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## **Key findings on the use of Tok Pisin and Vernacular Languages in Papua New Guinea Primary Schools**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the key findings of a recent study which investigated the attitudes towards Tok Pisin (an English-lexifier pidgin) and vernacular languages with specific focus on Tolai (an Austronesian language) in Papua New Guinea (PNG) primary schools and how they impact on PNG children's learning during transition to English in the current bilingual education program. It explores the attitudes of curriculum officers, teachers, parents and students toward these languages. The study also investigates whether the current policy on bilingual education is being implemented in schools based on the participants' views. Using a mixed methods framework (Creswell, 2003), the study was conducted in six primary schools in the Kokopo District of East New Britain Province, Papua New Guinea. The study involved 413 participants who completed questionnaires which were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics and 47 additional participants who engaged in in-depth interviews and whose responses were analysed using the grounded theory approach. This study contributes to international scholarship in terms of providing evidence that there was a general feeling of appreciation and support for the use of Tok Pisin more than for vernacular languages like Tolai in the education system. Children in particular embraced Tok Pisin far more than teachers and parents as it helps them enhance their understanding of English. This confirms Siegel's (1997) finding on Tok Pisin namely that it is a help and not a hindrance to students' learning. The study also addresses the practicalities of bilingual education in general, supporting the notion that where bi/multilingual education exists, there remains a dichotomy between supporters of mother tongue-based education and pidgin/creole-based education compared to supporters of the English-only curriculum.

### **Introduction**

The paper presents the key findings of a recent study which investigated the attitudes towards Tok Pisin (an English-lexifier pidgin) and vernacular languages with specific focus on Tolai (an Austronesian language) in Papua New Guinea (PNG) primary schools. The study emerged out of the concerns and interests of the researcher relating to the dilemma that parents, teachers and the general public in PNG are facing with regards to what language(s) best suit children in the formal school system in the country.

The researcher, well versed with the language situation from her experiences in the learning institutions where she worked, embarked on this mission as a result of her observations on: a) the decline in standards of English over a 18 year period since the inception of the bilingual education program commonly known as “the education reform” (Matane, 1986); and b) the reasons why this education reformed program had become an issue of national debate. The concept of bilingual education in PNG was introduced to combat the English-medium education which was propagated by the Australian administration during the pre-independence era. Prior to this introduction, pressure on the National Department of Education (NDOE) had been building up for many years as it had been expected to provide a relevant education for many different sections of society (NDOE, 2000, p. 13). The researcher’s involvement in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) in PNG and Australia during the last ten years was used as a ‘personal’ bench mark to compare the level of English of students who are products of the current bilingual program, and was the main motivating factor which contributed to her growing interest in the topic of this research.

### **Background to the Study**

Language education in PNG has undergone a multitude of changes. Before World War II, the colonial government’s objective for education and literacy was to pacify the indigenous population and to prepare workers for low level government and business positions and to teach in primary schools. They also wanted to extend their social, political and economic control over those in their colonies (Ahai, 2004, p. 4). The Germans, who controlled the northeastern part of New Guinea and several nearby island groups from 1884 until 1914, chose German as the language of education in New Guinea; the British and Australians, who controlled the southeastern quarter of the island from 1883 to 1949, chose English for Papua. New Guinea switched to English after World War I (Wurm, 1971, p. 206). When Australia finally took control of the German colony in northeastern New Guinea with Papua and New Guinea under its reign in 1914, it established English as the official language of instruction and laid the foundation for modern education in PNG.

After World War II, the government sought to extend its control over education. One action involved setting up the Education Department for the combined territories of PNG. W.C. Groves became the first Director of Education for the combined territories. He formulated a government policy meant to combine aspects of Christian, traditional, and secular education in “blended” schools (Malone, 1987). Groves’ (1936) plan was for the first four years of primary school to be in village schools and taught in local language. This was to be followed by four years in government schools where students would bridge into English. From these schools, students would then proceed to English-language high schools.

In 1953, a committee review of the Department of Education set up by the Australian minister for territories concluded that in a situation of such linguistic diversity, the only hope for an independent and united nation was to use English as a means of communication (Hasluck, 1976). In 1962, all government and government-supported schools were obligated to use English only, and mission-sponsored primary schools that used local languages were no longer eligible for government subsidies. This policy effectively banished indigenous languages completely from the formal education system so that by 1970 students were forbidden to use any language other than English on school grounds. The reasons for the pro-English policy were:

1. English was regarded as more convenient and, for some, “superior” than any of the indigenous languages. If civilization was to be transferred, it was argued, it must be done in English and not the local vernaculars.
2. English was the most convenient language for colonial officials because they did not have the time, the compulsion nor the consideration to learn and use local vernaculars and pidgins which they, generally speaking, deprecated (Nekitel, 1998, p. 175).

Many Papua New Guineans were not happy with the directions that the colonial administrators set for education. Therefore in 1974, a committee chaired by the then Director of Education, Sir Alkan Tololo and with an entirely Papua New Guinean membership drafted a post – Independence five year education plan which proposed that the use of vernaculars be emphasized in community-based schools and should be linked to development more widely and more equally provided. They planned to expand primary schooling to Grade 8 and expand access to Grades 9

and 10. They were also concerned that greater access to education should be given to females and to those from disadvantaged areas. However, these ideas were overturned (Waters, 1995).

