

**Moving multilingual education forward in Vanuatu:
Rethinking the familiar stories about language and education**



**A summary report on research carried out in 2011 for the PhD
thesis**

**‘Ideological and implementational spaces for multilingual
education: A case study in Vanuatu’ (2014, King’s College London)**

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July 2014

Introduction.....	4
A note on my own background	4
The stories we tell about language-in-education policy.....	5
Language-in-education policy possibilities	6
Medium of instruction across the curriculum	6
The teaching of languages.....	6
The language-in-education policy climate in Vanuatu	7
Arguments about language and education	11
Argument 1: Only English and French are suitable for education.....	11
Alternative arguments	12
1. Opportunities are not accessed automatically through English or French	12
2. English plus French does not equal double the opportunity	12
3. Bislama and the vernaculars also provide access to opportunities	13
4. Inside school, Bislama and the vernaculars have enormous instrumental value	13
5. Why is Bislama judged on different terms from English and French?	14
6. Complex arguments are made AGAINST Bislama IN Bislama	15
Argument 2: More than one language in the classroom would be confusing	15
Alternative arguments	15
1. We accept multilingualism outside school.....	15
2. Assessment needs to assess the thing being taught.....	16
3. Multilingual classrooms won't be as chaotic as we imagine	16
4. Too many languages or the wrong languages?	17
Argument 3: It is too costly and complex to use multiple languages.....	17
Alternative arguments	17
1. All languages can be developed for education when the will is there.....	17
2. The current system is also under-resourced.....	18
3. Are we asking the wrong questions?	18
Argument 4: It doesn't really matter which language we use – it's just a tool.....	19
Alternative arguments	20
1. Students don't seem to be picking up the medium of instruction	20
2. Some languages seem harder than others to pick up without careful teaching	21
3. Both language teachers and content teachers are currently facing an impossible task.....	21
Recommendations.....	22
Policy for medium of instruction across the curriculum	22
Policy for the teaching of languages	24

Introduction

At Independence, Vanuatu inherited two separate education systems – one from the British, in which everything was taught in English, and one from the French, in which everything was taught in French. Since that time, the Government of Vanuatu has worked towards a number of policy developments concerning, for example, curriculum and assessment, the extension of basic education, the removal of school fees, and greater and more equitable access to secondary and tertiary education. Throughout this period, certain questions of language have been bubbling beneath the surface:

On *medium of instruction across the curriculum*

- Should we maintain separate Anglophone and Francophone streams of education, or should we combine them? If we combine the streams into a single system, which language(s) should we use as the medium of instruction?
- Should we teach in the vernaculars and/or Bislama, particularly in the early years of school?

On the *teaching of languages*

- Should we aim for fluency in both English and French for all students?
- Should we enable children to learn, and learn about, the vernaculars and Bislama?

The starting point for this research was the simple observation that there has been constant debate about language-in-education policy since Independence, and several attempts to alter the system, and yet almost nothing has changed. Rather than putting forward yet another policy proposal, the aim of the research was to understand what has been stopping change from taking place.

The main part of the research was conducted during 2011. I spent the whole of Term 1 at one rural Anglophone secondary school and one rural Francophone secondary school. I observed classes and other school activities, assessed students' competence in both English and French, and held discussions with students, teachers and principals. I returned during Term 3 to conduct more formal interviews and group discussions with students, teachers and the principal of each school, and conducted a number of interviews at the Ministry of Education¹. Throughout the year, I also collected additional data that included statistics, media reports, photographs and historical documents. This work enabled me to build up a picture of the way different people feel and act and talk about language. I consider this documentation of understanding to be a critical stage within the implementation of policy change.

A note on my own background

I am from the UK, but I have also taught English for three years in Vanuatu and for one year in the Solomon Islands. I have a BA in Linguistics, a Diploma in Pacific Language Studies, an MA in Applied Linguistics, and a PhD in Educational Linguistics. I carried out linguistic research in Vanuatu for all four of these degrees. English is my first language. I learnt French throughout primary and secondary school and have a good understanding of the language, although I do not speak it very often. I speak

¹ I am very grateful for the interest taken in the research by all participants and those in the wider community. The ideas in this report represent a very wide range of contributions, which are much appreciated.

and understand Bislama well, and this was the language I used to conduct all of my fieldwork. I have a good knowledge about the vernaculars of Vanuatu, but I do not speak any of them myself.

The stories we tell about language-in-education policy

We have a tradition of passing down stories from generation to generation. We don't question these stories because they help us understand who we are, and they remind us of what is important to us. Sometimes, we seem to do something similar when we talk about language and education. We pass on stories – ideas, beliefs, values, attitudes – without questioning where these stories come from, or whether they make sense in the current context.

For some people, English seems to be the most logical language to use as the medium of instruction while, for others, French seems most logical, since this is the situation that we have become accustomed to. These ideas are confronted by other beliefs that it is most logical to use the vernaculars as the medium of instruction, or that Bislama is the obvious choice for everybody. Meanwhile, many people feel that it makes sense to use several languages together in the classroom, but they have different ideas about *which* languages these should be.

Sometimes we look at the whole picture at once, and we see one thing, but at other moments, we focus narrowly on one small part and we see something entirely different. Sometimes, ideas seem logical to the people who are closely involved, but outsiders look at things completely differently and see different logics. As a British former teacher at an Anglophone school, I was sometimes an insider and sometimes a complete outsider during my research. Sometimes I saw the whole picture at once, while at other times I was focusing on something tiny. In this report, I explain my own beliefs and observations, and recognise that they will be different from those held by other people.

When we look closely at our own ideas, beliefs, values and attitudes, we sometimes see that we use different logics at different times. For example, some people argue strongly that using English and a vernacular in the same classroom would be confusing for children, and yet the same people argue that using French and English together would be advantageous. As another example, French is often described as a living language, which can be hard for non-native speakers to keep up-to-date with, while the same people describe Bislama as a language that keeps changing, and this is considered to be a bad thing. When the same story sounds different about different languages, we need to ask why this happens.

It is important to examine the stories we keep telling about language-in-education policy, and to understand why we think the way we do. When we hear stories that differ from our own, this should open up discussion about the issues, and enable us to look at the evidence or reasoning on which the different ideas are based. This is what this research attempts to do in the belief that, if we don't ask questions about the stories we retell, then we just keep doing the same thing out of habit. The main part of this report looks at four familiar arguments about language in education, and examines other ways of looking at each of the issues. It presents summaries² of the different arguments

² Full transcripts of what people said, along with other data and detailed references, can be seen in the full thesis. There are copies at each of the two participating schools, the Ministry of Education, the USP library (Emalus Campus), and the Vanuatu Cultural Centre.

people made when they talked to me about language, and the different arguments revealed through the way people used language.

