

The Status of English as a language of Education and Communication in Vanuatu

Language issues affecting students: A case Study

Abstract

English in Vanuatu shares a unique official role along with French as a language of communication and instruction enshrined in the constitution, inherited from the colonial past of Vanuatu as the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides. From English, a pidgin form, Bislama, emerged which has developed and is recognised as the third official and national language of Vanuatu as stated in the constitution. It does not have the same status that English and French hold within the education system. Even after independence English has continued to receive more status in education because of the high enrolment it experiences today. Despite the fact that English and French are languages of instruction from primary to secondary level, there have been ongoing challenges faced by students in using the languages confidently because of the country's complex multilingual situation. This paper, however mainly focuses on the importance being placed on English as a language of education and communication. It addresses the question of whether English serves its intended purpose within the context of its role in society. This is followed by a discussion of the challenges faced by students and the efforts taken by the Vanuatu Department of Education and the University of the South Pacific in helping students cope with the challenges.

The Vanuatu Background

The people of the Republic of Vanuatu collectively speak 98 languages, according to Lynch and Crowley (2001), of which three are the official languages; English, French and Bislama. The population of the country is over 200,000 people. The Republic was formally known as the New Hebrides, and became independent from England and France in 1980 after 70 years of colonisation. Effects of this unique colonial condominium are still felt today after almost three decades of independence. Even after these many years of independence, there is yet a lack of consensus to fully amalgamate the two systems due to long standing political divisions between the Anglophones and Francophones. There was an attempt, in the 1990s to develop a unified curriculum but this was left to the administrators of each system to implement, thus continuing the dual education system. This dual system is costly and irrelevant but exists because of attachment the Ni-Vanuatu have with their colonial past which needs to be disconnected if appropriate reforms are to be made. Despite the costly system incurred it does not reflect a quality outcome as it would have liked. A recent adult literacy survey conducted in Vanuatu by the University of the South Pacific reveals a low literacy rate of 38% (Early & Tamtam: 2007). This rate is comparable to the low school based literacy rates experienced in schools which will be discussed later.

In 1998, the Education Master plan put together by the Vanuatu Ministry of Education (VMOE) prompted the government to draft a Vernacular Education Policy to introduce indigenous languages and Bislama to the education system so children could be taught literacy in their mother tongue during the first years of schooling (early preparatory year

and one or two years of primary schooling). However, faced with some technical constraints over sighted during its early implementing stage, the VMOE was required to further review and redesign the policy (Nako: 2004). Despite this, there is already a general acceptance about the benefits of allowing children to begin schooling in their first languages. As is observed, the National Language Policy in its fifth draft form further emphasises the need to introduce indigenous languages as language of instruction during the first few years of the system (National Language Policy: 05). English and French are to be introduced as subjects in the lower primary level but would become languages of instructions at the upper primary. Bilingualism in English and French is also emphasised but disregarding other languages including Bislama.

English in Vanuatu

According to Crowley (1989: 47), before Independence French (52%) had slightly higher school attendance compared to English schools (47%). On the contrary, after independence French schools have experienced huge drops by 30%. This trend has caused English to have more status than French and this was heavily criticised by the ombudsman's report in 1995 that the Department of Education was not doing enough to maintain the 50 by 50 % preservation of bilingualism in English and French (Early:17). Similar criticisms were raised by the Leader of opposition during the 2008 Francophone Day celebrated in Vanuatu in March. Despite the critics, the community at large are realising the significance of sending children to be educated in English schools because there are more opportunities for scholarships to English-speaking institutions and for employment, than for Francophone students.

Although, English is seen as a language associated with success in life or in pursuing a university degree, Anglophones including successful prominent graduates from English universities, will usually resort to Bislama in discussions, meetings or daily communication with other staff in their working environments. The reason given for this could be that English is not their first language. An ethnographic study, I conducted in a rural community in 1992, revealed another aspect. The study revealed rural Aulua speakers on the island of Malekula no longer use English after six years of primary school. They would instead negotiate meanings in Aulua but write texts in Bislama (Masing: 92.)

English proficiency in schools

About 80% of the total population live in rural communities and children will come to school already speaking two or three local languages before having to study English. However, the extended opportunity to learn English while not being able to write and speak with fluency, has always been an issue for schools and the VMOE. For instance, in 1994, the Pacific Islands Literacy Levels (PILLS) project revealed a literacy rate for Vanuatu at 34%, rather low compared to other Pacific Island Countries. This low literacy rate was further confirmed by the VANSTA test in 2004, where more than sixty percent of year four and six students were functioning at the lowest level. It was not possible to confirm VANSTA levels because the report is concealed by the VMOE.

