

Communicating written Tok Pisin: Problems of writing standard Tok Pisin

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When I was given the task of teaching Tok Pisin to PNG students, I didn't think I would have many problems in doing the job. I looked at the Program Specification Document (PSD) and I thought I would change the focus. Instead of teaching Tok Pisin as a foreign language, I decided to focus on translation. That is to translate English to Tok Pisin and vice versa. I chose this approach because I thought it would be interesting for the students to translate rather than to bore them with the basics of Tok Pisin. You see, I assumed they were the native speakers of Tok Pisin so they would have no problems in speaking and writing Tok Pisin.

However, I assumed wrong. When I gave them the first diagnostic test where they would translate a news article written in English to Tok Pisin that is when I discovered that they could not write standard Tok Pisin correctly. They wrote Tok Pisin the way they spoke it. That is their written Tok Pisin was full of contractions, had accent (mother tongue interference), colloquial, shorthand and English. By reading through each paper, I discovered that people from the mainland New Guinea wrote fluent Tok Pisin and conformed to the standard rules; people from the New Guinea Islands wrote Tok Pisin with their accent; people from the Southern region wrote Tok Pisin as broken English; and the people from the Highlands region tended to confuse the structure and order of the words. This observation prompted me to cover the spelling rules, punctuation and grammar of Tok Pisin in my lectures which was quite helpful and attempted to improve their written Tok Pisin.

Therefore, this paper will reveal the reasons why native Tok Pisin speakers are facing difficulties in writing standard Tok Pisin and even expressing themselves. By exploring my experiences in teaching Tok Pisin and also the experiences of my communication arts students, I aim to bring understanding on why these students who grew up speaking Tok Pisin are finding it difficult to write it.