Language-in-education policy possibilities

Medium of instruction across the curriculum

‘Medium of instruction’ refers to the language used for the teaching and learning of subjects across the curriculum (such as Maths, Agriculture and Social Science). This is the language in which children are expected to understand new concepts and skills, read and listen to new information, and speak and write about the things they have learnt (including in examinations). Since the 1960s, the medium of instruction for most formal education in Vanuatu has officially been either English or French³, depending on the school. We know that this can make things difficult, since the majority of children speak languages other than English and French at home.

It makes sense that children learn better through a language that they already speak and understand. Listening to the teacher, answering questions in class, carrying out group work with peers, reading textbooks, conducting independent research, and sitting exams – the typical activities we expect children to engage in – are all much easier when the language is familiar. At the same time, evidence suggests that a good foundation in a familiar language builds a stronger base for cognitive development and the learning of other languages, than if an unfamiliar language is used. Therefore, children who have to learn only through English or French often miss these opportunities, and find the requirements of formal education very difficult when they struggle to understand the official classroom language. There are also implications for parents’ and communities’ involvement in children’s education, as well as maintenance of the vernaculars.

Other alternatives include using the vernacular or Bislama as the medium of instruction, or creating a multilingual model of education in which teachers and students ‘code-switch’ between two or more languages as necessary. The important challenge here is to ensure that the right language(s) are being used that will enable the learning of content subjects to proceed successfully. However, many people have strong feelings against using more than one language in the classroom, and this report examines the arguments they put forward.

The teaching of languages

This section considers the teaching of languages as subjects. It is important to recognise that *teaching a language as a subject* is very different from *using a language as the medium of instruction across the curriculum*.

A further complication in Vanuatu is that we tend to distinguish between a language being taught as a ‘second language’ subject and a language being taught as a ‘foreign language’ subject, as follows:

In Anglophone schools,

- Maths, Agriculture, History and so on are taught through the medium of English

³Prior to this time, some missionary education was conducted through the vernaculars.

- English is taught as a subject (as a second language)
- French is taught as a subject (as a foreign language)

In Francophone schools,

- Maths, Agriculture, History and so on are taught through the medium of French
- French is taught as a subject (as a second language)
- English is taught as a subject (as a foreign language)

Too often, the differences between these three ways of using language are not made clear. Teachers of 'second language' subjects therefore often get the blame when students struggle to use that language as the medium of instruction across the curriculum. However, language teachers have their own syllabus to cover, which may include elements such as poetry, formal letter writing and grammar exercises, but which does not include strategies for studying subjects such as Maths, Agriculture and History in that language. Similarly, the 'foreign language' is often taught in the same way as the 'second language', despite the fact that the languages play very different roles in school.

Many languages can be learnt in school, and they can be learnt to a very high level. There are many advantages to be gained by learning languages such as English and French (and others such as Chinese) that are widely spoken around the world, and there are also many advantages to be gained by learning, and learning about, the other languages spoken in Vanuatu. However, certain measures need to be in place in order for this to happen:

- The purpose of learning each language needs to be clear
- Syllabi and teaching materials need to be appropriate for that purpose
- Teachers are needed who are trained in teaching that language for that purpose
- Assessments are needed that test the thing being learnt (either subject content *or* language)

Until the issues of *medium of instruction across the curriculum* and the *teaching of languages* are treated separately, we will continue to attempt to achieve two very different goals with the same policy, and are likely to fail in both.

The language-in-education policy climate in Vanuatu

This section provides an overview of the proposals and policies that have been set out since Independence regarding *medium of instruction across the curriculum* and the *teaching of languages*.

1981 Vanuatu Language Planning Conference

Resolutions were passed to use the vernaculars as medium of instruction in Classes 1-3, followed by Bislama as the medium of instruction in Classes 4-6. English and French would be taught as subjects during late primary school, and secondary schools would use one of these two languages as the medium of instruction. These resolutions were never put into place.

(1980s – 1990s)

The first two decades since Independence saw little change to, or even discussion of, language policy. No language policies were included in any of the First National Development Plan 1982-1986, the Second National Development Plan, 1987-1991, or the Third National Development Plan 1992-1996. At the Vanuatu Education for the 21st Century: Priorities and Needs seminar held in July 1997, a number of points were raised about language by several presenters and during panel discussions. However, no specific recommendations for change were put forward.

1999 Vernacular Language Education policy (Education Master Plan)

Responding to the 1997 Comprehensive Reform Program, the 1999 Education Master Plan set out the Ministry of Education's new strategy for the sector.

Medium of instruction across the curriculum was addressed within one of the most significant components of the Plan – the new Vernacular Language Education policy. The policy stated that Pre-School and Years 1-2 would be taught through the local vernacular (which could be considered Bislama in urban areas), before a transition to either English or French, depending on the school. Justifications for the policy included improved literacy acquisition; a reduced learning burden; a less alien school environment; clearer links between school and home; the maintenance of traditional culture and languages; the potential for closer parent and community involvement; and the increasing recognition of linguistic rights. However, a number of other advantages given for the policy included cost savings (due to higher attendance and reduced repeater and drop-out rates), possibilities to expand access to basic education (by utilising community-based schools for early years education, thus freeing up space for Years 3-8 to use the existing primary schools), and a more efficient way to achieve 'bilingualism' in English and French through creating a foundation in the vernacular first (thereby only valuing the vernacular until it could be replaced by English and French). Although theoretically well-justified, the policy also appears to have been used as a way to increase efficiency throughout the education system, in line with the reforms of the CRP. The policy was piloted in a number of schools, but implementation was hindered by a number of problems, including an attempt to proceed too quickly.

On the *teaching of languages*, the Master Plan states that all ni-Vanuatu should gain competence in either English or French, and that the aim should be for an elite to be fluent in both. However, no specific policies were included with regard to the teaching of languages.

2004 Education for All (EFA) National Action Plan

On *medium of instruction across the curriculum*, the EFA National Action Plan stated that either English or French should continue to be used as the medium of instruction, but that the use of the vernacular is encouraged in pre-school and for certain subjects in basic education. The arguments in support of the Vernacular Language Education policy were repeated from the Education Master Plan, and strong calls were made towards the implementation of the policy. The plan also highlighted that the use of English and French leads to heavy reliance on textbooks from overseas which are often ill-suited for contexts in which children use the medium of instruction as a second or foreign language.

On the *teaching of languages*, the plan reiterated that “it is the aim of education that every individual, besides knowing his/her mother tongue, will become bi-lingual in English and French” (p.71). No specific policy recommendations were made.

