

## Language shift and language planning in Papua New Guinea

### What this research was about and why it is important

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is the most linguistically diverse country in the world, and it has two official languages, English and Tok Pisin (New Guinea Pidgin). Since its independence in 1975, PNG has had policies of mother-tongue education, or the use of the students' first language as a medium of instruction in formal education. However, due to the perceived lack of success, in 2013 the PNG government enacted an educational reform to return to an English-only educational system. This policy could potentially risk the country's linguistic diversity and led to uncertainty regarding the role of local vernacular languages in education. Since English is not widely spoken at home in PNG, the 2013 English-only educational reform states that use of local languages is permitted under exceptional circumstances to facilitate learning in Elementary Preparatory Schools (e.g., to explain difficult concepts). The article reports on a case study of language planning initiatives led by the Kala Language Committee (KLC). The Kala language, one of the Indigenous languages in PNG, is a traditionally oral language with four distinct dialects and spoken in six villages in Morobe Province. The KLC's "long-term goal is to strengthen the use of the Kala language in our communities so that Kala can be sustained for our future generations" (KLC, 2008).

### What the researchers did

- The research activities spanned well before the enactment of the English-only educational reform in 2013 until 2019.
- In 2010, the researchers came to the Kala-speaking villages to help the KLC carry out their activities: "a) create a written form of the Kala language; b) provide training for elementary school teachers; c) create curriculum materials for use in elementary school programs" (KLC, 2008).
- Together with the communities, the researchers developed the Kala alphabet, conducted Kala language and alphabet training to adults in the communities, trained community researchers to continue the research activities, trained teachers, and developed learning materials and publications in the Kala language.
- The researchers also made funding available to each of the six villages to further develop their local language planning.
- In 2017, the researchers, accompanied by a Kenneth Longenecker, a marine biologist, came to the Kala villages to continue the language planning efforts, particularly increasing the documentation of the language and knowledge related to the aquatic environment.

### What the researchers found

- The Kala alphabet was developed in 2010. It was decided that the alphabet and punctuation system should be similar to those of the English language to enable a smooth bridging between Kala and English for children.
- Among the learning materials and publications in the Kala language developed was a trilingual dictionary of Kala, Tok Pisin, and English. The inclusion of English was due to the role of English in the formal education
- As each village experienced different levels of language shift, or the rate of change from the use of Kala to Tok Pisin across generations, each village had different priorities in terms of language planning. However, in 2013 during the early enactment of the English-only educational reform, one of the main focuses was related to education, including plans to send teachers for training, to build school buildings, and to develop curriculum materials in Kala. Other plans also included Kala literacy development for adults, and fundraising and awareness-raising activities.
- Despite the enactment of the English-only educational reform in 2013, the uncertainty about how much and under what circumstances the Kala language could be used in educational settings remained until 2017.

### Things to consider

- There were uncertainties both in the project due to funding and communication between the KLC members and the researchers and in the role of vernacular languages in education, in this case the Kala language after the enactment of the English-only education in 2013.
- In such a linguistically diverse country, linguistic diversity can bring both benefits and challenges, one of which concerns language planning at both the national and local levels.

**Material, data, open access article:** [article](#)

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