Te Reo
the Journal of the Linguistic
Society of New Zealand

Volume 68
Issue 3 (*Special Issue*): Vanuatu languages in action
Research Article
2025
Pages 71–105

December, 2025

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Tarihehe, R., & Willans, F. (2025). Implementation of Vanuatu's vernacular language policy: Insights from primary schools in West Ambae. *Te Reo 68*(3) Vanuatu languages in action [Special Issue], edited by T. Rangelov, E. Ridge, L. Takau & V. Chen. (pp. 71–105)
This paper is a peer-reviewed contribution from https://www.nzlingsoc.org/journal/

Guest Editors: Tihomir Rangelov, Eleanor Ridge, Lana Takau, Victoria Chen

Implementation of Vanuatu's vernacular language policy: Insights from primary schools in West Ambae

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Abstract

This article reports on a study that investigated the implementation of Vanuatu's vernacular education policy in selected schools on West Ambae. A trilingual picture-based language assessment was conducted with all children in Years 1 and 4 at two schools to ascertain their abilities to speak and listen in each of the vernacular (Nduindui), Bislama and English. Classroom observation was then carried out to see how the same three languages were used in the teaching and learning process for these groups of children. Finally, teacher interviews and community *hunguhungu* were conducted to elicit perspectives about the policy.

The language assessment revealed the strongest ability in Nduindui, and minimal proficiency in English, with Bislama showing a more mixed profile. There was very little difference between the levels attained by the two year groups, suggesting that limited acquisition of new languages had occurred during the first three years of school. This phase of the study demonstrates that Nduindui was the most logical language to use as the principal medium of instruction across the curriculum in Year 1, and that students were no more ready to use English for this purpose by Year 4.

The classroom observation data indicated that Nduindui was the predominant language used for oral interaction but that English was the only language written on the board. While all four classrooms were highly interactive and engaging, it became clear, particularly from the Year 4 classrooms, that the vernacular had become seen as a language to fall back on when English was too challenging, rather than part of the developing plurilingual repertoire. Through both the classroom observation and discussions with teachers and community members, it was clearly shown that there was widespread support for the vernacular policy, although there were indications of some gaps in implementation.

Summary in Bislama

Atikol ya hem i ripot blong wan stadi we i lukluk hao nao oli putum tugeta venakula edukesen polisi blong Vanuatu long ol selected skul long West blong Ambae. Wan pija asesmen we i yusum tri lanwis evriwan i tekem ples wetem evri pikinini long yia 1 mo 4 long tu skul blong faenemaot hao gud nao ol pikinini ya oli save toktok mo lisen long venakula (Nduindui), Bislama mo Inglis. I bin gat wan lukluk tu insaed long klasrum (klasrum obsevesen) long hao proses blong tijim mo lanem ol pikinini long trifala lanwis hem i hapen long grup blong ol pikinini ya. Las wan, i bin gat intaviu wetem ol tija mo sidaon tugeta (*hunguhungu*) wetem ol komyuniti blong harem ol tinktink blong ol long saed blong polisi ya.

Lanwis asesmen wetem yus blong pija long trifala lanwis hem i soem moa strong abiliti long Nduinduui, mo smol abiliti nomo long Inglis, mo Bislama i gat mikis abiliti. Hem i soem

tu se i gat smol difrens nomo bitwin tufala yia grup. Hemia i min se fasin blo lanem wan niu lanwis hemi hapen smol nomo long ol fas tri yia blong skul. Long taem blong skul ya stadi i demonstretem se Nduindui nomo hemi men lanwis blong ol pikinini i lan tru long hem long yia 1, mo ol pikinini oli no redi yet blong yusum Inglis blong lan kasem yia 4.

Lukluk insaed lo klasrum (klasrum obsevesen) hem i soem tu se i gat plante yus blong Nduindui blong toktok be Inglis hem i yus plante nao blong raet long blakbod. From i gat plante yus blong Nduindui long evri yia 4 klas we stadi i lukluk long ol, venakula hemi lanwis we ol pikinini i fol bak long hem taem Inglis i had blong lanem insted blong divelopem fasin blong lanem mo save plante lanwis. Folem lukluk insaed long klasrum mo ol toktok wetem ol tija mo komyuniti i kat plante sapot long yus blong venakula polisi, dispaet sam gap long wei we oli putum tugeta (implementation).

Summary in Nduindui

A boloki hika u viti viti huri na mahao makive hinea ramo tao tambul tak na Nonda Leo lo koro koro na hala na lae kiki kila lolo tan tano na huhuiana ratuaki tatanda, West Ambae. A ngwatak na leo doldolua kaitolu hinea rara natu na hukao katu kwale (1) mana hukao kaifati (4) lo tanoi huhuiana kai rua ramo tanga na nunu vunu ram duru ki na leo duhu duhri vohoi vohoi na nunu lo leo kaitolu hi kwara tana kikilae na nonga kiki kila lo nonga kwaha kwaha mana rongo rongo lo nonda leo (Nduindui), Bislama mana English. Tanga tanga lolo ingwa na huhuiana u vaiana vake kwara tana kiki lae hoknaha a leo kai tolu maira hini rao tambe na hala na huhuiana mana lae kikila nona rara natu maira hini. Rovo naki, leo duhu duhuri tina tangaloi na huhuiana mana hunguhungu mana tangaloi lolo vanua u vaiana kwara tana kikilae na domi dominga lo leo koro koro na huhuiana lo nonda leo.

A leo duhu duhuri lo ngwatui leo kai tolu hini rao mata ngwasara karea kwara a kikila u lakua kara kara hini lo Nonda Leo diko Nduindui, vu kele kele vohoki lo English, vunuhi Bislama rara natu rau rokek nia randu. Kwara raru dolua hini kele kele vohoki lo hukao na huhuiana kairua- kwe hini hi mo bete na tangatanga kwara kikila na leo karangwa lo hukao kai tolu tomuak na lai kikila hini u kele kele vohoki. Lo taro hini a Nonda Leo (Nduindui) aia u bakoto kwara rara natu rana lavi na kikila luna lo nonga huhuiana lo hukao tomuaki(1), vu vake rara natu rahe rarai terandu kwara rana lai kikila lo English taroki ramo maravuti lo hukao kai vatiki.

Tanga tanga lolo ingwa na huhuiana u mata ngwasara karea kwara a Nonda Leo hini u bakoto kwara ne kwahakiana lo taro na huhuiana. Tavaluki, English hini rahe kwahak lae terandu va u uliana vohok tomuak nira (board) ramo tanga vu ramo uli bibi. Taroki a ingwa na huhuiana kai vati hini a kwaha kwaha mana bulu bulu u mandi karea lo Nonda Leo, u mata ngwasara vake kwara English u huira randu lakwa na rara natu va tingwaravu hini a Nonda Leo aia tuku kwal koro na mahao hini hete kwara rana kikikila lo leo rusa vakatukwale lainga. Tanga tanga lolo ingwa na huhui mana leo duhu duhuri tina tangaloi na huhuiana mana hunguhungu mana tangaloi lolo vanua u vosangi kwara rusa rao tangai na koro koro lo leo na vanua (vernacular policy) u karea. A boloki luna rusa rao saro randu.

Keywords

policy implementation, vernacular education, West Ambae

1 Introduction

Since 2012, Vanuatu has followed a policy through which the vernacular (Language 1, L1) is intended to be used as the medium of instruction for the learning of content subjects across the curriculum, including literacy, while either English or French (Language 2, L2) is introduced gradually as a language subject, with either French or English (Language 3, L3) also added at a later stage. During the later primary years, L2 is expected to be used more frequently as medium of instruction across the curriculum, without replacing L1 (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). While policies that shift from L1 to L2 as medium of instruction have traditionally been called 'transition' policies, suggesting the replacement of L1 with L2, Vanuatu has chosen the term 'ademap lanwis sloslo' (adding languages gradually) during the first three years of school, and 'yusum fulap lanwis blong lan' (using many languages to learn) during the next three years of school (Vanuatu Education Support Program, 2017). The aims of the policy are to ensure that children learn effectively across the curriculum, using languages that they already know well, while also learning new languages.

The policy is complex and there have been mixed responses from the public, as displayed particularly on social media. Some commentators are concerned that teaching through the vernacular or Bislama will prevent children from learning English and French successfully. Others complain that the use of Bislama may threaten other vernaculars, views that are likely underpinned by ingrained negative attitudes towards this language. Others again seem more concerned by the complexity of trying to deliver education in so many languages, and there has been some confusion as to what the policy actually says (Willans, 2017b). The current status remains unclear, following media reports of a Government directive in February 2023 that only English and French were now sanctioned for use in schools (Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation, 2023).

This study sought to provide a snapshot of how the policy plays out in a small number of schools in a rural area, as there remains limited empirical evidence that can demonstrate how complex the policy really is in practice, what is working or not working, or even whether schools are implementing the policy at all. Without better understanding of what is happening in the classroom, results from standardised tests such as VANSTA and PILNA (national and regional assessments, respectively, of literacy and numeracy), as well as external examinations, cannot tell us much. This study aims to contribute to the building of this type of evidence, through classroom observations, language assessments, interviews and *hunguhungu* (the Nduindui term used for the process of culturally engaging adults in a community meeting that gives everyone, despite their status or gender, an equal opportunity to share their opinion on matters of importance) conducted at three rural Anglophone primary schools with teachers and community members on West Ambae.

In this area, there is one dominant language, known by linguists as the Nduindui dialect of the West Ambae language, and known by speakers as 'nonda leo' (our language) or 'leo tatanda' (the language of our place). This language is usually acquired as the dominant home language, while the national language of Bislama is spoken mainly to those from outside the community, and there are both 'Anglophone' (English-medium) and 'Francophone' (French-medium) schools available for parents to choose from. However, inter-island movement has gradually changed the dynamics of the community, intensified by the volcanic eruption of 2017 when the whole population of Ambae was temporarily evacuated to neighbouring islands.

2 The Case for Vernacular-Based Multilingual Education Policies

The rationale for vernacular-based multilingual education policies is usually based on a combination of cultural and pedagogical factors. For example, making the case for vernacular education in Vanuatu in a 2004 volume on 'Re-thinking Education in Vanuatu' (Sanga et al., 2004), Nako (2004, p. 40) noted that the use of vernacular in schools both was "necessary for the maintenance of cultural identity for ni-Vanuatu children" and would "result in greater effective learning than when foreign languages are used".

