



Te Reo
the Journal of the Linguistic
Society of New Zealand

Volume 68

Issue 3 (*Special Issue*): Vanuatu languages in action

Squib

2025

Pages 61–70

December, 2025

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Webb, L., & Webb, R. (2015). Developing a critical thinking course in Bislama. *Te Reo* 68(3) Vanuatu languages in action [Special Issue], edited by T. Rangelov, E. Ridge, L. Takau & V. Chen. (pp. 61–70)

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Developing a critical thinking course in Bislama

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Abstract

This case study outlines the development of a critical thinking course tailored for a ni-Vanuatu audience. The course is designed to equip participants with skills essential for navigating the complexities of daily life—its facts and deceptions—while also fostering critical reading skills, particularly for engaging with Bible texts. To make the course accessible to individuals with varying levels of formal education, the material is both written and delivered in Bislama, Vanuatu's lexically-English creole national language. This choice necessitated the creation of a new set of terminology to convey concepts that are largely unfamiliar in Vanuatu culture. The study shows how linguistic adaptation can bridge cultural and educational gaps, by demonstrating the process of selecting, testing, and establishing suitable terms and phrases while addressing the language's current lexical limitations. By tracing the course's thirteen-year evolution, the study illustrates how knowledge can be effectively conveyed through carefully developed linguistic innovations and offers a model for teaching complex concepts in Bislama.

Summary in Bislama

Hemia hem i wan sotfala storian nomo blong talemaot bigfala lukluk blong longfala storian we i stap. Storian ya i stap tokbaot wan kos ya we nem blong hem Trenem Tingting Kos. Tufala waetman i raetem kos ya mo tufala i wok tugeta wetem sam man Vanuatu we oli stap tijim kos ya naoia. Tufala i raetem kos ya blong givhan long ol man Vanuatu long saed blong tingbaot ol strong samting we i stap kamtru long laef long wol ya we yumi stap long hem tedei. Kos ya hem i blong givim smol save long ol patisipen blong wokemaot se wanem nao i tru o i stap givhan gud, mo wanem nao hem i giaman o i stap spolem laef blong yumi. Mo tu, kos ya i stap tijim olgeta olsem wanem blong ridim mo andastanem Baebol, from i gat sam man we oli stap mekem wok blong translesen. Blong tingting stret long ol difdifren samting we i stap kamtru long yumi, mo blong save andastanem gud wanem we yumi stap ridim, yumi mas lanem sam niufala fasin we kos ya i stap tijim. Bigfala nem blong wok ya long Inglis hem i Critical Thinking.

Kos ya oli stap tijim long Bislama lanwis nomo. Olgeta we oli mekem kos ya oli wantem yusum Bislama blong mekem se eni man i save tekem kos ya. Evri man Vanuatu oli save toktok mo andastanem Bislama. Be taem oli jusum blong tij long Bislama ya, i gat wan bigfala problem we i kamaot. Bislama i nogat ol bigfala toktok mo strongfala toktok blong tokbaot ol samting long saed blong Critical Thinking. Sam fasin insaed long kos ya i nogat long kalja blong Vanuatu, i mekem se oli mas wok had blong stanemap plante niufala toktok mo niufala tingting, blong ol patisipen long kos ya oli save kasem gud mo andastanem. Sipos no, kos ya bae i no save givhan nating long olgeta.

Storian ya i stap tokbaot rod we oli save folem blong mekem ol niufala toktok ya. Wok ya bae i tekem taem. Mo tu, kos ya oli bin tijim 13 yia finis, naoia i gat sam man Vanuatu we oli stap tijim kos ya. Fidbak blong olgeta wetem tingting blong ol patisipen i stap wok yet blong mekem kos ya i kam klia moa.

Keywords

Bislama, terminology, critical thinking, language development, Pacific education, cultural adaptation, Bible translation

1 Introduction

In the linguistically diverse archipelago of Vanuatu, where over 100 indigenous languages coexist with English, French, and Bislama, the development of specialized educational materials presents a unique challenge. This case study examines the process of creating and implementing the *Trenem Tingting Kos* (English: The Training Thinking Course) (hereafter TTK), which we started developing for ni-Vanuatu involved in translating the Bible into their own language. This is a critical thinking course conducted in Bislama, Vanuatu's lexically-English creole and national language.

