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THE NEED FOR A BETTER EDUCATION IN INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES: A Case for Alekano

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ABSTRACT

Children are the leaders in the maintenance and heritage of our dying languages and knowledge. As such, there is a great need to advocate the use of our local languages and knowledge for the benefit of this and future generations. This paper is based on unstructured interviews conducted with some Alekano speakers through open discussions, and on speeches made by some government officials and political figures in organized vernacular language awareness programs. The data was collected and analyzed using tape recorders, pen and papers. The information was then typed into a personal computer which was later analyzed. From the responses received, there is a great need to maintain and preserve the local vernaculars, knowledge and cultures of our nation, beginning at the elementary education level which the national language policy partly supports this trend. However, there are also impediments such as recruiting of elementary teachers and trainers who are not well-versed in the local language and knowledge which hamper the learning of children. Besides, primary school teachers are not posted to their local schools to effectively facilitate the language bridging process. Hence, these issues should be seriously addressed for the betterment of vernacular education in our education system.

KEYWORDS: vernacular education, elementary education, language policy, home-teaching, tok ples, Tok Pisin.

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INTRODUCTION

Papua New Guinea is well known in the world for its wealth of languages spoken. This linguistic diversity makes it really problematic for a specific language to be used as a medium of instruction in our education system. As such, the need for a better indigenous education should become the prime concern for the Papua New Guinea (PNG) Government and its local communities.

This paper is based on an ongoing awareness program conducted amongst the Alekano (Gahuku) language group in the Goroka District of Eastern Highlands Province. This awareness program was organized to mark the International Year of Indigenous Languages. The processes involved in collecting information included unstructured interviews, open discussions, and analysis of speeches made by guest speakers.

This awareness campaign, conducted in a number of villages with the assistance of native Alekano speakers, revealed the significance of valuing the indigenous language, culture, knowledge and identity. The Government of PNG legislated that “every person has the right to become literate in the language he or she knows best” (NDOE, 2001:1).

The findings of this awareness campaign show that there is a great need to uphold, maintain and preserve our local languages and cultures. The Alekano wanted their children to be educated to a certain level, using their local language and knowledge, together with the English language. They believe that teaching in the vernacular prior to commencing primary school will enable the children to learn their local language and cultures well which will then assist them to learn a foreign language and its cultures.

Some key questions which guide this discussion include:

- 1) What are the associated problems of vernacular education at elementary level?
- 2) Are there any strategies that can be used to tackle these issues?
- 3) Who are responsible for the betterment of our children’s education?

DISCUSSION

Vernacular and Bilingual Education in Perspective

Before the education reform, PNG children learned in a foreign language from their first day in school. “A vast majority of the children sit in their classrooms not knowing what is going on, nor what the teacher is saying, but it is their everyday classroom experiences and they come to accept it as such” (Yamuna, 2000:63). However, the endorsement of the National Language Policy in 1989 by the National Government formalized the trend towards acknowledging the importance of vernacular education and, to some extent, recognized the role of associated literacy activities. The reformed education system and curriculum are based on the assumption that education should start in a language children already speak, with subsequent gradual shift in focus towards children’s use of English (NDOE, 1992).

The concepts of vernacular and bilingual education in Papua New Guinea overlap. That is, learning begins with the language that the learners are familiar with at the elementary level, with gradual bridging to English. Education at this level aims to “assist children to relate better to their own environment, appreciate their own cultural values, and make them more psychologically secure” (Somare, 1974:13). It also aims to “ease children's transition from home into a Western-inspired education system” (Delpit and Kemelfield, 1985:9). The success of this policy is evident in an SDA-run literacy school in the Masi village on the outskirts of Goroka Town. After going through the literacy classes, some formerly illiterate local villagers are now able to read and write in Alekano language, Tok Pisin, and basic English. One of

the pioneer students of the school is now a church worker at the local SDA church and he is also a successful businessman at the Masi village because he could read and write in Alekano, Tok Pisin and simple English.

