The language of instruction controversy in Papua New Guinea

Debate

In Papua New Guinea, more than 400 local languages have been used for initial mother tongue instruction, but there has recently been a turn back towards English.

In addition to its three official languages, Papua New Guinea has over 800 living local languages, spoken by small communities scattered across the islands' diverse ecological settings. As of independence in 1975, the vast majority of these languages were still unwritten.

Papua New Guinea’s Constitution (1975) treats the nation’s cultural and linguistic diversity as a source of strength. Since 1976, schools were legally allowed to use the vernacular in Grades 1 and 2 when necessary for specific explanations—but government funding was only available for English-language teachers and materials, making English medium of instruction the norm. However, some communities began to feel that English-language schooling was resulting in children’s cultural alienation. With support from churches and NGOs, they developed local-language pre-primary schools called “Viles Tok Ples Priskuls”. Soon officially recognized by the provinces, this approach had attained national technical and financial support by 1986.

Through the efforts of communities, churches, NGOs and the government, over 400 vernacular languages were gradually phased in for use in local elementary schools. In order for this to be possible, the majority of these communities had to create a written system for their languages from scratch, participating in “Alphabet Design Workshops” co-sponsored by the Department of Education, national universities, and NGOs (particularly SIL International). A pragmatic approach toward supplementary reading materials was taken, using pre-illustrated book templates that communities could fill in with stories translated into the local vernacular.

Although there have been no formal randomized controlled trials or long-term studies of the learning achievement of students in the Tok Ples schools, Papua New Guinea was generally considered a remarkably successful example of a mother-tongue based bilingual education system in a very challenging multilingual context. [1]

Nonetheless, the program was not without its challenges. After 2000, reports began indicating that the training given to Elementary teachers was not sufficient for their responsibilities, especially regarding how to introduce children to L1 literacy, and how to help them bridge towards the usage of English as L2. Instructional and supplementary reading materials were also judged insufficient, and communities have not maintained the same momentum as they originally had for developing their own materials. Perhaps most significantly, some parents and communities seemed to be changing their minds about the value of mother-tongue instruction.
When our children go to school, they go to an alien place, they leave their parents, they leave their gardens, they leave everything that is their way of life. They sit in a classroom and they learn things that have nothing to do with their own place. Later, because they have learned only other things, they reject their own.

Now my child is in tok ples school. He is not leaving his place. He is learning in school about his customs, his way of life. Now he can write anything he wants to in tok ples. Not just the things he can see, but things he thinks about, too. And he writes about his place. He writes about helping his mother carry water, about going to the garden. When he writes these things they become important to him. He is not only reading and writing about things outside, but learning through reading and writing to be proud of our way of life. When he is big, he will not reject us. It is important to teach our children to read and write, but it is more important to teach them to be proud of themselves, and of us.


In 2012, these factors—particularly perceptions of low English learning achievement—contributed to a decision to once again change the language of instruction policy in Papua New Guinea’s schools. Here are some of the major events in a chronology of Papua New Guinea’s public conversation over the language of instruction.

The Language of Instruction Controversy in Papua New Guinea: A Chronology

45,000 ys ago: The first humans arrive in the Papua New Guinea region. As people spread among Papua New Guinea’s very diverse micro-climates and create communities that are often cut off from one another, they develop hundreds of independent Papuan languages.

3,500 ys ago: People speaking languages from the Austronesian family arrive in Papua New Guinea.

Late 1800s: Christian Missionaries reach Papua New Guinea and the surrounding islands. Many missions teach in the local vernacular of the communities where they settle, sometimes translating the Bible into a local written form.

1884-1907: Germany colonizes the northern half of the main island, while the United Kingdom colonizes the southern half, and then transfers control to Australia. The teaching of English is made compulsory in Mission schools in the southern half of the island.

1915: Australia occupies the northern half of the island (and continues administering the Southern half of the island). English is the only language of formal education. Hiri Motu (a language linked to the Motu tribe of Port Moresby from which the Australian-administered police force was drawn) and Tok Pisin (a pidgin Creole combining elements of German, English, Polynesian, and local languages) emerge as lingua franca.
1920s-50s: Debates arise between Missionaries and Colonial authorities, and among the Colonial authorities themselves, regarding whether English or the vernacular should be used in village schools.

1969: Ernest Kilalang, a primary school teacher in Tolai, asks those gathered at a national education meeting why children are not being taught in their own languages, as used to be the case with the mission schools.

John Gunther, a colonial administrator, writes the article “More English, More Teachers” arguing that Papua New Guinea’s education system did not need to use local languages.

