

The Pacific Islands Literacy Levels: Some Implications for Learning and Teaching

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For a number of years now I have been working with teachers - both primary and secondary - in workshops around the Pacific island nations. Mostly these workshops have had to do directly with educational assessment, and I have come to have great respect for the enthusiasm, knowledge and sheer professionalism of these people in this crucial activity. So, when I was asked in 1990 by the South Pacific Board for Educational Assessment to conduct a study, on behalf of UNESCO, of the literacy achievements of students in Pacific schools, I jumped at the chance. However, the research question within the initial request was phrased somewhat negatively - 'how much hidden illiteracy is there amongst Pacific primary school children?' It didn't quite square with what I had come to understand about these students' learning from their teachers. It also raised a couple of other questions. Was the hidden illiteracy a fact? And if so, how was it being 'hidden'? The first answer I was given always seemed to be another question: 'There are lots of blank papers handed in in national examinations - perhaps those candidates are simply illiterate.'

The research - the *Pacific Islands Literacy Levels* (PILL) study - was conducted between September 1990 and March 1991. The results in general confirmed the teachers' more positive view of the achievements of these children. The results cannot be discussed in detail in this article, because they remain national property, and the sponsors of the study will release them as and when permission is given. However there are a number of things which can be said about the research study, and its tests in particular. These may be useful and interesting to any teacher in one of the nine nations concerned, who work daily with children in trying to enhance their literacy development.

ENGLISH TEST, Part 2

3 I am a student in a New Zealand school. Write me five different sentences which tell me about where you live. You could tell about your family, the house you live in, the room you sleep in, or what the village or town that you live in is like.

3.1

3.2

3.3

3.4

3.5

Read the story in the box, and answer the questions about it.

4 Jo came into the shop. The lady who sold the food was putting some green bananas on the shelf. Three bananas fell down, and she picked them up and wiped them with a rag. Then she put them back with the others. But they fell down again. She smiled at Jo.

4.1 Did the shop lady know Jo was in the shop?

.....

4.2 What did the shop sell?

.....

4.3 Where did the shop lady want to put the bananas?

.....

4.4 What colours were the bananas?

.....

4.5 How many times did the bananas fall down?

.....

4.6 What did the shop lady do after the bananas fell down the second time?

.....

Figure 1: The English version of the test used in the *Pacific Islands Literacy Levels* as the basis for translation into the various vernacular languages.

The test instruments

Three tests were administered to each Class 6 student in the program. One was a short test of writing and comprehension ability in English, the second was (in most countries) a similarly-designed test in the student's appropriate vernacular language, and the third was a short 25-item test of numeracy (in fact, arithmetic processes at a fairly basic level). Where no vernacular testing was feasible, another English test was administered, using the same test as the various vernacular versions which were prepared. **Figure 1** gives the test of the test in its English version that was used as the basis for translation into the various vernacular languages.

Like all tests, these instruments can be (and were) challenged as to their appropriateness and validity. Some would say they were too easy; others (particularly teachers of classes whose work was significantly weaker than might be expected, given the overall results) might say they were too hard. Whatever the case, the tests were short, they were very simply designed, and they **looked easy** - far easier than some teachers' expectations would be of the literacy and numeracy development of a Class 6 child. This was intentional - the tests were designed to allow an assessment of **basic literacy**. That is, they tried to find out how many children were able to pick up a pencil and respond to a set of simple tasks. However, just because most students could do them, or at least attempt them, did not mean that everyone was awarded the top levels in the assessment.

The way in which these levels were calculated and described was designed to allow the markers to spread students out. The levels reflect a spectrum of ability ranging through:

- * Level 1, where students were still pre-literate: that is, unable to complete any of the tasks with any or much meaning (say, expectations of students in Class 1);
- * beginning and intermediate stages of real literacy development (Levels 2-3: say, Classes 2 and 3);

- * A reasonably assured ability (Levels 4-5) to write and comprehend language, which students might attain at the end of about Class 4 or early in Class 5.

Figure 2 shows how the levels might match, in a general way, the progress of students in moving along the pathways of literacy and numeracy development in the primary school.

Class 6 students generally are expected to have developed higher levels of development in language - a vernacular one or English or both - than these tests required. These children are further along the track of becoming powerful and sensitive users of language than their juniors in Class 4.