Over thirteen years, this course has trained 70 participants and developed six trainers, with more in the pipeline. The TTK comprises three modules, each of which is delivered over two weeks in daily intensive workshop sessions. Module workshops are usually separated by several months, in between which students are expected to conduct fieldwork whereby they teach some elements of the course to members of their own language community in formal or family settings.

This TTK case study offers valuable insights into the complexities of adapting abstract concepts for a language still primarily used for everyday communication¹, and as such may have implications for Vanuatu's formal education system. By exploring the linguistic and pedagogical strategies employed in developing this course, we illuminate the broader implications for language development, education, and the evolution of Bislama as a medium for specialized instruction.

2 Cultural Context and Challenge

Critical Thinking is not foreign to Pacific Islanders. It is a regular part of daily life. When a woman on Epi Island, Vanuatu, decides to go to the reef for octopus, she uses her critical faculties. She observes the tide, and the wind, she grabs her poking rod, she knows the best place on the reef to go, she observes the slightest sign of displacement of objects, and she strikes! She would not think to go without her rod, or go to the wrong place, or at the wrong tide, or stab about willy nilly. On the contrary, she puts all her prior knowledge and current observation together – and comes home with one or more octopuses!

There is no doubt that critical thinking in the local cultural context is a regular part of daily life. However, the critical thinking skills of asking questions, analysing, evaluating, and coming to a well-considered conclusion are less frequently applied to wider, often modern cultural situations. For instance, a few years ago, many citizens became embroiled in a financial

¹ Bislama is used in high-level government meetings, and scholarly work exists on Bislama as a medium for more formal discourse. Terry Crowley, for example, traced the historical development of Bislama, produced a seminal Bislama dictionary, and outlined Bislama's grammatical features. A list of Crowley's Bislama-related publications can be found in Lynch (2005).

scam.² Claims, which under scrutiny would have seemed dubious, were accepted as compellingly true with the consequence that many individuals and even associations lost their life savings. This limited approach to critical thinking also surfaces in tasks like reading and understanding Biblical texts—an especially relevant issue since many TTK participants work as Bible translators.

In Vanuatu culture, questioning is not traditionally valued and may even be considered disrespectful and confrontational.³ There is a strong history of passing on traditional thinking and practises through oral transmission and learning by example. This has fostered a cultural norm of respecting traditions without examination, and honouring elders and community leaders, often by following their teaching unquestioningly.⁴ Many ni-Vanuatu live in small village communities on one of the many islands that comprise the country. While internet access and regional mobility are on the rise, in rural areas exposure to global cultural diversity and the vast storehouses of literacy-based knowledge remains limited.

Most adults of Vanuatu were educated through a rote-learning approach (Niroa, 2021). Reading skills, and most other parts of their learning were taught by the teacher writing on the blackboard, and the students copying, memorising and reproducing, without significant interaction with the material. This method results in comprehension skills that are often inadequate for interpreting non-cultural texts, or discerning an author's intended meaning. Furthermore, the limited cultivation of explicit critical thinking skills affects individuals' abilities to make informed, logical choices (Brantley, 2014) based on visual, auditory or written data they encounter in daily life. Listening to a story and evaluating its veracity, accurately interpreting an observed event, or assessing the strength of arguments, all require honed skills of questioning, analysing, synthesising and evaluating.

3 Course Foundation and Language Choice

Recognizing these constraints and their potential negative impacts in many areas of life today, we developed the critical thinking course, TTK. This we undertook in our capacity as Australian members of the Summer Institute of Linguistics which works under the Vanuatu Christian Council. We lived and worked full-time in Vanuatu for 16 years until 2019. Since that time, we have continued support for Ni-Vanuatu TTK trainers—all of whom are former students—as they implement the course, including check-ins over the internet, and twice yearly in-country visits.