1972: The NGO SIL International gives training to Ernest Kilalang and other Tolais in developing vernacular literacy materials.

1973-75: Various academic conferences in the region recommend the use of Tok Pisin and vernacular languages in education. Research conducted by the University of Papua New Guinea Extension in the North Solomons Province (now the Autonomous Region of Bougainville) indicates that parents are interested in educating their children in local languages and cultures—primarily because their children were becoming culturally alienated by attending an English-medium school outside their communities, which taught no local knowledge or skills.

1975: Papua New Guinea becomes independent. English, Hiri Motu, and Tok Pisin are named as the official languages.

1976: A draft Five Year Education Plan includes provisions for basic education in the vernacular, but is rejected by the National Executive Council. Formal education remains in English, although schools are allowed to use the vernacular in order to aid in understanding. No teacher training or materials are provided in the vernacular, however.

1979: SIL International trains some North Solomons Province personnel in developing literacy materials in the vernacular.

1980: The North Solomons Provincial Government introduces the Viles Tok Ples Skul system, a nonformal pre-school system teaching in local languages.

1981-1985: Two more Provinces and four more local language communities establish their own Viles Tok Ples Skuls.


1986: The Philosophy of Education committee recommends vernacular education for the first three years of school, but Parliament rejects the recommendation.

1988: Parliament gives the National Department of Education funds for a section on vernacular language and literacy, training and materials. The newly-formed National Literacy Committee creates a national language and literacy policy, approved by the Secretary of Education, which recommends that provinces, NGOs, and communities support initial literacy in the vernacular.

1989: Parliament approves the Literacy and Awareness Program, which specifies that children
should learn to read and write in their own language. SIL International begins the Shell Project, using pre-illustrated book templates (“shell books”) that communities can fill in with their own local translations of stories.

1990: A sectoral review of the education recommends restructuring to allow for a three-year Elementary level based in villages and taught in the vernacular. This would be followed by 6 years of Primary school at the community level, and 4 years of Secondary school at the provincial level. This policy effectively extends the basic education cycle by two years, made possible because of the cost savings from hiring local community members, rather than fully qualified professional teachers, for the Elementary years.

1994-1997: The new education system structure is piloted in Milne Bay Province, and then in New Ireland Province the following year. News quickly spreads around the country that these two areas are receiving an additional two years of state-sponsored basic education, which parents feel would better prepare their children for paid employment. This factor—more than a desire for vernacular education in particular, though this was also appreciated—seems to have been the major reason parents exerted strong pressure for the system to be expanded countrywide.

1998: Due to public pressure for access to the additional two years of primary education, the new education structure is by now implemented in every Province, much more quickly than was originally intended. NGOs (especially SIL International), churches, and universities step in to help communities with unwritten languages develop their alphabets as well as reading materials. Not all communities are immediately able to offer vernacular instruction, and in some places there is confusion over which vernacular language should be used in schools.

2003: The first Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) syllabuses are published. OBE becomes a subject of significant controversy in the country, and also begins to be associated with the earlier language-of-instruction and education system structure reforms.

2008: A Department of Education study shows that approximately 30% of schools nationwide did not implement the new structure of Elementary (preparatory + 2 years) and Primary education (up to Grade 8). Most students start elementary education later than age 6 (the intended age) and there are continued problems with educational access and attrition.

2012: December 4, 2012—The new Prime Minister Peter O’Neill discusses parents’ dissatisfaction with the PNG education system. The public associates vernacular education with a broader Outcomes-Based Education reform, and O’Neill remarks that OBE and its focus on the vernacular was a foreign idea. He says that the Department of Education has not been responsive to parents’ concerns about the detrimental effects of vernacular-based education, and that PNG’s education leadership must change if they refuse to respond to public opinion. He announces that all elementary schools will convert to an English medium of instruction system as of the 2013 academic

December 14, 2012—The PNG Teacher’s Association cautions the government that a rushed decision to phase out OBE will cause chaos in the 2013 academic year.

2013-2014: Implementation of the English language of instruction policy begins in elementary schools around the country. However, there continues to be some confusion about what the new policy actually requires.

2017: The debate over language of instruction continues in media reports and editorials. Public
attention turns to other controversies, such as school practices of withholding certificates until students pay fees.

Notes


Patricia Paraide, "Rediscovering Our Heritage," (Port Moresby: National Research Institute, 2002); "Vernacular Languages and the Systems of Knowledge Embedded in Them," (Port Moresby: National Research Institute, 2009);


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