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Title: The engineering of plurilingualism following a blueprint for multilingualism: The case of Vanuatu's education language policy

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## Abstract

This paper examines recent proposals in Vanuatu for a new, plurilingual education system. The paper discusses these proposals with reference to three principles of plurilingualism upon which the proposals are ostensibly based: the need to value the linguistic repertoires with which children start school, the development of further linguistic resources to enhance individual potential, and the holistic integration of these resources within linguistic repertoires. It is argued that the proposals are driven not by concerns for the fostering of individual plurilingualism, but rather by an agenda of an imagined societal multilingualism within which certain languages are prioritised over all others. The result is an attempt to engineer plurilingual competence by following a blueprint for multilingualism, thus working against the needs of individuals. A proposal is put forward for a more flexible model of plurilingualism, within which teachers and learners have the freedom to negotiate meaning through whichever linguistic resources are available to them, rather than stipulating which languages should be used at any given time.

Title: The engineering of plurilingualism following a blueprint for multilingualism: The case of Vanuatu's education language policy

This paper examines recent proposals for a new plurilingual education system put forward by an advisory team appointed by the Ministry of Education of Vanuatu (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, 2010e).<sup>1</sup> These proposals will be used as a case study to illustrate the disjuncture that can occur within language policy and planning between explicitly stated policy goals and the language planning procedures through which they are intended to be implemented. The explicitly stated policy goals in this case are to recognise and develop the linguistic repertoires with which children begin school. The reports in which this policy is proposed justify these goals with reference to principles of *plurilingualism*, drawing on the Council of Europe's (2001, 2007) usage of this term.

*Plurilingualism* has been defined by the Council of Europe (2007, p.8) as “the repertoire of varieties of language which many individuals use,” in contrast to *multilingualism*, which refers to “the presence in a geographical area, large or small, of more than one ‘variety of language’” (p. 8). From this perspective, an individual's plurilingual repertoire is a “group of language varieties ... mastered by the same speaker, to different degrees of proficiency and for different uses” (p.51). The Council of Europe recommends “a holistic and coherent approach” to language education (p.8), in order to “promote an integrated competence and a consciousness of learners' existing repertoires and of their potential to develop and adapt those repertoires to changing circumstances” (p.41). This distinction between “plurilingual” and “multilingual” is well-recognised in certain contexts, but less so in others, where the terms may be used interchangeably. For the purpose of this paper, and in line with the theme

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<sup>1</sup>The specific policy proposals that are critiqued in this paper are those put forward by the Education Language Policy Team. Although this team was appointed by the Ministry of Education, the proposals do not necessarily reflect the views of the Ministry, or of the Vanuatu government as a whole.

of this special issue, I maintain this distinction, since I focus on the disparity between the needs of individuals and the (perceived) needs of Vanuatu as a whole.

It will be suggested that the proposals for implementation of this policy are inconsistent with the stated objective to enrich individuals' linguistic repertoires and instead are driven by the construction of a version of societal multilingualism that is both unrealistic and detrimental to the needs of ni-Vanuatu.<sup>2</sup> The proposals represent a form of top-down language planning that is designed to achieve a set of macro-level goals, as evidenced by the prioritisation of certain languages in particular. This paper argues that attempting to engineer plurilingual competence by following a blueprint for a particular version of multilingualism actually works against the needs of individuals, as plurilinguals and as learners. It will be suggested that this disjuncture between policy and planning is inevitable when a formal policymaking body retains full control over the implementation of a policy that is intended to be grounded in the experience, repertoire, and needs of each individual learner, i.e., based on the principles of plurilingualism outlined above.

The paper will begin by providing a brief overview of the current education system in Vanuatu before introducing the proposals that have been submitted for a new plurilingual system. These proposals will then be examined in terms of the three principles on which they are supposedly based. The paper will conclude by outlining, in place of fully articulated language planning procedures, an alternative vision for a broad framework within which plurilingualism could be fostered.

### **Background**

Vanuatu, an island chain in the South Pacific, has been an independent country since 1980. Prior to that date, the islands were ruled jointly by the British and the French as the

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<sup>2</sup> People from Vanuatu.

Condominium of the New Hebrides. At Independence, Vanuatu thus inherited two former colonial languages, English and French. These two languages were retained as official languages alongside Bislama, the national dialect of Melanesian Pidgin. Approximately 106 other languages are spoken in Vanuatu, that are referred to here as the vernaculars. They are each spoken by a relatively small population (given that the total Vanuatu population is less than 250,000), but most are considered to be vibrant languages, as they have continued to be passed on to successive generations (Crowley, 2004; Siegel, Kuiper, & Rubino, 1997).

