

Language dilemma in contemporary PNG classrooms: A case for schools in the Eastern Highlands and Simbu Provinces

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Abstract: Papua New Guinea (PNG) educators and students are caught between whether to use the native languages or ‘Tok Pisin¹’ as the initial or first language (L1) of instruction at the elementary level or to then bridge into English as the second language (L2). Therefore, from this research, it was revealed that there are problems existing in the language(s) that PNG students and teachers use in rural and urban classrooms using the bilingual education approach. The issues and challenges that are faced by students and teachers are also shared by the community members. The research participants agreed that proper communication and networking should exist amongst the National Department of Education with the schools, teachers, students and the communities, so that teachers and students focus on the desired language of instruction beginning at the elementary level. Hence, the need to standardize Tok Pisin as a language of instruction at the elementary level and bridge into English is seen as acceptable in both urban and rural contexts. Although the use of vernacular is acceptable in rural context, it is not effectively and adequately used by teachers and learners who most often resort to Tok Pisin as the suitable language of instruction because Tok Pisin is the lingua franca and L1 of most people.

Key words: Tok Pisin, bridging, bilingual education, elementary education, education reform

1. Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a country with more than 860 languages (Nekitel, *et al.* 1995). Generally, every student is expected to be a bilingual or multi-lingual, knowing two or more languages. PNG educators and students are faced with this dilemma, whether to use the native languages or ‘Tok Pisin’ as the initial or first language (L1) of instruction at the elementary level or to then bridge into English as the target language (L2).

The purpose and focus of this survey was to identify problems that surround the languages that PNG students and teachers employ in rural and urban classrooms using the bilingual approach. The issues and challenges that are faced by students and teachers were investigated. The data collected from this research are useful for the education authorities

in PNG to re-examine the existing language policies and make necessary amendments to standardize 'Tok Pisin' as the language of instruction at the elementary level, and then to bridge into English. This is to ensure that appropriate languages are employed using the bilingual approach to maintain quality education for our students in both urban and rural schools.

The current scenario within our education system is that teachers are passing the blame –the primary teachers blaming the elementary teachers for not preparing students well in the English language for primary education. The secondary teachers are having the same perception for primary teachers. Tertiary institutions are questioning the secondary teachers and the employers are also questioning the kind of students we produce who are not very competent and proficient in the English language. The problem of questioning each other's integrity is an ongoing issue which this research also addressed.

Although the issue on the appropriate use of language in the context of education reform is wider, this study is limited to the use of the languages of instruction in PNG schools, particularly in the Eastern Highlands and Simbu Provinces. These provinces were selected because of time factor and their easy accessibility. Although there are many schools in these provinces, certain schools and communities were selected as participants in this research.

The nature of this study qualifies for an in-depth research into the problem. Therefore, this research was centred around the following four key questions:

- i) Which language(s) are currently used as medium of instructions in Papua New Guinea schools?
- ii) Which is the suitable language of instruction highly preferred?
- iii) Are pupils entering primary, secondary and tertiary institutions able to read, write, speak and understand English well?
- iv) Are we producing students who are proficient and competent in English to enter the work force?

Though there are different research methods available, questionnaires, interviews and participant observation were employed to collect the necessary data. Questionnaires were distributed to the selected teachers and interviews were conducted with selected students in those schools. Interviews were also done with community members to get their views. To validate the data collected, the researcher was also a participant observer who was present in some elementary classrooms to collect additional information. The research participants

were both from rural and urban contexts. The data collected are discussed below.

2. Findings & Discussions

2.1. What the research participants say

According to the information provided by the rural student participants, they revealed that they could speak, read, write and understand Tok Pisin fluently, and more easily, than their local vernacular. They prefer Tok Pisin more than the local vernacular because of the fact that Tok Pisin enriches their ability to learn English well.

The similar sentiments were shared by the students who have been through elementary education in urban schools using Tok Pisin. They stressed that Tok Pisin enabled them to learn the basics of English faster when they bridged into English. Stringer and Faraclas (1987: 7) supported that ...when people learn to read and write in a way that is made as easy and enjoyable for them as possible, they go on to read and write with ease and pleasure for the rest of their lives.”

In addition, most rural elementary teachers asserted that they tried their very best to teach vernacular to students, but the students had difficulty in grasping most of the words and concepts. Thus, they resort to using Tok Pisin as the alternative language to disseminate information.

The teachers at the urban schools indicated that they are doing fine with the use of Tok Pisin as the language of instruction, and that they are assisting children to bridge into English. This is because of the fact that there is no alternative native language apart from English to use. They are only concentrating on Tok Pisin and English which makes learning easier for the students.