English continued to be the medium of instruction in schools until 1975 (independence), when PNG found itself with a need for a high percentage of skilled manpower to run its economy. In order to solve this, there was a need to set up a Commission that could survey existing educational resources and to advise the government on the formation and implementation of human resources and the labour market (NDOE, 1999). This link then led to the growth of enrolments, especially in primary and secondary schools, a growth which continued to be experienced in later years. Although formal education was expanding during this period, it was not directly accompanied by economic growth. Thus most of the school drop outs were soon left with neither jobs nor training (Rena, 2011).

In the 1980s, the government realised that the formal education system was not serving the majority of PNG's population and was a major contributor to social, cultural, spiritual and economic alienation. In response, a committee spearheaded by Sir Paulias Matane compiled the renowned 'Matane Report' of 1986, which stressed that school can help educate children but cannot and should not be regarded as the only agent of education. They further stated that the home, the churches, the community, the police and the politicians are also influences on a child's life and must contribute to the integral human development of the child (Matane, 1986). The process of integral human development calls for an education system that helps individuals:

- Identify basic human need
- Analyse situations in terms of needs
- See these needs in the context of spiritual and social values of the community
- Take responsible action in co-operation with others

(NDOE, 2002, p. 8)

Therefore, after the country witnessed the success of the piloted Viles Tok Ples Pri Skul (VTPPS), village vernacular schools in the North Solomons Province as well as some other parts of the country (Litteral, 2005, p. 3), PNG saw the rebirth of its education system and the introduction of all 850+ vernacular languages and Tok Pisin. The change was an attempt to curb

the irrelevant education propagated by the Australian Administration and educate an elite group of Papua New Guineans to continue to run the country after independence (Kale and Marimyas, 2003, p. 2). This was the beginning of what is called today the 'education reform' which incorporated the bilingual education program in lower primary schools.

### **The Current Education Reform**

The main purpose of the restructure in the 1990s was to increase access to education at all levels. Most importantly, a village-based, three-year vernacular elementary level consisting of preparatory and Grades 1 and 2 was introduced, changing the community school level to Grades 3-8 (which previously used to be from Grades 1-6). Secondary schools (which used to be from Grades 7-10) were then to be changed to Grades 9-12 in all provinces (Litteral, 1999, p. 5).

The key reason for this restructure was the difficulties faced by graduates of the previous education system, most of whom could not be absorbed into the shrinking labour market (Rena, 2011). Besides, there was a low enrolment and high dropout rates, significant gender and regional disparities and a curriculum lacking relevance to most Papua New Guinean children. The long-term goal of the reform was to achieve sustainable, quality, universal basic education, and a more productive, skilled population. The educational reform advocated for a more practical curriculum that would offer a wide range of employment opportunities, ensuring equitable distribution of educational resources throughout the country (Rena, 2011).

The education system was expected to ensure that students graduating at every level had some scientific and practical knowledge that could be utilized for self-employment, salaried employment or further training. It placed a greater emphasis on practical and technical aspects of education. Education under this reform policy was designed to provide lifelong skills and make individuals self-sufficient and productive in agriculture, industries and commerce (Waiko, 1996).

The aims of this major reform in the education sector are as follows:

1. To provide basic schooling for all children as this becomes financially feasible.
2. To help people understand the changes that are occurring in contemporary society through the provision of formal education and literacy programs.

3. To adequately prepare school leavers to return to their communities where there is, and always has been, traditional work and opportunities for community-based employment which covers approximately 85 percent of the population. The major source of employment of these citizens will be their own subsistence and small-scale community-based commercial enterprises. Their education will have provided them and/or their children for this reality.
4. To adequately prepare a small but growing number of marginalised urban youth for the realities of life in an urban situation.
5. To identify the manpower needs in the public and private sectors and to provide appropriate higher education and training programs.

(PNG National Education Plan, 1996, pp. 2-3).

The current language education system begins at the elementary school which follows the transitional bilingual education approach using either a local vernacular or Tok Pisin. The purpose of the three-year initial education in local vernaculars and Tok Pisin is to establish strong cultural bonding between children and their community (Waiko, 2003). Tok Pisin and vernacular education allows students to use what is already known to learn new skills such as reading, writing and numeracy in familiar contexts, enhances active interaction and communication in school from the first day, and enables students at a later time to use their abilities to learn a foreign language (English) and to gradually transition to education in that language when they are ready.

As children enter lower primary school (Grades 3-5) at the age of nine, they are introduced to the transitional bilingual program in Grade 3 which uses one of PNG's vernacular languages or Tok Pisin with English. This bridging period is expected to continue up to the end of Grade 5. When students enter upper primary school (Grades 6-8) typically at the age of twelve, the main emphasis in their classroom is on English as the language of instruction; however, the use of the local vernaculars and Tok Pisin is still encouraged. By the end of Grade 8, when students are fourteen years of age, they are expected to have mastered the basic skills in English and be ready

to enter secondary school (Grades 9-12). This study focused on the important phase when students enter primary school and transition to English in Grade 3.

