

## **Creative phonics: A strategy for teaching literacy in vernacular languages in elementary schools**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents a summary of the findings and their implications for the impact Creative Phonics training had on elementary school teachers in the East Sepik Province. The study explored the effectiveness of integrating Creative Phonics strategies into teaching children to read and write well in vernacular languages. It was found that the implementation of Creative Phonics teaching strategies was largely influenced by curriculum and language policy changes. The shift in curriculum and language policies caused confusion among teachers, children, parents, school boards of management and community members. These changes have fostered elementary school teachers to modify and create hybrid teaching models to cope with the changes. The findings of the study have indicated that Creative Phonics teaching method was effectively implemented by participants immediately after the training program in 2014. The results show that the most commonly used skill by all participants was the application of the Creative Phonics teaching strategy called 'hear, say, see and write' to teach phonogram sounds using phonogram count charts. They felt more confident in teaching phonics and were more organized and well prepared in their teaching of phonics mastery skills in either vernacular or English. Elementary school teachers saw improvement in their children's learning.

**Key words:** creative phonics, vernacular languages, elementary teachers, creative phonics strategies, creative phonics training

### **Recent history**

When elementary education first started in 1994, the entrants, to the training course with a minimum of a Grade 10 formal education, were nominated by their home community. The main requirement for selection was that they should be literate in their own vernacular and extremely knowledgeable about the culture of their area. Only a handful of them received formal training in vernacular literacy by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL). The applicants were the volunteers who taught in pre-schools/tokples schools established by SIL, which were later converted to elementary schools. The majority lacked training in teaching vernacular literacy skills.

Introduction of elementary education and vernacular came around the time that Outcomes Based Education (OBE) was introduced. In OBE, the language of instruction in elementary schools was vernacular. In the new Standards Based Curriculum (SBC), the language of instruction is English and vernacular can be taught as a subject in consultation with the Provincial Education Board (PEB)

and the school Board of Management (BoM). What is new though is the rate and frequency with which changes are being imposed on teachers and how education should be delivered. Discussion emerging from interviews noted that elementary teachers are confused as to how they should teach language in the new SBC. The standards for the elementary curriculum have been upgraded but little has been done with upgrading the elementary teacher education program.

During the period of the 1960s to the 1990s, English was the official language of instruction for early childhood classes. This changed in the 1990s with structural and curriculum changes which saw the establishment of elementary grades and a policy which allowed for teaching and learning in vernacular languages. Papua New Guinea (PNG) has seen a significant shift in language policy in basic education (Litteral, 1986). From 1990s to the 21st century vernacular literacy in elementary schools in PNG has been debated and inconsistent in achieving expected outcomes.

The tasks for elementary school teachers in PNG today are more complex and demanding than in the past. They have to respond to the wishes of the parents regarding the educational outcomes and the social needs for increased access to education. They are required to change themselves and what they do to meet specifications laid down by the policy makers. Teachers are continually required to alter their administrative and organizational systems, their pedagogy, curriculum content, assessment procedures, the resources and technologies. The interpretation commonly placed on this is that elementary school teachers are lacking in skills, knowledge and competencies.

However, it is important to know that elementary school teachers are pressurized by the on-going changes in the education systems in PNG. Elementary teachers are struggling for recognition as well-trained professional teachers. The link between their teacher preparation and practice is incoherent. Much of what teachers learned about their role grew out of images of their own teachers. Thus, in order to gain some understanding of what the changes mean to teachers and their feelings to adapt to the changes it is necessary to find out how they see and experience their work and how much importance they attach to it.

Therefore, this study was done to evaluate the impact Creative Phonics training had on the elementary school teachers' current teaching practices in regard to teaching of vernacular language literacy. The introduction of Creative Phonics teaching methods into elementary schools in Papua New Guinea is an initiative of the Elementary section of the Curriculum and Assessment Division of the Department of Education, to coincide with the current curriculum change from outcomes based to standards based curriculum. Creative Phonics teaching strategy is an intervention to uplift children's vernacular literacy level in elementary schools in preparation for learning a second language (which is English).

