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### Classroom code-switching in a Vanuatu secondary school: conflict between policy and practice

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## **Classroom code-switching in a Vanuatu secondary school: conflict between policy and practice**

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English and French have been retained by Vanuatu's education system as the two media of instruction. Other languages are ignored and often explicitly banned by school policies. However, code-switching between the official and other languages is common, with particularly frequent use of Bislama, the national dialect of Melanesian Pidgin. While it is commonly thought that Bislama is only used in classrooms to compensate for inadequate levels of English, research carried out at one Anglophone secondary school reveals that this is not the case. Bislama is shown to be an additional learning resource, which students employ to help them complete academic tasks, making use of the natural tools of bilingualism that they possess. However, since code-switching conflicts with school language policy, such useful practices are often carried out covertly, and learning may actually thus be hindered by the language policy.

**Keywords:** bilingualism; classroom code-switching; language-in-education policy; education in Vanuatu; Bislama in education

### **Introduction**

Schools in Vanuatu often ban students from using any languages other than the official medium of instruction, either English or French. The intention is to help students become more proficient in the medium of instruction and thus succeed in their studies. However, code-switching between the official and other languages is common, with the dominant unauthorised language being the national dialect of Melanesian Pidgin, Bislama. In academic discussions, code-switching is particularly prominent during student–student interactions, and there is widespread belief that Bislama is only used in classrooms as a result of poor mastery of the medium of instruction.

However, research carried out at one secondary school in Vanuatu suggests that English/Bislama code-switching is carried out not only to fill gaps when English levels are weak, but also to accomplish a diverse range of discourse functions. The position presented here is that students are making use of the resources of bilingualism, taking advantage of the ability to switch between languages, rather than being unable to cope with the demands of the classroom. Crucially, these productive patterns of interaction are restricted by the English-only policy, and thus only take place when the teacher is not present. It is concluded that, although the

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language of instruction in Vanuatu's classrooms is English, this is not the language in which the majority of genuine academic interaction takes place. The language policy is, therefore, not only ineffective, but may also be detrimental to students' academic progress.

### Classroom code-switching studies

The practice of code-switching, the 'alternate use of two or more languages, varieties of a language, or even speech styles' (Hymes 1977, 103), is a widely observable phenomenon that occurs in L2 medium classrooms. A distinction has been drawn between *discourse-related switching*, concerning shifts in meaning internal to the discourse, and *participant-related switching*, concerning the competencies or preferences of participants (Auer 1984). As noted by Martin (1996), many early classroom studies focused on the way teachers switch into the students' dominant language to facilitate learning, thereby suggesting that classroom code-switching is mainly participant-related. Data show teachers alternating between languages in order to enhance understanding or relate topics to experiences outside class, thus accommodating students' needs. The implication is that it is too difficult to carry out classroom activities solely in the language of education, so code-switching is used to 'relieve' this burden.

However, with a more recent focus on code-switching as carried out by both students and teachers, it is now acknowledged that discourse-related and participant-related switching co-occur and that it is hard to separate the two entirely (Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain 2005; Unamuno 2008). Indeed, recent work in the field of bilingualism (e.g. Garcia 2009; Heller 2007) goes beyond the notion of switching between distinct codes, referring instead to 'translanguaging' as more fluid language practices (Garcia 2009). While, for analytical purposes, it is considered useful here to conceptualise code-switching as alternation between two separate codes, and to draw on Auer's distinction between discourse-related and participant-related switching, it should be noted that bilingual practices do not conform to such neat separations between distinct languages.

Teachers may code-switch in order to negotiate lesson content, encourage participation, give praise and enforce discipline (e.g. Arthur 1996, Botswana; Camilleri 1996, Malta; Martin 2005, Malaysia); in this there may be an overlap between participant- and discourse-related functions. Code-switching has also been referred to by Lin as a 'response to the symbolic domination of English in Hong Kong' (1996, 49), by Canagarajah as a way for teachers and students to 'negotiate dominant ideologies, while at the same time affirming their own desired identities and values' (2001, 195), and by Camilleri, 'as a means of constructing specific professional identities: using enough English to appear "educated" but, at the same time, espousing a Maltese identity' (1996, 85). Such insights reflect a move towards critical approaches that combine analysis of micro-level classroom data with examination of macro-level policies, drawing links between local discourse practices and wider linguistic ideologies (Kumaravadelu 1999; Martin-Jones 2007).

Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain consider code-switching a 'resource for effective bilingual communication' (2005, 235). When code-switching is allowed, students can make use of their bilingual competencies in class as they would outside, conceptualising the classroom as a 'bilingual space', in which participants mirror interactional patterns found in situations away from the classroom (Liebscher and

Dailey-O'Cain 2005). The classroom is seen as a 'community of practice', with shared norms and understandings, so that participants use the languages available to them to achieve a common goal (Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain 2005, 245). Further support for this position is given by Reyes (2004), investigating the English/Spanish code-switching practices of pairs of native Spanish-speaking children in the USA. These studies conclude that greater bilingual competency leads to an increase, rather than a decrease, in code-switching, suggesting that children meet their communicative needs by drawing on the resources of their different languages. Rather than treating code-switching as a sign of deficiency in the L2, the suggestion is that teachers should acknowledge dual-language competencies and the strategies bilinguals employ.

In the South Pacific region, many studies have been published on language-in-education policy and planning (e.g. Baldauf and Luke 1990; Lotherington 1996; Mangubhai 2002), which raise many problematic issues arising from the use of English (or French) as the medium of instruction, but which suggest few realistic alternatives beyond early primary school. Tamata (1996) has carried out one of the few studies into classroom code-switching in the region, summarising its use in Fiji's secondary schools, but not reporting on interpretive analysis of specific episodes of classroom data. Siegel (1996, 1997) has conducted the most in-depth research into the use of Melanesian Pidgin in education but, again, has not specifically examined the interaction between English and Melanesian Pidgin in the classroom. Classroom code-switching is therefore a relatively unexplored phenomenon in the South Pacific.

### **Contextual background**

Vanuatu is a linguistically diverse nation in which approximately 106 different indigenous languages are spoken. According to the 1989 national census, over 90% of the population speak Bislama, a dialect of English-based Melanesian Pidgin, usually in addition to one or more of the indigenous languages. From 1906 to 1980, the country was ruled jointly by Britain and France as the New Hebrides, with the result that both English and French are also still widely used. Bislama is constitutionally recognised as the national language; English, French and Bislama share official-language status; and English and French are the principal languages of education (Lynch 1996).

Since independence, a dual education system has been retained, with approximately two-thirds of students attending Anglophone schools, and the remainder attending Francophone schools (Obed 2004). Official policy states that English or French is the sole medium of instruction, while the other is taught as a foreign language in later years. Guidelines for school principals state that, 'local languages should be used only at the week-ends or out of school hours' and, 'although Bislama is an official national language, it is not a language of instruction [and] where possible it should not be used when either English or French is appropriate' (Vanuatu Ministry of Education 1998, 43). Bislama is a lingua franca among students at secondary schools, and yet is often banned from school campuses. Government policy to use only English or French as the medium of instruction has been applied to the exclusion of all other languages, and many schools punish students for using Bislama (Lynch 1996).

### **The study**

The study was carried out at a rural Anglophone boarding school in Vanuatu, at which a policy states that only English may be spoken around the school campus.

The class chosen for the study was the Year 11 geography class, from which a participant group of three students was selected. The aim was to analyse this group's interactions during the completion of geography tasks, in order to establish whether code-switching was used only to overcome difficulties with the use of English, or whether there were more complex motivations involved. In order to investigate the interface between policy and practice, academic interactions were recorded both in class and outside, to take into account the influence of the teacher's presence.

Approximately 40 different languages were reported to be spoken as home languages by students at the school, while all students were fluent in Bislama and had varying proficiency in English. Students used Bislama during most school activities, only switching to English when a teacher was nearby. Other languages were also used by linguistically homogeneous groups, generally from the island on which the school was located, and the two neighbouring islands. Bislama was the home language for two of the students in the participant group, while the other spoke a language from a neighbouring island, and all were considered to be of average to above average ability in English. The geography teacher was in favour of the policy to prevent the use of languages other than English and reported using English with the majority of students outside class, although she sometimes spoke her first language to students from her island.

During the first phase of the study, the participant group was recorded three times while completing tasks that were also carried out by non-participant groups. In the first task, set during a lesson, groups had to use area and grid references to find and give the locations of places on a map. The second task was carried out that evening, during an unsupervised homework session, when the group was asked to complete the activity that had been started during the day's lesson. The third task took place the following week, during another lesson. On this occasion, groups were asked to make notes in answer to seven questions, based on their knowledge of tropical cyclones.