During the colonial period, the British and French established two separate education systems. Since Independence, children have continued to be enrolled in either an English-medium school or a French-medium school, although attempts have been made by the national Ministry of Education to unify the content of what is taught in the two streams. It is common practice for parents to send some children to each stream, with the result that siblings from the same family may become artificially divided as “Anglophones” and “Francophones.” English-medium schools also teach French as a subject, while French-medium schools teach English as a subject. However, in the current system, very little academic weight is given to this language subject in either English- or French-medium schools. School rules to enforce the sole use of the medium of instruction are often put in place in an attempt to improve levels of competence, thereby resulting in the enactment of a *de facto* monolingual policy (Shohamy, 2006). However, teachers and students, at secondary schools in particular, speak a number of different languages between them, resulting in widespread variation in the extent to which such rules are followed (Willans, 2011).

Vanuatu is thus a highly multilingual country, with the co-existence of a number of different languages and the recognition of three official languages. Vanuatu’s citizens are also highly plurilingual, and it is common for individuals to use a number of different languages in daily life. However, it is important to remember that the linguistic repertoires

with which children start school may contain little, if any, competence in the languages that are given official recognition by the state and by the education system. Some children may be monolingual in the vernacular of the local area, some may be monolingual in Bislama, and many others may have varying degrees of competence in more than one language. However, prior exposure to English and French tends to be limited, particularly in rural areas. Neither English nor French is widely spoken outside school, despite their official language status, and these languages must thus be categorised within the education system as “foreign languages” to which children have very limited access. Attempts to implement an education system that “promote[s] an integrated competence and a consciousness of learners’ existing repertoires” (Council of Europe, 2007, p.41) must take these factors into account.

### **Proposals For A New Plurilingual Education System**

In April 2009, an Education Language Policy Team was appointed by the Vanuatu Ministry of Education, tasked with proposing a language policy appropriate for all schools within the country. The team was led by a French technical advisor who was recruited to Vanuatu specifically for this purpose. The remaining members of the committee were selected to represent the Ministry of Education, University of the South Pacific, Vanuatu Cultural Centre, and community of chiefs.

The current proposals to implement a plurilingual system are not the first attempt to integrate a greater number of languages in Vanuatu’s education system. Previous debates and policy innovations may well have prepared the ground in which ideological space (Hornberger, 2002, 2005) could open for policy change. In 1999, the government mandated the implementation of a curriculum taught through the vernaculars for one preparatory year and the first two years of primary school, before a transition to either English or French from the end of Class 2 (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999). This innovation was motivated by

a debate that had run for over 25 years (Thomas, 1990), and which drew on arguments relating to literacy development, the cognitive and psychological implications of learning through a familiar language, language maintenance, and linguistic rights. Implementation did not proceed as anticipated, however, and, by the end of the pilot phase, very little had been achieved (see Nako, 2004).

The place of Bislama within education has also engendered much debate. The official stance has tended to be negative (Thomas, 1990), and Lynch (1996, p.248) cites a Ministry of Education directive that states that teachers using Bislama in school would be guilty of “professional misconduct” (p. 248). Current guidelines for secondary-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, p.43). Although linguists have long supported the use of Bislama in education (e.g. Crowley, 1996; Lynch, 1996; Siegel, 1997, 2006), Siegel provides an overview of arguments typically put forward by policymakers, teachers, and parents against the use of pidgins and creoles such as Bislama in education (1996, 1997, 1999, 2008). Negative views still appear widespread amongst these groups in Vanuatu (Willans, 2008).

The final issue that the Ministry of Education hopes to solve is that of discrepancies between the current Anglophone and Francophone streams of education. A number of issues are highlighted in the following excerpt from the Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy: “The heritage of the dual education colonial system has not worked to build strong literacy skills, pride in vernacular languages, or bi-lingualism. The dual system is expensive, unsustainable, divisive, and inequitable” (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 2006, p.16).

Concurrent with the language policy consultations, a team was established to produce a new national curriculum statement, recognising “the need to harmonize the curriculum for Francophones and Anglophones so that all children follow the same curriculum and have the same opportunities irrespective of their language background” (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 2010, p.2). The new education language policy was therefore intended to work within this complex situation.