### **Bilingual Education**

Mother-tongue based Bilingual education is a form of schooling that uses the L1 for teaching beginning literacy (reading and writing) and content area instruction (such as mathematics), while teaching the L2 as a second/foreign language. Using the L1 as a medium of instruction implies that teachers plan and teach lessons in that language and have textbooks and /or support materials in that language (Benson, 2005, p. 2). Research has demonstrated that bilingual education has cognitive, academic, social, and cultural benefits for elementary school students (Cummins, 2000; UNESCO, 1953). At the cognitive level, research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has shown that literacy in a child's native language can facilitate learning of an L2 (Cummins, 2000; Dawes, 1988; McLaughlin, 1987). These researchers argue that children who are literate in their L1 can transfer their literacy skills into the L2 learning situation, thereby making the situation easier. Cummins' (1981) Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) model stipulates that the two languages of bilingual children operate through the same central processing system. Even though both languages may look different at the surface, they are fused underneath. The implication of this theory is that when the child's L1 reading, writing, speaking and listening skills are sufficiently developed, they can serve as the basis for learning the L2.

At the academic level, bilingual education allows children to access the curriculum and perform better in lower primary schools. Past studies have demonstrated that children learn academic content faster in their L1 than in an unfamiliar foreign language (UNESCO, 1953). Other studies such as Ngara (1982) and Chaudron (1988) argue that learners not only have to understand the task that they have to complete, but also the language of the task. Cummins (1984) also introduced the concept of basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) in order to explain the linguistic and academic difficulties that children speaking a minority language speakers experience in schools. According to Cummins's theory, children who have developed the BICS may be able to communicate fluently, but may not have their advanced language skills (CALP) which are necessary to cope

with complex academic content. The researcher argues that schools should develop the CALP skills of children in both their L1 and L2 in order to allow them to fully access the curriculum and succeed. When L1 and/or L2 are poorly developed, children experience serious academic difficulties, which can lead to poor academic performance and dropout.

At the social level, bilingual education has the advantage of producing individuals who are often tolerant of other people and cultures (Baker, 2006). For example, many students in bi/multilingual programs interact with their peers who are from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds and learn to depend on each other in order to learn the academic content taught in both languages. Through this interaction, the students improve their social skills and become more tolerant of other people.

Furthermore, bilingual education preserves the students' native language (vernacular) and culture (Baker, 2006), which increases the students' self-esteem and cultural identity. One of the arguments for using vernacular languages in education is that it will help save indigenous cultures, and saving indigenous cultures is necessary to preserve a nation's intellectual and aesthetic creativity (Pattanayak, 1991). But to others, the relationship between the use of vernacular languages in education and the preservation of ethnic identities is exaggerated and not supported. Even if a positive relationship is clearly demonstrated, the use of threatened vernacular languages in formal and non-formal literacy and education programs will not preserve them or their related cultures unless the threatened languages and cultures are used and promoted in the wider society as well.

### **Bilingual/Multilingual Program Models**

Forty years of research and literature on bilingual education has produced a broad array of descriptions, analyses and models. Although these program models have been categorized into meaningful categories that highlight broad agreements among researchers, many variations exist in the delivery of each approach, such as the number of months spent in transition and the amount of time devoted to mother tongue maintenance. Also, as some scholars note, the

approach that educators say they are using does not often match what they are actually doing (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

Therefore, the first general rule according to May (2008) is that programs can be defined as either subtractive or additive. A program is considered subtractive if it promotes monolingual learning in the dominant language, either losing or replacing one language with another, whereas a program can be considered additive if it promotes bilingualism and biliteracy over the long term, usually by adding another language to the student's existing repertoire (May, 2008). Expanding on these definitions, Baker (1993 cited in García, 1997), explains that educational programs that support additive bilingualism are also referred to as *strong*, whereas those which engage in subtractive bilingualism are referred to as *weak*. According to García (1997), whether bilingual education promotes additive or subtractive forms of bilingualism is related to the reasons why the educational system uses the two languages. Often, bilingual education for the language majority promotes additive bilingualism, whereas that for the minority develops subtractive bilingualism. Yet, as Fishman (1976 cited by García, 1997) has argued, bilingual education with additive bilingualism as a goal can be beneficial for the minority, as well as the majority.

Secondly, according to Skutnabb-Kangas (1999), a good educational program accomplishes the following goals from a language and identity perspective: a) high levels of multilingualism, b) a fair chance of achieving academically at school, and developing a strong, positive multicultural identity, and c) positive attitudes towards self and others. The models of bilingual education as presented in section 1.2 can be evaluated according to their attainment of these three goals and categorized under weak and strong models as described by Baker (2001), García (1997), and Skutnabb-Kangas (1999).

### **Strong Models of Bilingual Education**

Strong Models of bilingual education include six of Ball's (2010) approaches, namely: Mother tongue-based instruction (Approach 1), Bilingual education or 'two-way bilingual education'

(Approach 2), Mother tongue-based bilingual education or ‘developmental bilingualism’ (Approach 3), Multilingual education (Approach 4), Maintenance bi/multilingual education or ‘additive bilingual education’ (Approach 6) and Immersion program (Approach 7). In these programs the promotion of two or more languages is attempted and the aim is to enrich the child, particularly linguistically (Baker, 1996). According to Skutnabb-Kangas (1999, pp. 51-53) the main principles that make these models effective at accomplishing multilingualism, fair academic achievement and positive multilingual and multicultural identity and attitudes through bilingual education are:

- They offer support by using the main medium of education at least during the first eight years that language which is least likely to develop to a high formal level. For minority children, this is their own mother tongue. For majority children, it should be a minority language.
- All children, not only minority children, are to become high-level bilinguals. This is especially important where minority children and majority children are in the same class.
- There must be equality in every area including the status of mother tongues and the roles the languages are accorded in class schedules.
- Teachers must be bilingual or multilingual. Every child in a school must be able to talk to an adult who speaks the same first language.
- Both languages have to be used as the medium of instruction in some phase of the children’s education.