The cultural reasons include stronger connections between school and home, more chances for parents to stay involved in their children's education, and a type of learning that is more likely to be relevant to the local context, as well as a desire to hear indigenous voices in the education policy sphere (Niroa, 2004). The pedagogical reasons build particularly on UNESCO's stance since 1953 that children learn best through the language(s) that they already understand by the time they start school (UNESCO, 1953). In the policy paper "If you don't understand, how can you learn?", UNESCO (2016) demonstrates that children who are taught or assessed through a language they do not use at home have poor educational outcomes. Students can express themselves better and participate more actively in classroom activities when they are comfortable using the language. When an unfamiliar language is used, however, classrooms are more likely to be teacher-centred with teachers doing most of the talking (Benson, 2004; Brock-Utne & Alidou, 2011).

While these factors usually drive the philosophical shifts towards multilingual policies, the specific models through which such policies are implemented in practice can often be shaped by an additional set of, primarily political, factors. Governments are accountable to their voters, with the result that negative reactions by parents and the general public can often derail a new policy or cause it to be modified in some way. Negative attitudes regarding vernacular education may stem from a lack of awareness about its rationale or evidence base, fears that children will miss the opportunity to learn international languages such as English and French, or practical concerns about the perceived cost or complexity of operating through multiple languages. Such concerns may lead to pressure to accommodate local languages for as short a time as possible before switching to the international or prestige language(s).

The problem with this situation is the evidence that early-exit transitional models – models in which the vernacular is used only for two to three years before a transition is made to a new language such as English – are rarely effective (Chimbutane, 2013; Heugh, 2011), and it is generally acknowledged that additive models that use English (or French) in addition to the first languages are more successful (Heugh, 2011). It has been found that most learners need six to eight years to learn a second language sufficiently well to use it as a medium of instruction (UNESCO, 2016) which is why removing the first language as early as mid-primary facilitates little success for the majority of learners, and merely serves to "delay the 'sink or swim' ritual" of an English-only classroom (Chimbutane, 2013, p. 316).

Vanuatu's policy, as initially conceived and as still visible on the Ministry of Education website at the time of writing, follows an early-exit transitional model, given the directive "By the end of Year 3, the language of instruction should be either French or English. However, teachers will continue to use, for as long as is necessary, the agreed local vernacular languages to support children as they make the transition to English or French." (Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training, 2012). Willans (2017a) referred to this policy as "the wrong model at the right time", given the sudden coming together of political will, economic resources and technical assistance in support of a policy that, on paper, seemed unlikely to succeed. However, since that time, far more flexible and inclusive approaches to multilingualism throughout

primary school have been embraced by the Vanuatu Education Support Program responsible for implementation. These include the 'Ademap lanwis sloslo' model from Years 1 to 3, which "introduces English or French from year 1 term 2 along with the mother tongue and slowly increases the time allocated to English or French over the three years" and 'Yusum fulap lanwis blong lan' from Years 4 to 6, though which "students experience a multilingual model incorporating vernaculars, Bislama, English and French" (Vanuatu Education Support Program, 2017).

Ensuring the success of a policy such as this requires strong, ongoing support for teachers to bring these strategies to life, ensuring they can make principled decisions about both how to make the best pedagogical use of the different languages that children already know, and how to help children "add" the new languages to their repertoires. In other words, it is important to recognise that teaching languages is not the same as using those languages to teach other curriculum content. It has long been shown that simply attempting to immerse children in a new language across the curriculum without supporting the learning of that language has negative outcomes, hence the dubbing of such approaches as 'submersion' rather than 'immersion' (Heugh, 2011). The role of the 'ademap lanwis' approach must therefore be to ensure this gap is filled, helping to build plurilingual competence in all languages that are valued.

At the same time, there is a need to embrace more productive conceptualisations of multilingual classroom strategies than traditional understandings of code-switching have implied. While terminology is not always used consistently in the literature, Probyn (2015) provides a useful distinction between classroom code-switching ("relatively short switches from the official language of learning and teaching to another language, usually the learners' home language, and back again" p. 220); translation ("repetition by the teacher of lesson content or instructions in the learners' home language" ibid.); and translanguaging ("the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, understandings and knowledge through two languages [in which] both languages are used in an integrated and coherent way to organize and mediate mental processes in learning" (Baker, 2011, p. 288, in Probyn, 2015, p. 221). As Probyn notes, "whereas code-switching and translation reflect a temporary (and sometimes illicit) deviation from a monolingual ideal, the notion of translanguaging reflects acceptance of a heteroglossic/ bilingual reality and a more comprehensive and flexible use of the classroom language resources to mediate learning" (p. 221). Operationalising this strategy in the classroom requires teachers to make principled decisions about how each language is used (see Willans, 2023 for discussion of a framework to help trainee teachers at the University of the South Pacific make principled language choices in their classrooms).

Finally, it should also be noted that the literature on language-in-education policy has been skewed towards the rationale or intent behind multilingual education, with less attention paid to how these models of education are then enacted in practice in the classrooms. In a recent study in Vanuatu that has attempted to address this gap, Franjieh et al. (2025, this issue) conducted a survey of teachers in the Vatlongos (South East Ambrym), Rral (North Ambrym), and Merei (Santo) language communities. They found that teachers reported using Bislama more than the main community language, with English/French the least commonly used language in the early years. This was in spite of the very high proportions of students and teachers who reported speaking the main community language. While the teachers expressed relatively high competence in speaking this community language, they were less confident in reading and writing, a finding that was attributed to lack of access to print resources and training. In all three communities, teachers were generally positive towards the policy but lacked the implementational support needed to enact it fully.

In the neighbouring Solomon Islands, Galokale's (2023) case study of one of the pilot schools for the vernacular education policy of 2010 found that implementation had fallen short by the time of her data collection. This was in spite of the early indications of success documented in the evaluation report by the Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development (MEHRD, 2019). Galokale found that some teachers had been posted to the case study school without having been trained to implement the policy, or even without speaking the language in which they were expected to teach, and there was limited support and follow-up training from the Ministry (of which the latter was also noted in the MEHRD report). For very different reasons, mainly to do with the manner in which the policy had been implemented in the initial phases, the equivalent vernacular education policy that began in Papua New Guinea in the 1990s has also reverted officially to English-only instruction (Volker, 2025).

This study is designed to help build the evidence Vanuatu needs to see about how its policy is being enacted, particularly in rural areas.

3 Research Design

3.1 Research questions

The study was designed to answer three research questions:

1. Which languages do the children speak, and how well do they speak these languages, when they enter Year 1 and when they enter Year 4?
2. How do teachers use the different linguistic and material resources for different purposes in the classroom?
3. How do teachers, parents and community members view the vernacular education policy?

The first question is important because the assumption behind the policy is that the children and teacher have one or more shared vernaculars (which may include Bislama) that can be used in the classroom. The assumption behind the previous policy was that the children and teacher had sufficient knowledge of English or French to use this language for all purposes. There have been very few studies that have attempted to understand which languages are actually available to be used – i.e., the linguistic resources that the children bring with them to school (although Early, 2015 reports on one exception) – along with the way children develop proficiency in these languages. Finding out how well the Year 1 and Year 4 children can speak and understand each of the vernacular(s), Bislama and English at the start of the school year will contribute valuable insights from one language area.

The second question seeks to observe what is happening in practice in the classroom, in other words understanding how the policy plays out from the perspective of a researcher-observer. The question enables triangulation of the data about what teachers say they do and gives more detail about how the different linguistic and material resources are used for different purposes. The third question is important because the views, beliefs and attitudes of teachers, parents and community members can impact the success of the policy. This question seeks to understand how the policy plays out in practice from these stakeholders' perspectives.

3.2 Research site

The research was conducted at three rural, Anglophone primary schools in the western part of Ambae Island. The data was collected primarily from two of these schools, with the third school

involved only for the interviews and *hunguhungu*. The first author (henceforth the researcher) is from this part of Ambae and is a fluent speaker of Nduindui.

The data was collected during a three-week period at the very start of Term 1, 2024, a timeframe that was slightly shorter than intended due to bad weather and transport delays.

3.3 Methods

To answer the first research question, a picture-based assessment activity was conducted individually with all Year 1 and Year 4 children at Schools A and B (a total of 43 children) to assess their speaking and listening skills in Nduindui, Bislama and English. Each child spent approximately 20 minutes with the researcher, who showed them a picture and asked them a series of questions in each language in turn, prompting them to speak about the picture in each language. Listening was evaluated by speaking to the child in all three languages. If they were unable to respond in the same language, they could demonstrate understanding by responding in a different language. For speaking skills, prompts could be given in the children's dominant language, when necessary, to ensure that weaker listening skills did not interfere with the evaluation of the speaking skills. They were then given a score for each language for each skill, using the criteria shown in the Appendix. Given the lack of any established oral proficiency scales in the context, these criteria were based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) scale (Council of Europe, 2020), adapted both by following the guidelines for utilising the CEFR with young learners (Council of Europe, 2018) and the principal researcher's own knowledge of cultural relevance. Proficiency levels are presented on a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 representing those with too limited proficiency to be rated, 1-3 covering the CEFR level A1, 4-6 covering A2, 7-9 covering B1, and 10 for those rated as early B2. Given the age of the children, no levels higher than B2 were used.

To answer the second research question, two one-hour lessons were observed at each of Schools A and B, one lesson for each of Years 1 and 4. During the lessons themselves, a simple tally chart was used to record the number of instances observed in each of the three languages from a pre-determined list of language functions (following Nunan, 1989): teacher display or referential questions; teacher explanations of L2 grammar, vocabulary or function; teacher explanations of content; teacher instructions or directions; teacher praise; teacher criticism; and student questions, answers or discussion. This provided a broad picture of what each language was used for, noting that no attempt was made to quantify how much time was spent on each function. After the lessons, the classroom talk was transcribed from audio and video recordings, from which focal extracts were identified for further analysis.