Following the recorded discussions, separate interviews were carried out with two of the three participants and their geography teacher. These interviews focused on the transcripts of the discussions, using examples from the data to elicit retrospective intuitions about the students' language choices made during the discussions. All 25 teachers and 25 students were also asked to complete a questionnaire designed to elicit both behavioural and attitudinal responses to the language policy.

## **Analysis**

The research therefore relied upon an integration of microanalysis of academic discussions, participants' post-hoc reactions to key episodes from these discussions and broader attitudes towards the language policy. In addition to positioning the observed patterns of discourse in their wider context, this integration provided triangulation to the study, as different perspectives were utilised. The approach followed the sequential procedure used by Borg (1998). Thus, although all analysis was guided by the discussion data, the actual path of analysis was dependent on the emerging interpretations of this data. This qualitative approach meant that a detailed picture could be drawn of what was happening in the academic discussions.

While some studies have made use of coding schemes of discourse acts (e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975), it was felt that this approach would place limitations on this particular investigation. Firstly, pre-determined criteria of discourse acts

would have imposed too rigid a framework on the data, detracting from the wider implications of language use. Secondly, the lexical similarities between Bislama and English often led to ambiguities as to which language was being used, so that coding choices could vastly skew the analysis. For example, since numerals are the same in both languages, and the first two discussions involved several episodes of counting, a quantitative account of language distribution would depend on whether the participants were perceived to be counting in Bislama or English. Thirdly, it was felt that the participants' own interpretations of their interaction patterns were vital to the description of the way they used the languages, which would not have been reflected by the use of a taxonomy of discourse acts.

Martin notes that, although it is theoretically possible to assign causes for all instances of language alternation, it is sometimes more appropriate to, 'show how the teacher and the student cope with the linguistic pressures of the classroom, in the wider context of language in society' (1996, 134). Taking too micro an approach to the analysis of code-switching can lead to the important issues being lost in the minutiae of motivations for individual switches. In this study, it was the intention to demonstrate the wide range of functions that code-switching accomplishes in the classroom, rather than provide an in-depth analysis of every switch. Determining how far these practices correlate with participants' perceptions of what code choices should be made provides insights into the conflict between ideology and practice.

### **Overview of data**

Following the decision not to quantify code-switches, only a very broad, impressionistic overview of how much each language was used was sought from the transcribed data. As expected, this overview showed that the unsupervised homework discussion was carried out almost entirely in Bislama, with switches to English generally being caused by direct reading from the task instructions. However, Bislama also seemed by far the most dominant language used in student-student discussions in the classroom, despite the English-only rule. Students tended to use Bislama as the principal language to negotiate both the grid reference task and the questions about cyclones.

In informal conversations around the school, both staff and students confirmed that Bislama was used a great deal in the classroom, despite the language policy. Typical opinions were that the use of Bislama was wrong and that students were not good enough at English to use only the official classroom language. Both groups felt that it would be better to speak more English so that language levels would improve, and as a consequence students would do better in their studies. Perhaps surprisingly, students were in favour of the language policy, even though they admitted that they rarely followed it. With these opinions in mind, the issue of whether code-switching was a resource used to compensate for poor English levels was examined with the help of data from recorded discussions, interviews and questionnaires.

### **Is code-switching only used to overcome gaps in students' English proficiency?**

According to the questionnaires, 64% of students and 72% of teachers believed that Bislama was used in class as a result of poor levels of English. An open question asked why they used any languages other than English in classes. Nine out of the 14 students who opted to answer this question, and 14 out of 17 teachers, referred to

the use of Bislama to aid understanding, explanation or clarity. The following were some of the answers given to this question by students:

- (1) 'I use other languages when I am discussing the answers with a partner or when working in groups to find the answers more easy to understand'.
- (2) 'Inside the classroom, I use Bislama mostly instead of English because I understand clearly and better with Bislama'.
- (3) 'Bislama must also be used inside the classroom because it will help other students to improve a lot in their studies. When he or she is clear about the topic, now use English'.

The following answers were given by teachers to the same question:

- (1) 'When students find it really hard to understand the concept I am teaching, I use another language to explain. That is, if after several explanations still they are confused I use another language'.
- (2) 'I use Bislama to clarify important points, for repetition if students do not understand what I am saying'.
- (3) 'I use other languages such as Bislama to explain problems or solve problems, because I think when solving problems, using Bislama will help students understand more easily'.

