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PAPUA NEW GUINEA
LANGUAGES AT A
CROSSROAD IN LIEU OF THE
INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF
INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES
2022–2032

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Key Points

- International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022-2032 promotes language preservation, and revitalisation.
- PNG languages are in danger of becoming extinct.
- Immediate intervention is needed to preserve PNG languages.
- Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education is a possible strategy in maintaining PNG languages.

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PAPUA NEW GUINEA LANGUAGES AT A CROSSROAD IN LIEU OF THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES 2022–2032

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The United Nations General Assembly Resolution (Ref.: A/74/396, 18 December 2019) proclaimed the International Decade of Indigenous Languages from 2022 to 2032 (IDIL2022-2032) with a preparatory period from 2020 to 2021. The IDIL2022-2032 aims, among its main objectives, to draw attention to the critical loss of indigenous languages and the urgent need to preserve, revitalise and promote them. The IDIL2022-2032 is a unique opportunity to raise awareness on the importance of indigenous languages for sustainable development, peace-building and reconciliation in our societies, as well as to mobilise stakeholders and resources around the world to support and promote indigenous languages worldwide.

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of the countries in the Pacific that is now vulnerable to losing its languages due to the heavy use of Tok Pisin and English. A new study (Kik et al., 2021) which surveyed and tested more than 6,000 secondary school students in PNG speaking 392 languages found that only 58 percent of the students compared to 91 percent of their parents were fluent in their mother tongue. This decline in language competence among PNG's populace is alarmingly worrying as it is driven by the process of an increase in the sharing of mixed-language families where each parent speaks a different indigenous language as well as life-style changes, particularly urbanisation.

In lieu of the International Decade of Indigenous Languages 2022–2032, this article highlights the need and ways of saving the more than 850 PNG languages as a contribution to the literature on IDIL2022-2032 with specific focus on PNG's linguistic situation and possible ways of preserving its languages. The structure of the paper is as follows; 1) Background, 2) PNG's linguistic situation, 3) Education reform, 4) The importance of Mother Tongue-Based Education, and 5) Conclusion and recommendations.

Background

In my response to an EMTV crew recently when asked about strategies to preserve the more than 850 languages in PNG, I pointed out that the best way was to include our indigenous languages in the education system. These languages which were embedded in the curriculum during the bilingual education

reform era in the mid 1990's to mid 2000. Unfortunately, this reform was short lived due to incorrect implementation of this bilingual teaching concept. This paper revisits the importance of this phased out Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MT-Based BLE) program which most stakeholders failed to understand, let alone, evaluate and assess its successes and failures and take preventative measures which could have resulted in a prolonged successful education system for the betterment and preservation of PNG languages. The MT-Based BLE curriculum was already picking up momentum and was viewed by our Pacific Island neighbours as a success playing an exemplary role during its initial phase, however, fell short due to gross misconception of the concept.

PNG's linguistic situation

PNG's indigenous population is one of the most heterogeneous in the world (DFAT, 2017) which has several thousand separate communities, most with only a few hundred people. What is striking about this Melanesian island nation is that it has been described by many linguists as the most linguistically diverse country in the world. It has a population of 9 million who speak more than 850 local vernaculars with different dialects (DFAT, 2017).

According to the author's own observation and research as a socio-linguist, the current linguistic trend in the country which sees PNG languages on the decline is due mainly to: mixed marriages where both parents speak different languages thus creating a vacuum for their children to learn either languages since Tok Pisin or English becomes the home language; natural disasters which causes linguistic genocide; economic globalisation where speakers of small language groups abandon their languages for Tok Pisin, a language seen by many as the symbol of modernisation and a means of attaining economic success; lack of language documentation – many small languages have become extinct without being documented; ignorance of the speakers themselves; and lack of education in indigenous languages.

Further exacerbating these concerns is the rapid increase in the linguistic process of moribund (at the verge of extinction) situations where small or minority languages die a natural death. Currently, 88 PNG languages are on the verge of extinction (Moseley, 2010). This means that when the last speaker of the language dies, so does the language. The classification of these 88 languages according to UNESCO's terms, 23 are vulnerable

(most children speak the language, but it may be restricted to certain domains such as homes), 15 are definitely vulnerable/definitely endangered (children no longer learn the language as mother tongue in the home), 30 are severely vulnerable/serverely endangered (language is spoken by grandparents and older generations; while the parent generation may understand it, they do not speak it to children or among themselves) and 20 are critically vulnerable/critically endangered (the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language partially and infrequently).