Further evidence of low levels of English proficiency is revealed through ELSA (English Language Skills Assessment) designed by the USP. The pass rates for the Vanuatu students are usually between 20 to 30 %. For instance in 2006, about 30% percent scored band 3 or more, while the rest needed to seriously work on their English language levels in order to cope with their degree studies. A similar percentage was shown in 2007. The test usually shows more improvement is needed in reading, vocabulary and grammar skills. Students with a low band (1 and 2) are required to enrolled in EL001 (A first year degree English course) to improve the necessary academic skills before being eligible to continue in their second year studies.

At university, students are faced with the awesome challenge of having to read course books and it is usually common to hear lecturers or tutors commenting on the fact that students are hardly reading. In fact, reports of low reading levels in English have been identified since primary or lower secondary level. For example, Valia & Henningsen (2004: 62) insisted that only 10 students out of 34 year 7 students at Epi High school were able to read at the level required by the year seven curriculum.

Contributing to these low levels of English proficiency, is the fact that Bislama is commonly spoken in schools despite rules being imposed by the administration. For instance, during a school visit in 2007 to a prestigious school in the northern part of the country, there was disagreement between students and staff about the use of Bislama in the school. The students saw no reason why they needed to study English.

Implications

Having discussed the above dilemma, the paper will now draw on some assumptions why English language proficiency may be low a majority of Ni-Vanuatu students. Further research work may be necessary to justify these claims.

Mismatch

Learning English at a young age must surely have a drastic effect on Vanuatu children because they are instantly robbed of their rights to learn and to develop communication skills in their rightful natural environment. This situation is worsened by the inability of parents to offer the support children. It could be said, their rights to assist children are being deprived because the language is unfamiliar to them. Paviour –Smith (2006:12) clearly expresses this mismatch when the Aulua community felt they could not fit in.

Good model speakers

Teachers who teach English are themselves not fluent speakers of English and, therefore, do not become good models for the students to rely on. In reality many of the children are not exposed to model speakers of English till later in their teens.

Untrained teachers

As raised earlier, there are number of unqualified English teachers who are not trained in appropriate English teaching methods and strategies, in addition to their lack of fluency. Consequently, it can be said that about eighty percent of students in rural schools will

have been taught by two or three untrained teachers during their time spent in the basic years of education. The following rural primary schools in 2007, (Wuro, Avunatari and Eniou) reveal that each had about one to three untrained teachers (VEMIS Report 2008).

A simple English

It is observed that during colonial rules a simplistic form of English was introduced to the education system but no one has elaborated much on this aspect except Crowley (1989: 44). The reason for this was that British education system introduced a form of English tailored for the local situation. This may also be a reason why English educated ni – Vanuatu use Bislama rather than English to speak to each other.

Lack of motivation

A majority of Ni-Vanuatu students never have the opportunity to enjoy English in a natural setting. Compared to the relaxed atmosphere of their natural language environment, the classroom is artificial or contrived. Corrections are always emphasised and this usually has a negative effect on how students view English, which is likely to destroy their motivation as well as developing a loath towards English lessons. This was witnessed this year, when a first year degree student stated that English is his worst subject because he and his classmates were always told they were not performing to their best during his school days. As a result, he grew to detest English classes since attending school. This same view is often expressed by a number of other students.

Content subject learning versus English

Furthermore, the children are faced with the awesome challenges of having to learn other subjects in English when they have not fully mastered the language. For instance, there is a maths register, science register, agriculture register, however, English lessons do not relate to the skills they would have to use in these subjects. Subject specialists in high schools or tertiary may not even see the connection between their subjects and language learning, thus, students must struggle to do well.

“ In fact, there weren’t any relaxing times during these past years because the curriculum was taught in this foreign language. A majority of us are struggling to gain the most of what is learnt in English in order to pass the other courses.”

Actions by VMOE & University of the South Pacific

Having looked at the implications of low English proficiency, the paper will now discuss specifically the strategies VMOE and the USP are providing to help students cope with these language challenges.

Vanuatu Ministry of Education

NZ Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language

VMOE continues to carry out its normal duties in training and running workshops amongst teachers to tackle the issue of raising language proficiency. Workshops and

overseas training have been provided even before independence. One of these is the Diploma in Teaching English as a Second Language offered at the Victoria University in New Zealand. Nevertheless, this training has had little impact on literacy progress because a majority of these teachers are later appointed to other administrative roles when they return to Vanuatu.

Basic Education

Since 2006, basic education is extended till year eight with the hope that this might have an impact in improving literacy and numeracy life skills. Currently, besides the National English Curriculum, there are seven other literacy and language enrichment programmes being trialled in Vanuatu to enhance student learning of English at the basic level. Despite these efforts, there are critiques that there should be some coordination by the VMOE, because these programs have much in common. In 2007 Vanuatu joined with other regional partners to propose a set of Pacific Literacy & Numeracy Benchmarks. It is hoped this direction should trigger some progress in literacy levels.

