

Perfecting 1 amongst 109: English in multilingual Vanuatu

Jane Kanas, Distance and Flexible Learning Support Centre, The University of the South Pacific

Abstract

Of the 180 indigenous languages spoken by 12 University of the South Pacific (USP) member states, Vanuatu carries 106 of these languages as well as the official English, French and the national Bislama (Pidgin) languages. English and French are the languages of education and government, while Bislama and any of the indigenous ones are used in everyday communication. With English (or French), confined to classrooms and government, using it as a language of instruction and learning poses some interesting outcomes amongst Vanuatu students for a tertiary provider of education as USP.

Multilingualism provides illusions of deformity and fragmentation. This paper focuses on situations of multilingualism as experienced by distance students in Vanuatu especially having attempted or completed one or both of the compulsory English courses offered at the pre-degree and degree levels. Results from these two courses indicate that Ni Vanuatu students actually fare averagely and sometimes better than students of other mono-cultural/linguistic backgrounds. It stands then, that because diversity is normality and that a pidgin is the lingua franca (not English nor French nor a vernacular), the unique multilingual community that Vanuatu DFL students originate from, actually provide a somewhat solid background to their learning and acquisition of English.

INTRODUCTION

Vanuatu a country in the south Pacific, belongs to the sub-grouping Melanesia. It has a demographic population of approximately 190,000 of which 21% are concentrated in the urban areas of Port Vila (capital) and Luganville (National Statistics Office, 2000:5).

The 80 or so islands are home to 109 indigenous languages which are spread in a disproportional way across the islands. Included in these 109 languages, are also the languages of office and education: English and French and the national language, Bislama.

The uniqueness of Vanuatu attaining two international languages in office and education stems from its colonial background of being the only condominium in the world governed by both Great Britain and France in 1906 in a weird arrangement that saw two parallel systems running side by side. In fact there was a third system that operated also, that of the indigenous people which catered mainly for those residing rurally. Urbanites and those in the rural government centres were forced to choose a system to adhere to educationally and for the use of basic services. Most often the system selected ran within a family, a village or a community depending on which system was the most influential. Hence adjacent villages could belong or adhere to any one system, and this was seen also within a clan, where various nuclear families would belong to one or other of the systems. The situation was not that rigid as despite whichever system one sought loyalty to, one could use the services of the other system if necessary and appropriate .

The country gained political independence on 30 July 1980 and although the two systems were melted into one national system, the legacies of the two systems remain today such as the English and French languages in formal situations.

LANGUAGE SITUATION IN VANUATU VS OTHER PACIFIC COUNTRIES

a) A Melanesian country with 109 languages

Melanesia includes Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia. (New Caledonia is not included in this paper). Being part of Melanesia, Vanuatu shares the characteristic of being diverse in cultures and languages. PNG with more than 750 indigenous languages and a population of 4,000,000, and Solomon Islands with around 70 and a population of 400,000 (Lynch and Mugler, 1999), gives Vanuatu with its population of around 190,000 and 109 languages, a heavy language density (Tryon 1987: 1) of roughly 1:1700 where the other countries fall around 1:5000. In actuality, language groups in Vanuatu can vary in population size, where many of the smaller languages harbour 200 speakers or less (Lynch and Mugler: 1999, online).

In Polynesia, countries include: Tuvalu, Tonga, Tokelau, Samoa, Niue, Cook Islands and American Samoa. Fiji takes a midway position between these two regions and is often included as part of Polynesia. These countries are essentially monolingual and so English acts as a second language being introduced in primary level of education. It is better to point out here that although English is a second language to most monolingual communities in the Pacific, it serves more closely to being a foreign language than a second language in the real sense of the term. This is because most Polynesian countries (Cook Islands and Niue being exceptions) are indigenously monolingual and use English only when communicating with foreigners. Fiji is the only country in the region where English acts as a lingua franca (Lynch and Mugler, 1999:online).