In support of that, two main reasons that hamper vernacular education at elementary level in PNG are rural–urban migration and intermarriage. These two factors contribute to changes in language use and language choice in our urban schools. Because of the need to communicate with speakers of other languages, people are forced to use Tok Pisin and English as the language choice in the urban schools (Mase, 1999).

Based on the education reform, it allows for the community to choose the desired language of instruction. Therefore, the community has the prerogative to choose the language for their elementary schools. Hence, most rural communities prefer Tok Pisin though they are supportive of preserving their ‘tok ples’². According to the research data, parents and guardians interviewed revealed that Tok Pisin makes learning easier for their children at the elementary level, though it is confusing at times for their children to grasp what the teachers are disseminating. They generally understand that most of the words

in Tok Pisin are borrowed from the English language and when their children learn Tok Pisin, and then bridge into English, they then assumed that their children would easily be able to learn in English. Most rural parents and guardians stressed that although they are trying their best to educate their children to speak their 'tok ples', their children continued to resort into using Tok Pisin. That makes it really problematic for children to master the local vernacular. This clearly indicates that there is competition between Tok Pisin and vernaculars in many rural areas. In many cases, Tok Pisin is utilized in place of the vernacular where there is no alphabet (Litteral, 2004).

Nevertheless, allowance can be made for the use of local vernaculars in place of Tok Pisin or English, if need be, especially in rural schools. Otherwise, as stressed by some research participants, local vernaculars should be encouraged out of school, especially at homes and villages where the students come from. These are the best places of promoting and preserving 'tok ples' because there are lots of interactions using 'tok ples' going on by the local people where students can easily learn and understand their 'tok ples', if they are actively involved in the process.

2.2. The education reform and bilingual education in brief

The education system in PNG before the education reform was focused mainly on English language. However, the education reform has shifted this trend through allowing English, Tok Pisin and local vernaculars to be used alternatively or interchangeably in our education system. McElhanon (1975: 139) affirmed that "by focusing on the individual merits and functions of the three kinds of languages... all can be fully utilized in Papua New Guinea, not only in education but for all aspects of communication." Due to the current education reform, the application of languages to deliver lessons and communication between teachers and students are not restricted. The previous education system started in the English language which the children do not speak. The reformed education system and the curriculum start in a language the children already speak and improve their use of English. Teachers and students are required to produce all types of materials in all the languages chosen by the communities, so that children are fully engaged in the bilingual learning process (NDOE, 1992). Janopoulos (1986) and Moll (1992) confirmed that it is also important that a variety of opportunities to read and write in both languages be available in the classroom.

The Ministerial Policy Statement No.3/99 approved by the then Minister for Research, Science and Technology, Professor John Waiko outlined a programme of bilingual education which specified that:

At the elementary school level, (preparatory to elementary 2), this means that the language of instruction is completely in the children's vernacular language, or the community lingua franca, with an introduction in oral English at the end of elementary 2. Children will leave elementary school literate in their first language...

In practice, the community must be informed in order to make the decision on what language should be used at elementary level. The language chosen should be the language that is shared in the community, and used for most communication in that community (NDOE, n.d).

This policy statement looks too broad because it is giving the option of selecting a suitable language of instruction whether it is local vernacular or Tok Pisin. That is where the problem is because schools and community members, especially in rural areas, are confused in selecting a suitable language to begin with at the elementary level. Thus, this research recognizes the importance of making a standardized language and it should be a complementary language of English in PNG schools using the bilingual education approach.

The National Department of Education (1992: 4) states that "bilingual education will enable students to develop effective communication skills in English and acquire better comprehension of English." Nonetheless, it is evident in PNG that bilingual children encountered a number of problems with English which include: vocabulary difficulties where they are frequently flooded with words of both languages. Their English sentences are not structured correctly where they make errors in inflection, verb tenses, and uses of connectives, articles, and negative forms. They also misuse idiomatic expressions because they tend to translate literally. In addition, they have pronunciation and enunciation problems. All of these difficulties in their use of English handicap them in other schoolwork. Thus, the purpose of teaching English to bilingual children is to help them learn the language and all its aspects. It should not be anyone's goal to erase the learners' knowledge of their first language, which is generally Tok Pisin (Petty & Jensen, 1980; Yamuna, 2000).

Most of us believe that the education reform is here to stay and part of that reform is the choice of language of instruction. So what do we say about the language of instruction to begin with at the elementary level? Local vernaculars, Tok Pisin or English? These are really problematic questions that most people have in mind. As indicated in this research, if PNG is seriously thinking of uplifting the fallen standard of English then, an alternative is to push for a shift in the language policy. But first, Tok Pisin should be standardized as a

language of instruction. Then, the policy should state clearly that Tok Pisin should be the language of instruction at the elementary level in which students should use it to bridge into English. This is to enable students in both rural and urban elementary schools to begin learning in the same language instead of different languages. What most people believe in is that Tok Pisin is the simplified version of English. On the other hand, English is the lexifier language of Tok Pisin (Siegel, n.d.). That is, English language provides most words for Tok Pisin. Therefore, students can easily figure out the relationships between these two languages and will easily master English as they progress on with their schooling.