### **Weak Models of Bilingual Education**

Weak models of bilingual education include two of Ball’s (2010) approaches: Submersion (Approach 8) and transitional bilingual education (Approach 5). The outcomes of these models include monolingualism in the majority language and assimilation into the mainstream culture, values and attitudes.

#### ***Submersion education:***

Submersion education represents the weakest form of bilingual education. It concerns children from language minority homes who are taught immediately through the majority language.

According to (Baker, 2001), there are many problems with this type of education which includes the following:

- Both teachers and students will be expected to use only the majority language, not the home language of the child.
- Considerable variations in students' language ability in a classroom may often create problems in teaching and classroom management for the teacher.
- There is no reason to assume that children will quickly and effortlessly acquire the majority language skills necessary to cope with the curriculum material.
- There may also be problems of social and emotional adjustment.
- The identity of the child, the parents, the home, community and culture appear to be disapproved of, disparaged and discounted. Such a model often denies or denounces their language, their relationships and often their race.
- There can be enormous stress: listening to a new language demands high concentration and is tiring with constant pressure to think about the form of language and less time to think about curriculum content because the child has to take in information from different curriculum areas and learn a language at the same time. Submersion education may occur with the addition of withdrawal classes to teach the majority language, but still appears ineffective in producing bilingual children.

### ***Transitional Bilingual Education***

The second weak model of bilingual education differs from submersion education in that language minority students are initially instructed through their mother tongue until they are thought to be proficient enough in the majority language to cope with mainstream education (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999). To use the swimming pool analogy, transitional bilingual education is a brief, temporary swim in one small pool until the child is perceived as capable of moving onto the mainstream pool. Transitional programs are also marked by the fact that the learner's mother tongue is seen as having little or no intrinsic value in society, only an instrumental value. Teaching through the medium of the mother tongue is not seen as a right to which the child is entitled. The mother tongue is seen as useful only in so far as its auxiliary use enhances the

knowledge of the dominant language. Transitional bilingual education is a more subtle form of assimilation, as it does encourage dominance and often monolingualism in the majority language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999) while proportionally decreasing the use of the home language. Since transitional bilingual education is a weak form of bilingual education, not supporting the home language and culture, it attempts to discourage children's acceptance of the cultural and linguistic norms of their ethnic group.

At the same time, the early-exiting of children into the mainstream classroom tends to result in a relative lack of full linguistic, cultural and educational accomplishments.

### ***Types of Transitional Bilingual Education***

According to Ramirez and Merino (1990, cited in Baker, 2006, p. 221), there are two types of transitional bilingual education programs: *Early-exit* and *Late-exit*. In the early-exit model, students use their L1 to help the acquisition of the L2 only for two to three years while in the late-exit model, students' use of L1 to help build up L2 can be for approximately six years (Ramirez and Merino, 1990, cited in Baker, 2006, p. 221). The major problem with the early-exit model is related to the time set to learn the L2. According to Ovando and Collier (1985), students perform better when they stay longer in bilingual programs and perform poorly when they stay for just two to three years. According to Cummins (1998, cited in Linqunti, 1999), the late-exit model benefits students by encouraging their proficiency in both languages, promoting students L1 literacy skills, which helps develop conceptual foundation for academic progress and clearly communicates students the value of their cultural and linguistic background.

Interestingly, the bilingual education model used in PNG is a somewhat modified version of the transitional bilingual model described above as it incorporates both the 'early exit' and 'late exit' approaches. According to the NDOE Lower Primary Language Syllabus (2003, p. 4), "bridging to English is a gradual change from vernacular/Tok Pisin at the elementary level to English instruction in the lower primary school". The suggested percentages of teaching, learning and assessment in vernacular and English in both the lower primary and upper primary are as follows:

- Grade 3: vernacular - 60% and English - 40%
- Grade 4: vernacular - 50% and English - 50%
- Grade 5: vernacular - 30% and English - 70%
- Grade 6: vernacular - 20% and English - 80%
- Grades 7-8: vernacular -10% and English - 90%

Adapted from Litteral (1999. p. 9)

It is expected that vernacular languages and Tok Pisin are still encouraged in the upper primary (Grade 6-8) but the emphasis is on English. This is what makes the transitional bilingual model in PNG unique from other bilingual programs elsewhere in the world as it neither uses the early-exit model on its own nor the late-exit model on its own. PNG children's education in their L1 for three years is followed by six years of decreasing usage of L1 in the classroom.

Policy planners in PNG believe that “using vernacular language for continued learning and development, while English is being learned, is an effective way for Papua New Guinean students to develop full potential” (p. 4).