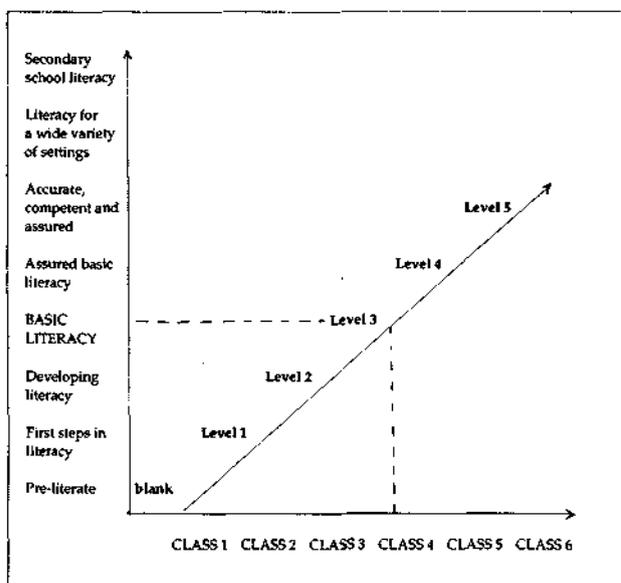


Figure 2: A Learning/Teaching Continuum Mapped Against the *Pacific Islands Literacy Levels*.

Higher powers of logic, more sophisticated abilities in expression, and a greater degree of aesthetic understanding and response are expected of them. The tests didn't attempt to measure these - it was basic literacy that was under scrutiny, and I didn't want anyone to be too scared to start. I wanted to know what they could do, not so much what their deficiencies were.

In a similar way, the numeracy test could have measured student ability to deal with a higher order skill, like work with fractions, for example. However, the mere sight of a fraction sometimes sends weak students into a state of mental paralysis, and they don't respond at all because of the stress.

To some extent, the tests were designed as they were because PILL was always conceived of as a small, inexpensive, pilot study - a first look at what was happening in language development 'out there'. It perhaps achieved a little more than its size and cost might have indicated.

Applying the PILL levels

All across the Pacific lots of children achieved the top Levels: 5 in Literacy and 4 in Numeracy. There were a few (very few) blank papers from 'true-illiterates', those who couldn't pick up a pen or otherwise even start. And there seemed to be many fewer of these than the papers and results of other Class 6 tests, on the subjects in the curricula studied in the various countries, might have suggested. Perhaps this was because these students were not frozen by fear or by failure to have learned specific content, as they might sometimes be in a national or school examination.

But, to repeat: not everyone achieved the top level. When classroom profiles of the results were calculated, a spread of abilities across the levels, in many classrooms, became obvious. The test was designed in such a way as to show any teacher where all the students in his or her class were on the spectrum of ability represented by the levels. Each profile of class results indicated how many, and who, the less able students were, and just how able each student in the class had managed to become during the years of schooling. It was, in this sense, a diagnostic test.

Figure 3, a record of the performance of children in one class 'somewhere in the Pacific', shows how the spread might have looked in a class profile.

Paper	B=	5	4	3	2	1	Blank
ENGLISH	28	12	5	8	2	0	1
VERNACULAR	28	12	7	5	3	1	0
NUMERACY	28	-	11	12	3	2	0

Figure 3: A Class Profile from the *Pacific Islands Literacy Levels* study

A number of principles lay underneath the test design and the tasks themselves. These might be summarised as follows:

- 1 It is clear that literacy and numeracy - their demands and their development - are grounded in the real life of the person (in this case, the test-takers), and not just in their school life. They make their first learnings about language - listening and speaking - in the home, and much else besides is learned outside the classroom.
- 2 The first result of this for the PILL tests was that the writing tasks quite clearly asked for commentary about the 'self' of the students. The other suggestions for continuing and elaborating the writing encouraged them to comment on other aspects of the life they led.
- 3 To do these things successfully, the test-tasks had to be confined to the real-life things that all the test-takers - wherever they lived in the Pacific - might be expected to have as **attributes in common**. So the literacy tests concentrated on:
 - * a sense of self;
 - * experience in the home;

- * contact with a local community;
- * an experience of schooling.

Therefore, in one or other of the two writing tasks, students were asked to use all these experiences as the subject matter for their writing. Furthermore, the stories which formed the stimulus material for the two comprehension tasks were located in either the school (Test 1) or the community (a local shop in Test 2 - Figure 1).

