STARTING FROM SOMEWHERE: A CASE FOR THE USE OF MELANESIAN PIDGIN IN SCHOOL-BASED LITERACY EDUCATION IN VANUATU AND THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

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1. INTRODUCTION

Choosing the official language medium of formal education in multilingual countries is a delicate task based on sensitive cultural, linguistic, social and political considerations as well as historical, economic and pedagogical realities (Goodman, Goodman & Flores 1978).[1] Bilingual, perhaps even multilingual, education is essential for most; children from minority language backgrounds will inevitably achieve some measure of bilingualism as a consequence of attending school in all but rare vernacular classes. But given that language has the power to constrain as well as to augment understanding, it is crucial that educational policy planners consider very carefully how to prepare children for education in another language. Through what medium should literacy, the cornerstone of education, be introduced?

This paper is concerned with helping early primary school children learn to read. The children considered are those in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, Melanesian countries within the University of the South Pacific region. These children are presently being introduced to literacy in schools via a world language. This paper argues in favour of introducing initial literacy in a language which is used at the community level, where emergent literacy begins, in order to facilitate literacy acquisition, promote the development of language skills, and improve community involvement in education.

Children in these Melanesian countries speak in the vicinity of 180 languages, most of which do not enjoy a literate tradition extending much beyond religious texts, if that. Furthermore, English (and in Vanuatu, French as well) is a language which children must master if they are to succeed at formal schooling. According to the Ministries of Education in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the present policy is to introduce literacy through immersion study in English (or French). Both English,[2] and by association, literacy, are, thus, contextualised in formal educational practice.

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1 I am grateful to colleagues at the University of the South Pacific, Joseph Wale and Kenneth Fakamuria for their insightful comments on literacy and language usage in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, respectively, and David Jenkins for his critical comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Thanks also go to Jeff Siegel of the University of New England for his helpful comments on the version of this paper presented at FICOL.

2 This paper will confine itself to the English-stream population, but remarks made about education in English apply similarly to education in French.

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It has been well demonstrated, however, that initial literacy does not begin in school with formal instructional programmes but in the home and community with exposure to reading as a natural activity (Curtis 1986; Goodman & Goodman 1979; Heath 1983). The establishment of school language and literacy programmes which are pedagogically discontinuous with and unsupportive of prior community learning creates an institutional mystique around school for both children and parents alike. The decision to provide all formal education in a high-status, colonially-introduced language that does not have currency at the community level further excludes the community from significant educational participation.

This paper argues that we can give Melanesian children a better chance to be successful readers, writers and learners by introducing text to them in a medium they can already use. This would reduce the disparity between community and school learning and provide intergenerational support for literacy acquisition. Given the complex linguistic demography of Melanesia, vernacular literacy education is an exceedingly challenging proposition, although programme precedents have been set in regions of similar linguistic complexity, such as the Village Tok-Ples School Project of Bougainville and Buka (Saovana-Spriggs 1984) and the PNG Trust critical literacy work (Faraclas, this volume). It is the position of this paper that primary schoolchildren in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu should be given the opportunity to become literate in their respective dialects of Melanesian Pidgin (MP), Pijin and Bislama, where vernacular literacy instruction is not feasible (such as in urban areas), while, at the same time, studying the world language to which they will eventually transfer their literacy skills.

2. LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

2.1 EMERGENT LITERACY

Although literacy is often viewed in Pacific communities as 'something children learn in school', the overwhelming evidence is that emergent literacy begins in the child's preschool years at home and in the community (Clay 1991; Curtis 1986; Heath 1983; Wray & Medwell 1991). Print is encountered as a natural occurrence in the context of home and community life in such places as shop and road signs, labels on food packages (including chewing gum and soft drinks), printed t-shirts, incoming or outgoing mail, and money, for example. Functional literacy skills are seen in practice in the casual reading of a newspaper, for instance, or the reverential reading (or singing) of religious texts (Goodman & Goodman 1979; Heath 1983). Curtis (1986) showed that preschool children from both monolingual and bilingual contexts who were exposed to literacy events in the home and community developed what she termed 'graphic sense': discriminatory perceptions of what a 'word' was in either English or Spanish (e.g. not *iii*, but *fin*; not a picture of a flower, but *flower*), as well as ideas about where certain content words were on the page (e.g. *kitty* on a page picturing a cat). Heath (1983) in her seminal ethnographic study of literate traditions in rural communities in the southern US found that two socioculturally diverse communities steeped their children, unconsciously, in their own literate traditions, neither of which was supported by instructional practices and values in further school literacy programmes. Children developed contextually appropriate literacy skills, such as 'reading' shop and road signs, identifying names on addressed letters, recognising and even 'writing' their names, reacting appropriately to prayers and hymns.

Goodman and Goodman (1979:139) state that, although learning to read should be viewed as natural learning, "Teaching children to read is not putting them into a garden of print and leaving them unmolested." As Wray and Medwell (1991:80) state:

> We do not wish to argue that the kinds of experience of using literacy which children get at home are in any way sufficient for them to develop as fully literate people. Schools do have a role to play.

The notion of school-initiated literacy has been reinforced by the concept of 'reading readiness': a view of literacy development positing that children become 'ready' to read at a certain age, which is accommodated accordingly in the curricula of formal schooling (Wray & Medwell 1991). However, children beginning school are, in fact, at quite different levels of preparation for literacy instruction contingent not only on individual differences but also, importantly, on their home and community literacy experiences (Clay 1991). Time and time again, experts in literacy education tell us that school literacy programmes should extend children's prior literacy experiences (Clay 1985; Heath 1982; Goodman 1985, 1986). Children who come to school from impoverished literacy backgrounds – in this case, those coming from village communities where print materials are scarce and do not form part of everyday life – must be pedagogically accommodated in school such that they can catch up with children who are coming to school with rich literacy experiences (Clay 1991). This applies to disadvantaged rural children who are expected to follow the same curriculum as their urban counterparts as well as to children from diverse social and linguistic backgrounds within the same classroom at school.

In any case, even if all children in the class have similarly poor prior literacy experiences, as might happen in a small remote village school, the literacy programme, if imported, as it will probably be if the language of instruction is equally imported, cannot be based on any relevant prior community learning. A programme of literacy instruction based on national needs and conditions is pedagogically more appropriate (Hallak 1993). Furthermore, creating a national programme of literacy instruction for the Melanesian child which can be conducted in a community language will help to facilitate intergenerational literacy (Nurss & Rawlston 1991; Sticht & McDonald 1990).

2.2 LINGUISTIC AND COGNITIVE DIMENSIONS OF LITERACY

Literacy is enormously complex. It is an indispensible educational building block. Literacy development predicts educational possibilities. It transforms social and cultural institutions. Literacy is powerful conceptual knowledge.

Researchers cannot precisely define what happens when we read because we cannot see the brain in action. We do know that reading is an interactive meaning-seeking process in which the reader and the text act together (National Academy of Education 1985); and that it is a problem-solving activity that grows in power and flexibility with practice (Clay 1991).

To read, we must be able to decode visual information – print – and process it cognitively and experientially in order to construct meaning. In order to read the reader must synthesise two basic sources of information: visual (print) and non-visual (background knowledge). Print must be mapped onto known experience in order for meaning to be constructed.

Obviously, understanding the language encoded in print is essential. However, literacy requires far more than a threshold comprehension level of the language in print; the kind of linguistic proficiency children must have in order to read and write is qualitatively demanding.

School literacy requires what Cummins terms "cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP)" (Cummins 1991a:16); an ability to process cognitively-demanding and context-reduced text. CALP is not dependent on the child's surface fluency of the language (i.e. how well the child speaks the particular language), but on his or her general conceptual and linguistic proficiency in any language (Cummins 1983). According to Cummins' linguistic interdependence principle, children transfer language skills learned in a language they know to a new language; they utilise a "common underlying proficiency" (Cummins 1983:42). So the child learning how to read and write in MP initially is not just developing his or her MP skills but a deeper conceptual and linguistic proficiency that will help him or her to develop literacy in a second language, such as English.