The preliminary report made clear in its introduction that “plurilingualism is a major objective of the education system” (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.3), and went on to state the following:

The plurilingualism concept which we promote regards the linguistic and intercultural competence of individuals as forming a single repertoire made up of complementary linguistic and behavioural skills enabling the speaker to react in the most appropriate and effective way to the most varied situations of communication and contact. Such plurilingual competence naturally involves a state of imbalance between the competence levels attained in the different languages and the various linguistic activities entailing comprehension and expression. It is also progressive because it is based on the individual and not on the different languages concerned. (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.7)

This definition of plurilingualism appears in line with that of the Council of Europe (2007), given at the start of this paper. The preliminary report also provided a number of principles on which its proposals for plurilingual education were founded. These principles are consistent with the principles set out by the Council of Europe:



1. Plurilingual education should take into account and value the “linguistic profiles” (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.10) of individuals, including the languages they speak before starting school.
2. Plurilingual education should work to develop further linguistic resources that will in turn help “develop individual potential” (p.2).
3. Plurilingual education should view language teaching “holistically” (p.2) rather than treating each language separately.

This preliminary report set out three different proposals for the first eight years of a common, plurilingual education system for Vanuatu, to replace the current dual-medium system. These proposals, which were then debated during public consultations (Education Language Policy Team, 2010d), are summarised in Tables 1 to 3 below. The tables show which language(s) are to be used as the medium of instruction and taught as subjects (with the number of hours per week given, where specified) at each stage of primary school. In each case, Bislama may be used as the vernacular, particularly in urban areas where a large number of languages are spoken.

**Table 1: Proposal 1 (Education Language Policy Team, 2010a)**

	Vernacular	French	English	
Pre-school	Medium for all subjects until term 3 of Year 2	Introduced through play activities	Introduced through play activities	
Year 1		Subject (9hrs)	Subject (45mins)	
Year 2		Transition to medium		
Year 3		Medium for all subjects (for exceptions, see English)	Subject (2 hrs)	
Year 4			Medium for 1 hr of social science	
Year 5				
Year 6				Medium for social science and 1 hr of science
Year 7				Medium for social science & science
Year 8				

**Table 2: Proposal 2 (Education Language Policy Team, 2010b)**

	Vernacular	French	English
Pre-school	Medium for all subjects until term 3 of Year 4		
Year 1			
Year 2		Introduced through play activities	Introduced through play activities
Year 3		Subject (9 hrs)	Subject (45 mins)
Year 4		Transition to medium	
Year 5		Medium for all subjects (for exceptions, see English)	Subject (2 hrs)
Year 6			Medium for 1 hr of social science
Year 7			
Year 8			

**Table 3: Proposal 3 (Education Language Policy Team, 2010c)**

	Vernacular	French	English
Pre-school	Medium for all subjects until term 3 of Year 2	Introduced through play activities	Introduced through play activities
Year 1		Subject (9hrs)	Subject (45 mins)
Year 2		Transition to medium	
Year 3		Medium for all subjects (for exceptions, see English)	Subject (2 hrs)
Year 4			
Year 5			
Year 6			Subject (3 hrs)
Year 7			Medium for 1 hr of social science
Year 8			Medium for social science

Therefore, the common threads of all three proposals were that the vernacular would be used for the medium of instruction for at least the first full year of primary school, and that French would be allocated a significantly greater proportion of time than English, first as a subject and then as medium of instruction. As noted by Early (2009, p.6), by the time of the 2010 consultations, the public were presented with a “false choice” between three very similar options. The only difference was the stage at which each language would be introduced. During the consultations, attended by approximately 450 invited stakeholders representing a variety of interests, groups were asked to discuss which of the options they supported, or to suggest an alternative option. The team’s report on the consultations (Education Language Policy Team, 2010d) showed that none of the three options was accepted in its original format. From 60 working groups at the 11 consultation meetings, a total of 32 alternative proposals were put forward.

In response, the team's final report to the Ministry (Education Language Policy Team, 2010e) set out a modified proposal. This proposal recommended a single system in which the vernacular would be the sole medium of instruction until the end of Year 2, with the two international languages being introduced gradually as media of instruction for different subjects (see Table 4). The intention of this proposal was that, by the start of secondary education, English and French would be used equally. However, the report was inconclusive as to which of these languages should be the first international language and which should be the second. This is a clear reflection of the lack of consensus achieved during the meetings and public consultations.

