

Why Primary Students are not Speaking, Reading and Writing English

Dongau Singin, Provincial Elementary Inspector Coordinator, Morobe Province

Papua New Guinea is a unique country in the world. Papua New Guinea has 800 plus languages. The children of Papua New Guinea are born into these rich cultures of ours. Research has indicated that children become members of their cultures by participating and watching people's lives in their daily activities Gonzalez - Mena (2001, p.2). Papua New Guinea needs to revive and encourage children through Vernacular Elementary to maintain and preserve their rich cultures.

The children of Papua New Guinea must be given their rights to these rich cultures that they are born into; Article 27 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948 – 1998). The Vernacular Elementary is and will be the vehicle which will empower the people of Papua New Guinea to hold fast to their cultural heritage for future generations.

Elementary schools now- a -days are brought closer to the door steps of the child. The child does not ever need to be sent away or walk long distances to attend these elementary schools. The community and the elementary schools are part of the child. The child has four hours of formal education and is sent back to the parents for the informal part of his/her education. The parents and teachers play important roles in any child's education.

At the elementary school, children learn to speak and listen, read and write in their first language spoken at home and in the community. Elementary education is three years of formal education in the local vernacular. Why should vernacular be used as the medium of instruction in the elementary education?

Children entering elementary schools are very fluent and competent in their own vernacular. Research has indicated that children of six to eight years of age learn as many as five to ten new words per day with vocabularies consisting of 10,000 to 14,000 words Allan & Marotz (2003, p. 145). Elementary children have more language, science, mathematical vocabularies in their vernacular which allows them to get meaning for themselves and those around them.

It can be said that elementary schools using vernacular language is not altogether a new concept in Papua New Guinea. It has been done before and can be done today. Some of the earliest schools in Papua New Guinea run by the churches used local language to spread the Good News to the people. The Lutheran Church was one of those churches that started schools in 1948 using Kâte, Yabem and Graged languages in church run schools. These three languages were known as the church language (The Lutheran Church in Papua New Guinea (1886-1986, p.410).

When children enter elementary schools, they will learn to read and write in the local language. They are competent users of their first language spoken at home and in the community. They bring to school rich experiences from their environment and the community that they grew up in.

These children have seen some literacy used at home and in their community. They are now at the elementary school. The elementary children are orally competent in their first language. In elementary school, the focus is now on literacy. The literacy knowledge, skills and attitudes must be learnt and used in their language.

When children enter an elementary school, they expect to read and write (Cutting (1989, p. 9). Children like to do well in most things they do. So they want to read in school. They need to act the parts of what readers do. They expect to hold the books, turn the pages, look at the pages and read from left to right. They will want to read and try to read books like the teacher, parents, older siblings or someone in class.

The elementary teachers are required to put into their teaching activities the Conditions of Learning as it applies to Literacy, (Teachers Book 1 Introduction to Elementary and Material Productions (1995 p. 18-22). Children are given or allowed Conditions of Learning in all teaching areas. The parents, teachers, children and supervisors need to apply these conditions of learning daily.

In elementary grades, teachers use interactive literacy to teach elementary children to read and write (Introduction to Elementary and Materials Production (1995, p. 48). The interactive literacy uses both the whole language and parts of language to teach reading and writing.

The elementary teachers write and produce Big books and small books that are used in the elementary schools. Big books are used by the teacher and children during the Shared Reading Experience, Cutting (1998, p. 37, and Teachers Book 1 Introduction to Elementary and Materials Production (1995 p. 24). The reading is modeled by the teacher during the Shared Reading Experience. The steps followed in the Shared Reading Experience are: Talk – Read – Talk – Read – Do talk.

Let us look at the Shared Reading Experience steps.

Talk: The teacher tells a story related to a Big Book story to arouse children's interest.

Read: The teacher reads the Big book. Reading of the Big book is done with a reading stick from left to right (To show, and to keep pace of the reading to the print in the book.

Talk: Teacher and children discuss the pictures in the Big book.

Read: The teacher and children read the Big book together.

Do Talk: Children do oral activities in assigned groups.

In the Shared Reading Experience, elementary teachers use both Top down and bottom up interactive literacy (Introduction to Elementary and Material Production (1995, p. 42). The elementary teachers need to understand and use the 3 Cueing Systems of Language (Teachers Work Book 1 Introduction to Elementary and Materials Production 1995, p.32 - 33). The 3 cueing systems of the language helps the elementary teacher to plan and teach complete language lessons.

Another important aspect of Literacy is the Four Essential Parts of Literacy (Teachers Work Book 1 Introduction to Elementary and Materials Production 1995, p. 39). The Four Essential Parts of Literacy are used to help elementary teachers plan and teach

complete language lessons. This is critical when elementary teachers can use these ideas in the strands and sub-strands in the Language Syllabus (2003, p. 11).