- 4 However, the tests had also to recognise that even within this commonality there would be **differences between the test-takers** which needed to be considered. So the test items took care to avoid possible differences between:

- * lifestyles;
 - * home and community environments;
 - * curricula in schools;
 - * cultural and linguistic traditions;
- as they might affect students in the various countries.

- 5 This meant that the only prior knowledge we could assume were those details of knowledge of language and number which avoided these differences. The language used in the literacy stimulus material had to be simple and the anecdotes on which the stories for comprehension were based had to be common. However, the language elements being tested (understanding of sequence, use of pronouns, etc.) were not so simple. Similarly, in numeracy, the difficulty levels of individual items were often quite high even if the tasks themselves were based on common, arithmetical processes.
- 6 What we know about literacy development also suggested that comprehension tests of a traditional kind would not have been a sufficient test of literacy on their own. It was felt that a test of **writing ability** had to be included if it were possible, and of a self-expressive rather than creative kind. We were testing basic literacy, not creativity.

- 7 There was also the fact that, even though **oral ability** is widely recognised as central to definitions of 'literacy', testing this was not feasible - it can only successfully be done by teachers, and there was not enough money for that to happen. So an attempt was made to design writing items which might allow some measure of oral fluency to spill over into what they decided to write about themselves.
- 8 Theories of literacy development suggest very strongly that students would write better if the test itself defined for them an **audience and purpose** for their writing. Hence there was an instruction to write 'a letter to someone overseas' (audience) to tell them something about life at home (purpose). This applied in both vernacular and English tests. Students didn't have to use letter format (a higher order skill than Class 4) but they did have to write meaningfully.
- 9 I also had a strong desire to make tests an **enjoyable experience** as far as possible. Teachers and students were giving up class time to help us, and it didn't seem fair to put students under too much pressure. So, quite consciously, I tried to avoid the stress of time pressures, and other factors which might mean that students did less than their best.
- 10 I also faced the need to specify a design which yielded responses which could be assessed **quickly and economically**, in terms of the time line and budget for the project. This meant that **testing time had to be short**. We did not want to waste large amounts of student and teacher time for learning and teaching.
- 11 Likewise, the assessment procedure had to be quick - there were thousands of papers to look at. So I chose **holistic judgement**, rather than totalling lots of short answers: that is, gaining a general, overall impression of the quality of each student's performance, rather than making even more thousands of tedious, unreliable little stabs at assessing what students might like.
- 12 Hence the design was based on levels, rather than marks and total scores. It was decided to use a **broad-scale assessment** of

performance, rather than base judgements on countless small differences between total 'scores'. If the performance to be represented by each of the levels is clearly and professionally described in advance, as I think PILL's were, then the assessments can still be quite reliable and valuable, no matter who makes them - the teacher or someone else (even an outsider like me).

<i>Literacy levels and their descriptions</i>	
5	Production and comprehension assured. If any errors occur they are minor. If any omissions occur, they are few, and likely to be mere slips.
4	Some real ability both to produce and comprehend displayed, but lacking assured control over one or other process.
3	Evidence of some capacity to produce or comprehend (perhaps both), but flawed by omissions or mistakes.
2	Minimal success at production and/or comprehension, but some attempt made to complete the test.
1	Little or no response in writing: little or no comprehension of basic printed material displayed. This level includes blank scripts.

Figure 4: Literacy and Numeracy levels and their descriptions, as used by Assessors in the *Pacific Islands Literacy Levels*.

<i>Numeracy levels and their descriptions</i>	
4	Assured control over all four basic processes even if a few errors are made.
3	Assured control over some basic processes, but marred by major weaknesses or carelessness.
2	Some control over one or more basic processes, but too many omissions or errors to be certain.
1	Little or no response to the questions asked. The level includes blank scripts.

Figure 4 displays the level descriptors used. Students assessed at Levels 3-5 in literacy were deemed to be basically literate. Levels 3 and 4 were deemed to represent that basic numeracy had been gained.