According to Paraide (2002) and Litteral (2004), teaching of vernacular and use of bilingual teaching strategies can assist second language learners to

master the speaking, reading and writing skills in the second language if the literacy skills in both first and second languages are taught and supported well. The findings from this study revealed that participants lack the motivation in developing reading and writing skills thus require further training on skills development. In this study participants who taught vernacular and/ or English using Creative Phonics teaching strategy expressed that children were able to read and write at an early age. So it is not the use of vernacular that hinders the development of literacy skills in children. It is how well elementary teachers are trained to teach literacy skills in either vernacular or English that matters most.

### **Effectiveness of creative phonics training**

Elementary teachers are not passive recipients of instructions. They actively strive to accomplish implicit or explicit goals they hold to be personally important to their work (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1992). The participants brought their local knowledge of their culture and vernacular into the training. They were able to share and participate well in all the activities. Nearly all the participants had more than 10 years of teaching experiences in elementary teaching.

When teachers judge a new form of instruction introduced to them as potentially helpful in their work, they attempt to understand and access that new form of instruction. They need time to grasp the new knowledge. Time is a very important aspect of teacher education for practical skills training. In order for teachers to fully grasp a better understanding of a new concept, more time has to be given for practical sessions for skills development in any training program for quality teaching and learning. Time allocated for Creative Phonics training was not sufficient enough to practice the skills taught during the training.

A study by Hobson (2006) conducted with early childhood education teachers for indigenous language education in New Zealand, Canada, America and Australian Aborigines states that training of early childhood education teachers for vernacular literacy was offered as a full time training program in established institutions with vernacular syllabus documents and teaching curriculum for most curriculum areas across all subjects. The trainers were all native speakers providing classroom instruction for teacher training programs. The report of the study stated that the impact of the training programs resulted in effective teacher performance and satisfactory students' academic performance in schools where vernacular literacy was taught in the early stages as the foundation for learning a second language.

In PNG, training of early childhood education teachers for vernacular literacy is not institutionalized. It is yet to be offered as a full time program or as a module in the institutionalized teacher training programs. Although the Department of Education encourages vernacular to be taught in some elementary schools where Tokples is the language children understand well as the foundation to learning a second language (which is English), it is yet to be

strengthened and formalized. There is a mismatch between general policy statements and actual curriculum implementation strategies.

The *Philosophy of Education for Papua New Guinea* (Matane, 1986) and the official education policies of the PNG government encourage a community based education but the curriculum is structured differently. There is a dissonance between what actually happens at the school and classroom levels. For instance, Creative Phonics teaching strategy was intended for the development of vernacular literacy skills. However, when there was a sudden shift from OBE to SBC, participants modified Creative Phonics teaching methods towards teaching of English literacy skills instead of vernacular.

### **Implementation of skills and knowledge learnt during Creative Phonics training**

The Department of Education is now embarking on improving the standards of education from 2015 onwards. This means that standards in the school curriculum, teacher preparation and professional development, examinations, inspections, school governance and restructuring of the school system and structures are some of the many components of education which will be improved by a Standards-Based Curriculum (SBC). Millions of kina were spent in the change to Outcomes Based Education (OBE) and now millions more will be needed to support the change to Standards Based Education (SBE). Much time, money, personnel and effort is needed to support implementation and monitoring of systemic changes in the field.

The findings in this study have revealed that less than 50% of the respondents were applying the skills of Creative Phonics teaching strategies daily in their teaching. The others were not able to do so because of the changes caused by the replacement of OBE by SBE early February 2015

Elementary teachers were told to let go of the OBE and move into SBE. Although the 1999 language policy on vernacular literacy was changed in 2013, it is unlikely that elementary school teachers, parents and school boards of management were well informed of the change in advance. As a result, teachers need support to avoid undeserved criticism.

A pleasing result was from the use of the Creative Phonics teaching skills – ‘hear, say, see and write’ – to accommodate teaching of English phonics in SBC. Creative Phonics strategies were intended for teaching of vernacular languages in particular. The findings of the study show inconsistency in the intended implementation of Creative Phonics strategies in vernacular literacy and a need for more professional development. Elementary teachers were using the Creative Phonics strategies prior to the introduction of SBC. Relevant SBC teaching materials and teacher training programs are still in the process of being developed.