2006 National Language Policy (5th draft)

On *medium of instruction across the curriculum*, the National Language Policy stated that the vernaculars should be the medium of instruction in pre-school and early primary, with Bislama considered a potential vernacular here. English and French should then be used from higher primary onwards, and should be “promoted equally in all classrooms” from this point forward.

On the *teaching of languages*, the Policy provided that English and French should be taught as subjects at the early primary level before they become media of instruction, and that Bislama should be taught as a subject at secondary and tertiary levels.

2006 Recommendations of the National Education Summit

At the National Education Summit of November 2006, ‘A Bi-lingual Society through Bi-lingual Schools’ was established as the second of seven priorities that make up the framework of the Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy (VESS). Although this was not specifically defined, it is clear from the document that ‘bilingualism’ referred only to English and French in this instance.

On *medium of instruction across the curriculum*, recommendations were made to:

- introduce vernacular in pre-school to Year 2, using a vernacular curriculum, and having carried out feasibility studies regarding choice of language, teacher training and materials development
- use French as ‘the global language’ from Year 3, and English from Year 6

On the *teaching of languages*, recommendations were made to:

- introduce English and French as subjects during pre-school
- make English and French compulsory subjects through all levels
- make the vernacular a compulsory subject from pre-school to Year 8, and then available as an option from Year 9 onwards

2006 Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy (VESS)

On *medium of instruction across the curriculum*, the policy set out in the Vernacular Education Sector Strategy was for:

- the vernacular to be used as language of instruction in pre-school and the first two years of basic education,
- either French or English to be phased in as the language of instruction from Year 3,
- the other of these two languages to be phased in as language of instruction from Year 7
- instruction to be ‘bilingual’ (English and French) from Year 9 onwards
- all Anglophone and Francophone schools to be merged into ‘bilingual schools’ by 2015

On the teaching of languages, the policy stipulated the teaching of both English and French from Year 3, with the intention that those leaving school at the end of Year 8 would “be able to communicate in” each of the vernacular, English and French, and that those leaving after Year 12 would be “fluent” in the vernacular, English and French.

2009 Vanuatu Education Road Map (VERM)

The Vanuatu Education Road Map builds on the strategies set out in VESS, as well as those of the Priorities & Action Agenda: 2005-2015, and the Planning Long, Acting Short: Action Agenda for 2009-2012. No specific policies were set out with regard to language, although the Road Map reiterated the objective “to promote bilingualism” (p.9), and called for a strategy for the development of literacy “in French, in English, and in other languages such as Bislama, if appropriate” (p.13).

2010 Vanuatu National Curriculum Statement (VNCS)

The National Curriculum Statement set out a new national curriculum for all subjects from Pre-school to Year 13. Throughout, the question of language was very relevant to this task.

On medium of instruction across the curriculum, the Statement noted the “considerable research evidence” that exists in favour of development of the first language during early education, in order to develop intellectual abilities as well as the learning of other languages. However, the Statement was unable to specify which language(s) should be used as the medium of instruction, aiming only to “produce a ni-Vanuatu curriculum whatever the language of instruction (French, English, Bislama or a vernacular language)” (p.v). The Statement made clear that decisions about medium of instruction would be taken by the Education Language Policy Team (see below).

On the teaching of languages, the Vanuatu National Curriculum Statement stated that Bislama, French and English must be taught in all schools, aiming for bilingualism in English and French for all.

2010 Vanuatu Education Language Policy Proposals (2009-2010)

An education language policy team was appointed in April 2009, to develop a new proposal for a combined education system that would replace the separate Anglophone and Francophone streams.

On medium of instruction across the curriculum, the initial report (2009) produced by the team presented three different scenarios for public consultation. All three scenarios proposed the use of the vernacular as medium of instruction for at least the first full year of school, before a transition to French, and later to English. The only difference was the timings of the transitions. The team’s unpublished report on the consultations shows that none of the three was accepted in its original format. From 60 working groups at the 11 consultation meetings, a total of 32 alternative proposals were made. A year later, the final report on these proposals recommended a single system in which all subjects would be taught in the vernacular for pre-school and a further two years, before the two ‘international languages’ were gradually introduced. The intention of this proposal was that, by the start of secondary education, these two languages would be used equally. However, this report was inconclusive as to whether French would be introduced before English, or vice versa.

On the teaching of languages, the report proposes the teaching of the vernacular from Pre-school to Year 2, the teaching of both English and French from Year 1 onwards until the end of Senior Secondary level, and the teaching of Bislama for one hour a week during Years 5 and 6. The report

also recommends offering additional languages such as Vietnamese, Chinese and Japanese at Senior Secondary level.

Summary

The above overview provides the policy background to the research that was conducted in 2011 for this study⁴. It was clear at the outset of the study that there was a great desire for policy reform, but that very little had actually changed since the language policies of the colonial period. In particular, it appeared that the Anglophone/Francophone debates might be taking attention away from other efforts to include the vernaculars and Bislama in education. It was clear that there were a number of competing goals and agendas that needed to be better understood in connection with one another, and this study aimed to document these, as a first step to moving forward.

Arguments about language and education

Argument 1: Only English and French are suitable for education

Policy documents such as the Education Master Plan and Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy make clear that English and French are important ‘international’ or ‘global’ languages that will help ni-Vanuatu to acquire jobs and scholarships, thereby contributing to economic development of the country as a whole. The result is that Bislama and the vernaculars are not considered to provide new and different opportunities, and are therefore not considered necessary to learn. English and French are the only languages considered useful in the formal economy, and all others are considered limiting. In particular, Bislama is not even considered to be a proper language. It is commonly referred to as “broken English” and “lanwis blong rod”, and many people hold very strong views that it is unsuitable for use in school. As a result, school rules usually exclude Bislama in particular, rather than simply encouraging the use of English and/or French.

In my study, interviewees were quick to repeat these ideas in favour of English and French, with a common extension that knowing both ‘international languages’ would present access to double the opportunities. This was the strongest argument put forward in support of a) keeping English or French as the medium of instruction, and b) wanting all schools to use *both* English *and* French as medium of instruction. Students at one school were reminded frequently not to speak Bislama, and interviewees at both schools told me that it wasn’t a suitable language for education, both because it limited children’s opportunities and because it was just “broken English”.

⁴ At the time of the study, the education language policy was ‘on hold’. A new language policy has since been put forward, many elements of which are in line with my own personal recommendations that I put forward at the end of this report.