However, upon close investigation, the main problem with each program described above as a weak model of bilingual education is that they are “based on seeing the minority child as deficient and education as trying to compensate for deficiencies” (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999, p. 47).

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants***

The study involved 413 respondents in a questionnaire survey undertaken at six schools in the Kokopo District of East New Britain Province. The questionnaire data was collected from primary teachers (n=85), parents of children in participating schools (n=86), and Grade 3 students (n=242). The interviews (47) consisted of curriculum/education officers based in the Curriculum Development Division (CDD) in Port Moresby (n=8), teachers (n=18), parents (n=15), and students (n=6) from the six participating schools.

***Procedure, Data Collection and Analysis***

After obtaining ethics approval of this study, the data collection was carried out. A total of 600 questionnaires were disseminated to all participants across the six schools. These questionnaires were given out to participants after prior arrangements had been made. This included a pre-meeting with the head teacher and Grade 3 teacher/coordinator of each school to decide when, where and how the questionnaires were to be disseminated and collected back from the participants. An allowance of two weeks was given for the completion of the questionnaires

Teachers' questionnaires were given out during a morning tea session in the staff room (in the first week upon the researcher's arrival in each school). The researcher used 10-15 minutes of this time (after prior arrangements with head teachers) to elaborate on the research project and the questionnaires (the different sections of the questionnaire) and explained in detail the cover letter and participants' consent form. The parents' questionnaires together with cover letters and participants' consent forms were then given to Grade 3 students by their teachers to hand deliver to their parents to complete and return.

Students' questionnaires were also disseminated at the end of the first week and after students had become accustomed to seeing the researcher in and around the school grounds. The researcher made prior arrangement(s) with selected Grade 3 class teachers to use the last 10-15 minutes of their nominated lessons to go through the questionnaire, explaining in detail what was expected of the students. Questionnaires were then taken home for completion. The time allocated for the completion of all questionnaires was two weeks. All completed questionnaires were brought to the schools' administrative offices where the researcher then collected them.

Arrangements for the in-depth interviews with the four different cohorts (curriculum officers, teachers, parents and students) differed from each other and are discussed below. All interviews were taped onto a digital voice recorder and downloaded to the password protected researcher's laptop and then transcribed. Arrangement for interviews with curriculum officers based in the Curriculum Development Division (CDD) in Port Moresby was done between the researcher and a senior curriculum officer prior to the researcher's field trip to PNG. By the time the researcher

arrived in Port Moresby, curriculum officers were ready to be interviewed. Eight in-depth interviews were completed. The first part of the interview required curriculum officers' to provide background information on the jobs they held at the CDD and the number of years in their profession. The second part sought curriculum officers' views on the bridging concept from Tok Pisin/vernaculars to English, and the third part sought their views on the issue of teaching resources in schools. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 20-30 minutes.

Interview arrangements with teachers took place during the researcher's first visit to each school. Teacher interviewees were selected according to their experiences with the bridging concept in lower primary schools, and these interviews were conducted depending on the availability of the teachers concerned. All interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 20-30.

Parent interviews were conducted either at a school location or in the village depending on the responses they gave to their children's teachers upon returning the questionnaires as to whether or not they wanted to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in either English or Tok Pisin depending on the choice of the parent. None of the parents chose Tolai. All interviews lasted between 15-20 minutes.

Interviews with students were conducted at recess and lunch in the staffroom. Students were selected by their class teachers depending on their level of confidence in speaking to strangers. Students' interview questions consisted of three parts. The interviews were conducted in either Tok Pisin or English depending on the student's preference. Tolai was also offered but no students chose this option. All interviews lasted between 5-20 minutes.

Results of the questionnaires were analysed using the IBM SPSS Statistics Version 21. Descriptive statistics for the continuous variables were demonstrated as case number and percentage. The non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test at a confidence level of 0.05 was used to determine the statistical differences between the attitudes towards the languages used in the current bilingual education program between different groups. In order to analyse the transcripts

from the interviews, the researcher used some ideas from the “Grounded Theory Approach” (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) adapted for use by Hesse-Biber et al., (2004).

### **Key Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the study revealed conflicting views amongst the participants’ attitudes towards the languages used in the current bilingual program. It found that the concept of using Tok Pisin and vernacular languages in PNG classrooms has not been fully accepted thus creating ambivalence among Papua New Guineans. This is a similar trend to the literature on Pidgin English in Cameroon (Mbufong, 2001), classroom pidgin in Hawaii (Dunford, 1999), creole language education in Jamaica (McCourtie, 1998), mother-tongue based bilingual education in Nigeria (Igboanusi, 2008), language of instruction in Ghana (Sellers, 2007), and literacy in two languages in South Africa (Holmarsdottir, 2003), where the dichotomy between indigenous languages (including pidgins and creoles) and English has continued to be of a paramount debate.

The results of this study provide evidence that there was a general feeling of appreciation and support for the use of Tok Pisin in the classroom, however, the use of Tolai was not as strongly supported. In terms of the practices and delivery of bilingual teaching in the participating schools, it was found that the use of trilingual teaching in Tok Pisin, Tolai and English was a common trend in contrast to bilingual teaching, particularly in Tolai and English programs. The study also found that although some participants embraced the current bilingual education program in the country, they were concerned about the increasing problems which affected both the teachers at the teaching level and the worrying outcomes that were seen amongst the students at the end of Grade 8 in primary schools.