The initial focus in the analysis of the discussion data was therefore on participant-related switches that seemed driven by students' English proficiency. The following examples were taken from discussions in which the participant group was working on tasks.

#### Example 1

- 1 Nellie: It occurs up in the sky?
- 2 Rosina: What?
- 3 Nellie: *Hem i occurs antap long skae no?*  
It occurs up in the sky doesn't it?

Analysis of Example 1 suggests that the code-switch had a repair function, intended to solve a breakdown in communication. In line 3, Nellie switched to Bislama to reformulate her original suggestion in response to Rosina's reaction of 'What?'. Nellie explained in the interview that this was because Rosina had seemed not to understand, so she had rephrased the suggestion in Bislama to make it clearer. It is possible that a discourse-related function may also have been involved here, if Rosina's turn is seen as an expression of surprise at Nellie's suggestion, rather than a misunderstanding of her language. When Nellie reformulated her idea, she may have switched to Bislama to signal that she was not sure of herself, as is suggested by the addition of a tag question.

#### Example 2

- 1 Nellie: What are the three main hazards (.) *Hazards hem i minim denjeres uh?*  
What are the three main hazards (.) Hazards means dangerous doesn't it?

In Example 2, Nellie switched to Bislama when she clarified the meaning of the unfamiliar word 'hazards'. The turn began in English, since the words were read

directly from the question, written in English. She explained that she hadn't been sure about a word she had read, so had wanted to check with the others. Nellie said that she found it easier to use Bislama when checking meanings of words. It therefore seems likely that this is an example of participant-related switching, since it was the speaker's preference for Bislama that initiated the switch.

#### Example 3

- 1 Nellie: What is meant by cultural features?
- 2 Jessica: Cultural (.) *olsem ol man oli mekem ating* (.) physical *olsem volkeno*.  
Cultural (.) like manmade I think (.) physical like a volcano.

Example 3 also involved clarification of meaning, but the switch was oriented toward the hearer's, rather than the speaker's, preference. In line 2, Jessica replied with a definition in Bislama when Nellie had asked in English about the meaning of 'cultural features'. Jessica suggested in the interview that she was most likely to use Bislama when explaining something to another member of the group, to make it clearer. The intuition that this was done for Nellie's benefit, rather than as a result of Jessica's competence in English, is supported by the fact that Jessica gave a well-formed definition of 'cultural features' in English during the interview, so was obviously linguistically capable of expressing this concept in either language.

The above examples indicate that some switches were, indeed, motivated by language difficulties, or the perceived need to avoid such difficulties occurring. However, there were several other switches that could not be accounted for in the same way.

### **Other motivations for code-switching**

#### Example 4

- 1 Nellie: ((reading)) 'Prison in Selly Bay' (.) *Wem Selly Bay ia?*  
((reading)) 'Prison in Selly Bay' (.) Where's Selly Bay?
- 2 Jessica: Shelly Bay
- 3 Nellie: **Where is Selly Bay guys?**

In Example 4, Nellie switched from Bislama to English when repeating her own question. In this situation, it is hard to attribute the switch to participant-related factors, since both languages would have been easily understood by all. It seems that the switch was discourse-related, since Nellie may have felt that the other members of the group had not responded appropriately to her first question, thus motivating a reformulation. By switching into the official language of the classroom, as well as by directly addressing her co-participants with the term 'guys', Nellie was able to emphasise her question in an attempt to provoke an appropriate response.

#### Example 5

- 1 Jessica: *Be hemia? Mi save se siro poen samting be mi no kaontem siro.*  
But this one? I know it's zero point something but I didn't count the zero.
- 2 Nellie: *Be tu long wanem tu sentimita* (.) *tu long wan.*  
But two for what's that two centimetre (.) two for one.
- 3 Rosina: ((laughs))
- 4 Jessica: *Ah be that's it hemia nao.*  
Ah but that's it that's it.



In Example 5, Jessica switched intra-sententially, with the same information being conveyed in both languages, either side of the switch-point. The preceding turns had been entirely in Bislama and Jessica began her turn in the same language, but then switched to English and back to Bislama again, repeating ‘that’s it’ in each language. This response indicates that Nellie’s answer to her original clarification request was satisfactory, and the switch can, again, only have had a discourse-related function, that of emphasis and assurance to the others that she now understood.