Alternative arguments

1. Opportunities are not accessed automatically through English or French

Of course knowing languages such as English and French can help secure scholarships and jobs. The data from this research does not suggest this is incorrect. However, I think we should question whether being exposed to English or French throughout school will lead *automatically* to these opportunities. We already know that a large number of students drop out of formal education along the way, and even those who complete Junior or Senior Secondary level may well return to the village once they finish. Many may have little to do with the formal economy in later life. At the same time, there are large numbers of young people looking for jobs in Port Vila and Santo without success. Of course jobs exist, and of course English and French qualifications are important, but there is no guarantee that school leavers will be able to find employment or scholarships. There are therefore a lot of ni-Vanuatu using English or French as the only medium of instruction based on the argument that this will help them find jobs in later life, who will never actually access such opportunities. The intentions to provide 'Education for All' may be compromised by using languages that make learning more difficult, with negative implications for the future workforce of the country.

2. English plus French does not equal double the opportunity

Although many people told me that "bilingual" speakers of English and French had double the opportunities, I could only really find evidence to suggest that Francophones gained additional opportunities by learning English. There did not appear much incentive for an Anglophone to learn French.

For example, statistics from the Scholarships Office reveal that a number of students completing secondary education in French are taking up scholarship opportunities at English-medium universities, while no Anglophone students have yet switched to French at this stage. In 2011, 160 scholarships were awarded to Anglophone school leavers (100% of whom continued at an English-medium university), and 148 scholarships were awarded to Francophone school leavers (25% of whom opted to attend an English-medium university). Many Francophone secondary schools enable senior students to take English-medium USP preparatory courses alongside their regular programme to facilitate such a switch, but there has been no call for Anglophone schools to provide the equivalent in French. Lower down the school system, there are a number of examples of students switching from the Francophone system to the Anglophone system, but nobody could think of a student who had switched in the other direction.

I analysed every job advertisement printed in the *Vanuatu Daily Post*, *The Independent*, *The Ni-Vanuatu* and the *Vanuatu Times* during a two-month period of 2011. Just under half included specific language requirements for the post, as follows: 20.4% asked only for English, 0.7% asked only for French, 11.3% asked for either English or French, and 14.1% asked for both English and French. In this particular sample, English was the more desirable language. International visitors clearly affect the job market. Visitor arrival statistics demonstrate that 74% of visitors arriving in 2011 were residents of either Australia or New Zealand (with the majority presumed to be dominant English speakers), 12% were residents of New Caledonia (presumed to be dominant French speakers), and the remaining 14% covering a variety of other countries. Far more jobs in the tourism sector require knowledge of English than French.

French is still an important language in Vanuatu, but it seems that English/French “bilingualism” only brought new opportunities for those educated in the Francophone system – in other words, it was English rather than English plus French that enhanced people’s prospects.

3. Bislama and the vernaculars also provide access to opportunities

We see these languages used widely outside school. We often see important notices concerning health, business, finance, disaster management, and so on in Bislama. Indeed the Ministry of Education uses Bislama to convey important information to communities, for example in awareness posters about support for school fees (“Skul fi support blong ol primary skul i stat long 2010”). Bislama is the language in which much of the country’s business is conducted, in which parliamentary motions are debated, and in which units such as the police force are trained. It is not simply “the language of the street”. It is one of the three official languages, it is the national language, and it plays a very important functional role in everyday society, so it is bizarre for it to be excluded (let alone banned) from the education of its citizens.

The vernaculars clearly also have very important instrumental value, albeit on a more local scale, and are used for far more than traditional cultural activities. The functional roles – economic, societal and developmental – of Vanuatu’s many languages (vernaculars, Bislama, English and French) should be recognised within the multilingual reality of the nation. There is no need to choose which language takes us furthest, since all of the languages we speak hold functional value. If we are serious about providing access to the languages that are important, then we should also be teaching students about the vernaculars and Bislama.

4. Inside school, Bislama and the vernaculars have enormous instrumental value

Inside the classroom, Bislama and the vernaculars are clearly also useful. During the research I carried out in 2008, I audio-recorded small groups of students completing Geography tasks, in which Bislama was used almost entirely. It was only when the teacher approached the group that the language switched to English but, when this happened, the communication became very stilted. During classroom observations in 2011, I heard students using mostly Bislama when they were free to work together in groups, and teachers commented that this was the only way to ensure that the task got done. Although teachers themselves wouldn’t speak in Bislama to the students, they were aware of the instrumental value of this language for the completion of academic tasks. Outside the classroom, Bislama and the vernaculars were of course frequently used too. A teacher at the Anglophone school commented:

Mrs Anne: Mi traem long taem blong skul olsem mi hardly toktok Bislama o eni ting long ol styuden and (.) be wanem mi faenem se (.) taem sapos yumi wokbaot tugeta wetem ol styuden bae yumi go olsem yumi wokbaot go long stadium or yumi go eni wea. Sapos we mi ting se mi communicate wetem olgeta long Inglis? Bae dis taem bae i katemaot conversation long olgeta nao. Bae mi mi toktok. Sapos mi toktok long olgeta? Oli yes no oli givim wan smol ansa nomo finis? Oli stop nao. Bae mifala i communication i no save go so. Mifala i jes wokbaot olsem (.) kwaet nomo i go. Be sapos mi jenis ia mi kam Bislama nao conversation i (.) i stat nao i go on.

[Mrs Anne: I try during school time like I hardly speak Bislama or anything to the students and (.) but something I find is (.) when if we are walking around together with the students we’ll go like we walk to the stadium or we go anywhere. If I think that I’ll communicate with them in English? Then this will cut the conversation with them now. I’ll talk. If I speak to them? They yes no when they’ve just given a small answer? They stop now. Our communication can’t continue so. We just walk along like (.) quietly. But if I change and come to Bislama now the conversation (.) will start and will go on.]

Mrs Anne recognises that it is unnatural to use English only. Bislama and the vernaculars enable students to interact with others, develop social skills, and grow up alongside their peers in a natural way, so they hold enormous instrumental value within school contexts as well as outside.

5. Why is Bislama judged on different terms from English and French?

Of particular interest to me is the fact that people make the same arguments about different languages, and yet draw different conclusions. As an example, one of the Anglophone teachers said the following about Bislama during a group interview:

Mr Aru: Naoia yumi stap speak/im uh Bislama? Naoia ol broken wan nomo. I no wan gudwan nating? Yestedei i gat wan expression blong one particular thing tudei bae hem i defren. Tumora yumi tok defren lanwis nao. Even though hem i stil Bislama but then yumi yusum ol defren wod/s altogether than yumi yusum ol same wod/s.