### ***Support for Tok Pisin***

This study revealed that there was general support for Tok Pisin usage among curriculum officers. They contended that since Tok Pisin is now the most preferred medium of communication in PNG and the mother tongue of thousands of Papua New Guinean children (Smith, 2002), it was only proper that it was used as a medium of instruction just like the local

vernaculars in schools. However, curriculum officers argued that if Tok Pisin was to remain successful as a language of instruction, it must be standardized to minimize the degree of dissimilarity in the different linguistic regions of the country (Devette-Chee, 2011) and to enable uniformity in teaching and assessment across all schools nationwide.

Like curriculum officers, the majority of teachers applauded the use of Tok Pisin in the classroom claiming that it helped a lot in situations where teachers do not speak the students' mother tongue and as a medium of communication in school settings where children come from different linguistic backgrounds, and additionally as a 'tool' that students use for self-expression when they exhaust English words in their mental lexicons. This confirms Siegel (1997) who found that "initial instruction in Tok Pisin in PNG is a help and not a hindrance to learning English and other subjects" (p. 86).

Some parents supported the use of Tok Pisin in the classroom like curriculum officers and teachers. These parents claimed that Tok Pisin is important for children to learn as it is a growing national language and children needed it to survive in all domains of society in PNG, which is in line with Tryon and Charpentier (2004). Further confirming this positive attitude are the results of a Mann-Whitney U test which tested for significant differences between Tok Pisin parents and Tok Pisin teachers. Results revealed that there was no significant difference ( $p = .784$ ) in attitudes of both groups towards Q 27. '*Teaching Tok Pisin in elementary school is important for a child's survival in PNG society*'.

Like teachers and parents, students were more supportive of Tok Pisin usage in the classroom compared to Tolai. They said Tok Pisin helped them speak to teachers and understand English better. As noted above, they were much more convinced of the usefulness of Tok Pisin for learning English than the parents. Interestingly, findings showed that children were more supportive of the use of Tok Pisin in helping English learning than some teachers and parents. Among the students ( $n=242$ ) who were surveyed through questionnaires, the majority reported that Tok Pisin was in fact helping them understand basic English concepts through self-

expression, which again supports Siegel's (1977) findings. Further findings from the statistically analysed data revealed that children use Tok Pisin heavily in their homes with their families, in the classroom with teachers (in a bilingual mode with English), and in the school playground and after school with their friends. This indicates that Tok Pisin plays an important role in the lives of Papua New Guinean children today and confirms Smith's (2002) finding on Tok Pisin being the L1 for many PNG children

### *Support for Vernacular Languages*

The study also revealed that curriculum officers were generally in favour of using the local vernaculars in children's initial education as it sets a foundation in children whereby they can utilize and transfer the skills they learnt in their first language to other languages that they later learn in life such as English. These officers believed that bilingual education (in local vernaculars and English) facilitates the development of both the L1 and L2. A number of studies have confirmed that students who develop higher levels of literacy in their L1 have an easier time developing literacy in the L2 (Krashen, 1996). In agreement with previous studies (Shin and Gibbons 1996; Shin and Krashen, 1996) there was strong support for this idea among curriculum officers in this study. Another reason for the support for vernacular languages by these officers was that it helps maintain and preserve culture and gives children an identity, the latter in line with McCarty (2008) who states that the mother tongue symbolizes a deep, abiding, even cord-like connection between speakers and their cultural identity.

Teacher findings revealed that only a small number of teachers (new graduates who are bilingual certified teachers) supported the use of vernacular languages stating that the languages do help when they are bridging the children to English and therefore play an important role in children's education. These teachers maintained that like other bilingual education programs elsewhere in the world, it is better to teach children first in a language that they know, then use this language to bridge them onto English at a later stage confirming Kale (2005) and Ball (2010).

Findings also confirmed that a small group of parents, like teachers, were in favour of the use of vernacular languages in the classrooms. This group claimed that using the children's L1 helped

preserve and maintain the languages and cultures similar to the views of curriculum officers and confirming the findings of Igboanusi (2008).

Findings from the questionnaires also revealed that Tolai students appreciated the use of Tolai as part of their cultural heritage and identity in line with the literature and confirming the perceptions of Baker (2006) and the curriculum officers and some parents and teachers. However, only a minority of Tolai students reported that they only used Tolai with their teachers in the classroom for clarification and enhancing their understanding of English concepts, which supports Klaus (2003).

### **Conflicting views about Tok Pisin**

#### ***Tok Pisin, a threat to vernacular languages***

Curriculum officers were very supportive of the use of Tok Pisin in the current bilingual education program, however, they were concerned about Tok Pisin threatening vernacular languages due to its dominance in all domains of society thus resulting in language loss. The curriculum officers also raised concerns about the need for Tok Pisin to be standardized in schools. These concerns were raised as a result of what they claimed as a rapid increase in different varieties of Tok Pisin in the major urban centres and regions around the country, as discussed by Devette-Chee (2011, pp. 96-97).