#### Example 6

- 1 Rosina: Shelly Bay (.) Shelly.
- 2 Jessica: *Hem i gerup i se Selly Bay.*  
She said Selly Bay.
- 3 Nellie: Shelly.
- 4 Rosina: Shelly (.) Shell (.) Shelly (.) Shelly Bay (.) Prison.
- 5 Nellie: *Um sikisti tu hem i easting blong hem (.)* and uh eighty eight is northing.  
Um sixty two is its easting (.) and uh eighty eight is northing.

In Example 6, Nellie switched from Bislama to English while giving a six-figure grid reference that she read off the map. Here it is hard to suggest any motivation for this switch, since both parts of line 5 contain exactly the same kind of information and perform the same function of conveying the answer. Nellie’s turn initiated a new discourse move, and reference to preceding utterances does not explain the intra-sentential switch. A possible discourse-related explanation is that Nellie’s use of English in the second half of her turn oriented towards the learning environment in which English was the official language.

#### Example 7

- 1 Jessica: I’ll just write only the answers.
- 2 Rosina: Yes.
- 3 Nellie: *Yes ansa nomo.*  
Yes just the answers.

In Example 7, Nellie confirmed Jessica’s suggestion in Bislama. The function of Nellie’s turn was to provide a response to Jessica’s, agreeing that she only needed to write the answers. Since Jessica had asked in English, there can have been no participant-related motivation for Nellie switching to Bislama here, as there would have been no breakdown in meaning if Nellie had simply repeated the words: ‘yes only the answers’. By switching out of the official code here, Nellie was perhaps conveying a reassurance that the written output did not need to be very formal. This interpretation suggests that the switch can only have had a discourse-related function.

### **The influence of the teacher**

The teacher’s presence was, unsurprisingly, influential in students’ language choice.

#### Example 8

- 1 Jessica: *Traem luk (.) kaontem Nellie.*  
Look (.) Nellie count it.

- 2 Rosina: *Tu ia.*  
It's two.  
**((Teacher approaches group))**
- 3 Teacher: **Okay have you finished the first part?**
- 4 Jessica: **Yes we've finished.**
- 5 Teacher: **Okay good keep going.**  
**((Teacher leaves))**
- 6 Nellie: *Siro poen.*  
Zero point.
- 7 Jessica: *Grid refrens i had we from yu stap kaontem ol (.) tens blong hem o.*  
A grid reference is really hard because you have to count (.) its tenths or.

In Example 8, the students had been discussing a grid reference in Bislama, but the teacher approached and asked a question, so they immediately switched to English. As soon as she left, the conversation reverted to Bislama. This was clearly an example of participant-related switching, since the new participant entering the conversation was the teacher, who expected students to use English. The teacher asked the question in English, and the students replied in the appropriate code but, as soon as they were able to, switched back to their preferred language.

#### Example 9

- 1 Nellie: Well (.) *yu no faenem?*  
Well (.) haven't you found it?
- 2 Rosina: *Z leta Z.*  
Z letter Z.
- 3 Jessica: m-m.
- 4 Nellie: **We ask Mrs Garae?** ((pause)) *wem leta Z ia?* (.) **we ask Mrs Garae** uh?  
**We ask Mrs Garae?** ((pause)) where's letter Z? (.) **we ask Mrs Garae** uh?

In Example 9, Nellie switched to English when suggesting asking the teacher for help. When asked about this in the interview, she immediately said that she had used English because they always have to use English when talking to teachers. When it was pointed out that she wasn't actually addressing the teacher here, but only talking *about* her, she still said that she had to use English. Although the teacher was, again, the trigger of the switch, she was not actually a participant in this episode. It therefore seems a better analysis to suggest that this switch had a discourse-related function, as Nellie was acknowledging the norms of teacher–student interaction before such an interaction began.

When questioned about general patterns of language use in and outside class, both Nellie and Jessica stated that they used more English in class due to the presence of the teacher. They both said that it was easier for them to use Bislama but that they felt freer to do so when there were no teachers nearby. Nellie referred several times to the possibility of being told off or put on detention for speaking Bislama, and reported switching to English when teachers were nearby, even outside class.