The elementary teacher's background knowledge of interactive literacy, Big books and small books, Shared Reading Experience, 3 cueing systems of Language Four Essential Parts of Literacy and Conditions of Learning enables elementary teachers to plan, prepare and teach complete language lessons to the elementary children. This becomes the basis of elementary children's literacy.

When elementary teachers follow these literacy procedures in their practices, the children are able to read and write in their own vernacular. Their three years of elementary education enables these children to be fluent speakers and fluent writers of their vernacular. Many Papua New Guineas are oral users of their vernacular. Today's elementary school children will become writers and authors and readers of tomorrow in their own language. This is how elementary teachers have helped elementary children to read and write fluently in their own language.

Bridging Process now

The Education Department has been criticized for the Education Reform in the media. It has been argued that students of grades 3 to 8 were not able to read and write English well in the Education Reform. (The National 21 March, 2005, p. 6). The majority of the population is not aware of the Education Reform.

Bridging itself has many problems. Like many new ideas, bridging needs teachers, school administrators and supervisors to have positive attitudes to make it work. Bridging is not an easy task. Bridging needs local vernacular grade three teachers to do Bridging. Grade three local teachers will understand the vernacular to English to Bridge the children. Teachers who are not from Vernacular cannot do bridging. This is not consistent with bridging. The bridging will lose its essence.

Bridging

When does bridging come in during the Vernacular Elementary? In Vernacular Elementary, Oral Bridging is introduced only at the end of Elementary Two. That is in terms 3 and 4 of Elementary Two grade National Curriculum Statement (2002, p. 13). The word 'Oral' means spoken. The Vernacular Elementary teachers take 5 to 10 minutes per day to say rhymes, do finger plays and actions in English, sing simple English songs with actions and say simple instructions in Vernacular and English and do actions in Introduction to Oral Bridging (1999, p. 8). These lessons or activities prepare Vernacular Elementary children to listen and say words and phrases in English, their second language.

It is understood that Vernacular Elementary children have had oral bridging in terms 3 and 4 of Elementary two. When one tries to do some mathematical calculations of 10 weeks x two terms x 5 days of school x 10 minutes per day one comes close to 1,000 minutes divided by 60 minutes, one gets 17 hours of oral instructions in English in Vernacular Elementary School. That is only 17 hours of oral instructions in English. Not much, but enough help to get started in the second language.

Vernacular Elementary students enter grade three in Lower Primary School with only Oral Bridging. These Elementary students come into grade three with cultural knowledge, skills, attitudes and beliefs. They are fluent in their language. They can read and write in their language. They are a step ahead of their older siblings who had

no elementary education, parents and grand parents as readers and writers of their language. These Vernacular Elementary children have mastered literacy skills in their three years of Elementary schooling.

When these children enter grade three in Lower Primary School, they expect to read and write in English just as they did in their Vernacular. They enter grade three with high expectations to learn in English. They are fired with dreams to speak, read and write English just like their older siblings, parents and those around them in their community.

In grade three of lower primary school, teachers will provide these children with literacy skills required to teach these children to read and write in English, their second language. These students expect to speak and listen, read and write in English as they did with their own vernacular at Elementary School.

In grade three in primary schools, these children enter another new world unlike their elementary school. They now have to meet new students from other feeder Elementary schools. Their teachers are new to them.

Even their classroom set up is new to them. They now have desks to sit on. While at Elementary Schools they had no desks to be confined to. They had the whole bare floor to exercise freedom and comfortable ways to learn. The individuals are comfortable sitting or sleeping on the floor to read or write. This new physical transition from Elementary classroom to primary classroom also has a great impact on these children.

This physical transition plays important an role in the learning. The primary teachers are unaware of these physical changes. Instead of really trying to work things out for this allowance, the teacher drops an atomic bomb on these children by going straight to English.

Bridging in Primary Schools now:

The Department of Education through the Curriculum Division, produce some in-service books on bridging. These books have the title ‘Bridging to English’ and ‘The Approach to Bilingual Primary Education handbook’ (2000, p. 26). Those books are believed to be very useful to bridging now. What has happened to these books? These books should guide and help bridging teachers in Primary schools to do effective bridging.

How much awareness was done on bridging in primary schools from 1999 to 2004? How many in-service packages were written, distributed and workshops run on bridging in all provinces in the country to enable primary school teachers to do bridging? How much has been done to prepare these primary teachers to do bridging effectively?

Many teachers in most of these primary schools have a vague idea of what to do in bridging. The steps to do bridging and how to go about has not been done to prepare these teachers to do bridging. The parents are making negative comments about the bridging in primary schools (The National 21 March, 2005, p. 6). Why do these parents make negative comments about the bridging? How much is the Education Department doing about the bridging at primary schools now?

Bridging like many new ideas to implement, will have many problems. The country now has bridging in place but how to go about bridging approaches has not been

deeply thought about. It is supposed that the primary schools would just know what to do with bridging? It is not that easy a task to do bridging.

Primary trained teachers need knowledge and skills to do bridging. Bridging teachers need special in-services training to help them plan, prepare and teach bridging at grade three level. Without these in-service trainings, the bridging is not as effective as it is now.