3. BILINGUAL EDUCATION

3.1 BECOMING BILINGUAL

Formal education in the Pacific is conducted fundamentally in a world language. Many children come to school as bilinguals. However, few are proficient in the language of knowledge and power on which the school runs.

Children who naturally pick up a second language in childhood become bilinguals without even trying. Under these conditions of acquisition, their command of both languages is unconscious. Children would normally pick up Bislama through everyday community interaction where there is linguistic heterogeneity in Vanuatu; the same applies to Pijin in the Solomon Islands.

Children in Melanesia learn English as a second language (ESL) at school, however. This requires conscious effort. Children learning a second language do not have the natural contextual supports surrounding their L2 development that they had in the development of their native language (L1). They do not have five or six years of life in which to absorb and try out the language in which they are immersed, unthreateningly, in a full emotional and functional range of use by competent speakers. They are not permitted trial-and-error language learning. Instead, they have a limited context, a classroom, in which school topics are discussed, often by non-native speakers who present a less than perfect model of the language. Children are called upon to produce a language they have had too little exposure to and are criticised, often harshly, for making the most natural of mistakes.

Similarly, acquired L2 proficiency for preschoolers does not include a conscious effort to learn in a threatening environment in which consequential tests and social embarrassment over mistakes in usage are part of the experience. Proficiency in an acquired L2 will depend on many factors, including how long and how much language use the preschool child has been exposed to. However, for urban children in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, proficiency in Pijin and Bislama will be developed within a

community of competent speakers. For what is estimated to be thousands of children, MP will be an L1.[3]

3.2 L2 IMMERSION EDUCATION

Language education policy varies from country to country in the Pacific. However, two models of bilingual education are prevalent. This paper will refer to these as the second language immersion model and the vernacular literacy model.

Melanesian countries put children into an immersion situation where they enter an English-speaking classroom from their first day at school. They are expected to acquire literacy in a second language which they are simultaneously learning.

The basic underlying theory in immersion education is communicative competence: children will learn to use the target language if it is used as the medium of communication for authentic purposes in the classroom. However, in Melanesia, teachers are often found to be using either the vernacular or MP as the real medium of spoken communication while operating in an English-medium print environment. This is not English immersion.

Children are thus required to learn to read in a language they do not know and are getting very little aural contact with. Moreover, school learning does not provide a continuation of community learning where family members can follow and even help the progress of their children learning to read so there is little contextual support outside the school for the school language. These children face at least two sets of variables affecting reading success which put them at-risk: educational context, and teacher (Flood & Lapp 1990).

Bilingualism can either be additive (i.e. the L2 is added to the learner's L1), or it can be subtractive (i.e. the L2 replaces the learner's Ll (Lambert 1990)). When communicative support for the Ll is provided in the home, school or community, the acquisition of an L2 in an educational context results in additive bilingualism; that is to say, the learner adds a language to his or her linguistic repertoire. However, when use of the L1 is not maintained for whatever reason, the bilingualism process becomes subtractive rather than additive, and acquisition of the L2 effectively promotes substitution of the L2 for the L1.

There are a tragic number of examples of suppressive immersion programmes which have attempted to eradicate the Ll of minority language speakers and replace it with a higher prestige L2, resulting in such problems as atrophied L1 development, inadequate L2 proficiency, poor academic achievement, and negative sociocultural identity (Cummins 1991b; McCarty 1993). This is no longer language immersion; it is language submersion (cf. Baker 1993).

The poor academic and linguistic performance of minority children subjected to oppressive 'educational' programmes of this sort has given rise to language deficit theories, such as "semilingualism" (Skutnabb-Kangas 1981:248). Children have been seen as semilinguals when they manifest poor language development and do not learn to use any language fluently. Skutnabb-Kangas argues that semilingualism results from discriminatory

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3 Personal communication, Dr John Lynch, Director, Pacific Languages Unit, USP.

social and educational practices for minorities emphasising subtractive bilingualism rather than from any cognitive-linguistic deficit.