When asked in the questionnaires why languages other than English were used in class, three students made it clear that the presence of, or interaction with, the teacher affected language choice:

- (1) 'When I'm speaking to the teacher, I use English only. This is just because I am afraid he/she might put me on detention. But when I'm speaking to other students, I only use our common language which is Bislama. . . . In group work, I only sometimes use English. That's when the teacher is just near me that he can hear every single thing I say'.
- (2) 'I speak English to teachers because I think it's best. Teachers do not speak or use other languages except English and this language will be used for excusing yourself. I think it's best to use other languages to speak to students because these languages would make them feel comfortable to speak to you and in discussing it is better to use other languages because it can be more understandable to your friend'.
- (3) 'I use Bislama when speaking with my friends. I use English when speaking with my teacher for help. I also use Bislama when group discussion and English when doing my homework'.

The unmarked language for interactions with teachers is English, but that for student–student interactions is Bislama. The switch from Bislama to English in the presence of a teacher can be considered participant-related, in that the arrival of the teacher motivates the switch. However, since the teacher represents the school policy, the students switch to conform to the expectations of the classroom, rather than the preferences of any of the participants.

Data from recorded classroom discussion, questionnaires and interviews all confirm a typical feature of student–student interaction. Students carry out much of their task negotiation in Bislama, but almost always switch to English if needing to interact directly with the teacher. Although this may seem unnatural, the switch may often not cause any breakdown in either communication or task achievement, as shown in Example 8. However, closer analysis of an episode in which the teacher's presence triggered a switch to the official language of the classroom shows that problems can sometimes be caused by such switches.

This is shown in Example 10. The students were unsure how to measure the grid reference for a large symbol on the map, whether to measure the centre of the symbol or the whole box in which it was found. When they tried to ask the teacher, she misunderstood the question and re-explained the basic technique for measuring grid references.

#### Example 10

- 1 Nellie: *Faev sikis (.) bae yumi kaontem long medel blong Z ia o olwe i go antap?*  
Five six (.) do we count it in the middle of the Z or all the way up?  
((pause)) I mean (.) yes ((pause)) better ask Mrs Garae.
- 2 Jessica: *Kasem en blong hem.*  
To the end.
- 3 Rosina: You ask.  
((Teacher approaches group))
- 4 Nellie: Scuse Mrs Garae (.) are we going to measure (.) if we measure the northings we measure it up here or only in the middle?
- 5 Teacher: Which one is the northings?
- 6 Jessica: This one.
- 7 Teacher: Okay so: what's your question?
- 8 Nellie: Are we going to measure it like (.) end of the box or only in the middle.

- 9 Teacher: No just start off because it starts off at ninety one so you start off your zero should be over the [ninety one].
- 10 Rosina: **ninety one.**
- 11 Teacher: Cause it's two centimetres up to ninety two so your zero should be here and then you can mark off every two millimetres.
- 12 Nellie: **Two millimetres.**
- 13 Teacher: To zero point nine.
- 14 Rosina: **Yes.**
- 15 Teacher: Within that box.
- 16 Nellie: **Thanks.**  
((Teacher leaves))
- 17 Rosina: Zero point one.
- 18 Jessica: ***Yu askem wanem long hem?***  
What did you ask her?
- 19 Rosina: We haven't.
- 20 Jessica: ***Yu ask se yumi meserem Z o meserem bokis.***  
You asked if we should measure the Z or the box.
- 21 Nellie: *Meserem Z.*  
We measure the Z.
- 22 Jessica: *Mi ting se::*  
I thought tha::t
- 23 Nellie: *Mi mi ting se bae yumi meserem Z.*  
I thought we should measure the Z.
- 24 Jessica: ***Hem i gerup i ansarem se bae yumi mesurem bokis.***  
She said that we should measure the box.
- 25 Rosina: Yes.
- 26 Jessica: *Hem i gerup.*  
She said.
- 27 Nellie: *Yumi meserem bokis.*  
We measure the box.
- 28 Jessica: *Yu meserem kasem en.*  
Measure it to the end.  
((All laugh))
- 29 Nellie: *bokis.*  
*box.*
- 30 Jessica: ***No X ia (.) stop long X nomo.***  
No X (.) just stop at the X.

In line 9, the teacher began to re-explain how to find a grid reference, which the students already knew. When they realised that she was explaining something different they did not tell her, but they acted as if she was answering their question by repeating her words and thanking her (lines 10–16). As soon as she left, they switched back to Bislama and discussed what the teacher had said (lines 18–26), before deciding to solve the problem in their own way (lines 27–30). Since the group had not known which point to measure, their eventual grid reference was close to the correct answer, but not exactly right.