Let us not forget that the Vernacular Elementary children have mastered the Vernacular literacy. They are now more than ready to take on the second language and the literacy skills and knowledge needed to read and write in English as well.

One of the greatest problems with bridging or bi-lingual today in our primary schools is how to teach. The bi-lingual approaches have not been introduced in in-services to enable or prepare these teachers to teach. These primary teachers need to teach grade 3 students to have literacy skills to enable these students to read and write in English, their second language.

How do the primary teachers teach in grade 3 in bridging or bi-lingual classes? From day one, most or all of the oral and written instructions are issued in English. The transition here was made at the speed of lightning. When only English is used, students barely understand what is going on and are easily distracted and bored (Crawford in Berk 2003, p. 389)

How should the primary teachers teach in grade 3 in bridging or bilingual class? Remember that these students come into grade 3 with three years of Vernacular Elementary Education. All educators are aware of this rule of known to unknown. So what is with this idea of bridging? Do the same start with something the children know and later go to a new language. The bridging from Vernacular to English must be done by bridging.

This means we use both vernacular and English in issuing both oral and written instructions. This bridging is not happening inside most grade three classrooms around the country. This is because primary teachers need in-service training on how to plan, prepare and teach bridging in lower primary.

How can primary teachers teach bridging when they have no experience in bridging methods and practices in bridging? These teachers were not given enough support in bridging. Primary teachers find doing bridging difficult when they move to known ways of teaching which is using only English. The more teachers use English in both oral and written, the more confused and frustrated the children become. In the end these children lose interest in their work and school.

Bridging must be done both in Vernacular and English at the beginning of grade three, Language Teacher guide Lower primary (2004, p. 10). The students are competent in Vernacular literacy. What is very important at this point? At this point, English literacy has to be taught just like the Vernacular literacy in the Elementary. This is where bridging is important and how it is done.

When bridging is done properly in both the vernacular and English at the beginning of grade three, students will demonstrate their vernacular literacy and actively participate and involve in the learning (Crawford in Berk 2003, p. 389).

How can bridging be done?

Bridging can be done properly when primary teachers are in-serviced in the underlying principles of bridging. At this time of bridging, no proper bridging in-service training books have been written to train teachers to plan lessons, prepare materials and show how to teach the bridging ways.

Primary teachers just will not be able to do bridging by only reading the syllabus and teachers' guides. Primary teachers need some practical 'hands on' experience the whole bridging areas from planning to teaching, evaluating and assessments of the lessons taught.

Bridging just does not happen over night. Bridging will take years to develop the concepts. Researchers have indicated that bridging or bi-lingual students can perform better than one language students in their reasoning at higher grades of learning Berk (2003, p. 388). All stake-holders need to support them in every area to encourage the bridging.

Some problems which affect bridging

Some of the problems below have causes a set back in primary children's education in Papua New Guinea.

1. The training of Elementary teachers has not been managed well after the Aus Aid team left the country. Elementary teacher training is compromising training components.
2. The supervision, monitoring and reporting of the Elementary trainee teacher is not consistent. This is an 'apprentice' type 'on the job' training (Certificate of Elementary handbook) (2003, p.5). These children are from Elementary. When not taught well, there are problems ahead.
3. The LLGs, districts, provinces are not supporting the Education Reform. Logistic support is not existent in most of the districts.
4. Primary Teachers' colleges are doing more on the Bridging theories and less on the Bridging practical side.
5. Primary teachers, administrators and supervisors need to know and understand the Bridging concepts to enable slow transition from elementary to primary school.
6. Primary teachers, administrators and supervisors have vague ideas relating to the Outcome Based Education and need to fully experience the planning and teaching of the syllabus.
7. Primary and Elementary teachers need to network in the children transferring into primary schools.

8. Elementary and primary schools should allow parents to become actively involved in their children's education in assessment and reporting.
9. Local Vernacular Primary Schools need to have local Primary teachers to teach bi-lingual in grades 3, 4, and 5 to implement bi-lingual concepts in all teaching areas.
10. Appointment of local teachers to local primary schools is to teach bridging.
11. Implementation, monitoring and supervision is not effective at all levels of education.
12. There is no control over permitted schools. These permitted schools send in children to primary grade three. These children have less than three years of elementary education. Permitted schools used their own curriculum. They do one year and send children into grade three because they use English

Conclusion

In Bridging we need to look back to how much is done in elementary Education of three years of vernacular. The training of elementary teachers and the teaching of elementary teachers will be evident in the grade three bridging.

In grade three, the training and teaching of the grade three teachers. If the teachers know what to plan, teach and assess what is taught, the bridging can be done with lesser problems.

When the bridging ideas are lacking, the children and the teacher lose the joy in learning. Even the administrators and supervisors cannot help with the bridging ideas. We need experts to help show the way to bridging.

This is the time that all stakeholders come to an understanding that we all need each others in put to make bridging or bi-lingual a success in our country.

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