To answer the third research question, interviews were held with a total of nine teachers across Schools A, B and C, and a *hunguhungu* was held in all three school communities which included parents and other interested community members, attended by a total of 35 participants. Within the context of Nduindui, *hunguhungu* are used during communal events like organising village work, addressing significant matters, or resolving conflicts according to custom. Like *talanoa* in other parts of the Pacific, *hunguhungu* offers a structured and respectful space for open discussion and is rooted in the cultural values of respect, cooperation, and *bulubulu* (unity). The interviews and *hunguhungu* were semi-structured in that a series of questions were prepared to guide the discussion, but it was more important that all participants had a chance to share their views. Questions covered participants' beliefs about the vernacular policy, how it was operating, and in the case of teachers, more specific probing about how they used languages for different purposes in the classroom. These sessions were fully transcribed and coded thematically to group similar ideas together.

Ethical approval was obtained for the study from the University of the South Pacific, followed by the Vanuatu Ministry of Education and Training. Permission to conduct the research in the specific schools and communities was then sought from the school administration and the wider community before beginning the data collection. All teachers are referred to in this article by pseudonyms.

4 Findings and Discussion

4.1 The languages children were able to use

The data in this section illustrates, firstly, which languages were known at the start of school and, secondly, which languages were known after three years. This data was derived from the picture-based speaking and listening assessment conducted with all children in Years 1 and 4 at Schools A and B.

Figure 1 illustrates the listening proficiency level for Year 1 students at School A in each of their three languages. There were 15 students in the class.

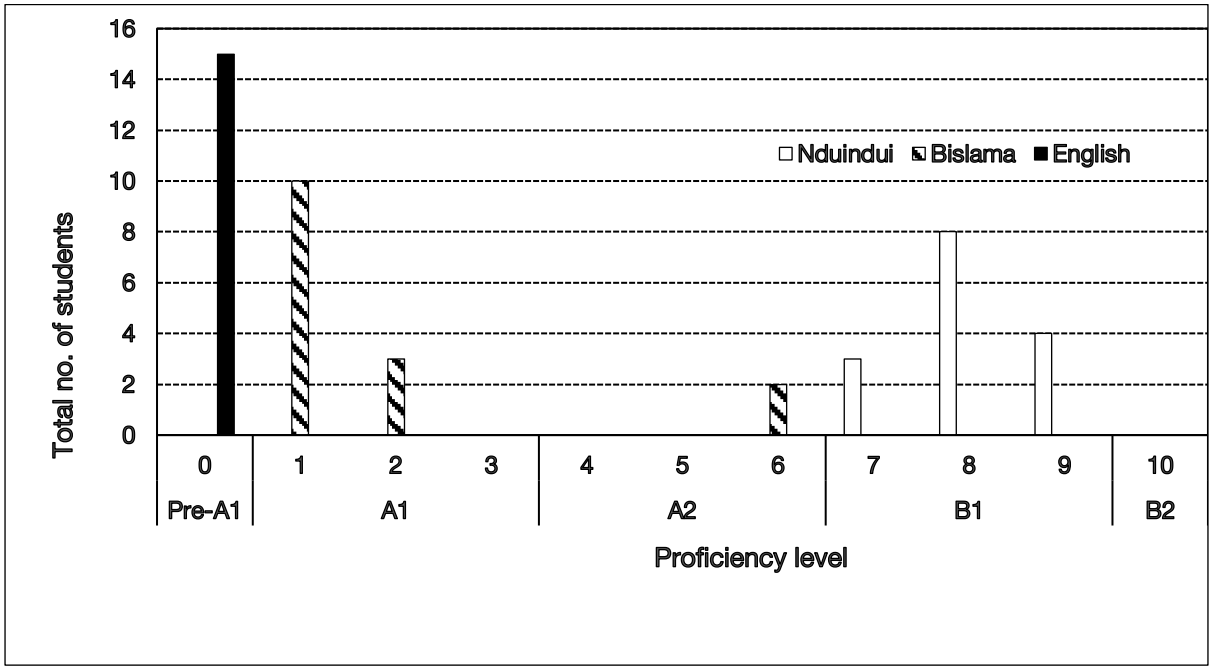

Figure 1. Year 1 School A Listening skills

The figure shows that all 15 students had the highest listening proficiency in Nduindui, with three students at level 7, eight at level 8 and four at level 9. This is followed by proficiency in Bislama with two students at level 6, and three and ten students at levels 1 and 2, respectively. However, all 15 students were rated to have level 0 listening proficiency in English. In other words, they were judged to be too weak at listening in English to be rated on the true proficiency scale.

Figure 2 illustrates the listening proficiency level for Year 1 students in school B in the same three languages. There were seven students in this class.

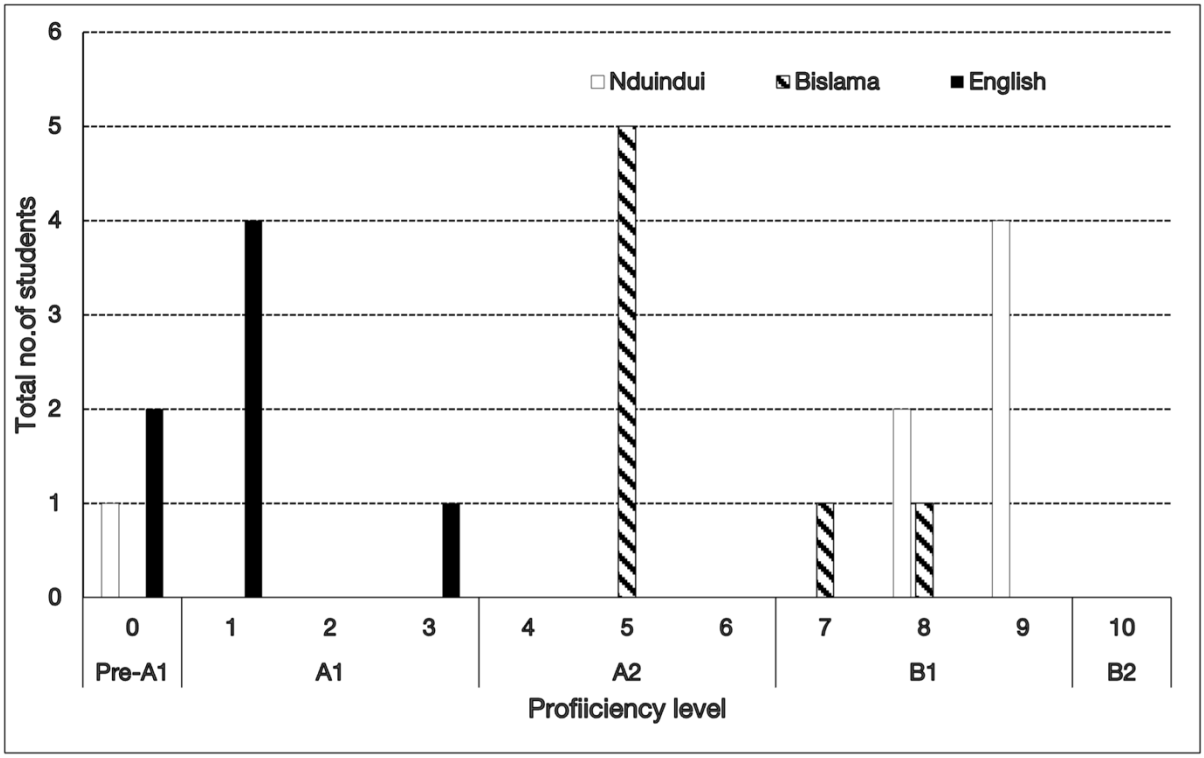

Figure 2. Year 1 School B Listening skills

At this school, most Year 1 students again had the highest level of listening proficiency in Nduindui with a total of four students at level 9 and two at level 8. One student, however, was rated at level 0 (no proficiency at all), an indication of a child who had just moved into the community of School B. This was followed by students' competency in Bislama, with one student each at levels 7 and 8, and five who were at level 5. Students' listening comprehension in English was again low in comparison, with two, four and one students in levels 0, 1 and 3, respectively.

Although there was slightly more variation in School B than School A, the data again showed that students' highest listening skills were generally not in English or Bislama, but in their own vernacular, while English was consistently rated at the lowest levels of 0–3. Listening skills in Bislama were generally rated between the vernacular and English.

Figure 3 illustrates speaking proficiency for the Year 1 children at School A.

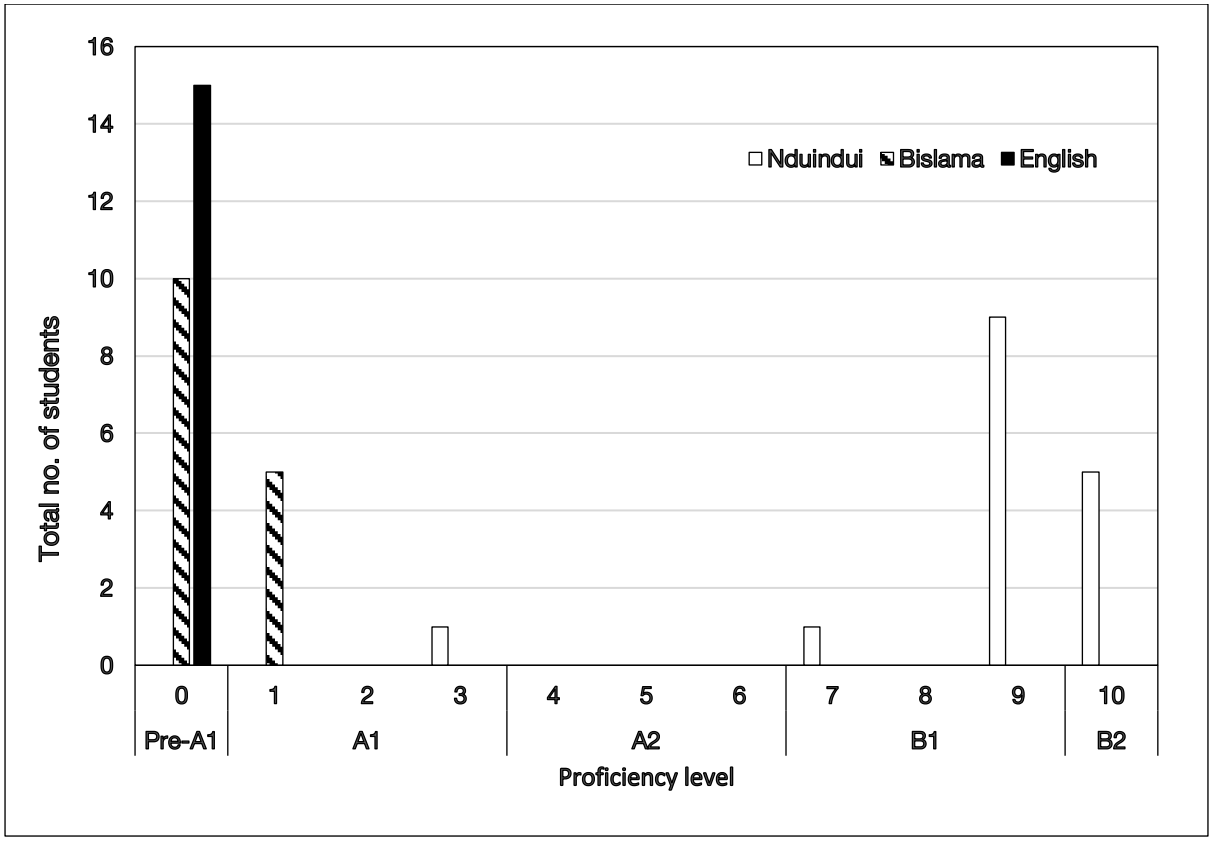

Figure 3. Year 1 School A Speaking skills

The figure shows great disparity in terms of the level of oral proficiency with vernacular at one end and Bislama and English at the other. Students at this school had by far the highest speaking proficiency in Nduindui, with five students at level 10, followed by nine students at level 9 and one student at level 7. In contrast, English and Bislama proficiency were both identified at levels 0 and 1, with all students rated 0 in the former and all but five students rated 0 in the latter. In the Year 1 classroom at School A, the vernacular was the only language the children had available for oral production.