When questioned about this exchange, the girls admitted that they had known at the time that the teacher was explaining something different but they had just kept quiet. Nellie responded:

*No from mebi i had blong mifala i eksplenem long Inglis so that's why mi talem olsem be hem i ansarem i go i had bakegen blong (.) mi no save se hao nao bae mi talem long Inglis mekem se mifala i stap kwaet nomo.*

No because (.) maybe it was hard for us to explain in English so that's why I said it like that but she answered and it was hard again to (.) I didn't know how I could say it in English so we just kept quiet.

In this case, it seems that the enforcement of an English-only policy prevented real communication from taking place and an opportunity for learning was missed. As there were few episodes in the data in which the teacher interacted directly with the participant group, it is difficult to confirm this analysis, but it appeared that the students switched to English for the sake of obeying the school rule, rather than because this is the best language in which to convey meaning effectively.

### **Implications**

This study began by focusing on code-switching between students during group tasks. Initial observations indicated that greater use of Bislama was made during informal homework discussion than in the formal classroom setting. When further analysis was carried out, it seemed that the presence of the teacher was an important factor in determining patterns of interaction. While the complete absence of the teacher from the homework situation enabled Bislama to be used almost exclusively, a similar dominance of Bislama was seen in the formal classroom activities when the teacher was some distance from the group. It may therefore be more accurate to state that patterns of language use were more greatly affected by the presence or absence of the teacher than the formality of the academic situation.

It became apparent that there were two codes being used. Interactions in which the teacher was involved were carried out entirely in English, while those in which only students participated were carried out in Bislama or in a mixed code of Bislama and English. The unmarked code during the former interactions was undoubtedly English, and it is unlikely that a student would ever use Bislama in the presence of the teacher. In contrast, in situations in which the teacher was not present, Bislama or a mixed code could be said to be the unmarked code.

However, within student–student interactions, discourse patterns were complex. Recorded discussions showed evidence of both participant-related and discourse-related switching. Some participant-related functions were easy to identify, such as repair of breakdowns in communication and clarification of terms. It is clear that other instances of code-switching accomplished subtler functions internal to the discourse itself, but such discourse-related functions were harder to analyse. It is suggested that such code-switching added emphasis to participants' turns, and showed speakers' orientation to either more or less formal situations. Some episodes seemed to contain elements of both participant- and discourse-related switching. Thus, although code-switching was sometimes used as a fallback strategy where the language of the classroom failed, its function was far more diverse.

However, teachers and students tended to explain code-switching as occurring purely for participant-related reasons, generally to help understanding. Functions that have been analysed here as being discourse-related were not mentioned by interviewees, and students said they could not explain why they had used both languages in many episodes. There was therefore the impression that Bislama was

only used in class because students' levels of English were not good enough for them to manage monolingually in the official classroom code. The practice of code-switching was deemed to be unavoidable but undesirable.

An alternative analysis presented here is that students were not resorting to Bislama out of an inability to use English, but were drawing on the resources afforded by both languages in their repertoires. They were acting as bilinguals do away from the classroom, following the discourse patterns that frame social interactions in much of Ni-Vanuatu life. Long before they arrive at secondary school, most students are adept at switching between two or more languages, and the classroom is just another context to contend with. This analysis supports Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain's (2005) conceptualisation of classrooms as *bilingual spaces*, as well as Garcia's (2009) notion of *translanguaging*. In Vanuatu's classrooms, students make use of both English and Bislama, without clear distinctions between the two languages, following non-academic patterns of interaction and accomplishing genuine communication.

Crucially, this creation of a bilingual space only happens when the teacher is not there, in what Canagarajah has termed the 'classroom underlife' (2001, 205). Entirely different interactional patterns are seen when the teacher joins the interaction, as English must then be used. The resultant interactions share many similarities with what have been described as *safe* language practices by Chick (1996). In such practices, teachers and students apparently conspire to create the impression that learning is going on, relying on strategies such as chorus answers and repetition of information that is written on the blackboard, in such a way that overt evidence of misunderstanding will be kept to a minimum. Although this term has often been used to describe whole-class interaction (e.g. Arthur 1996; Hornberger and Chick 2001; Martin 2005), the data presented here suggest that similar safe practices may occur during small-group discussions when the teacher takes part. Example 8 shows a productive, geography-based discussion that was being conducted through both English and Bislama replaced by a stilted, teacher-led episode in English. Example 10 shows an interaction driven by the students' need to ask for help, but constrained by the requirements of the language policy. In such episodes, student responses were short and conformed to classroom expectations, thus both complying with the rules and saving the face of participants, but this was to the detriment of comprehension and, ultimately, task achievement.