**Table 4: Final proposal (Education Language Policy Team, 2010e)**

	Vernacular	Bislama	International language 1	International language 2
Pre-school	Medium for all subjects			
Years 1 & 2			Subject (30 mins)	Subject (30 mins)
Years 3 & 4	Medium for Social Science, Sport, Health, Agriculture & Religious Ed		Medium for Maths, Science & Art; Subject (9hrs)	Subject (2 hrs)
Years 5 & 6	Medium for Health, Agriculture & Religious Ed	Subject (1 hr)	Medium for Maths, Science & Art; Subject (6hrs)	Medium for Social Science & Sport; Subject (4hrs)
Year 7			Medium for Maths, Science, Agriculture, Sport & Art; Subject (2hrs)	Medium for Social Science, Religious Ed & Technology; Subject (6hrs)
Year 8			Medium for Science, Agriculture, Sport & Art; Subject (3hrs)	Medium for Maths, Social Science, Religious Ed & Technology; Subject (5hrs)
Years 9 & 10			Medium as above; Subject (4 hrs)	Medium as above; Subject (4 hrs)

At senior secondary level (Years 11 to 13), students would choose either to study Science, Maths and Technology in English, and Social Science, Art and Crafts in French, or to study the former in French and the latter in English. Vietnamese, Japanese, Chinese and “others” were listed as optional language subjects at this level.

This final report stated in its conclusion that there were three reasons in favour of French being the first international language used as medium of instruction (namely, the dominance of English in the world makes it more likely that French speakers will go on to learn English too; lexical similarities between Bislama and English are argued to lead to confusion for children; French is said to be, in some unspecified way, more likely to safeguard the use of the vernaculars); and two reasons in favour of English first (English is used far more widely and therefore presents greater opportunities; 70% of the current teacher workforce is English-speaking). The closest the report came to suggesting an answer came on p.49 of the 78-page text:

In view of the human resources currently available [the proposal for English to be the first international language] seem[s] to be more realistic in the short term since the current staffing levels indicate that for every French-medium teacher there are two English-medium teachers. (Education Language Policy Team, 2010e, p.49)

At the time of writing, there has been no further progress with the actual implementation of this new plurilingual education system, and a number of alternative possibilities are still being explored.

### **The Fostering Of Individual Plurilingualism, Or The Engineering Of Societal Multilingualism?**

This section will examine the principles behind the proposed implementation of the plurilingual education policy. It will argue that, whatever the initial intention, the proposals currently on the table are not oriented to the needs of individual learners. They take into account neither the existing linguistic resources within individual learners' repertoires nor those that learners need to develop, and they do not promote an integrated, holistic approach to language learning. It will be demonstrated that the proposals are, instead, driven by other, macro goals that link to (perceived) societal needs. The outcome is far removed from the team's original stated purpose to "develop individual potential within a general context of plurilingualism" (Education Language Policy Team, 2009).

### **Lack Of Awareness Of Pre-Existing Resources Within Linguistic Repertoires**

The first principle promoted by definitions of plurilingualism is that the linguistic resources with which children arrive at school should be valued, and taken as a starting point from which to build up a plurilingual repertoire. The suggested proposals do move towards a system that takes into account these resources. Rather than continuing to introduce either English or French as the medium of instruction from the very beginning of primary school, children would now be taught in a familiar language for the first few years. However, there are a number of problems that remain to be resolved. The following extract comes from the 2009 version of the report:

The three proposals are based on the vernacular language (or Bislama in urban context); that is the first language learned by a child and the only one he (she) speaks when he (she) starts kindergarten. The use of vernacular at the beginning of schooling enables every child to extend the social scope of the use of his (her) mother tongue and build up

cognitive faculties by verbalising in that tongue with the help of the school. (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.8).

The stipulation that each primary school must decide which vernacular to use as the initial medium of instruction assumes that each school community is linguistically homogeneous, which may not be the case. In urban areas, where communities tend to be very mixed, it is assumed that Bislama will be selected as the medium of instruction, given that the children and their teacher are unlikely to share a common vernacular. However, these children may speak other languages at home, and therefore bring with them competence in these languages. Even in rural areas, children may not speak the same vernacular. For example, they may have spent time living with family on a different island or in the capital city, or one of their parents may speak a different vernacular which is used in the home. Some, but not all, children in the class may speak Bislama. In most primary schools, helping children to recognise the resources within their linguistic repertoires is likely to entail making use of both Bislama and at least one other language, whilst being aware that different children will have different levels of competence in each. The 2010 report acknowledged this issue:

Given the multilingual context of Vanuatu, children often grow up with more than one mother tongue as several languages are spoken in their families or their immediate environment. Therefore, tuition could be delivered in one of the first languages with which the child is familiar (Education Language Policy Team, 2010e, p.8).