This alarming scenario of language endangerment now calls for resolutions for preservation of PNG languages. One possible immediate intervention is to re-introduce MT-Based BLE or introduce indigenous/vernacular languages in the education curriculum as a subject.

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 to 8 (which previously used to be from Grades 1 to 6). Secondary schools (which used to be from Grades 7 to 10) were then changed to Grades 9 to 12 in all provinces. The long-term goal of the reform was to achieve sustainable, quality universal basic education, a more productive skilled population and to preserve PNG languages.

As children entered lower primary school (Grades 3 to 5) at the age of nine, they were introduced to the transitional bilingual program in Grade 3 which used one of PNG's vernacular languages or Tok Pisin with English. This bridging period was expected to continue up to Grade 5. When students entered upper primary school (Grades 6 to 8), the main emphasis in their classroom was on English as the language of instruction. However, the use of the local vernaculars and Tok Pisin was still encouraged. By the end of Grade 8, when students are 14 years of age, they were expected to have mastered the basic skills in English and be ready to enter secondary school (Grades 9 to 12). Sadly, this much anticipated policy failed to flourish due to improper implementation of the required strategies.

The importance of Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual education

When the MT-Based BLE was introduced, it was welcomed by mostly pro bilingual educators with very limited awareness to the general public causing a dichotomy between supporters of the Objective-Based Education (using English-only) and supporters of vernacular education (Devette-Chee, 2014). What the general population of PNG failed to see was the fact that MT-Based BLE is a form of schooling that uses the first language (L1) for teaching, beginning with literacy (reading and writing) and content area instruction (such as mathematics), while teaching

the second language (L2) as a foreign language. Research has demonstrated that bilingual education has cognitive, academic, social, and cultural benefits for elementary school students (Colón-Muñiz and Valenzuela, 2012).

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 (Colón-Muñiz and Valenzuela, 2012). 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. Research has shown that students who can speak and write in multiple languages have cognitive advantages over their monolingual peers. Those who learn a second or third language from a young age are able to develop communication skills and a higher degree of literacy (Colón-Muñiz & Valenzuela, 2012).

At the academic level, bilingual education allows children to access the curriculum and perform better in lower primary schools. Past studies (Thomas and Collier, 1997; Mohanty, 2010; Pinnock and Vijayakumar, 2009; Colón-Muñiz and Valenzuela, 2012) have demonstrated that children learn academic content faster in their L1 than in an unfamiliar foreign language. These research studies have also shown that children who have studied through their first language as the medium of instruction for several years (at least through primary stage) perform much better in the second language and other subjects than those who have studied through a second language or shifted very soon to the second language.

At the social level, bilingual education has the advantage of producing individuals who are often tolerant of other people and cultures. Research shows that 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 (Colón-Muñiz and Valenzuela, 2012).

Furthermore, bilingual education preserves the students' indigenous language and culture which increases the students' self-esteem and cultural identity. One of the arguments for using vernacular languages in the PNG's education system is that it will help save indigenous languages and cultures, and saving indigenous cultures is necessary to preserve the nation's intellectual and aesthetic creativity.

Conclusion and recommendations

To conclude, in order to protect PNG's indigenous languages from extinction:

- Re-introduce Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual education with an improved set of strategies on how to implement or execute the program.
- PNG languages must be included in the school

curriculum as a subject through one of the following options.

- Option 1: All languages can be used from Elementary to Grade 10;
- Option 2: Only selected PNG languages to be used as subjects in the Secondary School curriculum; and,
- Option 3: Selected PNG languages to be combined with appropriate courses at the teachers' colleges and universities. For example, a local vernacular language can be a minor specialisation and major can be English or social science.
- A national language institute must be set up to deal with PNG's language issues, activities and preservation of its languages.
- Public awareness is needed to educate parents to promote vernacular languages in the homes. This can be done through media outlets: TV, newspapers, social media platforms etc.
- There is a need for nationwide linguistic survey. This survey should focus on specific linguistic information such as the actual number of languages, the number of speakers of each of the languages, and whether the speakers are naturally transmitting their languages to the younger generations or abandoning them for other languages, and for what reasons.

It is imperative that more attention is given to the preservation of, and literacy in PNG languages. The best strategy is to embed these languages in the national education system using a different approach from the previous which encouraged bilingual education only as a bridge to learning English, and did not help with the development of vernacular languages and their cultures. What is needed is an education system which promotes language maintenance, preservation, and revitalisation which is in alignment with the IDIL2022-2032.

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