The Matane Report (1986: 37) pointed out that “when communication skills initially learned in a first language are later transferred to English, then bilingual students perform better than when they had received instructions only in English.” That is, our students are able to cope with English with assistance of Tok Pisin as the initial language of instruction. Some of our pupils are extremely capable and are able to learn well in English after exposed to Tok Pisin.

2.3. Some facts about Tok Pisin and English

Tok Pisin is an English-based creole spoken in Papua New Guinea by most people as their first language. Over time, it has evolved and become a creole acquiring more complex grammar in the process, though it does not have a defined culture associated with it. Tok Pisin as a lingua franca has the grounding within our linguistic roots. That is, Tok Pisin becomes our everyday language of communication. The majority of Tok Pisin vocabulary comes from English, though it also includes words from German, Portuguese and a number of Austronesian languages such as Tolai and Malay. It is also the language of instruction for the first three years of primary education in some schools (Ager, 2009).

Since English is the lexifier language of Tok Pisin, most of the words come from English. However, they are often pronounced in a different way, and some may have different meanings. For example: ‘*spak*’ (from ‘spark’) means ‘drunk’ and ‘*baksait*’ (from ‘backside’) refers to someone’s back, not to their butt.

Many Tok Pisin words have a meaning much wider than that of the English word they came from. For example, ‘*kilim*’ (from ‘kill him’) can mean ‘hit’ or ‘beat’ as well as ‘kill’; ‘*pisin*’ (from ‘pigeon’) means ‘bird’ in general; and ‘*gras*’ (from ‘grass’) means not only ‘grass’ but also ‘hair’, ‘fur’ and ‘feathers’. Also, some combinations of words have different meanings: e.g. ‘*bel hevi*’ (from ‘belly heavy’) means ‘upset’ (Gay, 1988; Snow, 1992).

Gay and Snow further claimed that the ways in which children communicate in their home cultures is critical to the development of written language models of reading and

writing. The home language of students provides the foundation for the emergence of reading and writing behaviours. If there is a mismatch between the structures, values, and expectations of the home language and school language, children may be at a disadvantage for success in early reading tasks, and thus spend their entire school careers attempting to catch up. It was noted from the research that students are not encouraged to read, write and speak the home language (generally Tok Pisin) extensively in collaboration with English. Reading, writing and speaking are essential tools to enhance the language proficiency and competency of learners. Therefore, it is necessary for all learners to learn and master the L1 and the target language respectively.

Second language students make sense of the second language by using many of the same strategies that worked so well in acquiring the first language. What is different, however, is that second-language students already have an understanding of the meanings, uses, and purposes of language; they now must go on to learn how the second language - oral and in print - expresses those purposes, uses, and meanings in the case of employing Tok Pisin and English in the classrooms (Lindfors, 1987).

First language influence appears to be strongest in complex word order and in word-for-word translations of phrases. In this regard, it is interesting to note that we can find signs of first language influence in immersion bilingual programmes where input is often primarily from the teachers. The result is 'padding', using old knowledge, supplying what is known to make up for what is not known. The children may be building up acquired competence via input. Several recent studies (Gary, 1974; Postovsky, 1977) imply that less insistence on early oral performance may be profitable for children and adults studying second languages in formal settings. First language influence can thus be considered as unnatural. One could theoretically produce sentences in a second language without any acquisition: the first language surface structure can be used with second language content lexicon inserted (Krashen, n.d). Hence, in the case of Tok Pisin and English, learners can easily work out the relationships and similarities that exist between these two languages, and then use them in their learning accordingly.

Whatever rules, forms and features learnt in Tok Pisin can be translated or transferred into English and vice versa. Language transfer typically refers to the learner's trying to apply rules and forms of the first language (Tok Pisin) into the second language (English). Transfer is an important factor in language learning at all levels. Typically, learners begin by transferring sounds (phonetic transfer) and meanings (semantic transfer), as well as various rules including word order and pragmatics. As learners progress and gain more experience with the target language, the role of transfer typically diminishes (Wikipedia,

n.d).