- 13 Since students were donating their knowledge to our study, we had to leave them feeling good - making the test as (superficially) easy as possible meant that virtually everyone was left with the feeling that, in doing it, they had had a taste of success. Even though not everyone was going to get top level assessments, or ever know their levels, everyone was left feeling they could do something to help us, as they indeed did.
- 14 The test design was also driven by the absolute requirement, in a literacy test administered in bilingual societies, of clearly and decisively **respecting achievement in both languages** a student might bring to school. Hence two separate but similar tests were designed, and both made compulsory if a student had two languages.

Testing and its implications for better teaching

Every time our students bring back to our classrooms a new question paper from another room, where they've just done a national or some other examination, we ask ourselves two basic questions, in order to learn how best to organise learning for, and better prepare, next year's group.

The first is: 'What can I, as a classroom teacher, learn from the experience of having my students do these tests?' The second is: 'What learning or assessment strategies could I now put in place in my classroom which might cause an enhancement of my pupils' development?'

What about PILL in this regard? Well, there won't be another PILL for teachers to work towards, but literacy and numeracy development needs to go on. What might one learn from this test design, and the matters displayed in the Figures? Here are a few samples: note that they might apply to secondary classrooms as well as to Class 6 or below. Note also that they don't imply coaching students for future tests, but improving our teaching generally. Above all, they do suggest that we consider our attitudes

to student learning, and the place of testing within it, very sharply.

The words below printed in **bold** (with numbers) refer to the commentary above, on the principles underlying the **PILL** design. Let's start with a positive one.

- A Can doing a test ever be an **enjoyable experience (9)**? Yes, it can, and all the evidence suggests that students will do better in this circumstance than in conditions where they are frightened or stressed out. For example, if one is a teacher who works in a school or a system where the headteacher or system has decreed that some sort of weekly test has to be given, there are several things one can do.

The first might be to remove the emphasis on test conditions - perhaps calling the occasion a weekly 'survey' or 'class exercise'. Perhaps a bit of extra time, so that everyone can finish - after all you want the most complete set of responses you can get. It's still a test, and students still know they're being tested in a real sense, but the guess is that their attitudes will alter, even just with a simple change of title for their weekly work.

Another strategy might be to arrange matters so that the poorer performers are not faced, every week, with work which they (and you) know they can't do at all, or can't do well at. Often in tests, alternatives are given, in order to allow those who have attributes in common (3) to answer on one task. **Differences between the test-takers (4)** are allowed for as well by providing other tasks for other groups. A simple arrangement like this in your class test might enable you to set realistic goals for everyone. It means a bit more work for you, but higher motivation might be the pay-off - and you don't have to do extra every week.

- B Another positive one. There is nothing like a **taste of success (13)**, however small, to motivate students to want more success - that is, to learn more, to stay in school, to continue with education. A lot depends on our attitudes, as teachers, as to whether we let them have this taste or not, when we design our class tests or end-of-term or end-of-year exams.

Do we want them to do as well as they can? Or are we out to trap and trick them? The first idea - doing as well as possible, being positive - will mean your giving everyone something they can record as an achievement. It means letting everyone at least get a score on the board, as our sports colleagues say. The scores won't always be high, but even a score at all might help lure the weakest away from an illegal fishing expedition or a re-viewing of last night's video, and encourage them to stay learning, in school.

- C Students might also respond more readily if we make the learning expressed in test performance more human, more related to **real life (1)**. Simple (or difficult) Maths problems expressed as real-life ones often let students see more easily the difficult concepts we ask them to deal with. However the language we use will have to be simple - it's still a Maths, not a language, test! It's the Maths content that will be **not so simple (5)**.

Or, in another example, if we want to test their ability to lay out a letter, make it a real letter, with a real **audience and purpose (8)**, not (as I had to in PILL) a rather phony one. And so on.

- D Can we make classroom tests genuinely diagnostic - tell us more about the individual **differences between test-takers (40)**? There are various ways.

For example, a weekly 'test' devoted to a mathematical concept such as a fraction might reveal a lot if, as well as asking students to do some computations, it asked them to explain in words how they actually did one of the tasks. That is, if it became a test of **writing ability (6)**. Students often enjoy such a change of context for writing. It mightn't be called a test, but it is nevertheless an opportunity for assessment by you. By reading their answers, you'll be able to make a **broad-scale assessment (12)** of five groups:

- 5 those who genuinely know how to do it (you'll be able to tell that from their words);

- 4 the group who were unsure and guessed right (they'll admit it, in their writing);
- 3 a few who guessed wrong (they'll admit it, too);
- 2 those who were just wrong, because they don't know how to do such problems;
- 1 those who can't even start (they'll tell you that, too - they're looking for help).

