

# Reviews

Mugler, F & J. Lynch. 1996. *Critical literacy and Pacific languages in education*. Suva, Fiji: University of the South Pacific. Reviewed by Kevin Ford and Sakarepe Kamene, Department of Language & Literature, University of Papua New Guinea.

## 1. Introduction

This important volume comprises a) eight chapters (130p) under the section heading 'Vernaculars in Formal Education: Policy and Practice' (on Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tuvalu, Niue, Tonga and Cook Islands); b) six chapters (100p) headed 'Revival, Maintenance and Non-governmental Programmes' (on Melanesian Pidgin, Papua New Guinea literacy, Solomon Islands, and Maori and Tongan programmes in New Zealand); c) four chapters (65p) on 'Issues, Problems, Standards and Attitudes' (on Bislama in Vanuatu, vernacular teaching in Fiji and Reo Maohi in French Polynesia); and an Introduction by Mugler and Lynch. The book was originally intended as a textbook for University of the South Pacific students, but it will attract a wider audience because it contains much useful information about a widespread but little-known region and because questions related to its issues are increasingly being asked by parents and educators, and by politicians and economists. Education and health are the most expensive services provided by Pacific island governments, and many people question whether

appropriate types of service are being provided and whether Pacific peoples are receiving value for money. What are the important issues for governments in developing the right education policies? How can education providers ensure the quality of their services? How can we develop the most appropriate education systems? This book has appeared at a time when Papua New Guinea is beginning a new era of Education Reform, including the introduction of an Elementary level incorporating vernacular (*Tokples*) languages. It is appropriate to consider the lessons drawn from the evidence in this book in relation to the expectations of Papua New Guinea's parents and educators.

## 2. Context

Consider the following imaginary dialogue. *Parent A*. 'The Principal of the school my children attend is a go-ahead type. The parents appreciate the efficient way the school operates; they are confident in the management and feel that the school fees are being well-utilised. The school has computers, and all children will soon have the opportunity to become computer-literate. It was the first

school in the country to be connected to the Internet.”

*Parent B.* “This sounds good, but do you realise that many children in other schools, especially those outside the urban centres, will start getting left behind in this push for progress? Access to computers and the Internet will further marginalise the children of the elite and drive a wedge between them and the majority of Papua New Guinean children, whose lives are rural-based. It is important for our children to receive a balanced education, for them to understand and appreciate their own culture and traditions as well as those of the new ‘international’ way. If we provide this balance, then our children will not become divided, and the social change which can cause so many community problems, will be better managed.”

Many of us have heard these kinds of comments, and the situation they describe adds a level of complexity to the formal education systems of all countries with tradition-oriented populations. We require teachers not only to educate for development (for cultural change), but also to reinforce traditions (for culture preservation). Such an education system has to be flexible: urban children have an advantage when it comes to the new ways, while the rural children have stronger ties to traditional ways.

### 3. Issues

The ‘two-way’ (as it is known in Aboriginal Australia) education system

must involve language, both English or French and the traditional languages. We can ask, therefore, what would this type of education be like? How would it operate, and what are its requirements? While not providing specific answers, Mugler & Lynch’ book explains what has been happening in other Pacific countries, and in their Introduction, they enumerate the critical issues.

#### a. Which vernacular?

Many Pacific countries are multilingual, and it can be difficult deciding which languages should (or should not) be promoted and developed for educational use. Based on 1985 figures (the best available), the average population of 796 languages in Papua New Guinea was 3500 (total pop. 2.8 million). The total population is expected to double between 1995 and 2020 (from 4 to 8 million). PNG also has more than 200 languages with populations of less than 400. While it might be ideal to see them used for initial literacy in schools, experience from Aboriginal Australia (McKay, 1996) and Micronesia (p21-31 in Mugler & Lynch) shows that school literacy programs are difficult to sustain among small populations, especially in preliterate, tradition-oriented contexts. In contrast, Tok Pisin (which is discussed in 5 below) is becoming more widely used as the medium of initial literacy.