In the TTK, students discuss everyday situations such as recognising scams, making sound purchasing decisions, or weighing up job opportunities. They also critically analyse traditional practises and beliefs. A significant part of the course focuses on strengthening analytical literacy, with students practising these skills through discussing daily life stories. The same foundational steps are used across diverse contexts with considerable attention given to applying them to Biblical texts in order to determine accurate meanings. This is especially relevant for those involved in translating the Bible text into their native languages, but has also been appreciated by many of the participants who have leadership responsibilities in their communities.

² Vanuatu Daily Post article (2019). https://www.dailypost.vu/news/afic-a-very-sad/article_6991fa14-109a-11ea-a9c4-e79ea8604d06.html

³ Two decades of working in both town and rural community settings (church and secular) in Vanuatu, have led us to this conclusion. It is non-controversial, and surfaces also in many TTK sessions.

⁴ Ibid.

As the instigators and developers of the course, we saw the value of sound critical thinking skills for people of any educational background in Vanuatu. To maximise accessibility, we chose to offer the course in Bislama, the national language and one of the three official languages, since using English or French would restrict participation, and local vernaculars were out of the question due to their sheer number. Bislama is widely spoken throughout the country and understood across diverse educational backgrounds. For a good proportion of the population, it functions at least as a satisfactory second language and thus an effective medium of instruction (Meyerhoff, 2013).

Therefore, we deliberately chose to use Bislama for all course materials, including the written resources and instructional videos, and in-class delivery; it better affords the inclusive access we wanted. While many participants, who represent a wide range of Vanuatu's vernaculars, have some familiarity with English or French from their schooling, Bislama is far less demanding. This enables students to focus their energy on what to them are often completely new concepts. Bislama also promotes clarity, interaction and deeper discussion. It allows the participants and trainers alike to comfortably express their knowledge, thoughts and emotions across a range of topics.

Bislama is now the mother tongue for a growing sector of the population, which might suggest that it can express almost anything a speaker needs to say. While this may be true for everyday discourse, to date there has been no real demand for specialized concepts, particularly in fields of logic and critical reasoning. Several factors contribute to this situation (cf. Jarraud-Leblanc, 2013). First, Bislama has not been adopted as a language of instruction in schools beyond the early primary level,⁵ and many institutions such as Bible and technical colleges increasingly opt for English instead. Additionally, as just noted the Bislama lexicon is still quite limited in technical vocabulary, which presents challenges when precise meaning is required in specialised contexts.⁶ This is particularly apparent in the TTK as it introduces non-cultural, and often abstract concepts that are rarely encountered in the target language communities.

Inspiration for the course came from Brent Brantley's *Critical Thinking: The Key to Successful Decisions*, which was originally developed for the students of the Training Indonesians for Transition to Institutional Training (TITIP) Learning Centre in Papua (Brantley 2014). This English language text stood out for its simple practical approach to critical thinking, making it ideal for our target audience. However, translating the key terms into Bislama—the chosen medium for this course—was not straightforward. Many of the critical thinking concepts and principles in the text lacked direct Bislama equivalents, hence they required considered adaptation to ensure accurate and accessible instruction.

4 Implementation and Evidence

To teach the analytical thinking skills in the course, students use workbooks organised into a series of lessons. The trainers guide the students through these workbooks. Workbooks include definitions of terms and concepts followed by interactive examples that help to clarify each new idea as it is introduced. Throughout each lesson, the workbooks also instruct participants

⁵ The Vanuatu National Language Policy 2012 (Ministry of Education and Training, 2012, p. 2) states that Bislama is a possible language of instruction up to the second semester of year three of schooling, after which instruction will be in English or French.

⁶ Bislama does have a somewhat standardised spelling system which is used in all TTK material. This came into being in the mid-1970s when the Bislama Bible was translated and published (Jarraud-Leblanc, 2013, pp. 49–50).

to engage in small group discussions. Apart from fostering an enjoyable learning environment, this helps us evaluate the participants' grasp of the critical thinking principles.

Brantley (2014, p. 7) emphasises developing the skills of a critical thinker over defining critical thinking itself. He encourages students to adopt a “different way of thinking about facts and details” (Brantley, 2014, p. 1). Building on this approach, the TTK emphasises practical thinking skills and processes, aiming to engage students in how they think as much as in what they think.