Within the same physical classroom, the students seem to differentiate between the official, or public, space controlled by the teacher, and the self-constructed, private space in which different norms exist. Liebscher and Dailey-O'Cain (2005) note that it is the sanctioning of code-switching that enables productive bilingual spaces to be created, but in Vanuatu, this sanctioning is achieved by teachers turning a blind eye to the practices that they feel they cannot prevent. When students feel pressured to obey the language policy in classroom discussion, the bilingual space that engenders effective engagement with the task is shut down, and replaced by the safe, teacher-controlled interaction patterns in which little genuine communication takes place.

## Conclusion

The clear finding from this research is that the language policy stipulated by both the Ministry of Education and the school administration is not being fully implemented.

There are, in fact, two different languages being used simultaneously in academic classes, where English and Bislama both play roles. The result is a de facto dual-language situation, rather than a deliberate bilingual programme. One language is used in the official space of the classroom and another in the private spaces; the former limits participation to safe practices of interaction and the latter engenders genuine communication and learning.

While public policy documents stipulate what is to be the language of education, it seems that, in reality, there needs to be a distinction drawn between *language of instruction* and *language of learning*. In this classroom, instruction and almost all forms of input are certainly delivered through the medium of English, but very little engagement with this input takes place in English. When students explain concepts to each other, develop ideas and complete tasks, they revert to the mixed code of Bislama and English. In effect, the school policy is attempting to eradicate the very language in which learning is taking place, in order to replace it with a language in which only very superficial classroom routines are being carried out.

When viewed in this way, the conflict between policy and practice is extremely serious. If students are only genuinely engaging with tasks when they are free to control their language use, a policy that bans their dominant language from the classroom effectively stifles their opportunities to learn. It is clear from discussions and interviews with both staff and students that an English-only policy is considered desirable, and problematical only in terms of its enforcement, so that more effective management might actually achieve a ban on Bislama, and therefore learning.

The alternative might seem to be the transferral of the strategies currently employed by students, from the private space to the official space. Since learning seems to take place in Bislama more effectively than it does in English, it seems logical to make greater use of Bislama. For example, if teachers modelled effective patterns of code-switching, drawing on the linguistic resources available to all participants, such language practices would be legitimatised and adopted. Importantly, the whole process of learning could be conducted publicly, rather than being carried out covertly and shamefully, with the sense that Bislama is resorted to out of failure.

However, the fostering of natural bilingual practices will not solve all problems. English is a language that must be acquired by Anglophone students if they are to continue their studies beyond junior secondary level (Year 10), since senior secondary and tertiary levels of education are administered by regional, rather than national, institutions. Examinations at these levels must be conducted in English and students must, therefore, be able to complete all the requirements of assessment in this language. In particular, it is important that students are able to express themselves effectively and appropriately in written English, in order to demonstrate the knowledge they have acquired and understood. It is understandable that those involved in educational institutions, as well as the general public, feel that English is the only realistic medium of education throughout all levels of school (perhaps after the first few years of primary school), in preparation for the demands of higher education.

The dilemma is, then, how to provide the high levels of English that are needed without doing so at the expense of achievement and understanding in all areas of the curriculum. An effective language-in-education policy must be one that, firstly, allows and encourages the use of whichever language practices will best facilitate understanding and engagement with learning and, secondly, promotes the effective

teaching of English in a way that will enable students to pursue further education and participate in the ever-globalising world. These two goals are not incompatible, but they cannot be tackled as if they are identical.

It is beyond the scope of the present study to suggest ways in which these two goals might be accomplished, but an understanding that Bislama is used not only to compensate for poor English may help in separating them. In addition, reconceptualising the way that languages are being used and moving away from the notion of Bislama and English as separate, competing systems, may help legitimatise students' bilingual practices. Further research must determine how effective language use can contribute to genuine learning, and how English can best be taught for the purposes for which it is required. Separate and systematic approaches must be taken to these two challenges, to avoid attempting to satisfy competing sets of ideals and achieving neither goal.

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