

## **From Papua New Guinea to Boston: Embracing Cultural Diversity in a Learning Community**

**Vilma M. Tafawa**

The inspiration for this article comes from a variety of sources, but the mention of two should suffice. First, I was most impressed by the scholarship of the first volume of *Teaching For Our Times*. Secondly, I identify with and relate intimately to the institutional goals and objectives of Bunker Hill Community College, particularly those which focus on:

- integrity, diversity, cultural competence and cross-cultural communication within the context of the discussion on curriculum and life-long learning;
- the creation of an educational environment that values the rich diversity of our student population and community.

This article draws heavily from my research into language learning in Papua New Guinea and considers that language is basic to any learning process. Another underlying assumption is that the language which is spoken during childhood and which continues in use is the one that gives the primary means of expression of thought, application of concepts and the development of ideas. This article also explores and illustrates the linguistic complexities of English language learning in Papua New Guinea, where 3.5 million people speak 869 living and distinct indigenous languages (one third of the world's) and where English is the official language of instruction. Papua New Guinea is without doubt the most linguistically and culturally pluralistic nation in the world, and the challenges that confront its educational planners should be of interest to all educators who teach in multi-lingual, multicultural learning environments.

Later in this article, I will attempt to draw parallels between my language teaching experience in Papua New Guinea and at Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC), where I have been an adjunct faculty member since September 1999.

### **Culture and Language in Papua New Guinea**

Papua New Guinea is situated in the South Pacific, north of Australia, and shares a land border to the west with Irian Jaya, a province of Indonesia. It has a land area of 462,840 square kilometers and a population of 3.5 million people. Most of the country consists of tropical forest and grassland on rugged, mountainous terrain. This environment has given rise to peoples who have traditionally lived in relatively small tribal groupings in comparative isolation from other groups. Despite urban drift, about eighty percent of the population still lives in rural villages and relies on subsistence farming.

While 869 distinct languages are spoken in Papua New Guinea, no indigenous linguistic or ethnic group predominates, either politically or numerically. The division of the island in the late 19th century amongst three colonial powers — the Netherlands, Britain and Germany — gave rise to the evolution of *lingua francas* (i.e. simplified languages evolved to facilitate communication amongst groups of people in the absence of common languages). The most popular lingua franca, *Tok Pisin*, or Neo-Melanesian Pidgin, is an English-based Pidgin language and is moving towards universality in Papua New Guinea.

However, it is standard English, a relatively recently introduced language, that has become the official language of instruction.

English is the language of the educated elite, of formal business, of the professions and is widely used by the national news media and in debates in the national parliament.

Politically, English plays a neutral role. It acts as a unifying force in a country where antagonism and suspicion amongst indigenous linguistic groups have resulted in ethnocentric attitudes toward each others' languages.

### **Language Policy for Public Education in Papua New Guinea**

Education policy planners have long been challenged, not only by the linguistic complexity of Papua New Guinea, but by the desire to establish a common language policy. The debate over language in education has been bitter, controversial and divisive. One group of educators is firmly of the view that English alone should be the medium of instruction in schools. This view has been reinforced by the desire to exercise government control and by the belief that English is a superior language. However, opponents of the "English only" policy argue that there would be difficulties teaching English successfully in village schools, thus depriving eighty percent of the population of access to formal education. They further contend that children acquire initial fluency at home in their first language, or vernacular, and therefore early literacy through formal instruction at school should be achieved in the children's first language. While the debate for and against the English-only policy in education raged, church missions, intent on converting the local population to their brand of Christianity, embraced vernacular languages as a necessity in religious instruction.

As the controversy over language continues, fuelled and sustained by a spirited national debate amongst academics, the adoption of English as the official language has been confirmed by the national parliament. Of equal significance is the fact that Tok Pisin has gained national acceptance as the lingua franca.

Politicians across the ideological divide have come to terms with the suggestion that, in a country of over 869 languages, English could continue to play a neutral role as the unifying factor and as an instrument of national development.

Once it became clear that the educated elite and the government were bent on retaining English as the sole official language of instruction at all levels of the educational system, an English language curriculum was developed and embraced. The attitude of students and parents toward English has changed because it is now regarded as an asset which must be acquired in order to succeed in school. As a matter of fact, the acquisition of literacy in English is now seen as a measure of one's level of educational attainment.

However, even though English has been embraced as the medium of instruction for the last three generations, it has failed to live up to the expectations of the majority of Papua New Guineans, both as an appropriate medium of communication and as the language of education. According to some commentators, the failure of the government to recognize the relevance and importance of early literacy in a language with which students are familiar in elementary school has led to disastrous results.

Given the fact that English has been the official language at all levels of formal education and that the vast majority of Papua New Guinean students are confronted with this language for the first time upon the start of schooling, it is not surprising that there are difficulties in the teaching and learning of this language. English as a medium of

instruction has brought about the mystification of knowledge rather than facilitating access to it.

