammar and these are measured as in this scale:

Very High Achievement	45-50
High Achievement	35-44
Satisfactory Achievement	25-34
Low Achievement	0-24

(Taken from English Teacher Guide - Lower Secondary, 2007)

Here are the explanations for the scale above (in ETG):

**Very High Achievement** means overall that a student has an extensive linguistic knowledge and understanding of the content and can readily apply this knowledge. In addition the student has achieved a very high level of competence and can apply skills and knowledge learnt to new situations.

**High Achievement** means overall that a student has a thorough linguistic knowledge and understanding of the content and a high level of competence and is able to apply this knowledge and skills to most situations.

**Satisfactory Achievement** means overall that the student has a sound linguistic knowledge and understanding of the main areas of the content and has achieved an adequate level of competence.

**Low Achievement** means overall that the student has a basic linguistic knowledge and

some understanding of the content and has achieved limited or very limited competence.

**Below Minimum Standard** overall means that the student has provided insufficient evidence to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes.

This is an example of the sort of measurement that we teachers need to evaluate the language performance of our students so that we can say that there has been a decline in the standard of English in Papua New Guinea.

The level of achievement of the broad learning outcomes is determined by the student's performance in the internal assessment tasks. Marks given for each assessment should show the student's level of achievement in the unit, and their progress towards achievement of the broad learning outcomes. On the whole, the broad learning outcome performance standards in the new curriculum will measure students' use of English structures and forms according to rules and conventions for functional and creative purposes. In addition, students will demonstrate that they will communicate ideas and information in a variety of ways – written, oral and visual according to purpose, audience and context. Furthermore, the specified performance standards will measure students abilities to analyze and respond to a variety of texts on a range of issues in PNG, the world and the different cultures (English Teacher Guide - Lower Secondary, 2007: 78-82).

This is the current scenario which is still to be evaluated. Will these performance standards raise the standard of English in PNG? How about standards of performance in the past language curriculums? What standard performance were used to evaluate the standard of English in PNG? The answer to these questions cannot be dealt with in this presentation as it requires detailed research to determine where the standard of English has declined in PNG schools and universities.

Standards are important because they give clear guidelines to schools and teachers and universities and lecturers on what students should be learning. When high standards are set with high expectations for all students and teachers' performance, one can expect learners to achieve more because more will be expected of them. However, it should also be emphasized that in universities, standard performance of lecturers and tutors should be clearly stated and staff performance should be evaluated on a yearly basis to ensure that staff are performing to meet and achieve the standard performance set by the University.

National Examinations in Grades 8, 10, and 12 should measure how well the students have learned the standards related to language performance and proficiency in the English

language. In this way, students are tested on what they are taught and teaching will be linked with the language performance standards. This approach to improving education is called “standards-based education reform”. This is the approach we should adopt for English language teaching and learning in Papua New Guinea.

First of all, there is a need to identify and establish whose standard of English has declined. Is it the students’ or the teachers’ standard of English? Any evaluation of the decline in the standard of English in Papua New Guinea should address the linguistic and communicative competence of both teachers and students in schools and lecturers / tutors and students in universities. Too often comments are made on the decline in the standard of English based on students’ performance. However, the other side of the coin, is the need to diagnose the professional and performance standard of teachers in schools and lecturers / tutors in universities.

Here in PNG, most of the teachers are native Papua New Guineans, who are graduates of the same system – that is to say, not native speakers of English. Osborne (1995) quoted McLaughlin (1995) that studies conducted at the Port Moresby Teachers In-service College revealed that ‘teachers’ comprehension, reading skills and pronunciation were found to be poor’. In addition, Osborne quotes Kenehe (1981) ‘that most community school teachers and a large proportion of high school teachers do not speak English well enough to be able to teach effectively. In many parts of Papua New Guinea, there are situations where teachers lacking in knowledge are expected to do something that they cannot do. As a result, teachers avoid the use of English much of the time or are teaching it badly’ (in McLaughlin, 1995: 7). This means that teachers standard of English requires improvement in order to facilitate for improvement in students standard of English.

One other scenario that Osborne (1995: 56) highlighted is ‘teachers lack of competence and confidence in English, leading to situations where a teacher teaches from textbooks, reading word for word and giving little or no explanations and little dissemination of concepts. Pupils in turn memorize the concepts without really understanding them and not being able to relate them to anything. Both the teacher and students are engaging in some rote learning activities because they are operating within an unfamiliar and ill-mastered language, which is English’.

In 1972, Keith Johnson’s publication of ‘Language Problems of Tertiary Level Students using English as a Second Language in Papua New Guinea’ clearly brought out English language problems which still exist today in our schools and universities (pp. 1-25). These language problems are:

1. Reading textbooks and lack of comprehension / slow reading vs little comprehension of what is read.
2. Syntactic complexities in texts contributing to difficulties in reading and students receiving little help.
3. Not understanding specialized vocabulary of different disciplines
4. Students have no real comprehension of concepts which act as labels as well as difficulties interpreting fundamental concepts and logical relationships expressed through lexical items and grammatical relationship of English.
5. Difficulty coping with the medium of instruction which is English
6. Difficulty in expression of ideas in writing correct syntax, appropriate choice of words and writing precisely, just to name a few.