Figure 4 depicts how well the Year 1 students at School B could speak their three different languages.

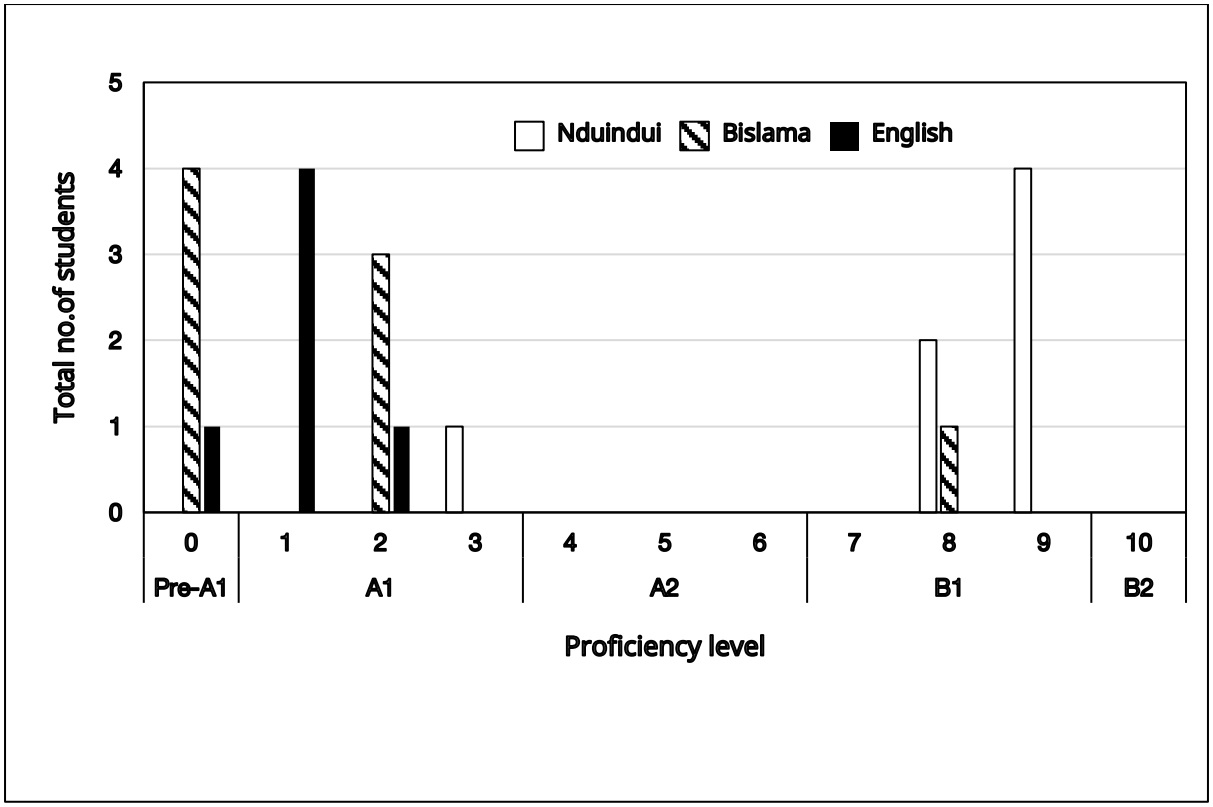

Figure 4. Year 1 School B Speaking skills

Six of the seven students in this class had high oral proficiency, either level 8 or 9, in Nduindui, while the remaining student had the equivalent proficiency in Bislama (level 8) but was only able to speak the vernacular at level 3. This was the same student who had limited listening proficiency in the vernacular (cf. Figure 2). For Bislama, four students were still at level 0 while three were rated at level 3. Spoken English proficiency remained for all students between levels 0 (one student), 1 (four students) and 2 (one student). To summarise, the vernacular was the only language available that the majority of children already spoke when they first entered this school, although one child in the class only had limited proficiency in this language. All children had extremely limited or non-existent levels of spoken English, making this unavailable for spoken interaction at the very start of school.

The next set of figures present data from Year 4 children at the same two schools. This data was collected to see whether proficiency levels differ from Year 1, once children have had three years of school. This is important given the expected transition from vernacular to English that is expected to happen from mid primary.

Figure 5 illustrates the listening proficiency of students in Year 4 at School A. There were 12 students in the class.

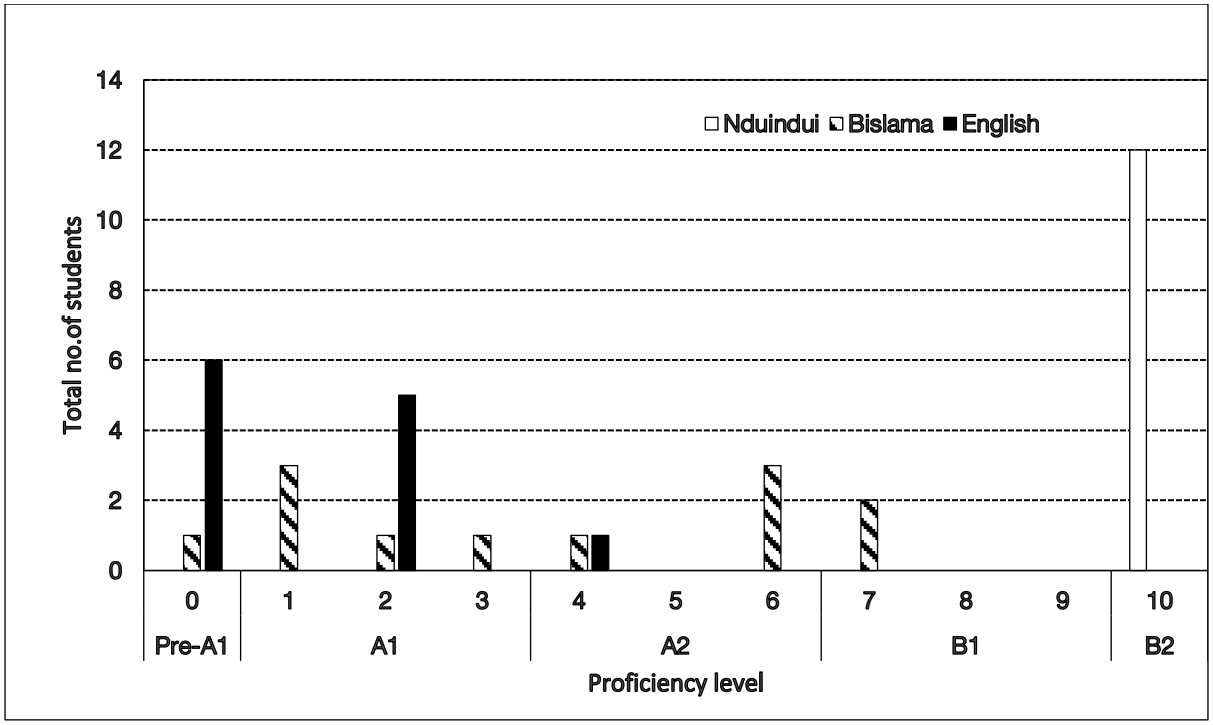

Figure 5. Year 4 School A Listening skills

Figure 5 indicates that the language students had the highest listening proficiency in was still Nduindui at this point, with all 12 students at level 10. Both Bislama and English remained lower on the scale for all students. For Bislama, there was one student at level 7, while three were at level 6 and there was one at each of levels 0, 2, 3 and 4. Similarly, students still had a low listening proficiency in English, with six at level 0, five at level 2 and one at level 4. This shows that there had been limited progress by Year 4 at this school in terms of their listening proficiency in English, the language that is anticipated in the policy to start being used more as medium of instruction from this point forward.

Figure 6 shows the distribution of each student's listening comprehension skills for Year 4 at School B. There were nine students in this class.