### **Academic Performance in English**

My study showed that the performance of Papua New Guinean students in English is influenced by a number of variables, including:

- the fact that teaching and learning takes place in an unfamiliar language in the early stages of the formal education system;
- the socio-economic status and linguistic background of parents and students;
- the linguistic environment of students at home and at school;
- the English language competence of teachers;
- physical environment and the level of teaching resources available to schools;
- the approach to teaching English;
- the English curriculum.

In particular, my study attempted to find out if the policy of requiring students to acquire initial literacy in a second language had any influence on their ability to grasp concepts and develop ideas in the second language with the same competence as their first (native) language.

To appreciate the scope of this research, one has to recognize that the vast majority of Papua New Guineans are competent speakers of at least four indigenous languages. While English remains the official language of instruction in education, it has been proposed that the primary education structure should allow students to receive instruction in a familiar language when they commence school. This reform is based on the assumption that unless children begin literacy instruction in a language that they already speak, they begin the whole process of education at a serious disadvantage.

In most societies, children are exposed first to a written form of a language they have already begun to master orally. Initially, what appear to be meaningless squiggles become associated with the sounds they represent, so that with several years of exposure, letters and groups of letters can automatically access a phonological code. Words for which the meaning is not known can nonetheless be pronounced. This skill can also be transferred to other languages provided that they are written in a familiar alphabet. This means that children and adults alike are capable of pronouncing foreign words, albeit with difficulty and without necessarily knowing the meaning of the words.

If the sounds of language are not associated with any written representation, then the link between letter and sound, which gives letters their linguistic status, cannot be built upon. As a class of visuospatial stimuli, words have a special status, only because of the sounds we have learned to associate with them and the meanings we ascribe to collections of these sounds.

According to the 1991 *Education Sector Review* commissioned by the National Department of Education, “the current practice of requiring all children to acquire initial literacy in a foreign language has resulted in many school leavers remaining functionally illiterate in any language.”

Papua New Guinea is probably amongst a very few countries in which initial instruction at the commencement of schooling is, for the majority of children, in an unfamiliar language. No one disputes the use of English as a unifying force and its role in national

development. However, many education planners hold the view that learners should acquire early education and initial literacy in a familiar medium and later transfer their abilities to English or any other national language.

### **On to Boston**

As an instructor of first year college writing skills at Bunker Hill Community College, I first entered the classroom adequately prepared to provide instruction in standard written English to what I expected to be a homogeneous student population. However, long before the end of my first lesson, it became abundantly clear that I would, as I had experienced in Papua New Guinea, have the opportunity to embrace the rich cultural and linguistic diversity of the student population.

There is no doubt that BHCC ranks amongst the most linguistically diverse populations in community colleges. A survey made in October 1999 by the International Center concluded that:

*The distinctive feature of BHCC's international programming is that it is an integral element of campus life and not a stand-alone component of the college's International Center. BHCC is one of the most diverse colleges in the U.S., with 53 percent of students reporting themselves as ethnic minorities. Almost 40 percent of students speak a native language other than English and more than 550 English as a second language students attend each semester. The college currently enrolls 297 international students from 68 countries. BHCC has taken advantage of this diversity to develop an inclusive environment where international and multicultural activities are an essential and equal component of the day-to-day activities at the college. (Huhra 1)*

In the last three decades, one of the challenges for English instructors at the college has been to wrestle with the various dialects of English within the context of the curriculum on standard written English. Today, the challenge includes recognizing the richness and value of these dialects and teaching students to appreciate the linguistic distinctiveness inherent in, for example, African American English, Irish American English, and Latino American English.

Added to the mix of dialects in the classroom are new elements of linguistic diversity precipitated by large-scale immigration from all parts of the world and the open admission policy of community colleges.

Instructors should no longer regard language learning difficulties as problems to be avoided, but rather as opportunities to apply linguistic skills. As a language instructor in a multicultural classroom, I strive to cast myself in the cultural and linguistic environment of my students, thus enabling me to help them acquire skills and linguistic competence essential for student success.

To be successful in a multicultural language classroom, instructors of English must have an appreciation of:

- the relationship between culture and language;
- the influence of the native or first language on second language acquisition;
- attitude of the students towards English;
- the factors which may exert influence on English competency;
- writing expertise and second language proficiency;
- the age factor in both first and second language acquisition, and
- the factors that influence first language acquisition.

## **Conclusion**

From Papua New Guinea to Bunker Hill Community College, multicultural classrooms and linguistic diversity present exciting challenges and opportunities for innovative and creative curriculum development. At Bunker Hill Community College, there is undoubtedly an opportunity for instructors to learn from the experiments of the past and thus to embrace and celebrate the linguistic diversity of our student population in imaginative ways.

## **Works Cited**

- Papua New Guinea. Department of Education. *Education Sector Review: Deliberations and Findings 2.1* (1991).
- Huhra, Lourdene. "BHCC Receives International Intercultural Achievement Award." *Bunker Hill Community College Faculty & Staff Newsletter* 18 April 2000.