Before children transit from a local vernacular to a foreign language, they need to be well-versed in their vernacular. Thus, the concept of vernacular education at elementary level as introduced by the National Department of Education (NDOE) is supported by the Ministerial Policy Statement No.3/99 approved by the then Minister for Research, Science and Technology, Professor John Waiko. The policy outlined a program 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 partly allows for the need to value and preserve the local language which most of the local educated Alekano speakers agreed with. One of the locals specifically pointed out that with this policy, our local schools are now able to incorporate the local language and culture with either Tok Pisin or English which makes learning easy and appropriate for our children.

Problems with the use of Vernacular in Elementary Education

A good number of Alekano speakers expressed that there is a need for the Government of PNG to establish a practical policy that would clearly emphasize the use of indigenous languages as a means of instruction in schools. One of the locals indicated that there is no restriction in the use of languages in all the schools within the Alekano community. The local elementary schools are using either Tok Pisin or English when they are supposed to use Alekano language to begin their schooling.

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

The Alekano speakers interviewed stressed that, although they try their best to teach their children to speak the local language, their children continue resorting to Tok Pisin. This is a clear indication of serious competition between Tok Pisin and the vernaculars in many rural areas, which makes it hard for children to master their tok ples language. Often, Tok Pisin is used in place of the vernacular in cases where no vernacular alphabet is available (Litteral, 2004).

Another detrimental factor that affects the learning of vernaculars in elementary schools is the availability of trained teachers. As indicated by Alekano speakers, some elementary teachers are either not native speakers or they are too young to be well versed in the local vernacular and the local knowledge. Some of them are employed through the formal appointment process and others are employed through nepotism or bribery. However, the initial understanding, it is believed, was to get volunteers to teach vernacular education organized by non-government organizations. Therefore, these elementary teachers do not teach well in the local language which contributes to the falling standards of vernacular education in the communities. In addition, some elementary trainers are not locals and yet they are training the local elementary teachers; this adds to the downfall of vernacular education in elementary schools.

One other concern noted is the process of language bridging from elementary two to lower primary grade three. It was highlighted by a guest speaker at one of the awareness programs that teachers are usually blamed for the difficulties faced by students in learning tok ples and bridging to English. However, NDOE and provincial education divisions should also share the blame, because of the existing appointment process. Primary teachers should be permanently placed at their local schools; they should be responsible for lower grades to ensure that the language bridging process is effectively facilitated after children transit from elementary level. These teachers can ensure that children use their local vernacular in their learning, thus fulfilling the expectations of NDOE.

Strategies for Better Indigenous Language Education

As noticed in the preceding discussion, tok ples is being threatened by the growing use of Tok Pisin. Therefore, the PNG Government should re-examine the language policy in PNG, focusing on specific procedures that guide teaching and learning in vernacular, Tok Pisin and English. If there is no specific policy for each of these languages to be used at elementary level, then something needs to be done to formulate such policy. Otherwise, the urban elementary schools will continue to use Tok Pisin whilst the rural elementary schools will remain at the crossroads, conflicted about whether to use local vernaculars or Tok Pisin.

Matane's Report (1986) further stressed that in elementary education, communication skills are first learned in the mother tongue and are later transferred to English. It also stated that bilingual students perform better in English. In schools where the students speak a variety of languages, the early instruction should be in the major language of the region or in Tok Pisin. Litteral (2004) argues that the formal education elementary level should use the language of the community as the language of instruction. This is generally the vernacular in rural areas, but a lingua franca (Tok Pisin) in urban areas.

Looking at what Matane and Litteral stated, the current language policy needs to have sub-sections that offer specific guidance for the use of the language of instruction (tok ples, Tok Pisin and English). These guidelines will assist teachers in determining which language(s) should be used at their elementary schools, in both rural and urban schools.