However, the proposals for communities to select *a language* in which to teach do not take into account the possibility that children may already have some degree of competence in more than one language. More importantly, they do not allow for the fact that different children in the class may speak entirely different languages. The assumption appears to be that there is a “common denominator” language that will be shared by all.

The second problem is that, as Table 4 shows, familiar languages are used only until an international language is considered able to take over, at which point the initial medium of instruction is simply replaced. By the end of the second year of primary school, children are expected to use a foreign language as the medium of instruction for certain core subjects and, by Year 7, only English and French are to be used. It is clear from the order in which the different subjects transition to an international language medium that the vernaculars are considered suitable only for “soft subjects.” Maths and Science are taught in an international language as soon as possible, followed by Social Science. This move is not about building on or developing repertoires, but about replacing the familiar languages with unfamiliar ones as soon as learners are deemed ready.

This type of early-exit transitional programme has been heavily criticised in postcolonial contexts (e.g. Brock-Utne, 2009) on the grounds that a more familiar language is used only until a bridge can be made to the monolingual use of an international language such as English, at which point the familiar language is replaced. Familiar languages (and potentially their speakers) are thus devalued, as the vernaculars are shown to be used only because learners are not considered ready to use anything else. The proposals validate the beliefs that Vanuatu’s languages are not fit for use within academic contexts, and that only international languages lead to success.

Competence in Bislama is afforded even less value than all other languages of Vanuatu. It is inserted as a parenthetical alternative for situations in which other vernaculars cannot be used, such as in urban areas:

The three proposals are based on the vernacular language (or Bislama in urban context) [sic]. (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.8)



It should also be pointed out that Bislama is considered to be L1 in some families, mostly in urban areas. (Education Language Policy Team, 2010e, p.8)

Teachers make frequent use of L1 or, where the teacher has no knowledge of the local L1, Bislama. (p.29)

In each case, Bislama is included as an exception, rather than the norm. It is not counted as a resource within teachers' or learners' repertoires, but as a fallback strategy for certain situations (with the implication that L1 is not *supposed to be* Bislama). The lack of value afforded to this particular language, which happens to be the national and joint-official language, appears to reflect the negative attitudes discussed earlier that are typically expressed towards pidgins and creoles.

In addition, the consensus within international research is that children struggle to learn content subjects effectively through such early-exit programmes (Banda, 2000; Benson, 2005; Heugh, 1995). After two years of schooling, in which English and French are taught only for thirty minutes each per week, children are simply not ready to learn other subjects through either language. The situation will only be compounded in Vanuatu if the proposal for all children to use both foreign languages as media of instruction is implemented. The proposals thus do not make a genuine commitment to building on pre-existing linguistic repertoires, despite their attempts to include the use of vernaculars in the early years.

When examining other education policy objectives, it appears that the use of vernaculars in initial education is incorporated only as a means to achieving other goals, falling in line with previous government policies. For example, the Education Master Plan (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999) set out five goals for education in Vanuatu: unity through a national education system; preservation of historical and cultural links with Britain and France; financial economies of scale gained from the predominance of English and French

within schools; preparation for national and international opportunities through fluency in one international language; and the creation of a society in which the elites speak both international languages fluently. The Master Plan concluded that “the Government of Vanuatu believes that the single most effective measure to help in achieving all of these goals is the introduction of vernacular-language education at the beginning of basic education, beginning the transition to English or French as the medium of instruction in about the third year” (Vanuatu Ministry of Education, 1999, p.64). This extract makes it clear that the introduction of the vernacular as medium of instruction in the early years of school is motivated by a desire to achieve a number of separate goals that are far from recognising and building on the linguistic resources with which children start school. The current proposals from the Education Language Policy Team appear to mirror this attempt to achieve other objectives through a transitional programme, despite the rhetoric of plurilingualism.