Some Tok Pisin words are not spelt similarly to English words although they have similar pronunciations like: ‘*kam* – come, *lait* – light, *buk* – book, *kona* – corner, *pawa* – power,’ etc. Some Tok Pisin words are not spelt similarly to English words with slight variation in pronunciation signaling the phonological differences. For example: ‘*pait* – fight, *pik* – pig, *paia* – fire, *dok* – dog,’ etc. Other Tok Pisin words have big difference in their spelling and pronunciations but the meanings remain the same. For instance: ‘*doa* – door, *wara* – water, *silip* – sleep, *namel* – centre, *sindaun* – sit, *kumu* – greens,’ etc. Besides, some words are spelt and pronounced similarly in both Tok Pisin and English as in: ‘*go* – go, *bag* – bag,’ etc. All these examples may sound confusing when you analyze all the vocabularies of Tok Pisin and English. However, there are certain relationships in terms of semantics, phonology, word formation and spelling that link both languages directly or indirectly. These features affirm that Tok Pisin may not be complicated to learn, and it can be used as the initial language of instruction to learn English, which is a more diversified and complex language. That means, teachers should know all the rules and aspects that administer those languages, so that they are able to teach their students successfully and correctly during the bridging process.

The above information is substantiated by the contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH). CAH predicts that where there are similarities between L1 and L2, the learner will acquire the target language (English) structures with ease. Where there are differences, learners will face difficulty (Lightbown & Spada, 1993). This is true with Tok Pisin and English languages. Sometimes we find that English translation of a Tok Pisin sentence may give the correct grammatical and syntactical structures by maintaining the intended meaning. For example: ‘*Mi laik go*’ (I want to go). Besides, the grammatical and syntactical structures may not sound right with direct translations but the intended meaning is there. For example: ‘*Yu go we na kam?*’ With direct translation, it can be written as: ‘You go where and come?’ It sounds a bit weird but it is semantically correct which means the meaning is there. However, the correct translation would be, ‘Where did you go and come?’ (PNG version of English) or in other words you can say; ‘Where are you returning from/ back from and coming from?’

Most times, our teachers and students are troubled with such situations. Nevertheless, it needs careful study and understanding of all the necessary rules, structures and aspects that govern Tok Pisin and English to master and use these languages correctly. The recommended period for these to happen is during the bridging process where all these language issues should be adequately and correctly addressed at the elementary level.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, since PNG is a diversified linguistic society, our educators and students are faced with the dilemma whether to use the native languages or Tok Pisin as the initial language of instruction at the elementary level or to then bridge into English as the target language (L2). Based on the findings and discussion, it is concluded that there is a need for the PNG Government to redefine the language policies. Most research participants are fully supporting the need for a well defined policy to accommodate the falling standard of English language in PNG, especially with our students. The overwhelm support from both urban and rural research participants prefer Tok Pisin as the choice of language of instruction over the local vernaculars at the elementary level. It is anticipated that Tok Pisin assists and prepares students to learn English well as the target language. The Government of PNG also believes that “every person has the right to become literate in the language he or she knows best”, which is Tok Pisin in general, and then the person can move on to learn English (NDOE, 2001: 1).

Though some research participants are adamant that it is vital to preserve ‘tok ples’ through its usage at the elementary level, it is not of interest to the general populace of the rural and urban contexts. That is because, instead of employing the local vernaculars, teachers and students resort into Tok Pisin as the suitable language of instruction which complements well with English, especially during the bridging process. Despite that there are problems related to the rules, pragmatics and aspects of Tok Pisin and English, there are many additive benefits that are associated with the two languages as revealed in this research. Hence, Tok Pisin can assist learners well to be proficient and competent in English if the linguistic aspects of these two languages are learnt, understood and used correctly by teachers and students beginning at the elementary level. This will in many ways assist in the uplifting of the falling standard of English in PNG and therefore will address the four key questions of this research.

The following are some of the suggestions that the National Department of Education and other concern stakeholders should consider for the benefit of uplifting the falling standard of English in our students:

- Tok Pisin should be standardized as a language of instruction.
- Tok Pisin should be taught as the initial language of instruction before bridging into English. That means, the grammar, syntax, semantics, phonology and pragmatics of both languages should be studied very well before teachers teach these two languages.
- Students need to be encouraged to read, write and speak without ceasing using

English after going through the bridging process.

- The NDOE, teachers, students, and communities should establish a check and balance mechanism to ensure that Tok Pisin is used with English at the elementary level because Tok Pisin is the main lingua franca and L1 of most Papua New Guineans where teachers and students are comfortable using it in the teaching and learning processes.
- However, allowance can be made for the use of local vernaculars in place of Tok Pisin, or English if need be, especially in rural schools. Otherwise, local vernaculars should be encouraged out of school, especially at homes and villages where the students come from.

Notes

1. Tok Pisin is an English-based creole, a lingua franca and an official language spoken by most Papua New Guineans.
2. Tok ples can refer to the native language, mother tongue or local vernacular of a speaker in PNG.

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