According to different studies conducted in the past at UPNG (Price, John and Elizabeth) as quoted in Johnson (1972: 11) reading abilities of the students in PNG were below the level of foreign students in Australian Universities. Other studies conducted at the University of Technology in Lae also revealed the difficulties students had with reading (Johnson, 1972: 23). More studies were conducted at Port Moresby High School, Goroka Teachers College and Sogeri Senior High School revealed that PNG ESL learners language proficiency were far below those of the students who were native speakers of the English language (Johnson, 1972: 23-39).

### **3. What is the situation today?**

I conducted a little survey to seek views of the Year 3 BEd Pre-service Language and Literature majors (18 respondents) on what they think about declining standard of English in PNG schools and universities. Given here is part of the analysis of their views:

1. That 94% of the respondents agreed that there is an issue of falling standards of English at the University of Goroka. Various reasons and examples of evidence linked to falling standard of English at the University of Goroka were highlighted. These were based on what students have experienced or heard from those around them. For example, students have heard lecturers discussing poorly – written essays in offices.

Others expressed that some lecturers' lack good pronunciation and grammatical correctness in the delivery of their lectures. Also in public forums, students expression of their ideas are rather poor. About 20% of the respondents expressed that the quality of English expressions in lectures and tutorials are unlike what is expected of lecturers and students in universities. (Students and lecturers do not speak like

university students and lecturers). Other views stated that students do not speak fluently, pausing to look for the right words or expressions, even speaking like primary and secondary school students. This is evident in student seminar presentations. On the whole, there is total agreement that there is a decline in the standard of English at the University of Goroka.

2. All the respondents identified what aspects of the standard of English is declining at UOG. The following features apply to both lecturers / tutors and students:

Pronunciation (50%) – incorrect pronunciation of words, including wrong word stress.

Vocabulary (39%) – incorrect use / wrong choice

Grammar (39%) – wrong verb tenses and poor grammatical construction of sentences.

Many respondents indicated that they are aware of the lack of fluency in the English language and would like to work towards correct pronunciation, grammar and the need to expand their vocabulary.

Respondents attributed the decline of English standards at the University of Goroka to lecturers / tutors lack of competence in the English language (39%), the dominance of Tok Pisin (28%) and vernacular (28%) in daily communication. Other reasons were to do with students doing very little reading (17%) as well as not having the ability to speak English well (17%).

3. Generally, most of the respondents believe that standard of English in PNG can be improved provided that teachers are trained well and possess very good language proficiency in the English language.

Some informal discussions held with some teachers and students in some schools revealed that the decline in the standard of English is very serious indeed. More research needs to be done to diagnose the specific language problems and pinpoint the areas of decline of the standard of English in PNG. However, here are some examples of the language used by students in schools:

1. Pulumap it in the bag. 'Put it in the bag'.
2. I saw her carrying... wanem ya? 'I saw her carrying...what is it?'
3. I don't want, yah! Or I don't want ye! (adding Tok Pisin question tag at the end).
4. My stomach is crying. (word choice – noise made in the stomach).
5. Up the volume! 'Put up the volume!'
6. I was finding you but I didn't find you. 'I was looking for you but I couldn't find you'.

Teachers also contribute to the decline of the standard of English in schools due to their poor linguistic competence in the English language. For example, in a spelling dictation, the teacher pronounced 'odourless' wrongly, adding incorrect stress, and the students all

spelt the word wrong. When teachers mispronounce words and students know the correct pronunciation, they do not correct the teacher because the teacher may get annoyed. Some teachers make spelling mistakes which students copy and do not bother to correct the spelling because that is how the teacher spells the word. There are many cases of teachers not modelling correct English resulting in their learners acquiring endless errors carelessly made by teachers.

There is a need to develop professional and performance standards for language teaching in Papua New Guinea to recognize and develop the professional abilities and language proficiency of language teachers. The standards will provide a way for teachers to reflect on their work and identify areas for professional learning and development. Teachers need to be flexible and creative in order to teach the English language in different contexts to students of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. They will need to keep up to date and grow in their knowledge and expertise to maintain the required standards of English in Papua New Guinea.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This paper is only the beginning of what could lead to more research on the decline of the standard of English in PNG schools and universities. There is a need to conduct research to determine what has declined in the standard of English in Papua New Guinea and whose standard of English: is it the teachers or students standard of English? One cannot deny that this problem of the decline of the standard of English does exist in our country and is one factor which may affect academic performances of students striving to acquire knowledge and skills in this modern world of technological advancement and globalization of the English language.

It is recommended that Government of Papua New Guinea seriously address the falling standards of English in schools and universities. The PNG Education System should establish performance and professional standards for teachers, lecturers and performance standards for students in the hope of improving the standard of English at all levels of education in Papua New Guinea.

#### **References**

- English Teacher Guide – Lower Secondary (2007) Department of Education, Papua New Guinea.
- Johnson, R. K. (1972) A report on language problems of tertiary level students using English as a second language in Papua New Guinea, *Research Report 19*, Faculty of



Education, Port Moresby: University of Papua New Guinea.

Kenehe, S. (1981) *In Search of Standards*. Vol. 2. Port Moresby: Ministry of Education.

McLaughlin, D. (1995) Teaching for understanding: *The Melanesian Perspective*, *Papua New Guinea Journal of Teacher Education* 2 (1) pp. 7-15.

Osborne, Deborah (1995) 'A comparison between the French immersion in Canada and English-language instruction in PNG', *Tesla: A Journal for Teachers of English as a Second Language in Papua New Guinea*, Vol. 11, No. 1, December 1995, p. 55.

Vetunawa, H.H (2008) Survey of falling standard of English at UOG – Views of Year 3 *Language and Literature Majors*, University of Goroka.