The current situation in the field now is that elementary teachers are developing *hybrid teaching models* to cater for the rapid changes taking place

in the education system during the transition period. There is no *exit strategy* for teachers to sail smoothly from the old system into the new system.

### **Impact of creative phonics training**

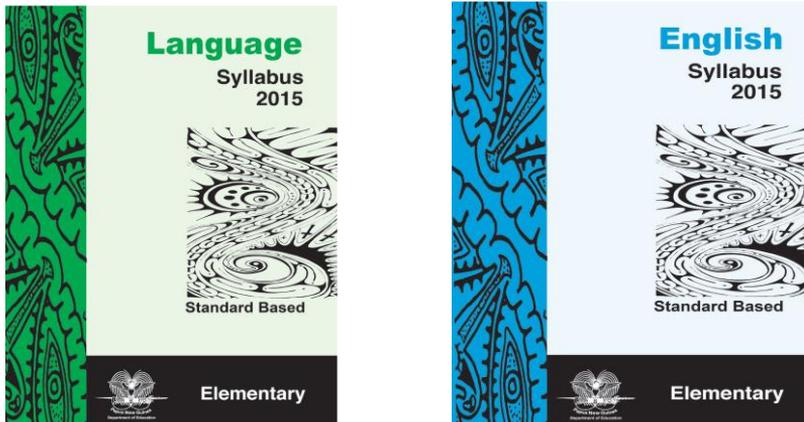
Effective teachers use students' first languages and background knowledge as a base for what they are teaching and hold high expectations for all their children. The results show that what teachers find enjoyable is a major influence on what learners also find enjoyable. The respondents indicated teaching sounds and building words as the areas in which they would like further training, which are already the areas in which they are comparatively successful. The finding is that teachers lack motivation to improve their skills for reading, writing and forming sentences. Elementary is the foundation from which students can build their abilities for successful learning in later years. The stakeholders must be very careful when planning developments in the education system to ensure progressive improvement. Elementary school teachers need to be monitored and mentored regularly by field officers for quality teaching and learning to be more effective. Elementary teachers need opportunities for further studies if the government is serious about quality teaching and learning in elementary schools.

Results indicate that when elementary teachers started using Creative Phonics strategies to teach sounds and building words, children were able to read at an early age. They were able to say the sounds of the letters in either vernacular or English. Children were able to form words and write short sentences or phrases to form a simple sentence. It was fun and enjoyable. Teachers also enjoyed teaching children sounds and word building.

However, teaching of Creative Phonics came to a stand-still when teachers were instructed to do away with OBE and proceed with SBC. Nevertheless, a few teachers, who were very smart used the Creative Phonics hear, say, see and write strategy to teach English phonics in the new SBC. They found it very helpful and useful. Others were afraid to take the risk and kept to their familiar practices. Those who integrated the Creative Phonics strategy; hear, say, see and write expressed that it was the best method to use to teach phonics either in vernacular or English. Respondents recommended that the Creative Phonics strategy be included in the new SBC and further training should be provided for teachers in elementary schools in the East Sepik Province.

### **Factors influencing the implementation of creative phonics teaching strategies**

It is interesting to find that in the new SBC, English is now to be taught as a separate subject to language (vernacular). The syllabuses have been written. Time has been allocated to teach English and language (vernacular) within the normal instructional hours. Introductory training of the new syllabuses had been conducted early this. Syllabuses (illustrated in Figure 5.1) were given to each school for teachers to use for planning and programing.