### **Lack Of Development Of Appropriate Linguistic Resources**

The second principle on which the proposals have been founded is that learners should be given the opportunity to develop the relevant linguistic resources for their own circumstances. The team have stated the intention to “develop individual potential” through being “based on the individual and not on the different languages concerned” (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.7). In this way, the policy does appear to set out to cater for the further development of children’s linguistic repertoires in ways that respond to their changing needs. However, it is not clear that the resources expected to be developed are appropriate to the needs of ni-Vanuatu.

It is evident that the only languages valued by the proposed system are international languages. As noted in the previous section, more familiar languages are gradually replaced by both English and French, thus demonstrating to children that these are the only languages

with any functional value. Furthermore, those who remain in education beyond Year 10 will be shown that languages such as Japanese and Chinese, from other (more economically powerful) countries, are also more important to learn than those spoken throughout the islands of Vanuatu.

A system in which all children are expected to master both English and French, and in which all other languages spoken in Vanuatu continue to be devalued, does not seem to be based on individuals' needs. The 2009 census indicates that 76% of Vanuatu's population lives in rural areas, where English, French and other international languages are rarely used, if at all. Local vernaculars and Bislama are the languages in which health campaigns are conducted; in which the travelling theatre group *Wan Smolbag* dramatises awareness about various social issues throughout the islands; in which non-formal education providers conduct workshops; in which local bank transactions are carried out; in which small business cooperatives operate, and so on. Although English and French may be the languages of tourism, the vast majority of rural ni-Vanuatu are very unlikely to interact with foreigners on a regular basis, or have call to use either of the two international languages (let alone both).

A lack of school places creates high numbers of students pushed out of the system, many of whom are unable to seek formal employment. For example, Ministry of Education statistics show that of the 6,016 children who started Year 1 in 2000, only 63.7% began secondary school in 2006, and only 32.8% began senior secondary level in 2010. For the many school pushouts, it seems that learning to participate in society through the use of Bislama and other languages spoken in Vanuatu would be useful. In contrast, it is unclear that developing competence in both English and French by the end of primary school, as is set out in Table 4, will help many of those who leave school at this stage.

Of course, many students do continue with their formal education and hope to secure employment. A plurilingual system must enable students to acquire relevant linguistic resources for these purposes. Many jobs require the use of either English or French, particularly for written purposes, but again, it is very rare for both to be needed. A sample of advertisements collected in daily and weekly newspapers throughout February and November 2011 demonstrates this. Approximately half of all advertisements printed within the two-month sample made explicit mention of language requirements, but only 14.1% asked for both English and French (11.3% asked for either English or French; 20.4% stated only that English was essential; 0.7% stated only that French was essential). It is clear from these figures that very few students hoping to seek formal employment will need both English and French.

Similarly, many of those students who continue to senior secondary education hope to achieve a scholarship to continue with their tertiary studies. There are currently no nationally-owned tertiary providers, and English or French is therefore needed at this level. However, within the new proposals, all students at senior secondary level would be expected to learn one group of subjects through English and the other group through French. This means that a student could theoretically apply to study Biology at an English-medium institution in Fiji or Australia, but could only apply to study Geography at a French-medium institution in New Caledonia (and vice versa). Meanwhile students hoping to undertake interdisciplinary programmes such as development studies and environmental sciences (both highly relevant in the Pacific region) may find they struggle to meet entry requirements to a single-language tertiary institution if they have school qualifications for sciences and social sciences in different languages. This also seems to reflect the wishful thinking that students will somehow gain sufficient competence in both languages, thus enabling them to use either in

any given situation. Considering that many students in the current system struggle to reach adequate competence in one international language (Kanas, 2006), this seems unlikely.

Furthermore, the order in which the Education Language Policy Team (2009) initially stated that English and French must be introduced reveals something other than attempts to develop individual potential. The preliminary report gave the following rationale for introducing French before English in each of its three proposals (from Tables 1-3):

It is evident that plurilingualism requires a *particular sequence* in the introduction of the languages taught; *with a wide consensus, all the Ni-Vanuatu people we have met are unanimous to state that*: the first learning during kindergarten period enables the child to extend the social scope of the use of his (her) mother tongue and build up cognitive faculties by verbalising in that tongue with the help of the school; then *French comes before English* as medium of instruction. (Education Language Policy Team, 2009, p.6, my emphasis)

No explanation is given as to why French should be introduced before English. It is also not specified how the consensus of the Ni-Vanuatu public was ascertained, since this document was issued prior to the public consultations. Indeed, the fact that no original proposal was accepted during the consultations (Education Language Policy Team, 2010d) makes this assertion appear premature. In particular, it is unlikely that the general public would have made comments about, for example, the development of “cognitive faculties.” Elements such as this suggest that there is an agenda behind the team’s proposals to ensure the maintenance of both English and French, which is being repackaged as concern for plurilingualism, rather than a genuine desire to develop the linguistic repertoires of ni-Vanuatu.

