Introduction

In this paper I shall present a short outline of the situation pertaining to literacy and language in Solomon Islands. The comments I make are relating to adult literacy and mainly to programmes in Pijin and vernaculars. I propose a model to illustrate the relationships between the 3 language categories in the country, vernaculars, Pijin and English and finally give a brief review of the activities currently being undertaken by the larger groups around the Solomons. It is, however, important to remember that there are very many groups who are conducting classes and very many individuals who teach their families and neighbours in their spare time. It will be the effort of these groups and individuals as much as by the efforts of the larger groups that illiteracy will be eradicated in Solomon Islands.

Solomon Islands has about 65 indigenous languages and a pidgin, Solomon Islands Pijin, in addition to the official language, English. This inevitably leads to a complex picture in the field of literacy.

Lee (1980) described both an indirect and direct route to becoming literate in an unknown language, in this case English. The learner may try to learn both English and the skills of reading and writing at one time or may, more readily, attempt to acquire the skills in two steps. He asserts that:

"If a known language is read fluently, it is much easier to go to the second language."
In the context of contemporary Solomon Islands we see that financial constraints prohibit the implementation of vernacular literacy programmes in 65 languages. It would, however, be possible to use a Pijin literacy programme to reach the majority of areas within the country. Many people, within and outside government oppose the adoption of Pijin programmes. This seems to be related to the low status of Pijin as a language rather than to any objective reasons. Keesing (1990) states:

"Pidgin has never been accorded recognition, legitimacy or a standard orthography. Solomons Pijin remains, in government policy and in the dominant popular ideology, a 'bastardised' form of English, a holdover from the days of plantation labour, to be progressively replaced by English."

Unfortunately English is rarely used as a medium of communication and it seems unlikely that it can replace Pijin at a time in the near future.

Model to demonstrate the inter-relationships of language and literacy in the Solomon Islands.
Language relationships

The relationships between languages in use in Solomon Islands in their spoken and written forms is an area of conceptual difficulty for some and it is with this in mind that I have tried to produce a model to demonstrate the relationships.

The circle has been chosen to illustrate the closeness and coherence of the system. It will be seen that the lines are shown as either dotted, regular or bold. Bold lines indicate a route that is travelled by many in their lives, dotted lines represent paths trodden by few. The length of lines depicts the relative difficulty with which these routes may be followed.

Language and learning literacy skills can be considered on three levels alongside national identity (Horoi, 1990): a monolingual, village level at which communications is in the vernacular and where literacy programmes should ideally use this medium; a bilingual, urban level where Pijin is the language of communication and is applicable as a medium for literacy skills acquisition; finally, at a trilingual, international level, English is used. Solomon Islanders who wish to communicate at that level must be literate in English.

Literacy materials

How far have existing literacy programmes taken the linguistic situation into consideration? Until 1981 there were no materials available for literacy work in Pijin. During that year a book was published by Solomon Islands Christian Association intended to teach Pijin reading and writing to those already literate in vernaculars or English. Although this book was not intended for use for non-literates it has been used in this context with some success. Other programmes have been designed in the languages of Natugu, Santa Cruz (1980), Lau, North Malaita (1982), Rennell (1983), Aiwo, Reef Islands (1985), Cheke Holo, Isabel (1990), Small Malaita (1982) and To’ambaita, North Malaita. These programmes vary greatly in their content and have met with varying success.
During 1990 the Solomon Islands Centre of the University of the South Pacific began a literacy programme. This programme promoted literacy using public lectures and, in conjunction with Solomon Islands Translation Advisory Group (SITAG), taught a course on teaching literacy skills in Pijin and vernaculars. The expected result of the course, increased teaching of literacy skills in Pijin and vernaculars, did not materialise. On investigation it was found that the failure to teach was due to a lack of materials. The course had attempted to give experience in materials production, but despite the acquisition of these skills, teachers had clearly failed to acquire the requisite level of confidence to proceed alone.

At this point an attempt was made to produce a set of materials for use in Pijin. A group of teachers was formed to participate in this work. Materials produced by teachers during their training course were edited and new materials were produced. Instructions were included in Pijin to assist those teachers who themselves were not proficient in English. The material was ready in April 1991 and 20 copies were made. These copies have only been distributed amongst those who wished to teach a class at that time. It was felt that a quick response was needed and that this was more likely from a small number of contributors.

The materials have been fully tested in one group in Honiara and also used in other groups. The text written in Pijin, a language which has yet to be standardised, has prompted many suggestions for alterations. The course content has also received thorough scrutiny and suggestions for alterations have been made.

In the Honiara group where the materials were tested, most students were able to read and write their own names prior to the commencement of the classes. Most were unable to write the name of their husband or father. At the end of a twenty week course most of the students were able to read in Pijin a number of short statements (total 159 words) with fewer than 10 mistakes. The writing was less good but legible and all students could write a short item in Pijin on a subject of their own choice. There is obviously room for improvement but all students are continuing in classes and will practise over the coming months. They also hope to
transfer their new found literacy skills to English. Unfortunately, as yet, there are no materials available designed for them to do this in Solomon Islands.

The format of the materials used derives from that suggested by Stringer and Farasclas (1987) but has been modified somewhat. There are 3 books for teachers. The first covers reading and writing readiness materials and how to use them, the second is a primer, and the third is a story book with ideas for writing and reading stories developed from shared experience, material for copying to make small booklets, big books and stories to read to students. A book for students to accompany the readiness materials is an optional fourth book in the series.

These books are still being edited but they are already being used quite widely indicating that they are filling a deeply felt need. We hope that the books will be ready for printing in early 1992 and will then be available at a low cost in a form which will be easy to use.

Materials for maintenance of literacy are also hard to find in Solomon Islands. The National Literacy Committee has recently announced a story writing competition in the hope of stimulating writers to produce materials suitable for new readers. The response so far has been good in only two languages but the materials in these two languages can be published as a story book. A number of groups working under SITAG have also produced story books. Most stories are directed at an older adult audience and there is no material suitable for young adults or older children. In addition to stories Solomon Islands Development Trust produced a Pijin comic. This is published irregularly but is very popular.

The National Literacy Committee is also undertaking training of literacy teachers for adult education groups in some areas of the country. Nazareth Apostolic Centre also trains literacy teachers in a course which deals with other more functional approaches as well as including the materials developed in the USP/SITAG project.
References


