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RAISING LITERACY LEVELS IN VANUATU: RESULTS OF A BOOK FLOOD IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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In 2005, the Vanuatu Ministry of Education conducted a “Book Flood” project in 40 rural schools, in four of its six provinces. The aim of the project, which was referred to as “VANLEP” (Vanuatu Literacy Enrichment Programme), was to increase greatly pupils’ exposure to, and interaction with good quality books in English, and so improve their mastery of the language. The project was funded by NZAID, as part of the NZAID Vanuatu Education Assistance Programme managed by PINZ.

Most Vanuatu pupils speak one (or more) languages at home, and a different language at school. This is a handicap which affects all of their school learning. However, there is good evidence that the handicap can be partly overcome by increasing pupils’ exposure to good English by means of a flood of high-interest, illustrated story books, and by showing their teachers how to use the books constructively in the classroom.

With assistance from PINZ consultants, the Ministry designed the project in Years 3 and 4 of 40 rural primary schools which had poor resources and limited exposure to English in their community. To provide a flood of books, literacy specialists identified 30 suitable fiction titles (+ 6 Big Books) in the *Pacific Literacy Series* which are designed for Pacific children, and published by Learning Media in New Zealand. In addition, a large supply of books in the Shortland Publication series was identified, making up over 100 books per school. Year 3 and 4 teachers in 20 of the selected schools received the selected books and book cabinets to store them in, plus two training workshops, and monitoring visits. These schools were located in Malampa, Shefa and Tafea provinces. Meanwhile, another set of 20 schools in Penama province received the books and cabinets, but no training. They were provided with a two-page list of suggestions on how to use the books. Five more schools were included in a control group which had no extra books or training.

In January 2005, a New Zealand reading specialist was employed by PINZ to conduct two three-day workshops, one in Malekula and one in Port Vila. Two local literacy specialists provided support. The chief purpose of these workshops was to train the teachers to use the VANLEP books constructively, so that pupils get the maximum value from them. The main activities included shared reading, guided reading, study of letters and sounds, acting the stories, silent reading, retelling, drawing and writing captions for favourite parts, rewriting, and the making of Big Books. Teachers were given suggestions about book displays, parental links, class organisation and timetabling - the books to be used for at least 30 minutes each day.

Each school in the main project received two monitoring visits in order to check on progress, to observe the teacher at work, to demonstrate specific strategies, and to resolve problems. In August, the New Zealand trainer conducted further workshops for the VANLEP teachers, to exchange experiences and extend their skills.

Evaluation

The impact of VANLEP was assessed by formal testing of the pupils on a series of English reading, vocabulary, listening and writing tests. The 2004 cohorts of Year 3 and 4 in all schools were tested to establish baselines, and the mean scores were compared with those of the 2005 cohort, who had participated in VANLEP. In addition, the progress made by the VANLEP pupils in the main project was compared with the progress made by control group of five schools, and by the pupils in the supplementary project in Penama province.

Table 1
Mean Scores, Percentages & Gains for VANLEP & Control Groups in 2004 & 2005

<i>YEAR 3</i>	<i>Pre-tests</i>			<i>Post-tests</i>		
	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean2004</i>	<i>Mean %</i>	<i>Mean2005</i>	<i>Mean %</i>	<i>Gain %</i>
Project	257	9.6	40.0%	11.9	49.6%	9.6%
Control	86	12.2	50.9%	12.8	53.3%	2.4%
<i>YEAR 4</i>						
Project	260	18.1	45.4%	21.5	53.7%	8.3%
Control	93	21.8	54.5%	21.6	54.1%	-0.4%

Table 1 shows that in Year 3 the VANLEP Project group improved by 9.6% in 2005, when they were exposed to the book-based programme, while the Year 4 VANLEP Project group improved by 8.3%. Meanwhile, the pupils in the control group schools, who had no extra books or training, gained an insignificant amount i.e. 2.4% in Year 3 and -0.4% in Year 4. The Penama group also showed no change in Year 3, and only 1.4% gain in Year 4. This pattern of no change is typical, unless a special programme is set in place. Figures 1 & 2 show the results in graphic form, classified by province.

Conclusion

This project has demonstrated that the English literacy levels of rural ni-Vanuatu pupils can be raised by nearly 10% in one school year, by flooding their classrooms with high-interest, illustrated story books, and training their teachers to use them constructively. The improvements were found at both grade levels and were similar across provinces. However, teachers who implemented the programme well made larger gains than those who missed the training, or deviated from the suggested programme, or who experienced staffing problems. The strongest gains appeared to be in writing and in word recognition. The top VANLEP pupils wrote longer more coherent and interesting sentences, and were able to identify words more accurately than the best students in schools without an influx of books.

This project confirms the results of other book floods, conducted in Fiji, Niue, Tonga, Sri Lanka, South Africa, and also in the schools in Port Vila in 1997-9. Pupils learning in English as a second language, in a context where English is rarely used outside school, need sustained exposure to interesting text if they are to improve.

(Further details of this project can be obtained from PINZ website: www.pinz.co.nz)

Fig.1: VANLEP Literacy Gains, Year 3, by Province.

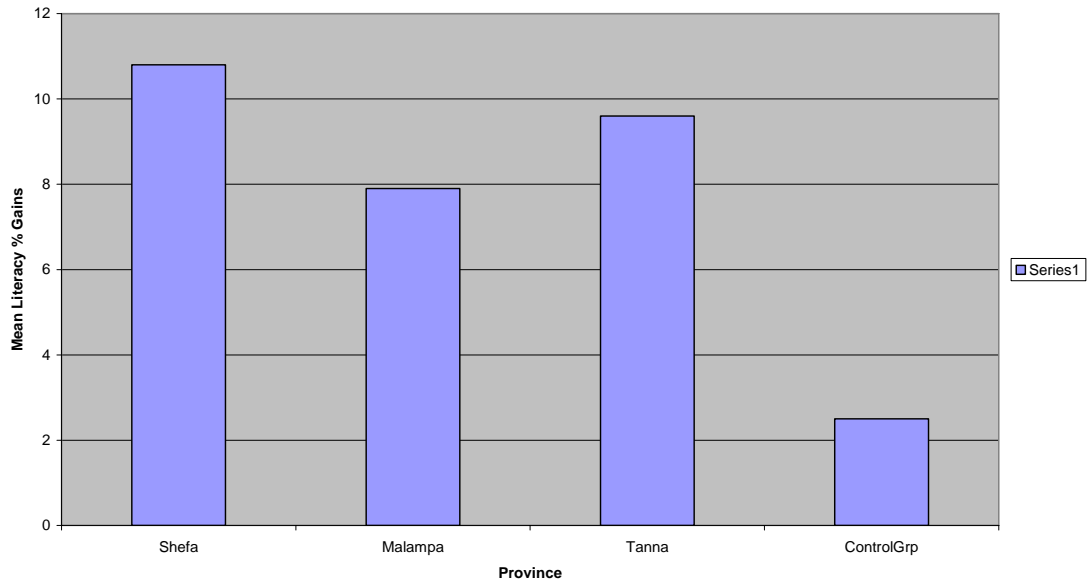


Fig.2: VANLEP Literacy Gains, Year 4, by Province