[Mr Aru: We're speaking Bislama now? It's just a broken version. It's not a good one at all? Yesterday there was an expression for a particular thing today it'll be different. Tomorrow we'll speak a different language. Even though it's still Bislama but then we use different words altogether rather than using the same words.]

A few minutes later, Mr Aru's colleague also described French as a language that constantly changes, and yet she seemed to see this as a positive characteristic:

Mme Adrienne: Mi save talem se mi save French from mi stap long environment blong yumi hemia. But (.) mi gat kwestin. Mi gat kwestin sapos we mi go long wan environment we oli toktok French naoia? Se bae mi catch up wetem olgeta? From actually French hem i wan kaen lanwis we olsem hem i laef. Oli jenisim ol long ol expression ... But maybe somewhere outside? Hem i already jenis.

[Mme Adrienne: I can say that I know French because I am in this environment of ours. But (.) I have a question. I have a question whether if I go to an environment where they speak French now? Will I keep up with them? Because actually French is a kind of language which is alive. They change the expressions ... But maybe somewhere outside? It's already changed.]

In a different interview, a similar point was made:

Mr Felix: Blong mi toktok wetem ol styuden hemia mi save toktok olsem long Franis olsem. O wetem wan colleague blong mi mi save toktok. Olsem mi toktok Franis. Be sapos mi toktok wetem (.) wan stret Franis man? Bae vocabulaire blong mi bae (.) hemia nao bae mitufala no save gat niu wan. Sapos mi save toktok olsem wan Franis man (.) bae mi laekem.

[Mr Felix: To speak with students that's I can speak French like that. Or I can speak with one of my colleagues. Like I speak French. But if I spoke with (.) a real French man? My vocabulary would (.) that's it now we wouldn't have any new ones. If I could speak like a French man (.) I'd like that.]

What is not clear is why French can be a living language that changes and develops, while Bislama is considered to be broken. Mme Adrienne and Mr Felix also make clear that they consider themselves to be second language speakers of French who are at the mercy of changes made by native speakers somewhere else. However, Bislama speakers do not seem to claim any ownership over this language.

6. Complex arguments are made AGAINST Bislama IN Bislama

It is also worth pointing out that Bislama was the language of choice during my interviews with teachers and students, and it was used to discuss very intricate and precise ideas. I was told several times – in long and complex sentences of Bislama – that Bislama is not capable of explaining high-level concepts and arguments. We have so much evidence that it is possible to explain very complicated ideas in Bislama.

Argument 2: More than one language in the classroom would be confusing

In the classrooms of the two schools, teachers used either English or French only. If students were unable to answer a question, the teacher would rephrase the question in simpler words or help them towards the answer, rather than switching to Bislama or a vernacular. In interviews, teachers told me that they felt bad if they used Bislama in the classroom, because they thought it was important to use only English or French. Both teachers and students said they thought it would be confusing and chaotic to use more than one language at the same time, and they pointed out that textbooks and exams were written in one language only – either English or French.

Alternative arguments

1. We accept multilingualism outside school

Outside school, I witnessed numerous multilingual encounters in which people asked for and gave information. At the bank, at the hospital, in the Air Vanuatu office, in the Digicel store ... I heard mostly Bislama, but I also heard a lot of English or French used here too, because these are the languages in which people are used to talking about finance, medicine, transport and technology, and these are the languages in which many documents are written. Throughout the research, I heard parents, priests and politicians alike explaining important and difficult concepts to others, using a combination of vernaculars, Bislama, English and French. This is normal, because being multilingual is normal.

But the moment I stepped into a classroom, the multilingualism stopped. Teachers spoke one language only – either English or French – and the students said very little at all in any language. They could usually give one-word answers (sometimes ‘yes’ or ‘no’) to their teachers’ questions, and the whole class would often answer together in chorus. When I sat in the Francophone classrooms, I suddenly understood what this was like. I could understand everything the teachers said in French but I didn’t feel confident enough speaking the language to talk about the diverse range of topics covered in one day – breeds of cattle, population growth, grammatical agreement, force and pressure – without relying on some of my other languages to help me check my ideas and explain myself. It made me wonder what opportunities we were missing to talk about ideas in multiple languages inside the classroom, just as we do outside. I wondered whether we were passing on information in the most effective way, and whether students were learning as much as they could.

2. Assessment needs to assess the thing being taught

Assessment seems to be one of the hardest areas for multilingualism to be accepted in, because there are already concerns about the degree of standardisation between the Anglophone and Francophone systems. We need to ask, though, whether we are really testing students on what they know about a subject, or whether we are testing them on how much they can safely communicate in English or French. In 2008, I conducted an experiment in which I asked teachers to judge audio-recordings of students explaining some challenging concepts, rating how far they thought they understood the concepts, how well they explained them, how intelligent they thought the students were, and how successful they thought they were in their studies. Some of the recordings were in Bislama, and others were in English. The results showed the teachers consistently judged the Bislama speakers much higher in all four categories than the English speakers. However, the trick behind the experiment was that they were actually listening to the same students speaking in both languages. So the teachers were judging each student to have understood the concept well and be intelligent when they were speaking Bislama, but then judging exactly the same student very negatively when they were speaking English. This data has implications for the way we are assessing students through a second language.

National standardised assessments would clearly have to continue to be performed in languages for which qualified markers were available – although this could theoretically include all three of the official languages – but there is potential for some internal school assessments to be conducted in whichever languages were shared by the teacher and students concerned. More importantly, however, even if students continue to need to sit assessments in their second language, there is no reason why they must prepare for these using only this language. They could use multiple languages in the classroom to learn through, and then focus on the required language needed for the assessment. At the moment, students do not really feel comfortable speaking and writing in the language of assessment, because this issue is just ignored.

3. Multilingual classrooms won't be as chaotic as we imagine

It sounds logical that, if everybody in the classroom wanted to use a different language, then it would be chaos. However, once again, multilingual communication proceeds comfortably outside school, because people are aware of the languages that other participants are familiar with. I spent the morning in a primary classroom in 2011, where the teacher and pupils switched very comfortably between French, Bislama and the local vernacular, and it was the most engaged group of learners I saw throughout my research. French was the dominant language used by the teacher, and this was the main language written on the blackboard. However, the teacher constantly switched to the other two languages in order to help make sense of the new information being learnt, and the children often asked questions in Bislama or the local vernacular.

Probably only two or three languages can be used in whole-class teaching (Bislama, English or French, and perhaps a local vernacular). However, other languages can be used if they are shared by smaller groups who are working together – students do this anyway, so bringing this out in the open would enable genuine engagement with learning. If teachers do not speak all of the languages in the classroom, that's okay, because they will still retain control through the language(s) that everybody shares. Teacher training programmes would need to help teachers feel comfortable allowing multilingual interaction in their classrooms (including by discussing videos of effective classrooms

such as the one described above), so that they can provide good learning environments that are both well-controlled and engaging for learners.

