Vernacular phonics (including Uniskript) versus “straight-for-English” literacy in Kitori District, Papua New Guinea

By Robert Petterson and Deborah Petterson

This paper presents statistical evidence (1) to support initial mother tongue literacy teaching in schools, and (2) to show how literacy using an innovative idea called “Uniskript” compares with literacy in orthographies based on arbitrary symbols.

In 2011, we started conducting literacy surveys in elementary and primary schools in a region of Papua New Guinea where most children speak a vernacular language as their mother tongue. We found that about half the elementary schools were following a “straight-for-English” literacy methodology, and the other half were following the official vernacular literacy education policy. In 2013, there was a national policy change demoting the vernaculars as languages of instruction in favor of English, because it was perceived that the vernacular policy was resulting in low literacy and educational levels. Our survey data showed that, contrary to popular perceptions, those who started off with mother tongue literacy in elementary school did nearly seven times better in English literacy than those taught only in English.

In 2013, we started training volunteer teachers to teach children to read in their mother tongue using a new phonics-based literacy idea that came to our attention called Uniskript (Uniskript uses “letters” that are icons of the phonological features of a given language). We found that those volunteer teachers who we trained and followed up regularly had good success, and that by the end of one year many children had bridged from Uniskript to reading vernacular written in Roman letters, and had even started to read English.