Vanuatu Educational Language Policy

Under the Vanuatu Education Sector Strategy (VESS) there are plans in place to document an educational language policy for Vanuatu. It is hoped that the policy will reflect the national language policy already in place and also to see if there can be opportunities to help Vanuatu achieve a real unified education system. It is hoped these can provide some opportunity for change.

The University of the South Pacific

The University of the South Pacific Emalus Campus receives a range of students from years 10 12 or 13 and 14 both Anglophone and Francophone. Besides these students there are also mature students who have left school and are employed but wish to take up further studies.

LL114 – English for Academic Purpose course

This is a compulsory English course required off all first year degree students. It is a highly advanced course and for a majority of the Vanuatu students who took the course through the distance mode (DFL), the course proved to be quite complex. Since, it was introduced the pass rate was usually low, for instance, in 2005 the pass rate for DFL was 18 % which is pretty low compared to 52% for face to face students. In 2006, work on re-designing the course took place after much consultation with respective departments at USP and also based on comments received from students' evaluation. Since then, there has been significant progress in pass rates. For instance in 2007, the semester two DFL pass rate was 68% while face to face mode was at 81%. This is significant progress and for the students this opportunity should enhance their chances of success (Green & Sameer: 08)

LL116 & LL117 – Business English & Law English

According to Green (personal communication: 08) there are also plans in place to design a few more language courses to fit departmental needs. At the writing of this paper, work has started on designing a Business English Course (LL116) for students intending to take Business or Economic studies. The School of Law is also interested in seeing another English course designed specifically for their students (LL117). It is hoped that when these course are available in the near future, the students will have a fair change to learn English skills that are related to their programmes.

Centre for the Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT)

Besides the academic programs offered, the university was experiencing much challenge to meet the human resource needs of its 12 member nations and the diversity of the learners as well at the physical distances that separate the teachers and learners. Since 1992, CELT began offering student support programmes and activities are focused on the learning abilities of students to enable them to become self-motivating, independent, and life long learners. This support service was extended to Emalus and has assisted a number of students in their studies. The two significant projects which are carried out at Emalus are English Language Skills Assessment (ELSA) and English Language for First year degree students (EL001).

EL001 – English Language Course for First year degree studies

Since 2004, ELSA usually reveals between 70 % and 80% of ni-Vanuatu students have low English language proficiency. Thus, students who are identified by ELSA have to enrol in EL001 (English Language course for first year degree studies). This course is designed to help improve students' reading, writing, listening and speaking skills and it is offered face to face or through the distance mode (DFL) for remote students. There are about one hundred and fifty students who have enrolled in this English course. No evaluation has yet been done of the impacts of EL001 upon these students. Nevertheless, there are ongoing occasional positive remarks by ni-Vanuatu students who note that the course has allowed them to work through some basic skills they had overlooked earlier. In addition, EL001 has widened their capacity to see themselves be responsible for their own learning and also gave them confidence to take up academic challenges throughout their studies.

Conclusion

Evidently, the low language proficiency levels revealed in schools is critical and the VMOE has taken some measures such as encouraging other programs to enhance the current English curriculum, to combat the low literacy levels. Despite these efforts, the progress is slim. This may be due to other factors such as lack of teacher training or teachers being poor models of the English language. Information regarding English Proficiency tests such as PILLS, VANSTA and ELSA should also be released to interested stake holders but not withheld by the relevant authorities as it is experienced.

The contributing factors raised about implicating the low standard of English language today will need to be researched further. It can be said that, it is timely for Vanuatu to regard some of these language issues seriously before the writing up of an educational language policy in 2009. Thus, focus should also be placed on the vernacular policy to

allow students to begin their education in their first languages before introducing English at the senior level of basic education. Definitely, VMOE will also need to produce an updated teacher training curriculum which should seriously consider second language acquisition. It has been noted that achieving fluency in a second language should take between five to seven years provided students are literate in their first language.

The University of the South Pacific should be applauded in its stand to attempt to deal with these language challenges or learning challenges that students face during the first year of their studies. We have witnessed some success stories about Ni- Vanuatu students who have benefitted from these opportunities offered by the university. Furthermore, the attempts in place to design other specific language courses will present more prospects for students to acquire the specific language requirements in their course programs. The continuing educational language courses provided at Emalus campus also has given access to a number of students who have not completed the senior secondary to undergo university studies.

To conclude, English will continue to be a challenge in schools until Vanuatu puts together a language policy that clearly outlines the teaching issues clearly. However this policy should be based on the real practices otherwise the mismatch between policies, school practice and real life. Without resolving structured issues such of the languages as stated in the constitution the teaching of English will remain out of touch with reality in Vanuatu.

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