#### b. Materials.

Developing the resources to support vernacular education is no small task, and

Papua New Guinea is making a fresh start in this area (efforts to introduce *Tokples* education have been made previously in selected regions, in the 1970s and again in the late 1980s). Evidence in Mugler & Lynch shows that a lack of new teaching materials can be a sign that a program is failing.

### c. Training.

All staff require specific training, and the evidence shows that receipt of training is not in itself a guarantee of successful teaching practice. Papua New Guinea is fortunate in having massive support (professional, logistic and financial) from Australia in preparing the groundwork for the new start in Elementary literacy. Training and implementation costs over the seven years 1997-2004 will total more than K220 million (K1 = US\$0.50) and will provide a pool of 16,000 trained Elementary teachers (see Papua New Guinea-Australia Development Cooperation Program, 1997). Recurrent salary costs for these teachers - to be borne by Papua New Guinea - will be K65 million annually. Aid donors are providing many more millions for additional classrooms and associated infrastructure and materials.

### d. Standardisation and vocabulary development.

Standardising a language for literacy purposes can be complicated and the result can be confusing to students and teachers, as users. Understanding by communities of the need for standardising

and acceptability of educational decisions can be slow to develop. It is not uncommon for groups to stand out from the mainstream and require their own materials and staff, on socio-cultural grounds.

In addition to these four main hurdles for new programs, there are the following, which are more specific but still important contributors to the success of vernacular education initiatives.

### e. Managing the transition.

Initial literacy should be provided in a language that the children speak and understand. Given that the education programs described in the various countries are intended to provide the preparation in mother-tongue literacy for a changeover to English or French, when and how this transition takes place is significant. None of the traditional languages in Western Melanesia, or even the lingua francas such as Tok Pisin/Pijin/Bislama, is sufficiently well-developed (in terms of standardisation and the availability of curriculum and library resources) to act in place of English or French as the medium of higher literacy. Evidence from students at the University of Papua New Guinea shows that attitudes towards acquiring higher literacy (in this case, in English), in combination with preparation, are crucial to success. The development of initial literacy through the vernacular will affect attitudes towards higher literacy, but it is not clear that initial literacy through the vernacular (or

Tok Pisin) is a pre-requisite to success in higher literacy through English.

In Fiji, for example, after fifty years of 3-year transitional programs, students according to one expert (p280-1) have "fluency only in Fiji English (a local variety) and a lack of knowledge of both English and the vernacular". This kind of program is described as "minimal". Only Palau, which makes the transition after grade 8 (and which has a single vernacular language to manage), seems to be achieving the right kinds of results, in terms of developing biliterate school matriculants with equal facility in both their mother tongue and English (p27-8).

#### f. Multilingual contexts.

Some situations (like Tonga and Samoa) might be considered fortunate in having a single language shared by their students and teachers; others have classes with two and occasionally more mother-tongues, and this requires special measures and appropriately skilled staff.

#### g. Language mixing.

Evidence from observational research shows that long after transition, many teachers rely on their vernacular to explain ideas, while official policy generally excludes or prohibits this. James: 1996 reports in the case of Brunei Darussalam (which, within a bilingual education policy, faces the complexity of several vernaculars and its own creole lingua franca as domestic languages, Bahasa Melayu as transitional medium, and

English as the eventual target) that experiments with language mixing in the classroom may prove to be educationally beneficial. In Papua New Guinea, there is evidence that Tok Pisin has long been used in primary-level classrooms for effective communication between teacher and pupils. And there is evidence in Mugler & Lynch (eg p103-110) to support this approach. Students ideally should leave school as fluent speakers, hearers, readers and writers of all the languages in their repertoire. In Papua New Guinea, Divine Word University, Madang has a policy of graduating bilingual and biliterate journalists (*Tok Pisin* and English), and this is both forward-thinking and commendable, not least for its emphasis on biliteracy since many children currently leave school in PNG unable to read and write well enough in any language.