Like curriculum officers, teachers raised a number of concerns but they were slightly different. A small group contended that the use of Tok Pisin as a medium of instruction in the classroom only interfered and confused their students, thus hindering their learning progress in English. This supports Charpentier (1997), who argued that pidgins and creoles are not suitable for literacy and use in formal education in Vanuatu due to negative transfer that occurs when pupils subsequently learn English. This feeling of uncertainty among this minority of teacher participants led them to question whether the language is appropriate for use in the current education reform, which is in line with Seller's (2007) views on pidgin in education, which she describes as a language not seriously considered as a medium of instruction (p. 7). On a similar note, Siegel (1999), points out that because of "continuing negative attitudes about creoles and minority dialects it would

still be difficult to get teachers and parents to accept using any of these varieties as a medium of instruction” (p. 524).

The views of the parents towards Tok Pisin were more similar to the teachers than to the curriculum officers. They acknowledged its prevalence and usefulness for life in PNG but queried its appropriateness as a medium of instruction in schools. However, they were less convinced than either teachers or students of statements that Tok Pisin could help with the learning of English. They saw it as more of a hindrance than a help. Nevertheless, like teachers and students, parents rated the educational value of Tok Pisin significantly higher than the educational value of Tolai.

### **Conflicting views about vernacular languages**

#### ***Attitudes towards local vernaculars (Tolai)***

Unlike curriculum officers who strongly supported the use of vernacular languages in the classroom, the majority of teachers were not very supportive of the use of local vernaculars. In addition, results of a Mann-Whitney U test revealed that Tolai teachers had a significantly lower level of agreement ( $p=.009$ ) to the statement Q32 *‘The use of Tolai alongside English in the classroom helps students acquire English easily’* compared to Tok Pisin teachers’ attitudes towards Tok Pisin alongside English. This suggests that Tolai teachers in general have a low regard of Tolai usage in children’s education.

These negative attitudes towards Tolai were also evidenced in the parents’ interviews where nine parents spoke vocally against the use of local vernaculars in the classroom. Although worldwide research has proven that literacy in the child’s first language (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000) enables the child to learn the dominant language (English) better, many parents in this particular study had a completely different perspective to that. What parents wanted to see similar to what Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) pointed out as claimed by other researchers, was a good education in English which would enable their children to get paid jobs in the future.

An important finding was that students appreciated the use of vernacular languages more than teachers and parents. However, Tolai students appear less convinced of the importance of Tolai for speaking with their teachers or understanding English. This is perhaps not surprising given that the results of this study revealed that Tok Pisin plays a large role in classrooms that are supposedly Tolai/English bilingual settings.

### **The Importance of English**

Like many multilingual countries around the world, English has been viewed as a cornerstone to prosperity and good will which exerts power and status, and PNG is no exception. A study by Mazrui (2002) on the language scenario in African countries (which were former British and French colonies) resembles the current perception that Papua New Guineans have on the role of English today.

Curriculum officers described English as a difficult language to learn, thus relating to their own learning experiences during the reign of Australian administration where they were forced to learn English. This alienated them from their culture which confirms Matane (1986). This is one of the reasons they so strongly support the current education system where students are learning with ease in a language they know in support of Skutnabb-Kangas (2000), who contends that when children's education is in a language they do not know, whether due to family choice or lack of an alternative, it violates the child's rights.

Teachers on the other hand, were more vocal about the significance of English in the current education system alongside the use of Tok Pisin and vernaculars similar to the study in Arizona by Garcia-Nevarez (2005). What was found in this study was that the significance of English, which traditional ESL teachers were taught to believe as 'the key to success', a common slogan on most classroom notice boards and hallways, (which often read as 'English is the key to success' or 'Speak English only and you will succeed') during pre and post independence days in PNG, is still colouring the attitudes of traditional ESL teachers in contrast to bilingual certified teachers. This no doubt influences their attitudes towards the bilingual education program.

Teachers' attitudes to the bilingual policy are also affected by the link between the current educational reform and falling standards of English and high drop-out rates. Teachers are overwhelmed by the fact that most children are failing to master the basic skills of English (not being able to read and speak English) after having gone through the transition and bridging to English period enshrined in the bilingual program in the lower primary years. There are alarming scenarios where entire classes fail to read and comprehend English. As reported by a female teacher (IV13/teach/Martha/9.06.09), out of her class of forty students, only ten knew how to read in English while thirty were struggling. Worse still were concerns raised about the nature of tests which are all written and conducted in English which students have great difficulties comprehending. Such reasons explain why many teachers do not support bilingual education.

Many parents also fail to see the benefits of bilingual education claiming that their children are being deprived of their rights of not being fully literate in English by the time they complete primary school. A similar sentiment was expressed by parents in Hawaii (Dunford, 1999), Jamaica (McCourtie, 1998), and Cameroon (Mbufong, 2001). These past studies revealed that parents thought that using Pidgin English and mother tongue in the classrooms undermined the learning of Standard English. Interestingly, the parents who participated in this research were far more supportive than teachers of the statement '*English is an international language therefore children should acquire it at an early age (in elementary 1 and 2) to be successful in life*'. There was a highly significant difference ( $p < .001$ ).

Further confirming this strong demand for English were parents from a particular village in Kokopo who showed their dissatisfaction with the current situation by pointing out that most children from their village today do not go beyond Grade 8 compared to the past. They claim that the contributing factors include poor foundation in English skills, and that their children are either still illiterate or semi-literate in English by the time they complete Grade 8 and therefore are denied places at high school and are forced to go back to the village as drop-outs. This is a real problem in this village as more and more children now drop out of Grade 8 and become a threat to the village community as there are no job opportunities for them in such an environment which confirms Rena (2011).