We have refined the course iteratively over thirteen years (from 2011), and have taught it to seven distinct cohorts. In recent iterations, we have placed greater emphasis than formerly on the progressive evaluation⁷ of student understanding, allowing us to better gauge how effectively they are grasping the terms and concepts the course introduces.

A particularly helpful form of evaluation has been listening to the reports of participants when they return from fieldwork for the subsequent modules of the course. In one recent instance, a participant described explaining to others in his village about ‘choosing between fish and chicken at the store’. His classmates immediately recognized his reference to one of the many class examples demonstrating critical thinking principles. Though he did not use specific terminology, his report clearly demonstrated that he had internalised the teaching concept through practical, relatable experience rather than abstract definitions.

5 Terminology Development and Standardisation

The remainder of this paper examines the development of critical thinking terminology in Bislama. Strategies we have employed include: selecting semantically equivalent words from the Bislama lexicon; using lexical extension to expand the meaning of existing vocabulary; and retaining English words⁸. A key part of the development process has been ongoing testing and revision of the terms we select. Also highlighted in the discussion is the importance of using numerous examples and illustrations to explain new concepts.

In developing terminology where none exists in Bislama, we recognise the danger of merely Bislama-ising words that fall outside standard Bislama vocabulary. This approach can lead to a proliferation of meaningless terms⁹ that at best will become jargon for a select few, but which will ultimately confuse the broader audience. Such an outcome contradicts the fundamental purpose of the course. Therefore, while we have transliterated, or even retained some English terms, we have prioritised the use and adaptation of everyday language to enhance effective communication.

Even so, rather than coining a new Bislama term for critical thinking, we opted to retain the English. At the beginning of the course, we provide a Bislama definition of critical thinking, immediately contrasting it with what critical thinking does *not* entail. This distinction is essential, as we encountered an initial challenge with a misleading lexical crossover: students

⁷ We have used multiple means including written reflection, quizzes, and group discussion.

⁸ As the course developers we drew on English (our first language) for non-Bislama technical terms, but their French equivalents could be used instead.

⁹ For example, the following sentence has a semblance of Bislama but will fail to communicate to anyone but those who know the meaning of the numerous English words transliterated: “*Wokshop ia hemi bin saksessful from hemi helpem ol trena blong VTSV blong oli kasem ol esensiol skil mo save blong unpacking ol units blong Assesmen mo moderesen. Olgeta skil mo save we oli kasem long kapasiti bilding ia bae hemi assistim olgeta blong Vokasionol Trening Senta blong Vetimoboso blong deliverem trening servis blong hem long wan wei hemi efektifiv mo efisient long komuniti blong VanuaLava mo long evri pipol blong provins blong Torba*” (Vanuatu Qualifications Authority, 2024, p. 1).

often associated the English word ‘critical’ with criticism. As noted earlier, this association is particularly problematic in Vanuatu culture where criticism and questioning are considered signs of disrespect. Consequently, clarifying this misunderstanding of critical thinking has been vital for the course’s acceptance and success.

From the outset, we designed the course to employ examples through drama and culturally relevant written stories that demonstrate critical thinking in action. This approach helps students view critical thinking as a positive and practical analytical process and helps to internalise its meaning. Although we experimented with the phrase *sap tingting* (sharp thinking) its novel collocation in Bislama made it difficult to gauge how listeners interpreted its meaning. Intuitively, it does seem a better option, but further experimentation is necessary. We also explored the transliteration *kritikal* (critical). However, this did not appear to add value, so we ultimately retained the English term while continuing to strive for clarity in students’ understanding of the concept. Participants may well transliterate the term themselves, but that is their prerogative.¹⁰

When we the developers first taught the course, precise terminology was less crucial. We could build understanding of new concepts through extensive descriptions and multiple examples. However, in order to deliver a more sustainable and contextualized course, we began training ni-Vanuatu instructors, hence it was necessary to standardise terminology.¹¹ To maintain conceptual consistency among multiple teachers, we invested significant time with the trainers in developing and testing key terms. This terminological standardisation process demands ongoing attention and encouragement to preserve the precision and focus of these carefully selected terms.