In the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu, the Ll is not officially supported in school literacy programmes. Instead, learners are introduced to literacy in a high-status world language which is equated with educational success and high prestige jobs. Teachers, however, who are, by and large, not native speakers of English, may be using the vernacular or MP to explain things to children. In this case, children who are supposed to be immersed in English for purposes of acquiring a sufficient threshold level of the language to be able to apply it to the acquisition of literacy, are, in fact, learning that the vernacular or MP is the language of real communication.

Immersion education is not intrinsically bad, of course; immersion programmes have been very successfully implemented in other contexts, notably in Canada, Ireland and Wales (Baker 1993). For example, the Canadians have developed a much-discussed French immersion programme in which children, mainly anglophones, begin school in French, acquire literacy in French, and are at or above grade level achievement with their monolingual anglophone peers by Grade 8 (Swain & Lapkin 1981).

The French Canadian early total immersion programme seems, on the surface, to be structurally comparable with the Melanesian English immersion model which this paper claims to be biased against success because of the information overload for young children. However, on closer examination of the whole educational context, there are major differences in social and educational support for the programmes.

The population in French immersion in Canada is not the sum total of Canadian children in Class 1 as it is in immersion education in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. French immersion is optional in Canada. Students who show problems in coping with the schoolwork can be voluntarily withdrawn from the programme. Melanesian students do not have the alternative of L1 education.

Furthermore, middle-class children of parents who wish them to have a head start in acquiring bilingualism in the official languages of Canada to ensure sound prospects for future employment are over-represented in French immersion programmes (Lapkin, Swain & Shapson 1990). Therefore, the students enrolled in French immersion do not necessarily represent a normal sample of the Canadian population.

Importantly, the middle-class homes from which most French immersion children come typically support literacy development in that parents read to their children, provide a good model of language and literacy, and reinforce their children's studies in English. Children from homes such as these may well come to school as L1 literates. These immersion-educated children are given maximum social support to become additive bilinguals. Comparable support for L1 literacy is unavailable to children in Melanesia.

3.3 VERNACULAR LITERACY EDUCATION

In the majority of Pacific countries, the policy is to educate children to basic literacy and numeracy in their L1 while providing core instruction in the L2. Children then transfer literacy skills learned in the L1 to the L2 which becomes the medium of the classroom after basic vernacular literacy has been achieved.

Although the vernacular literacy model is the more facilitative programme for encouraging initial literacy, it is only practicable where both schoolchildren and their teacher share the same L1 or the teacher is, at least, a proficient speaker of the vernacular. Furthermore, the intention is that children will transfer literacy skills and carry on their education in the world language, whether English or French, despite the fact that the metropolitan second language has varied levels of support outside and, in fact, inside the classroom, where teachers often continue to use the vernacular as the de facto medium (Lo Bianco 1990).

An excellent international example of a vernacular literacy programme is the English-Navajo language arts programme at the Rough Rock Community School in north-eastern Arizona. The school, which is located in a large Navajo reservation is developing and implementing its own Navajo-English bilingual programme, turning its shortcomings into strengths for both students and teachers alike. McCarty (1993:182) cogently sums up the history of American Indian education:

> The history of schooling for indigenous groups in the United States is, first and foremost, one of external, largely federal control over the education process...It is a history informed by explicit policies designed to extinguish indigenous languages through "sink or swim" methods still prevalent in Indian schools – methods based on the unusual assumption that all-English instruction for non-English speakers accelerates their English proficiency and academic achievement. Abundant research from many cultural and linguistic contexts proves that assumption dead-wrong...

In reaction to previous widespread academic failure resulting from these sink-or-swim methods of federal government implemented English immersion education, the Rough Rock Community School has begun to reclaim its culture, language and academic success through bilingual whole language pedagogy.