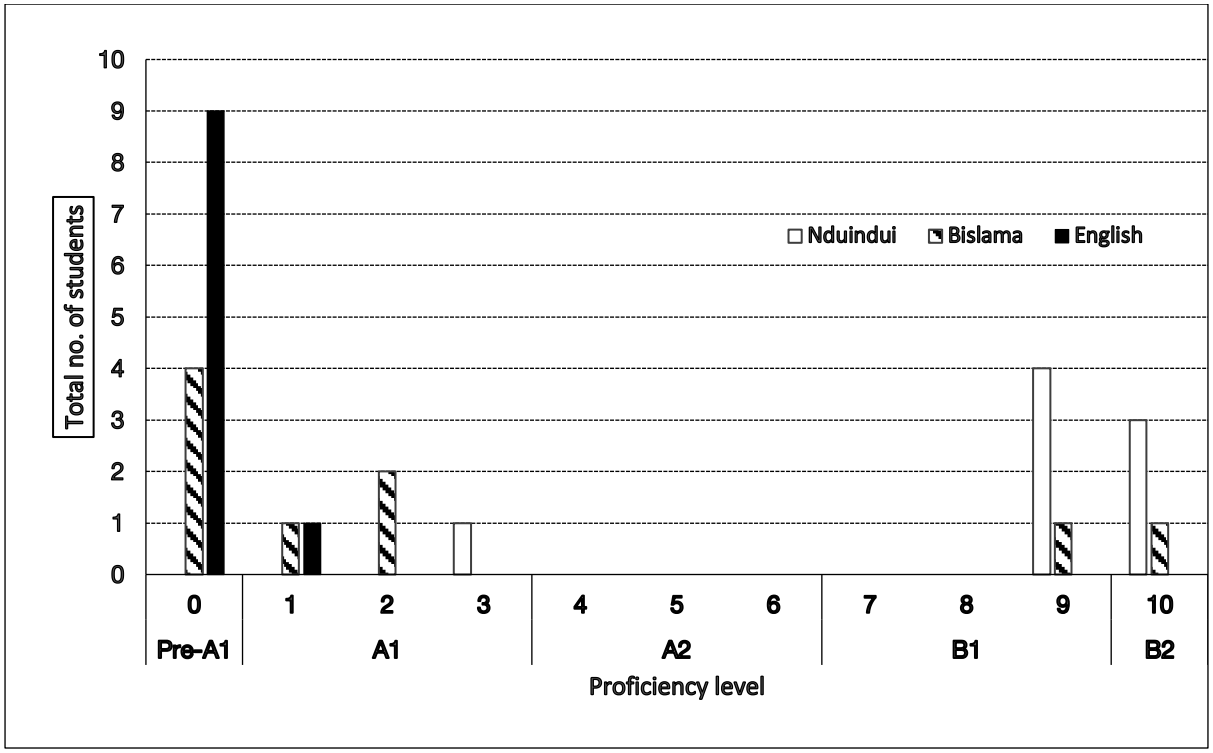

Figure 6. Year 4 School B Listening skills

The most striking finding shown by Figure 6 is that all nine students remained at level 0 (pre-A1) English listening proficiency, while four of these students also showed the same result for Bislama. The only language these students demonstrated any listening comprehension in at all after three years of school is Nduindui. It is also notable that no students had higher than level 3 listening proficiency in more than one language. Seven students demonstrated a very strong listening ability (level 9 or 10) in Nduindui, but level 2 or lower in the other two languages, while the remaining two students had this high level of listening in Bislama but level 3 or lower in the other two languages.

Figure 7 shows how Year 4 students at School A fared in speaking proficiency in their three different languages.

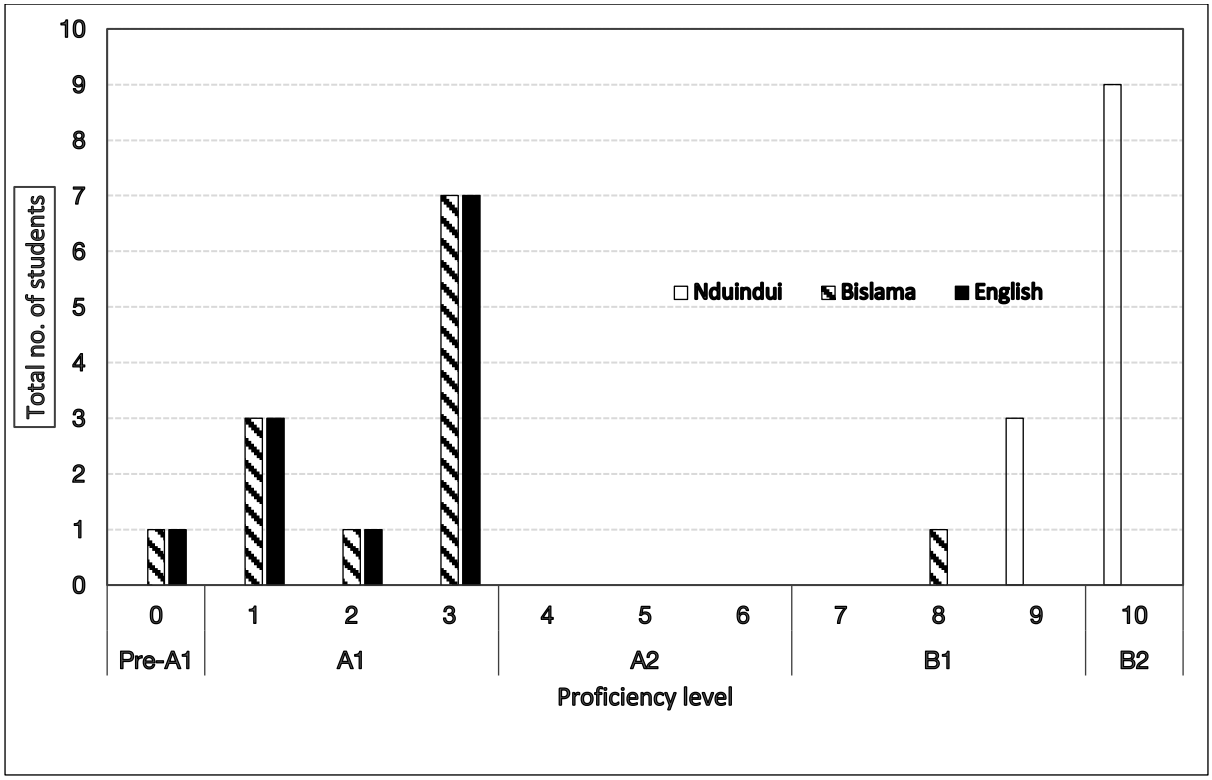

Figure 7. Year 4 School A Speaking skills

According to Figure 7, students had the highest speaking proficiency in Nduindui, with a total of nine students at level 10 and three at level 9. For the other two languages, with one exception, the students were rated at level 3 or below, with a very similar profile shown for Bislama and English. Only one student was able to speak confidently in both Bislama and Nduindui.

Finally, Figure 8 reveals how well Year 4 students at School B spoke their three languages during the picture test.

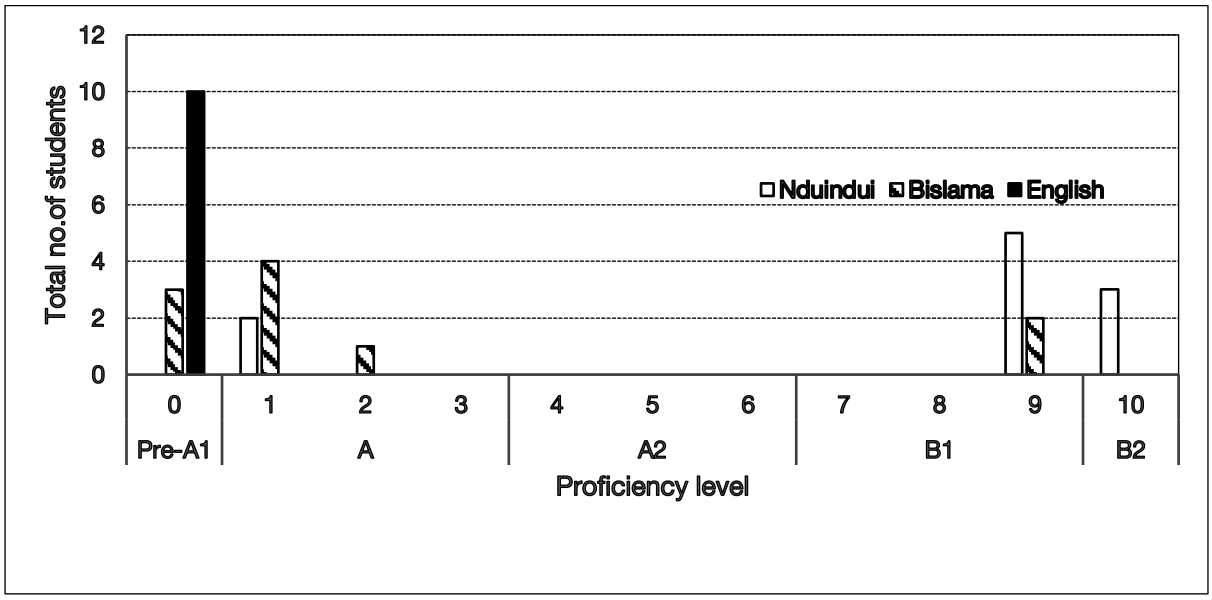

Figure 8. Year 4 School B Speaking skills

The pattern shown in Figure 8 is quite similar to that of Figure 6, showing that the Year 4 children at School B had similar profiles for listening and speaking. Once again, the majority had highest spoken proficiency in Nduindui, with five and three students in levels 9 and 10 respectively. However, the same two students were at level 9 in Bislama, with much lower Nduindui proficiency, due to their prior background in an urban area. The remaining students had very limited spoken proficiency in Bislama, rated between levels 0 and 2. Once again, all ten students in Year 4 at this school exhibited no proficiency (level 0) in spoken English. This shows that English learning had not occurred at all in terms of equipping students to be able to speak this language during the first three years of school, and it is clear that Nduindui was the dominant language still for the majority to express themselves across the curriculum at this particular school.

The data shown in this section allows us to make certain comments. The general pattern at the start of Year 1 across the two schools (22 students in total), was high proficiency in Nduindui for both listening and speaking, low or non-existent proficiency in English for both skills, and a wider range in Bislama, with listening skills in this language usually stronger than speaking skills. There was only one student in this data set who started school without a strong knowledge of the vernacular, and who was dominant in Bislama instead.

The first implication is that Nduindui was clearly the most logical language to use in the classroom as the principal medium of instruction at these two schools, since this was the dominant language for almost all students. This point supports the reasoning behind the current language policy and demonstrates that using English as the main medium of instruction would be impossible since proficiency in this language was so low at the point of entry.

The second point to note is that, while the above pattern represents the majority of students starting school at these two schools, it is likely that at least one or two students could be present in a classroom who use Bislama (or a different vernacular) as the dominant language. This situation indicates that a strict vernacular-only approach will not always be appropriate, but it certainly does not indicate that an English-only approach would be better. The implication is that teaching needs to be done flexibly in order to accommodate the different linguistic repertoires that children bring with them to school.