It appears that the drive for all children to learn both English and French (and potentially other, globally strategic, languages) reflects an idealised image of a multilingual society, rather than a concern for the needs of individuals. The reasons for this are numerous. The dual colonial period has left behind a double legacy in which both English and French are thought of as part of the “heritage”; perceptions that Francophone-educated ni-Vanuatu are disadvantaged by the dominance of English in Vanuatu and elsewhere motivate attempts to bolster the use of French in the country; continued links with English-speaking and French-speaking countries are considered to bring additional benefits in terms of trade and international relations; and, perhaps most importantly, financial aid to education, as well as to many other sectors, comes from both English-speaking and French-speaking (and, increasingly, Chinese-speaking) sources, and it would be naive to sever these ties or pass up the opportunity to forge new ones. Such nationally strategic moves are not necessarily bad, in themselves, but it is difficult to build a case for all ni-Vanuatu children being required to learn these international languages on the basis of individual need.

### **Lack Of Coherent Integration Of Languages**

The final element that needs to be questioned is the way the different languages are intended to be incorporated. A key principle underlying attempts to implement plurilingual education is that the resources of different languages should be integrated, rather than treated as separate entities. In the case of the proposals, however, the timetable has been very clearly divided so as to stipulate which language will be used at any given stage for any given subject. Only one language will be used as the medium of instruction for each subject at any one time. The subject of Maths provides a good illustration of how this is designed to work in practice (see Table 4): children are expected to acquire initial numeracy skills in the

vernacular before using the first international language as the sole medium of instruction for this subject from Year 3 to Year 7, and then switching to the second international language from Year 8 onwards.

This is far from an integrated approach. Although the incorporation of different languages appears to move beyond the monolingual characterisation of the present education system, the proposed programme intends to keep these languages separate by allocating blocks on the timetable in which each language shall be used as medium of instruction. Rather than making use of a number of languages in the classroom, the environment will remain a monolingual one. However, now students will be expected to master three different languages sufficiently to use them all as separate media of instruction at different stages. Following Heugh (2003), Banda (2009, p.1) refers to this approach as “multiple monolingualisms,” and attributes this to a Western experience of language learning. He notes that language policies based on such perspectives make no sense in contexts where people use a number of languages on a daily basis without separating their linguistic repertoire into distinct “languages.”

It is also possible that the need for an adequate level of competence to fulfil this function in each language will lead to more focused attempts to keep these languages separate. There has been no discussion of a plurilingual assessment system, and it can thus only be assumed that examinations for each subject will be administered monolingually in whichever medium of instruction was expected to be used at the relevant stage. To return to the example of Maths, Year 3 and Year 8 teachers may spend a lot of time reinforcing the new medium of instruction at each stage in order to prepare children for examinations in that language. A sudden switch in Year 8 from one language to another would need to be artificially reinforced in order to take effect, and it is thus likely that the medium used for this subject the previous year would now be discouraged. This does not appear to encourage the “integrated” or “holistic” approach advocated.

Instead, once again, the proposals reflect attempts to construct an alternative vision for Vanuatu as a multilingual whole in which both English and French hold equal status. The process by which three different media of instruction and assessment (plus the brief inclusion of Bislama as a subject) have been included appears to reflect a desire to combine a number of different possibilities without eliminating any languages, particularly English or French. There seems to be an attempt to fit the two current systems into a single new one. Whether this is in order to appease all sectors of society or to ensure the maintenance of international relations with both Anglophone and Francophone countries is debatable. However, it is hard to justify the approach in terms of the principles of plurilingual education. The initial stated objectives of an integrated individual-oriented programme appear, again, to have been overridden by the desire to retain both English and French within Vanuatu.

### **Ways Forward?**

This paper has argued that the proposals put forward to the government by the Education Language Policy Team do not reflect the plurilingual principles on which they are supposedly based: the recognition and valuing of the linguistic repertoires with which children start school; the development of further linguistic resources as needed by each child; and the fusion of languages within an integrated repertoire. Instead, it appears that the proposals are driven by different agendas for which English and French are considered essential while other resources are afforded no value. Rather than fostering plurilingualism as an individual-oriented concept, the proposals attempt to engineer a version of plurilingual competence for each citizen according to a multilingual “blueprint” that is constructed as necessary for the country.