In the multilingual countries however, a person may need to acquire two indigenous languages simultaneously while growing up (if both parents are from different language groups) and learn pidgin from his contact with others outside his language group, perhaps at the same time as learning the two indigenous languages and eventually learn English or French when attending schools. This makes English (or French) a third or fourth language for a Melanesian.

b) Bislama, a dialect of Melanesian Pidgin

Melanesian Pidgin serves as the linkage between all the different language groups within a Melanesian country. The language has 3 distinct varieties: Tok Pisin spoken in PNG, Pijin in the Solomon Islands and Bislama in Vanuatu. All in all, Melanesian pidgin "is the first language of perhaps half a million people and the second language of perhaps three million" (Lynch and Mugler, 1999: online). All three varieties are to some extent "mutually intelligible" although "there are phonological, grammatical and lexical differences between them" (Lynch and Mugler, 1999:online).

Bislama is an English based pidgin and so much of its vocabulary is derived from English. This puts Bislama in an intermediary position towards learning English. There is much debate about this, where many teachers and education specialists (and parents) strongly disagree to this being an advantage. Many believe that Bislama is actually detrimental to the learning and acquisition of English. However in educational institutions, Bislama is sometimes used to explain difficult concepts.

c) English and French in education

So with these two languages being left behind by colonial masters, Vanuatu has had to embrace and entertain bilingualism (i.e acquisition of both English and French languages) in its education system. Thus, the English educated: Anglophones and the French educated: francophones, have had to learn the other official language at secondary school level. It is generally believed that because of Bislama's Anglo-based vocabulary, francophones tend to find it easier to learn English than the other way around. This is some proof that Bislama does feed the development of acquisition of the English language.

d) Strength in Bislama

Hence, we can say that Bislama's position as a lingua franca in Vanuatu does carry some weight in assisting a student in learning English.

PURPOSE OF LLF11 AND LL114

Improve English Skills and English usage competency

USP offers pre-degree courses as bridging towards the degree programmes available. Amongst the courses is a compulsory course, LLF11: Communications and Study Skills. According to the USP calendar, the course is designed to assist students in increasing their proficiency in various study skills and aspects of communication required for post-foundation courses. The course deals with aspects from note-taking to essay writing to effective library use to oral expression. This course was predominantly offered as a distance course though in some campuses of the USP it had been offered as a face to face course. Prerequisites for this course required that the student be familiar with different levels of English usage. Most students enrolling for this course would have completed up to Form 6 (Year 12) in secondary school. The course measures a students' performance through 50% continuous assessment and 50% examination of the final grade. The course has special requirements for passing both the continuous assessment and examination in order to pass the course overall (USP, 2006:269).

It has been found that students who have completed this course at foundation level successfully, have tended to perform well in the next compulsory course offered at first year level; LL114: English for Academic Purposes.

As described in the calendar, LL114 is a course where students should gain "a proficiency in academic writing, reading and speaking [that is then] sufficient to support their language needs in courses" in a wide spectrum of fields. The course is designed in such a way that it caters for students "studying in all of the above areas" (USP, 2006:270).

This course is a compulsory course offered at both face to face and distance mode. Both modes measure a student's level of competency in all areas on a relatively equal basis, where continuous assessment account for 60% of the final grade, and the final exam accounts for the last 40%.

The next section concentrates on LL114 due to lack of information gathered concerning LLF11.

EFFECTIVENESS OF LL114 AS A DISTANCE COURSE

Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking

The course materials that make up LL114 for distance students include two course books that contain the learning units, an introduction and assignment booklet and a blank audio cassette. Recommended texts are kept in the libraries in the various campuses. Other assistance provided for distance students include a weekly 1 hour tutorial session conducted at the campus as well as audio satellite sessions offered on a fortnightly basis. Face to face students of course attend lectures and attend tutorial classes on campus.

Assessment exercises try to test the reading, writing, listening and speaking skills of the student. With LL114, the first, second and third assignments focus on reading and writing including other important skills such as research. The fourth focuses on listening and speaking skills.