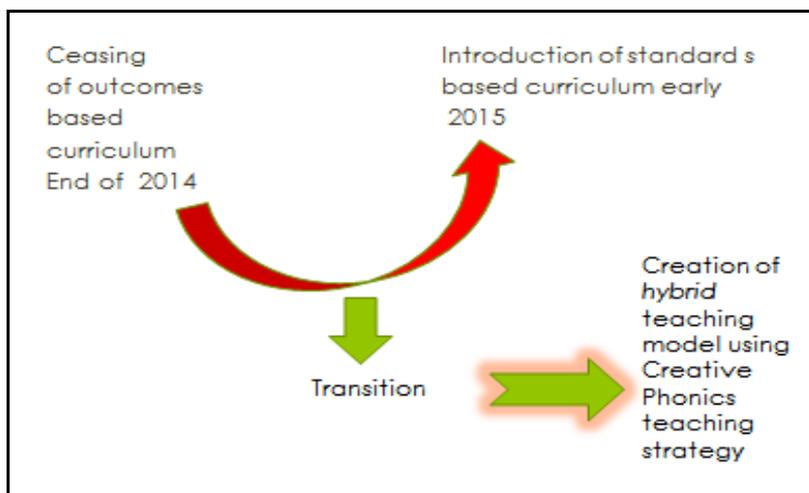
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**Figure 1: Covers of new Elementary language syllabuses**

There were two reasons given for including language in the SBC. First it will help current elementary teachers in bridging vernacular to English. They have been teaching vernacular in elementary schools for many years and the language syllabus will help them to teach English better. Secondly, the elementary pupils will learn English quickly when vernacular language is used to explain different English words or concepts. It is important for the cognitive and literacy skills development of the child, in preparation for reading and writing.

The question now is: How effective will language be taught in the elementary schools when there is lack of awareness about the changes by teachers, parents, children, school boards of management and the general public? Vernacular literacy has already been seen as a problem. There are three conditions for teaching vernacular language: the language must have orthography; it must be the language commonly spoken and understood by all; and the teacher must be a native speaker before a language can be taught as a subject. How can these be maintained if Language is to be taught as a subject? This move is now calling for PNG to reinforce indigenous education in vernacular literacy. Creative Phonics strategy can be used as a teaching strategy to teach vernacular language literacy in the country.

Another interesting finding derived from the study was that elementary teachers in the schools were creating *hybrid teaching models* to accommodate smooth and continuous teaching during this transition period. Teachers have pulled together pieces from different teaching models to create their own *hybrid teaching models* to keep the class going while waiting for formal induction and training for the new SBC. Respondents defined a hybrid teaching model as pulling out different teaching methods to form a teaching strategy that one is comfortable with to teach children during the transition. Figure 5.2 illustrates the finding that emerged from interviews with participants about their personal experiences in regard to the change that had taken place in the education system from OBE to SBC early 2015 in ESP.



**Figure 2: Impact of curriculum changes**

Even though an introduction workshop was held with elementary teachers in the ESP on the new SBC, participants felt that it was not sufficient to help them with their teaching in the classrooms. The course helped them to understand the changes in the curriculum but it did not give them enough information on how to teach the content. Participants expressed concerns that too much information was delivered in a short period of time and they were not able to grasp the content well. The course should have been extended. More time should have been given on teaching methods rather than subject content.

Elementary teachers were challenged to implement SBC as soon as they resumed duty so what they did was to pull together teaching strategies from different teaching models to teach different subjects. The 'hear, say, see and write' strategy was applied to teach daily English phonics scripted lessons. Teaching of vernacular language and bridging vernacular to English are now concerns for elementary school teachers in the new SBC.

## Conclusion

Teachers need to master the skills well in order to help the children to read and write well. Results show that what elementary teachers find enjoyable is a major influence on what learners also find enjoyable. More awareness is needed to inform the teachers about the curriculum changes. Elementary teachers, BoM members, and parents and citizens need to be educated about the latest changes on the language policy for all schools in regard to vernacular literacy. Most elementary teachers are reluctant to teach vernacular literacy due to lack of knowledge on the latest language policy changes. Parents are putting pressure on them to teach their children in English. Elementary teachers lack motivation to improve their reading and writing skills. They are burdened with the curriculum changes. They need re-fresher workshops and supervision to motivate them. Respondents have created *hybrid teaching models* to

accommodate for the vacuum created between the OBE exit point and entry into SBC. Proper exit strategies need to be created to help teachers during transition period from OBE to SBC. Elementary teachers have to undergo professional development if the government is serious about quality teaching and learning in elementary schools. Training of elementary school teachers need to be institutionalized thus making it possible for vernacular literacy to be included as a component of the training program. Creative Phonics teaching methods can be one of the teaching approaches for vernacular literacy skills development.

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