The question that is raised by this discussion is whether plurilingual policies that are genuinely oriented to each individual can ever be put into place, or whether such endeavours



will always be driven by other agendas and justified by means that will appeal to the voting public. There appears to be a paradox if a government, or some other top-down planning body, attempts to implement what is meant to be grounded in the experience and existing repertoires of individuals. It will be suggested here that it may be possible to set out a model or framework within which plurilingualism can be fostered, but that the fruitfulness of this model will be lost as soon as planning bodies stipulate which languages are to be used and learnt when, by whom, and for what purposes.

This paper puts forward a model in which teachers and learners are given the freedom to negotiate teaching and learning through whichever resources are available to be used. In terms of the teaching of content, a plurilingual model that encourages the recognition, valuing, and use of multiple linguistic resources can be imagined. Children in Vanuatu learn to understand and participate in all other areas of life through the use of a number of languages, from formal occasions such as church services and traditional ceremonies, to less formal events such as socialising with relatives from a different island. If children are accustomed to using multiple linguistic resources to negotiate meaning from an early age outside the classroom, then a genuinely plurilingual education system should capitalise on this practice (cf. Agnihotri, 2007; Higgins, 2009; Shohamy, 2006). Importantly, a government body does not need to stipulate which linguistic resources should be used at any given time in the classroom, if opportunities are presented to simply proceed with meaning making in the way that it is done outside class. Such a proposition moves beyond the debate between a single medium and plural media of instruction. It calls for the need to rethink the very notion of the media of instruction and to look for ways to foster the productive use of composite repertoires of linguistic resources within the classroom.

Realising this plurilingual environment for negotiating meaning requires change, however. This change must happen simultaneously on ideological and practical levels. On the former,

it requires united commitment from linguists, government, the media, teacher trainers, and so on, to break down negative perceptions about the value of the vernacular languages and Bislama before these can be brought into the classroom in a positive way. On the latter level, change requires radical alterations to assessment, materials development, and teacher training in order to provide realistic alternatives to the status quo. If tests must be completed monolingually, and if all written materials in the classroom are presented monolingually, it is not surprising that certain languages are understood to be the only ones that count. Shohamy (2006) refers to this as a *de facto* policy towards monolingualism that ensues if only lip service is paid to the use of other languages. Similarly, if teachers are not given the skills to manage classrooms in which interaction takes place in multiple languages (which teachers may not themselves speak), they may feel they face a choice between losing control of their classes or, in order to retain their authority, resorting to a language such as English in which all participants have limited competence.

In terms of the development of further linguistic resources, the situation is perhaps more complicated. There are good reasons why both English and French are considered desirable in Vanuatu. However, certain principles for their teaching should be followed. Firstly, these languages should be understood to be “foreign languages,” rather than “second languages” (Brock-Utne, 2009) for the majority of ni-Vanuatu, given their limited usage outside the classroom. Where children are not exposed to these languages elsewhere, they need to be taught explicitly as foreign languages by trained teachers using appropriate materials. This is not the case at the moment, where it is common practice for French to be taught in an Anglophone school by, for example, a Science teacher who happens to be a Francophone. Secondly, although there is no reason why students should not have the chance to learn both English and French, desire for these languages must not override opportunities to use other languages within education. Again, this is not currently the case, as it is still common practice

to punish students for using Bislama or vernaculars in order to promote the use of English or French.

Although the proposals put forward over the past few years may state that they are founded both on principles of plurilingualism and on a commitment to move beyond the divisiveness of the colonial past, this does not appear to be the case. This paper has argued that the proposals are driven more by the construction of societal goals in order to achieve other agendas than by commitments to plurilingualism. These attempts to incorporate both English and French for all students only serve to push other languages further out of the classroom. There is no easy solution to language policy in Vanuatu's education system. However, there are plenty of opportunities to foster a plurilingual environment of teaching and learning without stipulating exactly which languages should be learnt under which conditions. Such a proposal would require policymakers and parents to have faith in the ability and willingness of teachers and students to find ways to negotiate learning through multiple linguistic resources, eliminating the boundaries that are traditionally set between named "languages."

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