Reading and writing are culturally foreign to the Pacific and although we are in the 21st century, in most parts of the region, encouraging students to read and write for pleasure is a struggle especially in the rural areas. Encouraging them to do so for academic reasons is an even tougher feat. In urban areas, reading and writing of course is fast given some recognition as part of development and so is encouraged somewhat.

Generally, most students who take LL114 as a face to face course have continuously been in the education system and therefore for most, working on these skills may sometimes not be too much of a strenuous task as it is for those who may be part-time adult learners who are taking up the course through distance.

According to Lightbrown and Spada (1999:51), motivation can play a big part in the

success of second language learning. Various studies show that highly motivated learners can be successful learners while others show that highly motivated learners can rate equally as those who are least motivated in learning (1999:52). As with any distance course, students undertaking it do require some degree of motivation given the mode of delivery. As with other countries in the USP region or any country for that matter, Ni Vanuatu students face the same socio-economic problems that other students studying by distance face. Thus motivation is a big factor in the successful completion of the course.

Although their multilingual background may seem like a hindrance (Simon, 1969:24-25) to learning or perfecting another language for the purpose of academy, this in fact is an advantage. Just as they are 'skilled' in handling more than two languages at the same time, this trait is further extended to this foreign language. Southward (1977:224) cited in Apte (1976:927) shows how [multilinguals] "develop functions of linguistic heterogeneity which go beyond the expressive possibilities available in a single [language]". Thus, this assists Ni Vanuatu students in grappling with reading, writing, listening to and speaking in English to satisfy requirements of the course. Having said this, this does not go to say that Ni Vanuatu students do not face any problems with LL114 or the English language. Ni Vanuatu students face similar problems of grammar, expression, phonology etc. as other students from monolingual societies. Lightbrown and Spada (1999: 50) argue that some second language learners never achieve native-like command of a second language and so is the case of Ni Vanuatu students in their pronunciation as an individual's identity is closely linked with the way he or she speaks (1999:56)

LL114 poses a challenge for its students as it focuses also on listening and speaking skills, the latter being one that seems to contravene the passive cultural trait of Pacific Islanders: Vanuatu being no different. The assessment for this component is to give an oral presentation on given topics or a topic of personal preference upon consultation with the tutor. This is similar for both face to face and distance students. However the difference here is that while face to face students present live in front of an interactive audience and are assessed on the spot, distance students have had to present in front of an interactive audience but their presentation is recorded on audio tape. The audio tape is then sent and assessed by the tutor. Where there is a local tutor who has been endorsed to mark assignments, the students may have their presentation marked on the spot.

Most students panic with this assessment, but as with careful guidance and reassurance from the course material and other support provided, most students perform relatively well. As can be seen from Table 2 in the Appendix, the marks gained from this assessment (A4) for Vanuatu students is somewhat low mainly because from the raw data (Table 1), a number of students had not completed this task. But as from experience over the years, after the initial shock, students stabilize confidence and perform fairly well.

LL114 as a compulsory course for the first year of degree studies does provide adequately in preparing students for their various programmes. Vanuatu students have proved that by passing this course with average to above average marks, their multilingual background does in no way deter them to successfully complete a distance course.

CONCLUSION

Although data provided is insufficient, it can be seen that multilingualism does not really hinder the learning and acquisition of another language as is seen in the profile of Vanuatu. It is in fact because the lives of its inhabitants are accustomed to diversity that learning and performing in one more language is not novel. The students doing LL114 show that their performance can be likened to those coming from monolingual societies.

This paper assures its readers that multilingualism is not divisive in a community but in fact carries inconspicuous strengths and the Vanuatu students have shown this in their pursuit of higher education in English.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Apte, M., 1976. *Multilingualism in India and its sociopolitical implications* cited in Fasold 1987.

Fasold, R. 1987. *The Sociolinguistics of Society*, Blackwell, Oxford, UK.