The Rough Rock School faced many problems, most of which will be familiar to Pacific educators (McCarty 1993):

(i) a lack of printed materials in the L1 (Navajo);

(ii) a lack of culturally appropriate literature;

(iii) a lack of local teachers qualified to teach the vernacular; and

(iv) students with varying proficiency levels in both the L1 (Navajo) and the L2 (English).

Their solution has been to discard what amounted to a curriculum of oppression encouraging language submersion, and to spend available funds towards the following (McCarty 1993:184):

(1) developing English and Navajo oral language and literacy using whole language pedagogy;

(2) staff and materials development; and

(3) classroom-based research on children's emerging literacy and alternative literacy/biliteracy assessment.

The Rough Rock's investment in itself has resulted in a curriculum of Navajo values in which authentic literature is being produced and self-published by teachers in conjunction with local artists. Although the programme is still evolving, and still facing many problems, preliminary evaluations make clear the progress being made. It is noteworthy that children making greatest gains on both local and national measures of achievement are bilingual students experiencing cumulative, uninterrupted initial literacy experiences in Navajo (McCarty 1993).

According to Cummins (1991b), improvement in indigenous students' education is dependent on the extent to which their interaction with adults in the school context reaffirms their cultural identity and generates academic and personal confidence. Another factor of major importance is community participation in curriculum development and school operation. Rough Rock is doing both of these things.

Cummins (1991b) asserts that the most important factor in the success of bilingual education is the maintenance and valuing of sociocultural identity. Therefore, whether a child is from a minority language background or from a majority language background is highly significant. High-status English speakers learning French in an officially bilingual English-French country have nothing to lose and everything to gain by learning the other official language. Research has shown that anglophone children in French immersion suffer no erosion of language and cultural identity (Genessee 1987). On the other hand, American Indian children in an officially monolingual English-speaking country have shown poor progress in oppressive immersion programmes designed to 'get them speaking English as soon as possible'. Children's cultural heritage is thereby devalued and subtractive bilingualism is encouraged.

4. INTRODUCING AN MP-ENGLISH BILITERACY PROGRAMME

Literacy is being taught in MP in Melanesia, mostly to adult populations, but also in preschools, and in non-transitional church-run instructional programmes which are not meant to prepare students for English-medium schools (Siegel 1993). Far fewer adults would require literacy programmes if they learned to read as children, of course.

For example, at the Goroka YWCA in Papua New Guinea, the 'Kisim Save Skul Bilong Ol Meri' (The Gaining Knowledge School For Women) teaches literacy in Tok Pisin, along with other life skills in an outstandingly successful programme for women. The *skul* includes a *rum buk* (library) of materials in Tok Pisin, some of which have been been written by students and staff (Maben & Chapman 1990).

In Vanuatu, the Melanesian adult literacy project began teaching literacy in Bislama to one adult and one preschool class in Malekula in 1989. Since then, the project has expanded to four islands and is continuing to grow despite initial problems faced, viz. lack of teaching materials, suspicion of the Ni-Vanuatu people, and limited official attention given to Bislama literacy (Netine 1993).

In the year of literacy (1990), the USP Centre in Honiara, Solomon Islands, began a literacy programme that promulgated the teaching of Pijin literacy to some of the estimated 85 per cent of people in the Solomon Islands who are thought to be functionally illiterate (Mosley 1991). The Literacy Association of the Solomon Islands (LASI) is committed to

feeding what they term 'literacy hunger'. They teach and write literacy materials for adults in Solomons Pijin.[4]

Given that literacy educators are successfully mobilising programmes for adults and preschoolers in MP, why not extend MP literacy to schoolchildren? A vernacular education model of bilingual education, using Bislama and Pijin for urban and linguistically heterogeneous areas, is a feasible and highly preferrable alternative to the existing English immersion mode of education practised in primary schools in both the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. The problems are, of course, many, as they are for communities around the world. However, instituting initial literacy in the vernacular, where possible, and in MP, where it has been acquired and widely used during preschool years, as the medium of the classroom and the printed page would have pedagogical, linguistic, social and political advantages.