Another alternative that should be examined is 'home-teaching'. As correctly pointed out by some Alekano speakers, parents and other community members should always communicate with their children in their local vernacular after school. This is a positive approach that will encourage children to improve their linguistic competency and proficiency in their local language. Furthermore, this would promote children's learning of local cultures and traditional knowledge. Stringer and Faraclas (1987:7) contend that

when children learn to read and write in their own local language it helps them to be proud of their language and their culture ... 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.

Vernacular education at the elementary stage has many benefits. Ada (1986) claimed that encouraging the maintenance and development of tok ples languages will reinforce people's sense of cultural identity. Furthermore, the maintenance of the local language strengthens family and community ties. Local language maintenance also enhances communication between generations. When students forget the language of their families and communities, they may lose access to their local heritage. To enhance vernacular education, elementary schools need financial assistance and community support. They need to have adequate educational materials and equipment, such as dictionaries, syllabi, textbooks, reading materials, and so forth, in the local languages.

In the case of Alekano speakers, the local Member for Goroka, Mr Thompson Harukaveque, pledged to financially assist the reviving and preserving of the Alekano language. The Alekano speakers are also fortunate to have 'Alekano Dictionary' compiled by Ellis W. Deibler (Wanimapi), which was published

by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) in 2008. Without such assistance and input, indigenous languages cannot be successfully taught at elementary level. That is why the Alekano speakers are responding well to the advancement of vernacular education, while at the same time highlighting the problems that are associated with it.

CONCLUSION

The linguistic and cultural differences in PNG make it really problematic for a specific language to be used as a medium of instruction in our education system. As a consequence, the PNG Government has shown some initiative in addressing this issue through the establishment of vernacular and bilingual education system. This has had some success so far. However, the National Language Policy is too broad to capture the essence of utilizing tok ples, Tok Pisin or English at the appropriate grade levels in PNG's school system. As such, adjustments need to be made to expand on the use of tok ples and Tok Pisin in our rural and urban elementary schools. The Alekano speakers interviewed in this study expressed the desire that the Government, through NDOE, should re-examine the current language policy and create supplementary policies to meet the expectations of learners and their communities in both the urban and rural settings.

The recruitment of elementary teachers and trainers is also a point of concern. Some of the teachers are not well versed in the local vernacular and yet they are recruited. This contributes to the current stagnation of vernacular education. Elementary and primary teachers are often blamed for not teaching the students according to expectations; however, NDOE and provincial education divisions should share the blame, because of their appointment process. This is to ensure that children are not faced with difficulties in mastering the indigenous languages when they either excel in the education hierarchy or leave school and go back to their respective communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the aforesaid, the following recommendations are suggested:

- The National Government, through NDOE, should re-examine the National Language Policy governing our school system. They should provide supplementary language policies that specify the use of tok ples and Tok Pisin.
- Papua New Guineans should encourage home-teaching by encouraging children to use tok ples in their daily communication.
- Community members and teachers of elementary schools should strongly encourage the use of tok ples on school premises, as well as after school.

- The appointing authorities should select elementary teachers who are qualified and well versed in the local language and knowledge, so that they can teach the students both effectively and efficiently.
- Elementary trainers should come from the local linguistic group, so that they can deliver better to the elementary teachers who will then teach the students in their local vernacular.
- Members of the community, business leaders, local MPs and others should constantly support the local elementary and literacy schools in cash and kind, to assist them in facilitating and promoting vernacular education.
- Teachers should be qualified to teach children in their indigenous language, and then help them bridge to English. They should continue to encourage the use of vernacular throughout the children's education as recommended by NDOE through the Ministerial Policy Statement No.3/99.
- NDOE and provincial education divisions should appoint primary teachers who would be permanently placed at their local schools, so that they will be able to effectively facilitate the language bridging process after the children transit from the elementary level.

Once these and other related issues are addressed by the PNG Government, a better education in indigenous languages will become a reality.

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