These children may be literate in their mother tongue, Tolai and/or Tok Pisin, but what good will this bring them if there are no job opportunities using their own *tokples*? Honan (2003, p. 7) highlighted this very question in her paper on ‘Disrupting assumptions about vernacular education in PNG’. She questioned what would happen in PNG communities in twenty years’ time when most people have had a basic education using their own mother tongue. She also questioned what social practices would change or arise with the development of *tokples* literacy practices. The reality of this scenario is now dawning in one such village in Kokopo as described by three parents where children have returned to the village with the feeling of regret, humiliation and denigration of their rights of gaining a good education, thus adding onto the already existing social and economic ills in the village.

This study showed an equally strong demand for English among students as young as 9-14 years old in lower primary schools, probably a ‘flow-on effect’ from their parents on how they should perceive English. Such views influenced their attitudes towards the languages they used in the classroom. From the students’ questionnaire data, it is clear that although they appreciated learning Tok Pisin and Tolai as part of their cultural heritage, they saw English as a language of high importance in terms of reading their exam papers (which are all written in English), English being an international language and most importantly, the expectations of their parents to be literate in English in order to secure future job opportunities, the ultimate goal of most parents. This conforms to past studies such as Mbufong’s (2001), who stated that “parents are naturally anxious that their children should become doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects, graduate teachers etc” (p. 2), and Igboanusi’s (2008), who reiterated that English is important in securing jobs and that the association of English with prestige, power and opportunities has been the driving force for the preference of many parents to wish education in that language for their children.

However, responses from teachers in the interviews indicate that not all parents are as convinced of the importance of English as those who participated in this study. Some teachers reported a strong village influence undermining the schools’ attempts to transition to English. One teacher spoke of the need to make children aware of the importance of learning English in order for them

to stay focused and appreciate why they are learning the language. The parents who took part in this study may have been particularly concerned about the current system.

The findings also revealed that there was a lack of parental support in English for their students/children at home. The study found that in most homes, Tok Pisin was the most common medium of communication, followed by Tolai whilst the use of English was either very minimal or non-existent. It was also found that English usage in the classroom was very limited in its quantity and there was a narrow focus on specific vocabulary and English concepts thus encouraging 'rote-learning' (which should have been phased out) to dominate the lesson, especially in classes taught by traditional ESL teachers. Students' responses in English, if they responded at all in English, were limited to one-word answers with no explanations in most cases. Evidence from the questionnaire data showed that students seldom used English outside the classroom with their peers.

It is clear from the data that students need help in English both in and out of the classroom and at home. Teachers and parents are the key players in helping their students/children achieve the ultimate goal of securing job opportunities and, therefore, need to play their part if they wish to see their students/children become successful in life. Parents in particular could provide an avenue at home where their children are able to practise English, a wish that was expressed by a student in this study (IV25/stu/Alanna/18.06.09) who wishes to see her parents speak English to her at home in order to help her with her oral skills in English. However, using English at home might conflict with the family's identity as a Tolai or Tok Pisin-speaking community.

### **Transition from Tok Pisin and Vernacular Languages to English**

A second contributing factor towards the participants' attitudes to the languages used in bilingual education was the timing of transition from Tok Pisin and the local vernaculars to English in Grade 3. There was a general feeling of dissatisfaction among teachers and parents about the age at which students are bridged to English. The majority wanted an earlier transition to English. However, it was surprising to find that parents were far more discontented with the current age of transition than teachers. As the Mann-Whitney U test showed parents were significantly more in

agreement with the statement ‘*English is an international language therefore children should acquire it at an early age (in elementary 1 and 2) to be successful in life*’ than teachers ( $p < .001$ ).

As a reminder, according to the NDOE, Philosophy of Curriculum Reform (2007, p. 9), English is first introduced to children towards the end of grade two (in elementary schools), which involves simple oral English. By the time they reach Grade 3 in primary school, the actual bridging in a bilingual mode takes place up until Grade 5 when they are supposed to have mastered all English basic skills and are ready for an all-English classroom in upper primary (Grade 6-8). Many participants in this study believe that children are not achieving the English outcomes stipulated in the national primary reform curriculum on bilingual education, and they attribute these poor outcomes to English being introduced too late.

An important finding in this study is that some participants prefer either an education system where English is introduced together with Tok Pisin and the local vernaculars from day one in elementary school or where English is the sole language of instruction from elementary prep up to Grade 12, in other words a re-introduction of the English-only curriculum.

### **Conclusion**

The views discussed in this paper are clearly at odds with the literature which shows that requiring children to transition too soon to education in a new language (such as English) can be detrimental to their learning processes and their academic achievement (Porter, 1990). This is further supported by UNESCO (2008) which suggests that the transition to a language of instruction other than the child's L1 should not be required of students before 6 to 8 years of formal schooling. Other studies have also concluded that children who learn in L1 for the first 6-8 years of formal schooling have better academic performance and self-esteem than those who receive instruction exclusively in the official language or those who transition too early from the home language to the official language.

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