4. Too many languages or the wrong languages?

There is a big push towards “bilingualism” in Vanuatu, by which people mean competence in both English and French. This idea is mentioned in policy documents, in the media, and by members of the public, and many people seem to support the idea of “bilingual” education in these two languages. So people seem happy for more than one language to be used, which challenges the argument that ‘more than one language in the classroom would be confusing.’ The problem seems to be more about WHICH languages are being used, as discussed in Argument 1.

Similarly, when asked which language(s) could be used in the classroom, teachers and students often said that English and French were both fine, but that Bislama would make things more confusing. This is what a Year 10 Anglophone student said:

*Arthur: Long tingting blong mi mi ting se ating bae
(.) yumi save yusum (.) Inglis nomo? Mo French ...
be sapos oli ademap Bislama i go bakegen? Naoia
bae i jes stap mekem i had ia nao from (.) wan i
wantem toktok Inglis? O French? Wan i wantem
tok Bislama? Mekem se tufala lanwis er trifala
lanwis ia bae oli no save gohed gud wanpis.*

[Arthur: In my opinion I think that maybe (.) we should use (.) just English? And French ... but if they add Bislama in again? That will just make it difficult now because (.) one wants to speak English? Or French? One wants to speak Bislama? So that the two languages er the three languages can't go ahead at all.]

If we look at Arthur's point, we see that he argued that English and French together would be fine, but that English, French and Bislama would be confusing. We soon realise that it is not the NUMBER of languages that is thought a problem. It is the NATURE of the different languages.

Argument 3: It is too costly and complex to use multiple languages

Vanuatu has approximately 106 vernaculars, most with very small populations of speakers. Some of them have been used officially in the very early years of school, but many of them have not, and there are currently not many materials written in either Bislama or the vernaculars. When I asked people whether they would support using these languages in school, I was always given the same two answers: it would be too difficult to develop these languages enough to use them to talk about academic topics, and it would be impossible to create enough teaching materials to use these languages in school.

Alternative arguments

1. All languages can be developed for education when the will is there

All languages develop according to need, including those such as English and French. As new technology develops and new experiences are encountered, new words are needed – by creating new words, extending the meaning of existing ones, or borrowing from other languages. As we have seen, Bislama and the vernaculars are used for a variety of purposes outside school. Bislama, in particular, has developed in complex ways in order to deal with technology, medicine, commerce,

and so on. Government websites, Wan Smol Bag productions, health posters, and so on all manage to provide information to the public in Bislama about complex topics. As soon as there is a need for a language to be used, we know that its vocabulary will be developed – whether through innovations created by its users (as we see happening with increased use of SMS messaging) or through deliberate planning by a language committee (for example, as was carried out prior to the first Bislama translation of the Bible). However, until these languages ARE used in new academic domains, they will not automatically become ready for use in these domains.

We also have evidence from other multilingual contexts such as Papua New Guinea that it is possible to create materials in large numbers of languages if there is a will to do so, and some success has already been seen in Vanuatu. There is expertise available to provide guidance, within the Linguistics community as well as from experienced organisations such as SIL, but we need to coordinate this expertise, particularly in line with the educational use of Vanuatu’s languages.

2. The current system is also under-resourced

To produce large sets of teaching materials in multiple languages would indeed be very expensive and time-consuming. However, arguing that these new sets of materials would be needed in order for other languages to be used makes it sound as though every classroom in Vanuatu is currently well-resourced with adequate materials in English or French. This is not the case. In the two rural secondary schools of this study, and in three additional primary and secondary schools that I visited more briefly, almost all of the classroom teaching was done via notes and exercises on the blackboard. In some cases, a few copies of a textbook were shared between large groups of students and, in many more cases, only the teacher had a copy of a book. Some of the books used in Vanuatu’s schools are not designed for second language users, so they are already not necessarily a good use of the budget. Of course, it would be best to have well-resourced classrooms, but a lack of teaching materials should not be a reason for keeping languages other than English and French out of the classroom, given that we do not currently have a perfect education system in any language.

3. Are we asking the wrong questions?

If we continue to ask whether the vernaculars and Bislama have as much vocabulary as English or French, or whether there are as many books available in them, then the answer will always be ‘no’. It is unlikely that any of these languages will ever have the range of technical vocabulary or resources that languages such as English do. Languages CAN be developed and materials CAN be written, and some such work will be needed. However, if we wait for every language to reach some imagined standard before it is used for something new, then we will never move forward.

Perhaps, however, we are asking the wrong question, and we should stop asking whether the LANGUAGE is able to do what we want it to. Perhaps we should think, instead, about whether TEACHERS and STUDENTS are able to talk about the topics they need to, by drawing on whatever linguistic resources are available to them. We know that teachers and students already ARE making use of the vernaculars and Bislama in their classrooms, alongside either English or French, so we can see that they are already considered useful for academic purposes. The evidence we have from outside school shows the same thing – these languages (particularly Bislama) ARE being used for complex and technical subjects. These languages can all be used together in productive ways. ‘Multilingual education’ does not mean we have to do everything in every language.

A good example is the animated video about climate change produced by Live and Learn in 2013⁵. Definitions, questions, comparisons and explanations are all given in Bislama and, where technical terms are not readily available in Bislama, various strategies are used. Sometimes, an English term is used such as 'greenhouse gas', which is then defined in Bislama. Sometimes, Bislama terms are used with extended meanings, such as 'rabis win', which is understood from the context to mean 'harmful emissions'. The majority of technical terminology may remain in English and French, but this does not in any way prevent people from discussing technical subjects in Bislama or the vernaculars.

Argument 4: It doesn't really matter which language we use – it's just a tool

Although teachers and students are aware that there are difficulties in using the medium of instruction, they rarely question the fact that English and French are unfamiliar languages for the majority. We have all got used to the idea that some students learn through English, while others learn through French, and it therefore seems that we just need to find a way to make sure that the students (and teachers) are good enough at speaking these languages. Secondary teachers rely on primary teachers to prepare their students well, and content teachers rely on language teachers. Teachers often talk about other students (from previous years or at 'better' schools) who find it easy to learn through English or French, as if their current students simply need to try harder. Schools discuss how they could make their language rules stricter, to help students to improve their competence in the medium of instruction. I was told throughout my research that language is just a tool, so any language is equally acceptable as the medium of instruction, provided that everybody works hard to learn this language.