One important advantage would be that children would start from somewhere; they would have a better chance of learning to read because they would be familiar with the medium of the text and could map print onto known experience. Involving the community in the writing of stories for schoolchildren based on familiar values and experiences would further encourage children's utilisation of background knowledge in reading. Community-written stories would also promote better home-school communication, providing support for children's early studies as well as opportunities for intergenerational learning.

Children would have a better chance to succeed in school, having an improved sociocultural identity and L1 development resulting from an appreciation of the value of a community language and the shared culture embodied in the use of that language. They would then have a better chance to read to learn as they continue on in school with stronger literacy and language skills.

Using MP in school would help to decrease the dislocation of preschool community-based learning and school learning, making school attendance less traumatic and estranged from the community. There would be a healthy desanctification of the institution of the school because it operated, at least in the early classes, in a shared community language. Furthermore, MP-medium materials would provide a tie-in to adult literacy instruction.

Using MP in a formal school programme would lend it greater legitimacy. The status of Solomons Pijin and, to a lesser extent, Bislama, which already enjoys official recognition, would thus be raised.

Of course, limitations and problems exist. Since pidgins evolve much more rapidly than other natural languages, there may be a problem in establishing a standard. This is less of a problem in Vanuatu where the orthography has gelled through print.

It is, of course, important to note that literacy in Bislama or Pijin is recommended only where a school programme of vernacular literacy is impracticable, and viable only where children have acquired and used the language in their preschool years.

Appropriate curricula and materials would have to be developed and written. Teachers would need increased professional development not only in MP literacy but also in ESL for the successful teaching and transfer of classroom language media. However, fears that literacy in MP will negatively affect the acquisition of standard English should be allayed.

4 Personal communication, Jack Rekzy, Co-ordinator, LASI.

According to Siegel, ed. (1993:9), "the use of pidgins and creoles to teach literacy has no negative effect on the subsequent acquisition of the standard form of the lexifier language".

Preschool literacy experiences would still be limited as long as books in community languages are in short supply around the home and community. However, with cumulative community support, local literacy resources for adults and children alike could be created and collected.

Lastly, there may be a lack of community support for comprehensible education in an available language because it lacks mystique and, so, appears to be a low-status alternative, which it is not.

5. CONCLUSION

Although there is no shortage of practical problems in implementing community language-based initial literacy instructional programmes, the advantages in children's pedagogical, cognitive, linguistic and sociocultural development outweigh the problems.

This position paper presents a theoretical justification for rethinking language policy for Melanesian school literacy programmes. It argues that initial literacy programmes in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu be nationally reclaimed and rethought, given the importance of using a community language to develop language and literacy skills. The purpose of the paper is to spur relevant empirical research: feasibility studies introducing literacy in Bislama and Solomons Pijin need to be conducted in linguistically favourable areas, such as in the urban capital cities of each country. The vernacular should be used for literacy instruction in homogeneous language communities.

Many concrete questions will need answers. Before a pilot programme can be developed, it will be necessary to know what percentage of the population in each of these countries would, by virtue of its linguistic make-up, benefit from an MP literacy programme. This would include communities splintered by languages if MP is widely used as a lingua franca as well as urban areas in which MP has creolised into L1 status. Crowley (1993) has interpreted the 1989 census in Vanuatu to present a picture of communities where Bislama is spoken, alone or in conjunction with English and/or French.

Pilot studies would have to devise a balanced programme giving maximum benefit to children such that they acquire literacy skills and a sufficient threshold level of English to transfer these skills successfully and carry on learning.

The need for children in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu to develop a sound, literate proficiency in English which, as a world language, brings with it access to knowledge and power, is not questioned in this paper. Rather, it motivates the discussion. Children are not successfully coping with the great demands made on them in acquiring literacy and this high-status language all at once, any more than they do elsewhere in the world where fundamental support for literacy or ESL is not available in the home and community. English and literacy should be treated as two different hurdles which can meet up when children have been given maximum opportunities to make the connection and move on. Melanesian children's needs for language and literacy must be seen as baseline skills in learning, not as obstacles in themselves.

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