Building on Brantley’s writings, we established a foundational approach to applying critical thinking to visual, audible or written materials. This approach involved identifying ‘premises’ and ‘conclusion,’ concepts that also lack direct equivalents in Bislama. A tertiary educated ni-Vanuatu colleague helped us in selecting appropriate terminology by considering how to examine a written text for how it conveyed information. Following this discussion, we chose *infomesen*, a transliteration of the English word, ‘information’ to refer to ‘premise’. While the transliteration is used widely in modern Bislama, our usage of the transliterated word is in an extended sense to convey the meaning of a different English term – in this case ‘premise’.

We did not assume that participants would have an equivalent understanding of the meanings of ‘information’ and *infomesen*. Instead, we provided examples to demonstrate our use of the word, to refer to small segments of a text which convey meaning (trying to get at something approximating a ‘premise’ but perhaps landing more towards ‘propositions’). A definition of the term is also provided in the course material: ‘*Hem i ol smolsmol haf we i stap insaed long wan stori*’ (the small pieces within a story).

In earlier versions of the teaching material, we included both the English word ‘premise’ and its Bislama translation. However, we later decided to focus solely on the Bislama term

¹⁰ While the course is taught in Bislama, we do emphasise to the students that when they are teaching in their own communities, they should endeavour to use their vernacular. To reinforce this, at various points through the course we ask participants to work out definitions of concepts in their vernaculars and to then ‘back translate’ them for the class to see what they came up with. This is a good test of whether concepts have been internalised.

¹¹ The course trainers themselves start with little or no previous exposure to the critical thinking concepts taught in the course. A prerequisite to becoming a trainer is that they complete the course themselves and depending on the educational background they come with, they gradually assume responsibility for facilitating or teaching various aspects of the course. To date none of the trainers have taught the whole course.

chosen, as this approach proved more effective for reinforcing the concept's meaning. At the same time, we avoided adding yet another piece of jargon.

The translation of 'conclusion' as *las tingting* (final thought) uses semantic extension to emphasise that reaching a conclusion involves prior steps in the thinking process. In the course, *las tingting* is defined as 'pulling together all the pieces of *imfomesen*,' thus underscoring the idea of integrating all relevant information to form a final understanding of the meaning or intention of the text.¹²

We considered other Bislama terms already in circulation to convey the idea of the word 'conclusion,' such as *stamba tingting* 'foundational idea' and *bigfala tingting* 'big thought'. However, we rejected these terms due to their established (mis-matched) meanings. *Stamba tingting* typically denotes a theme or underlying principle, and *bigfala tingting* while closer in meaning, lacks the idea signifying the end of a reasoning process. Opting for *las tingting* provided an ideal opportunity to establish a new term with the precise meaning required. The coined term has resonated with participants, however, given the overlap in meaning with *stamba tingting*, there remains an ongoing challenge to keep these terms distinct, particularly as students are initially grasping the concept.

Through repeated examples and practical applications, participants become comfortable using 'imfomesen' and 'las tingting'. By employing these terms consistently in both written materials and verbal instruction, we establish meaning for the terminology for students. This consistency has been key to developing familiarity and confidence with the concepts, allowing students to internalize and reliably apply them across different contexts.

As we developed ways to explain the critical thinking process for our context (see Figure 1 for the method overview, which includes Bislama translations for the salient items), we needed to represent other terms. For some of these, where there is an equivalence in meaning, it was straightforward (for example *tingbaot* 'think' – that is, careful consideration before drawing a conclusion). However, other terms were particularly challenging to express precisely in Bislama. We will now discuss several of those.

¹² To further confirm and clarify the meaning of these new terms, we also used visual images: the details within a picture were likened to *Imfomesen*, while the title or overall message of the picture, was compared to the *Las Tingting*. This visual approach helped students grasp the relationship between the individual pieces of information, and the concluding or overall meaning.