The third implication to arise from the Year 1 data is that most children arrived at school with a strong dominance in one language only. If they are to develop plurilingual competence in vernacular, Bislama, English (and French), and also to start using greater amounts of English across the curriculum in the later years of school, the new languages need to be taught explicitly through appropriate pedagogy.

By Year 4, after three years in school, the pattern was not quite so uniform across the two schools (21 students in total), although certain points can be summarised. Nduindui remained the strongest language by far for the majority for both listening and speaking skills, with only two students in this age group using Bislama as their dominant language and with much lower proficiency in Nduindui. Of concern, all Year 4 students at one school demonstrated zero proficiency in English in both skills, while no student at the other school was rated higher than level 4 in this language. The ratings for Bislama were again more mixed but, once again, higher for listening than speaking.

The key finding is therefore that very little was different between the overall proficiency levels of Year 1 and Year 4 children. This suggests that plurilingual competence was not being developed very effectively during the first three years of school, since many students displayed no proficiency at all in two of the three languages.

The implication is that students were no more ready to use English as the principal medium of instruction by Year 4 than they were in Year 1 and it is essential that Nduindui continues as the main teaching language across the curriculum at this stage to ensure effective learning of content subjects. This is consistent with findings from studies in South Africa (Desai, 2012; Makalela, 2015), Ghana (Kwao et al., 2021), Rwanda (Milligan et al., 2016) and India (Vogelzang et al., 2025), all of which make clear that children are not ready to switch from mother tongue to English as medium of instruction by Grade 4.

Either more time is needed for proficiency in English to develop or a more effective approach to the teaching of English is needed while the vernacular is used as the main medium of instruction; likely both. In terms of timeframe, Heugh's (2011) review of multilingual education studies across Africa makes it clear that, "under optimal conditions" (p. 128), at least six to eight years of second language learning are needed before students are ready to use it as a medium of instruction. In terms of approach, Heugh demonstrates that, while it might seem logical that introducing English earlier or for more hours per week would lead to better acquisition of the language, the evidence does not support this.

In Ethiopia, for example, Heugh, Benson, Gebre Yohannes and Bogale (2010) showed that students learning English in addition to their mother tongue and the national language outperformed those who learnt only English and the national language. However, interestingly, when large-scale investment was subsequently made in the support of English language education, without the continued focus on the mother tongue, that achievement in both English and content subjects declined. Hartshorne's (1992) study in South Africa showed similar drastic reductions in English scores following a change in policy from eight to four years of mother tongue education. A synthesis of research carried out in the Global North over the past three decades suggests the same (Cummins, 2019). Students from bilingual programmes fare as well as, if not better, in English than those in monolingual programmes, despite the reduced hours spent learning that language.

In the most comparable available context to Vanuatu, the evaluation conducted of the Solomon Islands vernacular education pilot (MEHRD, 2019) demonstrated that children enrolled in vernacular medium schools not only outperformed their English medium peers on the same islands in Maths but, from Grade 2 onwards, they also performed either at the same level or better in English, despite studying or being exposed to the language for far fewer hours per week. In that project, English was introduced orally first, while reading and writing was developed in the vernacular which, as will be shown in the next section, was not the case in the classrooms of the current study.

As mentioned above, it is also clear that new children may arrive in the school community at any age, and teachers will have to be able to accommodate new arrivals who may not speak the dominant local language. However, this complexity is not an argument to simply teach through English instead given that no students appear to know this language well.

4.2 Patterns of language use in the classroom

This section presents a very brief snapshot of how the four teachers in the study were using the three different languages in the classroom, based only on four lesson observations each of approximately one hour in duration. Quantitative data based on tally charts completed live during the lessons is presented first, which shows a summary of *how frequently* the different languages were used for different functions, before selected excerpts from transcripts of classroom interaction are provided to illustrate *how* they were used.

Figure 9 compares the different languages used in the classroom for different purposes, as observed using Nunan's (1989) real time classroom observation scheme. Tallies from both schools are included in the same figure since the patterns were very similar.

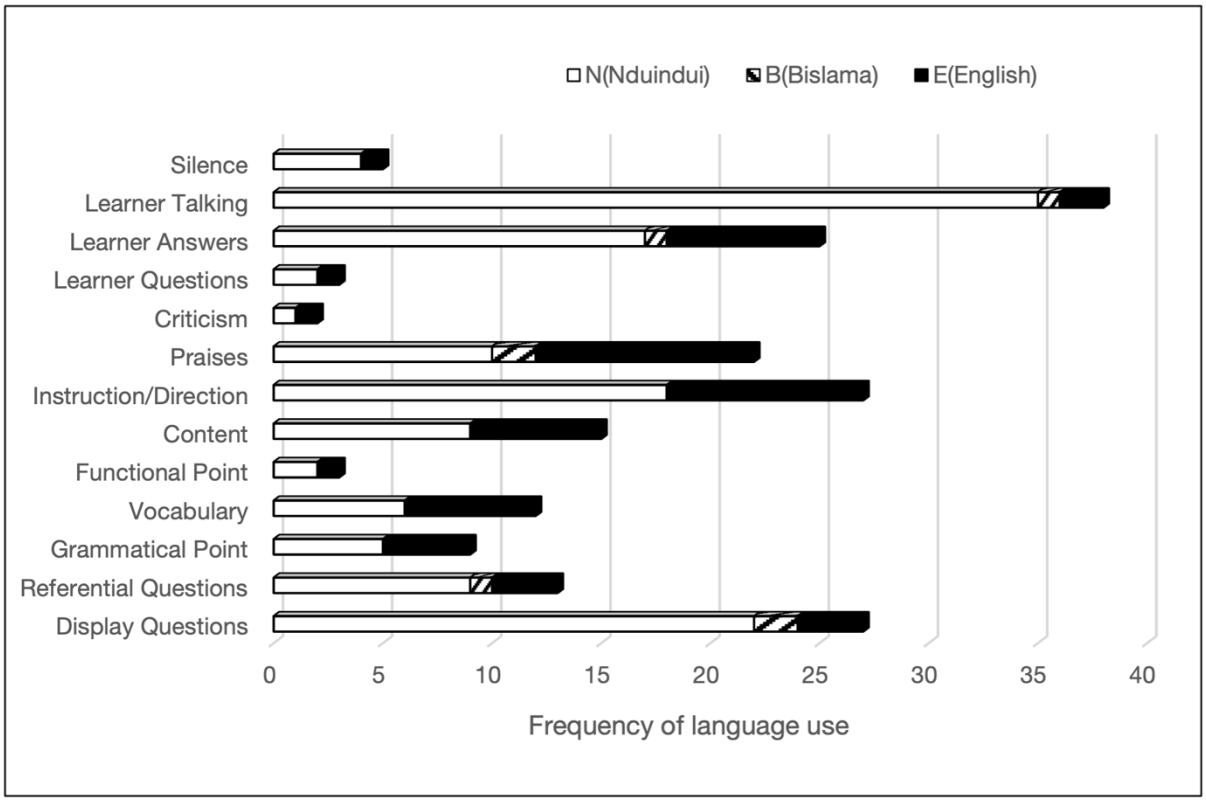

Figure 9. Frequency of language use for different purposes in Year 1 at Schools A and B

Figure 9 reveals the dominance of Nduindui across the different categories of teacher and student talk. This language was used for 70% of the occurrences, while English was used for 27%, and Bislama only 3%.

Nduindui dominated the learners' turns, accounting for high levels of learner talk with each other and the teacher, and learner answers in response to direct questions. This contrasts with Bislama and English, which showed much lower usage. Unsurprisingly for this age, there were very few questions posed by learners. However, it is clear that the learners spoke quite frequently during the lessons, which could potentially be due to both the high number of teacher questions and the use of the learners' dominant language, fostering significant learner interaction and engagement.

The Year 1 teachers used Nduindui more frequently than English when giving oral instructions and explaining curriculum content, and Bislama was not used at all in these categories. Nduindui also dominated for teachers' questions, for both display and referential questions, with very few questions posed in Bislama and only a slightly higher number in English. It is also noticeable that there were twice as many display questions in total (questions to which the teacher already knew the answer) as referential questions, although the same proportions between the different languages appeared for both types. Praise was given in equal amounts of Nduindui and English, with Bislama used a little. The few turns coded as criticism were also split equally between Nduindui and English.

The final set of categories from Nunan's scheme relate to L2 learning (functional points, vocabulary and grammatical points) with specific reference to English. Vocabulary and grammar seem to be the categories that had the most even split between the vernacular and

English, in addition to praise, indicating that both languages were used to support an explicit focus on the mechanics of the new language, English.

Figure 10 shows similar data for the Year 4 classrooms, again including the tallies from both schools in the same figure since the patterns were very similar.