Lightbrown, P.M. and Spada, N., 1999. *How languages are learned*, Rev. Ed., Oxford University Press, Auckland.

Lynch, J and Mugler, F., 1999. *English in the South Pacific*, Available:

National Statistics Office, 2000. *The 1999 Vanuatu National Population and Housing Census: Main Report*, National Statistics Office, Port Vila.

Simon, W. B., 1969. "Multilingualism, a Comparative Study" in *Studies in Multilingualism* Vol. VIII, Leiden, E.J. Brill, Netherlands.

The University of the South Pacific, 2006. *Calendar*. USP Marketing and Communications, Office, Suva.

Tryon, D. 1997, *Bislama: An introduction to the national language of Vanuatu*, The Australian National University, Canberra.

Figures

Table 1: Continuous assessment for LL114 Vanuatu Campus Semester 1 2005

Table 1 LL114 Course Assessment

Country	A1 (10)	A2 (15)	A3(10)	A4(15)	MST	Total
Tonga	8.5	12.5	7.5	10	6	44.5
Tuvalu	5	7	7.5	11	4	34.5
Samoa	7.5	11	7	10	5	40.5
Vanuatu	6				5	11
Vanuatu	8	8.5	5.5	11	7	40
Vanuatu	8.5	14	7	12.5	2.5	45
Vanuatu	7	9.5	6	11		33.5
Vanuatu	8	13	9	14	8	52
Fiji	7	11.5	6.5	10	0	35
Vanuatu	8	10			2.5	20.5
Vanuatu	7	11	6.5	11	7.5	43
Vanuatu	6.5	4				10.5
Tuvalu	5.5	9.5	6	13	6.5	40.5
Vanuatu	7	10	9	13	2	41
Vanuatu	4	5.5	5		1	15.5
Vanuatu	8	11	6	9.5	6	41
Vanuatu	5	8.5	4	8	3	28.5
Vanuatu	8.5	12	7.5		4.5	32.5
Samoa	6	7.5	6	10	4	33.5
Vanuatu	7	10	6	12	6	33
Vanuatu	8.5	10	5.5	9.5	4	38
Vanuatu	5.5	8.5	6	7.5	4	32
Vanuatu	5	9	6	12.5	1	34
Vanuatu	7.5	9	6	11	5	38.5
Vanuatu	7.5	10	7.5	12	5	42
Vanuatu	8	11.5	6.5	11.5	1.5	39.5
Vanuatu	5.5	7	5.5	11	3	32
Tonga	8	13	8	11	9	49
Vanuatu	6	8.5	8	11	6	39.5
Vanuatu	7.5	10	7.5	11.5	4	41
Vanuatu	6.5	10	9	9.5	5	40.5
Vanuatu	7.5				7	14.5
Samoa	5	11	6	12	7	41
Vanuatu	5	9	8	12	2	36
Vanuatu	7	9.5			4	20.5
Vanuatu	6.5				6.5	13
Tuvalu	5	8.5	8.5	10	6	38
Samoa	7.5	13	8	14	7.5	50
Vanuatu	8	12	8.5	10.5	3	42.5
Vanuatu	9	13	9	13.5	7.5	52
Vanuatu	7.5	12	7	11	8	45.5
Vanuatu	8.5	12.5	7	13	1	42
Vanuatu	5	7			3	15
Vanuatu	5					5
Samoa	8	11.5	8	11	6	44.5

Table 2: Average marks for continuous assessment for LL114 Vanuatu Campus

Semester 1 2005

Country	A1 (10)	A2 (15)	A3 (10)	A4 (15)	MST (10)	Overall mark (60)
Fiji	8	6.6	5.1	11.3	0.8	28.5
Samoa	6.8	10.4	7	11.5	5.9	42.4
Tonga	8.25	12.75	7.75	11.5	7.5	46.75
Tuvalu	5	8.3	7.3	11.3	8.3	37.6
Vanuatu	6.9	8.1	4.9	7.4	3.8	30.9

[Back to Papers](#)