Amongst the second last group, we will also have an insight as to why they go wrong - exactly what it is each individual can't do, or misunderstands. Their words will also tell you a lot about the various ways it's possible to go wrong - not everyone will be the same.

This five-part grouping of your class - a sort of **holistic judgement (11)** - will tell you a lot more than a simple file of answers to a problem, some right, some wrong, some blank. It enables you to know where to start, **quickly and economically (10)** on helping the weaker - where your efforts will be of most good. Incidentally, such a test often tells you a lot about student **writing ability (6)**, at the same time as testing maths. Each student has, once again, a **real life (1)** purpose, and audience for telling you something, this time about him or herself (2) in relation to Maths ability.

This example might also help to explain why numeracy was included in a 'literacy' study. The numerals and the mathematical concepts and processes we use are often expressed, as we do the processing, as words. Special words, certainly, but nevertheless words, in an especially important part of the school curriculum.

- E For variety, some of the answers to the Maths exercise I've just mentioned might be spoken by students, rather than read by you. If you pick a couple you are fairly certain to have got the problem right, they will teach the others as they speak.

Oral ability (7) has to become, if it's not already, a focus of literacy development and assessment (and further development) in ordinary classrooms. Formal examinations have to leave it out: if the teacher doesn't do it, no one will. How will students develop otherwise? And perhaps they need to develop - listen to Society raving on in its newspapers: 'Our citizens can't express themselves.' It's not always as true as Society might think, but ...

Across the whole term, you can 'test' everyone in this way - if you choose the occasions carefully, everyone (even those very weak at writing) can have another taste of success (13).

- F I've left perhaps the most important one till last - **respecting achievements in both languages (14)**. We will do much to keep this principle high if we, day by day, put into place learning situations and (more occasionally) testing situations where students can choose the medium of response themselves. I know this happens in many classrooms, but perhaps it's worth saying again.

Very often, students can do something in one language that they can't in another. For example, in PILL, if we'd only looked at the results on the English tests, or only at results on the vernacular tests, quite often we'd have found total or class results which didn't look too good. But when we looked at the low-level scorers in one language medium, and tracked back through their booklets to look at their scores on the other language paper, what did we most often find? A high level score. So they weren't illiterate at both languages. How often do our classroom teaching and testing procedures fail to take account of this - one of the most important **differences between test-takers (4)**? Too often, perhaps. And could this also be part of the answer to the questions about 'hidden illiteracy', as represented by those blank answer sheets to papers in national examinations? They are mostly set in only one language.

Is the struggle for universal literacy in the Pacific over?

Back to PILL. The simple answer to the question in the heading is: 'By no

means'. The battle is, to be truthful, not 'over' in any country anywhere, Pacific nation or not. What will help bring us closer to this happy conclusion? We don't yet know how PILL results might contribute exactly, though we have a large number of different suspicions. The PILL results are perhaps indicative, but by no means conclusive, of ways to go.

In the various countries, these preliminary results are being inspected carefully, for their possible contributions to answers to specific questions such as 'what makes the difference?', as well as 'where might we go next?' Because there are differences in achievement to be observed: some slight, some possibly significant. They occur between schools, and between areas, in every country. The answers might lie in a greater availability of resources (particularly in remote schools), or they might be in enhancing teaching practice (perhaps by in-service programs such as the South Pacific Literacy Education Course). Or they might be in firm language policies (especially with regard to bilingualism), or in altering attitudes to assessment, such as the ways I have tried to outline in this article. We don't yet know all.

But what is very clear from the students' papers is that they love using language. Even the very weakest seem to have been delighted to have something to say, and an opportunity to say it, even if they sometimes didn't say it very well. Furthermore, one fundamental literacy concept (not unique to English, but not confined to it either) is almost universally understood - the notion of the sentence as a basic structure for communication. Almost without exception, students use this concept ably, even if things sometimes go wrong within their sentences. It is perhaps indicative of the seriousness with which they regard language, alongside the enjoyment of it I mentioned. In these and many other ways these children are ready and willing for the further literacy development they deserve, and will receive, in Pacific classrooms.