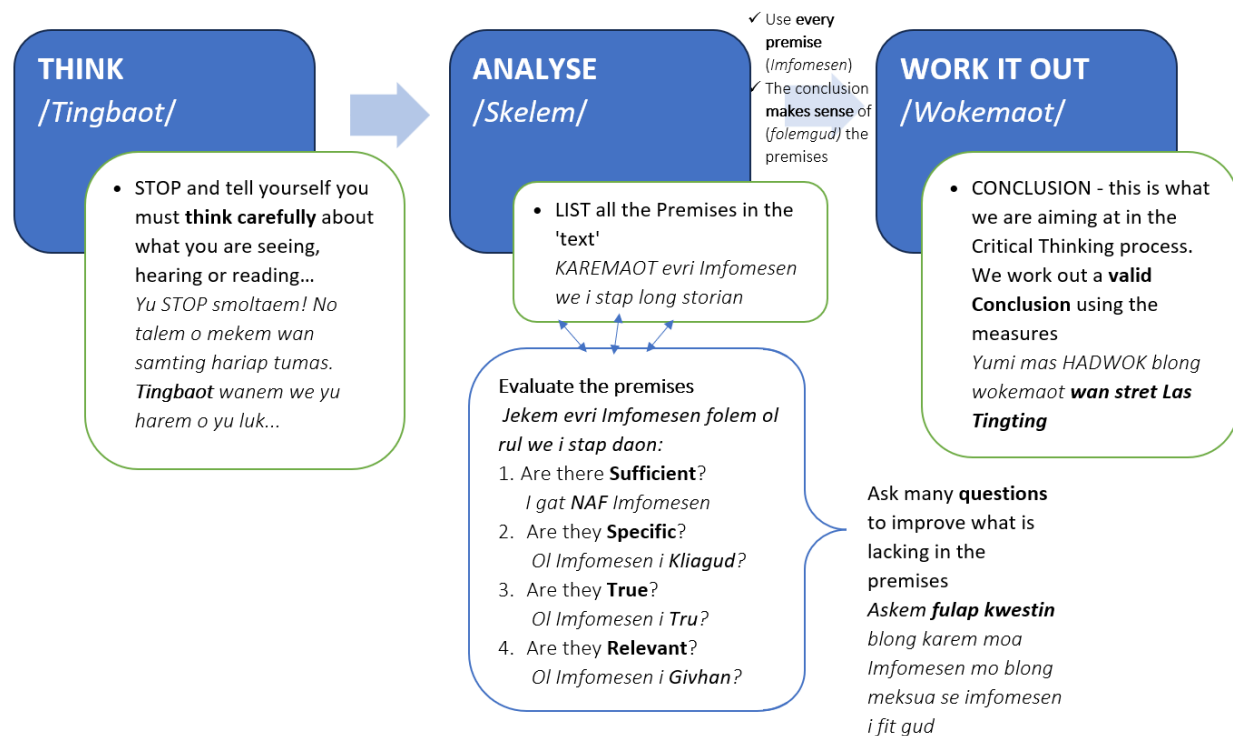


Figure 1. Critical thinking course method overview

The central component of the critical thinking process is to *Analyse*; after pausing to *Think* about the issue at hand (perhaps better put as ‘Wait, don’t just rush on’), one must begin digging deeper into what has been presented. To progress, the course presents a technique for identifying all the meaning components (*imfomesen*) that make up the ‘text’¹³, then further analysing these. The Bislama dictionary offers *skelem*, ‘to scale’ and ‘to weigh’. *Skelem* is most often used metaphorically to convey ‘weighing up’ or ‘analysing’. So *skelem* is a fitting translation for the second stage of the critical thinking process.

The next step in the analysis is to ‘evaluate the premises’ (Figure 1). The verb *jekem* ‘to check’ was adopted. Initially we trialled *testem* ‘to test’, but this was potentially confusing because the word is often used for ‘to taste’ rather than ‘to test’.

Part of the evaluation of the *imfomesen* in a text is to check that all the *imfomesen* given is *relevant*, the fourth question under ‘Evaluate’ (Figure 1). To our surprise, despite there being no direct equivalence, ‘relevance’ proved to be straightforward to convey in Bislama. The full definition of ‘relevant’ is unwieldy: whether the *imfomesen* (premise) either ‘helps’ (Bis: *givhan*) or does not ‘help’ (*no givhan*), that is, supports or does not support, a particular conclusion. So, in the TTK context, the Bislama word *givhan* communicates the idea of ‘relevance’. Contextualised examples (such as the following from the TTK workbook) clearly showing relevant and irrelevant information, contributed to students quickly grasping the concept:

“Alan Jimmy is from Tanna Island. He used to work in the bank.
 Alan’s wife is good at sewing.
 Therefore, Alan Jimmy would be the best choice to be the President of Vanuatu.”