Possibly the most important factor that Lynch and Mugler highlight is the following.

#### h. Attitudes towards vernaculars in education.

Pacific Island countries are realising that passing through secondary school 'successfully' does not guarantee attainment of the required knowledge and skills, particularly where attitudes preclude the use of a local language alongside English or French. Even where vernacular transitional education is available, the combination of education curriculum and local attitudes may

prevent pupils from attaining the required level of skills and undervalues schooling.

The following information (Mugler & Lynch p27) is provided by Mary Spencer (Director of the Micronesian Language Institute at the University of Guam):

“English literacy in Guam and CNMI [Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, where English is used alongside Chamorro, while English dominates it in Guam: KF/SK] appears to be comfortably above the international benchmark for literacy, but substantially below average performance levels of US mainland students. In the 1996 NAEP study, Guam’s English reading scores were the lowest in the nation”.

The implications of these facts in relation to the information provided about Fiji (which has a 3-year vernacular-to-English program) and about Palau (which has an 8-year transitional program), indicate that the important stage for the development of cognitive (as opposed to initial or survival) literacy is the upper Primary and lower Secondary level. Papua New Guinea (which has had an English-only program and is just beginning its vernacular transitional program) seems to be no better or worse off than Fiji. The evidence is strong that Pacific countries should investigate and apply Palau’s policies if real progress is to be made to develop higher literacy through vernacular education.

## 5. Melanesian Creole

Approximately 25% of the book is taken up by papers about Melanesian Creole (called Tok Pisin or Pidgin in Papua New Guinea, Pijin in Solomon Islands, and Bislama in Vanuatu). The three forms are closely related and provide an exceptionally successful linguistic bridge both between the three nations in question but also within what are three of the most linguistically complex countries in the world.

Siegel (‘Melanesian Pidgin in education’) provides statistics on the use of the language in schools in the three countries, showing that it is the most widely spoken language in the Pacific. He provides specific comparative evaluations of Tok Pisin/English-medium primary schools in Ambunti (West Sepik Province, PNG) and concludes that ‘fears of interference (by Tok Pisin, of subsequent English learning) are unfounded’. English teachers would readily agree with this, on the basis of their experience. Standard English, which is the target of higher levels of education, is a written language, and its forms, in non-native contexts, are best assimilated by reading. By contrast, Tok Pisin is primarily a spoken language and an ideal common language for the early years of education and the development of literacy, particularly in view of its consistent spelling.

Lee (‘Solomon Islands Pijin in education’) considers the principal

arguments put forward against the use of Pijin in education: lack of standardisation of spelling and usage, and lack of instructional materials. He demonstrates from practical experience in the Solomon Islands that an appreciation of standardisation develops with improved literacy skills, and its promotion is one of the tasks of the teacher. He explains the direct benefits to be achieved in education by contrasting the structures of Pijin and English and concludes that Pijin is indeed appropriate for education.

Lynch ('The banned National language') provides important information on the socio-political history of Vanuatu and its complex language situation, and he details the extraordinary problem of local attitudes towards Bislama: on the one hand acknowledging its importance in everyday life, while ignoring, on the other hand, the potential benefits of this language in early education.'

Crowley ('Teaching Bislama in Bislama') demonstrates the principles that he used (from 1987) to develop a straightforward metalanguage to talk about the structure of Bislama in Bislama. He is compelled to admit that his metalanguage has not caught on, but this is not because it is not a good metalanguage. The fact is that few people (even among language teachers) are interested in linguistic metalanguages! But Crowley's point (that

a vernacular metalanguage is possible) stands, and his invention remains for future use.

## 6. Conclusion

The content of this book is thought-provoking, and the editors are to be congratulated on gathering such a useful collection of contributions. The volume is attractive and well-produced typographically; unfortunately the binding (paperback) fell apart during the process of this review. But this can be easily remedied, unlike some of the difficulties which beset education in the Pacific.

## References

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