When I asked people what they thought about the education language policy proposals of 2009-2010, many people seemed to be in favour of learning through French first and then switching to English. For example, a Year 10 Francophone student said the following:

⁵ Accessible from <http://vanuatudaily.wordpress.com/2013/06/13/climate-change-is-everyones-business/>

Feven: *Mi long tingting blong mi se bae yumi yusum French taem yumi skul long praemeri i kam antap. Kasem long Klas 6. Afta yumi (.) blong go long secondary long Yia 7 go long ... French mo Inglis. Ol tija oli kam givim Inglis blong yumi bae yumi stap yusum.*

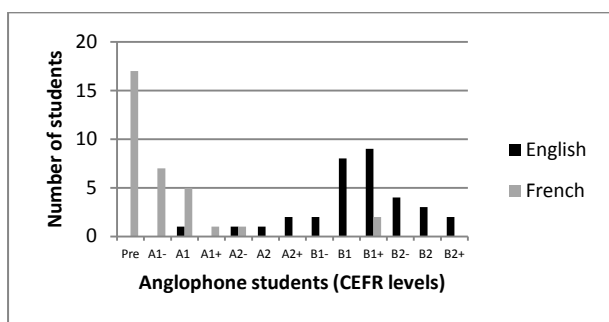
[Feven: In my opinion we should use French when we're in primary school upwards. Until Class 6. Then when we (.) go to secondary in Year 7 we should go to ... French and English. The teachers will come and give English to us and then we'll use it.]

Feven seems to think that they can just be “given” another medium of instruction in Year 7, without any difficulty at all, and many of her teachers made similar comments. This is a common perception, so we start to think about which languages we *want students to speak*, rather than which languages they *can learn effectively through*. The assumption is that the best way to learn these desirable languages is to use them as much as possible, i.e. use them as the medium of instruction for all subjects, and encourage students to practise speaking them as much as possible. This leads to the exclusion of all other languages which are feared to interfere with the target language.

Alternative arguments

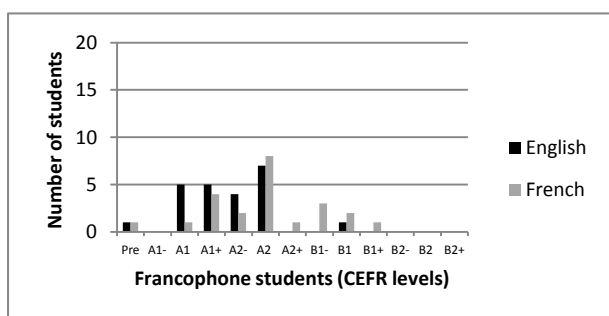
1. Students don't seem to be picking up the medium of instruction

We know that students find it easier to learn through a language that they already understand. So they need to have a good knowledge of whichever language(s) are used in the classroom before they are required to use them. I tested the Year 10 students' English and French competence at the two participating schools to see whether they were managing to pick up enough of these languages to cope in school. In the speaking test, I asked them to talk about familiar (non-academic) topics, just to get a sense of how comfortable they were using the two languages. The results from this test are shown in Figures 1 and 2. The levels are based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which considers those able to use a language ‘independently’ to be at B1 or B2 levels.



In terms of the medium of instruction, my co-assessor and I considered the majority of these students to be able to speak at some length in English, and assigned an average level of B1/B1+. According to the CEFR framework, this classifies them as ‘independent users’ of the medium of instruction.

Figure 1: Anglophone Year 10 speaking test



We considered the majority of these students to be at A1 or A2 in French. According to the CEFR framework, this judgement classifies the majority of this group as ‘basic users’ of the medium of instruction.

Figure 2: Francophone Year 10 speaking test

The first point to make, therefore, is that the students do not simply pick up English and French by being exposed to it as the medium of instruction. These students have been exposed to their medium of instruction for ten years now, and a great number of them (particularly at the Francophone school) are not considered able to use the language independently. A basic knowledge of a language is not enough to use it as the medium through which to learn and discuss new and complex ideas. Interview data with their teachers, along with classroom observations, supports my contention that students are struggling to understand and engage with what they are learning.

Secondly, we should note that the test used here was very simple – students were asked to speak about familiar topics such as family, sport and daily events, which are far less demanding than the academic subjects they deal with in the classroom. International evidence from a variety of both developing and developed countries shows that the cognitive demands of learning academic subjects are far greater than those used for basic everyday conversations. We also have evidence (e.g. from research conducted for the Association for Development of Education in Africa) that using a second language as the medium of instruction is most successful once children have had at least 6 to 8 years of education through the medium of a language that they speak well. We should therefore rethink the idea that any language at all can be used as the medium of instruction.

2. Some languages seem harder than others to pick up without careful teaching

In terms of their own medium of instruction, the Anglophone students in the study appeared to be faring better than their Francophone counterparts. However, when we look at the results for the other school language (taught as a ‘foreign language’ subject), we see a very different picture. Figure 1 shows that the vast majority of the Anglophone students were considered to be ‘pre-level’ in French, unable to produce anything at all in this language. Meanwhile, Figure 2 shows that the Francophone students’ levels in the two languages were closer together, averaging A1 or A2 in English, just as they did in French. Despite having so much more exposure to French than English in their daily lives, the Francophone students seemed to be able to speak both languages just as well. However, as noted above, this level is not considered high enough to use either language as the medium of instruction.

Linguists would say that there is nothing about either English or French as a language that makes either of them particularly easy or difficult to learn. However, a key factor that makes a difference is the amount of exposure one has to each language. We know that children pick up Bislama very easily, because they hear it everywhere around them. English and French are not used very much outside school especially in rural areas, so the only time students hear them is in school. One difference between these two languages in Vanuatu, though, is that English shares many similarities with Bislama, so it may be easier for ni-Vanuatu to learn English than French. It is therefore hard to argue that all languages are equally easy to use as medium of instruction.

3. Both language teachers and content teachers are currently facing an impossible task

At the moment, language teachers are expected to prepare their students to survive in the content classroom, as well as passing their language exams. At the schools I attended, several language teachers had originally trained to teach other subjects such as Science or Social Science, so they had

not had adequate training to deal with this double task. Meanwhile, content teachers who teach through a second language really need to be able to help their students with the language requirements of their subjects, rather than expecting them to be able to use the medium of instruction expertly already, but they told me that they do not feel confident enough talking about the medium of instruction, so they just leave it to the language teachers. In other words, the academic language support that students received was left to chance.