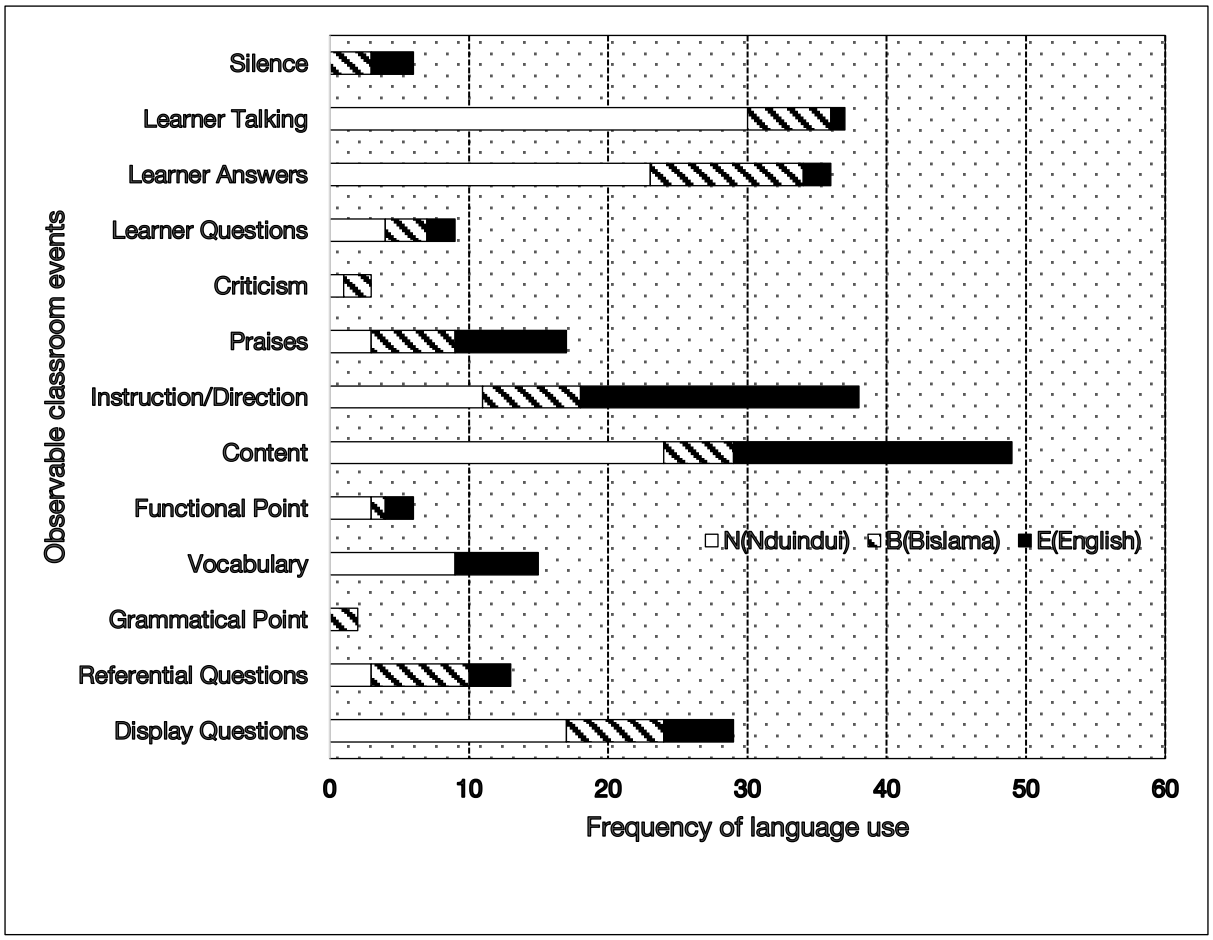

Figure 10. Frequency of language use for different purposes in Year 4 at Schools A and B

Figure 10 shows a slightly different distribution of languages across the categories by Year 4, with 49% of occurrences in Nduindui, 28% in English, and 23% in Bislama.

Learner talk was still dominated by Nduindui across all categories, although Bislama was used quite frequently. There were very few instances of learner talk in English, with a noticeably small number of responses to teacher questions in this language, showing that it did not appear to be expected as the main classroom language at this point.

Teacher talk was more mixed. Instructions were given more frequently in English than the other two languages, with roughly half the instructions given in English, and the remainder in either Nduindui or Bislama. For content teaching, however, approximately half the turns were given in Nduindui, with the remainder mainly in English. Praise was given slightly more frequently in English than any other language, but all three languages were used for this category, while criticism was given predominantly in Bislama and occasionally in Nduindui. Display questions were, once again, used twice as often as referential questions, but the distribution of languages was slightly different in Year 4. Display questions were given far more frequently in Nduindui than the other two languages, whereas the referential questions – those with a less predictable answer – were more likely to be posed in Bislama.

Of the relatively few turns related to L2 learning, vocabulary was dealt with in both Nduindui and English, while the small number of grammar-related turns were all in Bislama. All three languages were observed in turns relating to functional points.

While Figure 9 and Figure 10 show which languages dominated the classrooms for different purposes, the remainder of this section will use excerpts from transcripts of classroom interaction to provide a closer look at how each language was used. Elements from different languages are indicated using regular type for Nduindui, italics for Bislama, and bold for English. The original of each transcript is presented on the left, with an English translation on the right.

Excerpt 1 is taken from the Year 1 classroom at School A. Mrs Kura was eliciting the names of different fruit trees that grow around the local community from the 15 children in the class.

Excerpt 1. Children answering comfortably about a familiar topic

Mrs Kura: Turu hungu butu. *Mi talem long yufala yestedei se* hikakarangwa tana tanga tanga lo nonda **topic** na vikae diko a **tree** maira. Ihe u dom hangwe? Nu vit kwara va kona vanamai va kona vit na hina na virakai katukwale hinea motu tatamiu. Kare a va hika ihe ne vit na hina na kanda virakai diko a **fruit trees** maira tatanda?	**Mrs Kura:** Be quiet everybody. *I told you yesterday that* today we will be looking at our **topic** on trees or **trees.** Who can remember what I said? I told you to come today with the name of a fruit tree that grows at your home. So now who can name the fruit trees or **fruit trees** that grow on our island?
S1: Nan dom hangwe **Mrs Kura**, a **mango** tu tatamai.	**S1:** I can remember **Mrs Kura**. There is a **mango** tree standing at our house.
S2: Kami a pele tu tatamai.	**S2:** We have navel (cut nut) growing at our house.
S3: Virakai rusa navanua *Tisa.*	**S3:** Plenty of fruit trees at home *Teacher*.
Mrs Kura: Karea vohok! Nu rongo kwara virakai rusa va hika na uli na hinanga lo **board**. (Writes the name of fruit trees for students to copy.) **Okay,** karea vohok! Katabola, molvari, voka. Aha vake?	**Mrs Kura**: Very good! I can hear we have many fruit trees so now I should write their names on the **board.** (Writes the name of fruit trees for students to copy.) **Okay**, very good! Nakatabol, molvari, avocado. And what else?
S4: *Tisa* a ngwangwe vake?	**S4:** *Teacher* what about namambe?

The excerpt indicates a highly interactive activity in which the children were all eager to contribute the names of different fruit trees. They were answering individually rather than in chorus, and they did so in full sentences, indicating a clear understanding of what they were expected to do and a strong ability to join in. In the final line, Student 4 was confident enough to volunteer an answer, even though he was not sure if it was correct. These are all indications of effective classroom interaction. The two factors that are likely to have fostered this dynamic are the use of a topic that was familiar and relevant to the children, and the use of a language through which they were comfortable interacting. The two school-related words 'topic' and 'board' were said in English, and the keywords 'vikai' (tree) and 'virakai' (fruit tree) were presented by the teacher in both Nduindui and English, but the main language used was Nduindui.

Excerpt 2 is taken from the Year 1 classroom at School B. Here, Ms May was using a rhyme to teach her class of seven children about the importance of water.

Excerpt 2. Fostering understanding through multiple languages

Ms May: Vu tari tanga tanga lo nonda bolok huri na rani hika, nu lengeia kwara tana vit na bulanda **rhyme** diko a bolo. *Hu i tingbaot?* **Who remembers our rhyme?**	**Ms May**: Before we look at what we are supposed to do for today, I want us to say our **rhyme or** song. *Who can remember*? **Who remembers our rhyme?**
S1: *Tija* ku vit na blanda bolo na kwai?	**S1**: *Teacher* are you talking about our song about water?
S2: Hete bolo. *Tija* viti a **ram.**	**S2**: Not a song. *Teacher* said it's a **ram.**
Ms May: Yio. Hete **ram** be a ra viti a **rhyme**. Kita vunu ta viti **rhyme.**	**Ms May**: Yes. It's not a **ram** but we say **rhyme**. Everybody says **rhyme** together.
Ss: Rhyme.	Ss: Rhyme
Ms May: Taliku. Rhyme	Ms May: Again. Rhyme
Ss: Rhyme.	Ss: Rhyme.
Ms May: **Very good!** Yumi talem **rhyme** blong yumi blong wasem han**.**	**Ms May: Very good!** Let's all say our **rhyme** about washing our hands.
Ss: Vak lo kwai vak lo kwai Sasapula sasapula Kwai u karea kwai u karea Sasavula sasavula	**Ss:** To the water to the water Washing hands washing hands Water is good water is good Washing washing (of hands or face depending on context).
Ms May: Karea vohok. Bulanda rhyme u viti kwara a kwai u karea.	**Ms May**: Very good. Our rhyme is telling us that water is good.

Once again, this appeared to be an interactive classroom about a familiar topic in which the children were clearly comfortable speaking up. S1 was not sure if he had the right answer but was willing to try contributing, and S2 was then quick to correct her classmate when she thought it should be a rhyme rather than a song. Nduindui was again the dominant language, both for the rhyme itself and for the talk about the rhyme, but Ms May also took the opportunity to weave in both Bislama and English while prompting the children to remember, including an explicit focus on pronunciation of the relatively new word 'rhyme'. Importantly, her use of Nduindui, followed by Bislama and then English appears to follow the order of language proficiency of the children in the class, suggesting that this was a deliberate strategy to build plurilingual competence through translanguaging. This appears more intentional and productive than the more typical types of classroom code-switching or translation (Probyn, 2015) that are familiar in English-medium classrooms, in which content is given first in English and then explained or even duplicated in the vernacular to ensure understanding.

These patterns of interaction are in line with the wide range of studies reviewed by Alidou and Brock-Utne (2011) from across both Anglophone and Francophone Africa. Studies from Burkina Faso, Ghana, Malawi, Mali, Niger and Tanzania all demonstrate how teaching through familiar languages facilitates learner-centred pedagogy, motivation and active participation, while studies of L2-medium classrooms in Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, South Africa, Tanzania and Togo reveal the opposite patterns – traditional, teacher-centred pedagogies in which teachers talk and children either stay silent or respond only via chorus answers or repetition of rote-learned chunks.

Excerpt 3 presents a numeracy activity written on the board in the Year 4 classroom at School A. The classroom interaction shown in Excerpt 4 then illustrates how this activity was made sense of by the 12 children in Ms Dolcey's class.

Excerpt 3. A challenging activity written on the board in English

Pair Work

Put True (T) or False (F) by looking at the sign greater than (>) and less than (<) after adding the number in bracket.

a) _____ _____
(15 +3) > (14+1) T/F

b) _____ _____
(9+3) < (6 +7) T/F

Given the results of the picture task in which the Year 4 children were shown to have very limited oral English proficiency, it would be reasonable to assume – although not verified by any reading or writing assessment – that the phrasing of the task instruction would be very hard to understand. Solving the task required the students to, first, add the pairs of numbers in each set of brackets, second, to determine whether the answer on the left was greater or less than the answer on the right and, finally, to decide whether the completed statement was true or false based on the symbol shown. While these separate steps may have been manageable for the children, the phrasing of the task instruction does not make this transparent, given its complex sentence structure in which the steps are presented in reverse order, requiring the children to understand the logic of the connectives 'by looking at' and 'after adding'. Excerpt 4 shows what happened.