¹³ The ‘text’ could be anything read, seen or heard.

Students are easily able to identify that the premise, ‘Alan’s wife is good at sewing’ does not support (help) the claim that Alan Jimmy is the best choice for President. Thus *givhan* ‘to help’ was chosen to convey the relevance criterion for evaluating premises in the critical thinking process.

Moving further along the process chart (Figure 1), to come to a valid conclusion, Brantley (2014, p. 11) states that “the conclusion must follow logically from the premises.” Because applying this way of thinking to written texts, and articulating this process aloud, is relatively new to Vanuatu, we knew there would not be a direct equivalent for ‘follow logically’. However, the Bislama *folemgud* appears to communicate this idea. It literally means “to follow well.” The course emphasises that one must ‘follow well’ the main line of thinking given by the *imfomesen* identified to work out the conclusion. But we have observed that trainers tend to overlook this step when teaching how to reach an accurate conclusion by following the process described in the diagram. Perhaps *folemgud* doesn’t convey adequately a stepwise movement to the end of a text? Is it too vague? Or does it carry a meaning other than the intended one? Further examination of the term *folemgud* is necessary.

A separate topic in the course addresses the concept of assumptions, which is yet another term difficult to express in Bislama. Given its semantic complexity, and being faced with wielding at least a phrase, if not a sentence to convey it in Bislama, we decided to use the English word and provide an explanation of the meaning. We explain the meaning of assumption as ‘something that one believes is true but may not be true.’ To explain the term, it was contrasted with the word ‘fact’ which again is met with a challenge of no direct equivalent in Bislama. We define ‘fact’ as ‘something that is always true; there is never a time when it is not true; you can always show that it is true.’ Such long explanations are necessary but are obviously cumbersome for frequent use in teaching a lesson.

Again, we do not assume that the words and definitions are sufficient on their own for participants to adequately grasp the meaning of new terms but rely on multiple examples to clarify meaning. In the case of ‘facts’ and ‘assumptions,’ examples of each are listed in the students’ workbooks, and games are played to test the students’ ability to distinguish between the two. Stories from everyday life which highlight assumptions we make readily, are read and discussed. The goal is to fill an introduced word with meaning.

6 Keeping the Meanings Accurate

Ensuring that the trainers fully grasp all the concepts and definitions is crucial to minimising the possibility that they will transmit to students inaccurate or less than precise meanings. There is always the danger that new terminology introduced in Bislama will be understood differently by different students, with not merely a linguistic process at stake but cultural factors and constraints coming into play as well. The ideal we strive for is that the intended meaning will always be accurately conveyed and received. We have now passed on teaching responsibilities to Indigenous trainers. We still have the privilege of observing the trainers’ teaching and interaction with the teaching material and this continues to provide us with evidence for both the acceptability of various terms as well as the ongoing accurate transmission of meaning from trainer to student.

7 Conclusion

We have discussed some of the challenges and potential solutions to the development of specialized educational material in Vanuatu’s national language of Bislama. Despite Bislama’s underdeveloped technical lexicon, we believe many abstract and non-cultural ideas and

concepts have been successfully communicated in the TTK. These terms have been created, tested, evaluated, and when necessary modified, before adopting them. Some of the terminology continues to be evolved. We observe though, that the use of longer definitions along with multiple examples of culturally relevant vignettes and stories, are imperative to an accurate understanding of any of the terms used in the course. Careful, gradual and ongoing training of trainers to deliver the course material is essential for the maintenance of meaning for each term introduced in the course.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to our ni-Vanuatu colleague trainers, a number of whom have worked with us faithfully for many years. They have been patient in providing valuable insights and feedback as we developed the terminology and ideas presented in this case study. We also wish to express our appreciation to Brent Brantley whose *Critical Thinking: The Key to Successful Decisions* served as an inspiration for the course discussed here. His generosity in allowing us to draw on his material significantly advanced the development process.

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