If we have good teaching in the language classroom, with trained language specialists and appropriate materials, then it will be perfectly possible to learn either or both English and French. We have plenty of evidence that many ni-Vanuatu learn these languages well, despite not speaking them before they start school. We also have evidence from around the world that students can learn a foreign language such as English to a very high standard, even though they use a different language as the medium of instruction for content subjects. There are relevant organisations already working in Vanuatu, such as Alliance Française, who could be asked to support the teaching of languages in schools, as well as outside.

Recommendations

Based on the research summarised in the report, I believe that there is the potential to improve the way languages are used and taught in Vanuatu's schools, if we can succeed in questioning some of the stories we retell about language and education. There are lots of contradictory beliefs and ideas about multilingualism and education. Both the familiar arguments and the alternative arguments can be considered logical, but some arguments circulate in more powerful contexts than others and are thus harder to challenge. There are therefore a number of issues that need to be more clearly defined and resolved before we can move forward. In brief, my recommendations are:

- I. to create one policy that addresses medium of instruction across the curriculum
- II. to create a separate policy that addresses the teaching of language subjects

In moving forward, I believe it necessary to adopt a 'sideways' approach to change – with awareness raising, training and preparation at all levels from the community up to the Ministry and donor partners – rather than attempting to implement an entirely new reform from the top down.

Policy for medium of instruction across the curriculum

I recommend creating a policy that deals specifically with medium of instruction across the curriculum, which stipulates:

- which languages textbooks and other teaching materials will be provided in
- which languages will be used for the technical vocabulary and terminology of content subjects
- which languages assessments will be conducted in
- which languages will be *allowed* in the classroom and other school areas
- which languages will be *encouraged* in the classroom and other school areas

The aim of such a policy should be to enable the most effective means of ensuring understanding, learning and participation across the curriculum, whilst ensuring that students will be prepared to sit assessments in the required language(s).

Immediate steps

At the present time, some schools are identified as 'Anglophone' and others as 'Francophone', and there appears no desire to change this. My suggestion would therefore be that one language (either English or French) would continue to be the the main language of learning and teaching at each school – the main language of textbooks and other teaching materials, of the technical vocabulary and terminology of content subjects, and of assessment. Where steps have already been undertaken to implement vernacular-medium education during early primary years, this should continue and be strengthened. In this case, the relevant vernacular would be the main language of learning and teaching for as many grades as there has been adequate preparation.

Following the different arguments discussed here, I believe that all languages should be *allowed* in the classroom and all other school areas. However, I would go much further than this, and argue that whichever languages help learning to take place should be *encouraged* in the classroom and all other school areas. Teachers and students should be helped to recognise the value of all of their languages and should have the chance to use them in whichever ways best help them to learn and participate across the curriculum. I believe that there should be a degree of flexibility in the ways languages are used, rather than setting targets for the percentage of teaching time that should use each language.

Content teachers across the curriculum need to receive training and awareness on how to deal with the medium of instruction in their classrooms, and how to work with multiple languages together. They do not need to become language experts, but they need to pay sufficient attention to language to help students understand textbooks and other materials, learn the specific vocabulary and terminology of their subject, and prepare to sit assessments. They should recognise that their students are also not language experts.

Preparation for longer-term

A longer-term goal would be to make greater use of the vernaculars and Bislama as the main languages of learning and teaching throughout as many grades of primary school as possible, before a principled transition to either English or French as this language. Preparation for such a goal requires conducting an audit of the resources currently available for each vernacular (existing materials, standardised spelling system, teachers, community interest, external expertise, and so on). It requires awareness within communities, sharing of positive results from other communities, and collaboration of all interested parties. Teachers need to be trained and supported (to read and write the language if necessary, as well as use it orally to explain the curriculum to children), and materials need to be created, before attempting to implement a new innovation in a school.

Preparation also involves thinking about the transition from a vernacular to English/French as the main language of learning and teaching. Whether this transition will be made during the earliest

grades of primary school or, more appropriately, in the later grades, teachers need to be trained to help children deal with the new language in its academic context, without excluding all others.

Policy for the teaching of languages

I also recommend creating a separate policy that deals specifically with the teaching of languages as subjects, which would stipulate:

- which languages will be taught as subjects in each grade
- what the purpose is of learning each of these languages

The aim of such a policy should be to make sure that the methods and resources used for teaching each language will be appropriate for the purpose for which it is being learnt.

Languages being taught in order to support curriculum learning

Each school will be using either English or French as the main language of learning and teaching. This language (often referred to as L2) will also need to be taught as a subject. The purpose of teaching this language should therefore be to assist with its use as a major component of medium of instruction across the curriculum. Teaching should therefore focus on the academic language requirements of the content curriculum (general components such as explaining, comparing, arguing and so on, as well as components specific to academic disciplines where appropriate). Other elements that are currently included within the L2 curriculum, such as literature and formal letter writing, should be dealt with separately (see below) in order to keep the focus of this subject on academic language support.

The ideal scenario for me is one in which L2 is taught as a subject for a number of years before it is expected to become part of the medium of instruction. From this point forward, I believe L2 should continue to be taught as a subject up to Year 13, with assessments taking place at Year 8, Year 10, Year 12 and Year 13.

Languages being taught as subjects for other purposes

Other language subjects that have either been taught or proposed at various times include:

- either French or English (whichever is not being used as the main language of learning and teaching, sometimes referred to as L3)
- Bislama and the vernaculars
- other 'international languages' such as Chinese, Japanese and Spanish

A proposal for the teaching of languages must begin by setting out the purpose for each language to be taught.

For example, we need to ask whether French and English are being taught (as L3) for the purpose of oral communication with other speakers, to enable school leavers to go on to tertiary education in either language, or simply to honour the requirements of the Constitution and the historical

significance of both languages in Vanuatu. The methodology and materials used in each of these scenarios would be rather different.

Currently, the L2 curriculum includes elements of literature and language study, and these elements might still be considered important. If there was a separate 'language and literature' subject, the main purpose would be the appreciation of language, rather than mastering the language for communication.

When we consider the teaching of the vernaculars and Bislama, it will also usually be for the purpose of learning *about* these languages (understanding that they are worthy of study, learning about their historical and contemporary usage), rather than learning *how to use them*. This type of language study will therefore have a very different purpose from the study of English or French.

Finally, it has been suggested recently that languages such as Chinese, Japanese and Spanish should be included as optional language subjects for senior students. If there are (human and material) resources available, this might be possible, but such languages might be competing for space in the timetable with other 'employability enhancing' skills such as IT.

Once the purpose of language learning is known in each case, then appropriate materials can be sourced or developed, appropriate methodologies can be identified, appropriate assessments can be devised, and decisions can be made about the grades in which each language is compulsory or optional.