Excerpt 4. How the children make sense of the challenging activity on the board

Ms Dolsey: Okay **two questions** kwara kuru ne vai mai bulim. Karea? Kuru ta tabulatk na *namba* long **bracket** kairua vu kuru tanga na *ansa* kuri mo viti kwara **T** diko **F.**	**Ms Dolsey**: **Okay two questions** to copy and then do with your friend. Is that alright? You and your pair will first add the *numbers* in **bracket** then decide if it's **T** or **F** by looking at the *answers.*
Ss: Yio! (Talking to each other while copying from the board.)	**Ss**: Yes! (Talking to each other while copying from the board.)
S1: Tisa talem se bae yumi putum tugeta?	**S1:** Did the teacher say we add the two?
S2: Nan dom tana tau **T** diko **F**	**S2:** I thought we should put **T** or **F.**
S3: Tana **must add** diko **plus** tomua.	**S3:** We **must** first **add** or **plus**.
Ms Dolsey: Hatu kwaha mai bulim tavaluki. **Discuss** mana nom friend vohok.	**Ms Dolsey:** Don't speak to other students. Discuss only with your pair.
S4: Atjay ningo tahike nao tahikei.	**S4:** Atjay you are there and I am here.
S5: *Raba raba.* Bet na nom *raba.*	**S5:** *Rubber rubber.* Give me your rubber.
S6: *Tija* tangai Jean.	**S6:** *Teacher* look at Jean.
Ms Dolsey: Jean nu vit kona tanga na nom bolok.	**Ms Dolsey:** Jean I told you to look at your work.

Ms Dolsey began by providing a direct oral translation of the activity in Nduindui, with the result that the children could actually ignore the written version on the board. Once left to work, the children then tried to piece together what they needed to do, using multiple languages. S1 used Bislama to ask whether they should add the numbers, before S2 suggested in Nduindui that they were supposed to put true or false, before S3 was more authoritative about the need to add the numbers first, using mainly Nduindui but inserting the mathematical terms 'add' and 'plus' in English. In some ways, we can say that this was a positive display of plurilingual competence, as the children pooled their resources to solve the task. However, it also seems that some of this could have been avoided if the teacher had presented the instructions differently – perhaps writing in Nduindui, but perhaps by writing only the sums and using other visual strategies such as numbers and arrows to illustrate the order in which to tackle the steps. This is a good example of a situation where a teacher could reduce the 'language load' of instructions to ensure that the focus remained on solving the Maths task.

The next two excerpts are again linked, both taken from the Year 4 lesson at School B, which was also focused on comparing the relative size of pairs of numbers. In Excerpt 5, Ms Vuti used a rhyme to help the nine children remember the meaning of the 'greater than' and 'less than' symbols. Excerpt 6 then shows what happens when Ms Vuti followed up the rhyme with an activity written on the board.

Excerpt 5. Focusing on content over language

Ms Vuti: Karea tana kahok na bulanda bolo na **sign greater than**, **less than** mana **equal to**.	**Ms Vuti:** Alright we will sing our song of the **sign greater than, less than** and **equal to**.
Students: (singing)	**Students:** (singing)
If the first number is big put greater than.	**If the first number is big put greater than.**
If the first number is big put greater than.	**If the first number is big put greater than.**
If the first number is big, put the sign greater than.	**If the first number is big, put the sign greater than.**
If the first number is big put greater than.	**If the first number is big put greater than.**
If the first number is small put less than.	**If the first number is small put less than.**
If the first number is small put less than.	**If the first number is small put less than.**
If the first number is small put less than.	**If the first number is small put less than.**
If the first number is small put less than.	**If the first number is small put less than.**
Ms Vuti: Kairua raru *sem sem* mak.	**Ms Vuti:** Two is the *same.*
Students: (singing)	**Students:** (singing)
If the two number is the same put equal to.	**If the two number is the same put equal to.**
Equal to.	**Equal to.**
If two number is the same put equal to.	**If two number is the same put equal to.**
If two number is the same put equal to.	**If two number is the same put equal to.**
If two number is the same put equal to.	**If two number is the same put equal to.**
Ms Vuti: Okay! Thank you mana bolo tam kaho. **Ah okay**. Tingwarap tam dom hangwe na nonda **sign.** Hah?	**Ms Vuti: Okay! Thank you** for the song we sung. **Ah okay**. We must not forget our **sign.** Is that clear?

In this example, we can see two languages used for different purposes. The song was sung entirely in English, while the majority of talk about this song was conducted in Nduindui. In this sense, the main content input could be said to be presented in English, while this content was made sense of predominantly in the vernacular, in the same manner as was illustrated in the previous pair of excerpts. However, while the content point of the song was covered well,

it can also be seen from Excerpt 5 that the wording of the English song introduced two grammatical errors that were now being sung by the class. In the first two verses, the children were taught that it matters whether the first number is 'big' or 'small', rather than 'bigger' or 'smaller' than another number, which is technically incorrect and potentially misleading. In the final verse, the children sang about 'two number' rather than 'two numbers', thus ignoring the number agreement. This is an example in which using English as the medium of instruction at a stage when the students had limited proficiency in the language appeared to be consolidating grammatical errors.

Excerpt 6 shows how the class activity continued following the song.

Excerpt 6. A reactive rather than proactive use of the vernacular

Ms Vuti: Karea vohok, hoknia tamo kaho nonda **question** kaifat. Ihe kikilae na *ansa* kona hokak kambam tangauhu va kona viti na *ansa*. (Writes on the board: "**Q1. According to our song, does the sign greater than point to the right or left?"**) Lolo bolo hi **greater than** u tihu lokive? lo huku diko loki beo?	**Ms Vuti:** Very good, now that we have sung, we have four **questions**. Whoever knows the *answer* will raise their hand to give their *answer*. (Writes on the board: "**Q1. According to our song, does the sign greater than point to the right or left?"**) In that song, where is **greater than** pointing to? Is it to the right, or the left?
S1: *Tija* nan dom **greater than** u tihu vohivohi nan namba kelekele.	**S1:** *Teacher* I think **greater than** points towards a smaller number.
Ms Vuti: Yes Rexley. Turu tanga vanamai. **Greater than** ne tihu vohivohi na *namba* kelekele.**Very good!** (Writes on the board: "**Q2. What sign will go between 8_____6?"**) Hava **sign** ne vano lo livukak na kwalu mana ono?	**Ms Vuti**: **Yes Rexley.** Everybody please look up. **Greater than** will point towards a smaller *number.* **Very good!** (Writes on the board: "**Q2. What sign will go between 8_____6?"**) What **sign** will go between eight and six?
S2: Greater than hi *Tija.*	**S2:** That's **greater than** *Teacher.*
Ms Vuti: Excellent!	Ms Vuti: Excellent!

By this stage, the excerpts are showing how the teachers were using the vernacular to translate and make sense of content input given in English, suggesting that the language load of that content input was higher than the students could cope with independently. It is also clear from Excerpt 6 that writing was expected to be done in English, regardless of the plurilingualism of the oral classroom talk, an observation that was borne out by the lesson observations. All work written on the board was entirely in English, but such text was then talked around at length in other languages. In other words, the vernacular was reduced to being a scaffold to help teachers and students cope with the English of the classroom, which was a far cry from the more productive pedagogical translanguaging designed to build plurilingual competence that was glimpsed in Excerpt 1 and Excerpt 2.

To a certain extent, this shift from translanguaging in Year 1 to a greater reliance on unavoidable translation by Year 4 appears to mirror the situation described in Willans (2017a), using data collected in 2011 from a school in North Ambae. While the Year 1-2 teacher in that study could be seen to be translanguaging fluidly between the vernacular, Bislama and French; the Year 7 science teacher employed relatively short instances of code-switching to elicit the vernacular names for local fruits within an otherwise French-medium lesson; and the Year 10 social science teacher tried to teach predominantly in French, but would translate questions in Bislama whenever they failed to provoke a response from the students. It may be that the feeling that English or French ought to be the dominant language of instruction in later years

is starting to close down spaces for more productive plurilingualism by as early as mid primary school, regardless of the official policy.

However, Abiri and Zammit (2022), in a study of Year 4 literacy classes in Papua New Guinea, show some more encouraging examples of productive translanguaging, in which teachers appear to be building knowledge and literacy confidence through Tok Pisin, while still adhering to the broad expectations of English-only literacy instruction. A decade earlier, Franken & August (2011) had shown teachers in a different area of the same country using similar multilingual strategies to support teaching through English, despite their apparent lack of support for the vernacular policy that was still in place at the time.

Meanwhile, the researcher witnessed very little explicit teaching of English as a new language. It should be clarified that he did not specifically request opportunities to observe English language lessons, and he simply observed the most convenient lessons for the teachers. However, one of the few language learning moments that was observed is shown in Excerpt 7, again taken from the Year 4 lesson at School B.

Excerpt 7. An abstract lesson on indefinite articles

Ms Vuti: Hika tana tanga tanga lo nonda **English articles** taliku. I ihe dom hangwe na **article** kairua tamo *lanem*?	**Ms Vuti:** This time we will look again at our English **articles**. Who can remember the two **articles** we *learned*?
S1: *Tija* nan lolobongi.	**S1:** *Teacher* I forgot.
Ms Vuti: Turu dom hangwe kwara **article** hi a leo lo **English** hinea vanamai tumuaki na **nouns** diko nonda **naming words** maira. **Remember some nouns begin with a vowel letter** hokna (Writes on the board: "egg, island, ice-cream, aeroplane")	**Ms Vuti:** Do you remember that **articles** are **English** words that come before **nouns** or **naming words**. **Remember some nouns begin with a vowel letter** like (Writes on the board: "egg, island, ice-cream, aeroplane")
S2: **Ms Vuti** hokna 'ato' mana 'anga'	**S2: Ms Vuti** that is like 'ato' and 'anga'
Ms Vuti: Yio hi lo nonda leo be hika tana viti a leo hoknira hi be lo **English** vohok.	**Ms Vuti:** Yes but ato and anga are in our vernacular we need only **English.**
S3: a mana **an** hi a nonda **articles** kairua.	**S3: a** and **an** are the two **articles**.
Ms Vuti: Karea vohok. Yio **a** mana **an** hi nonda **articles**. **So which** *wan nao hemi kam bifo wan* **naon** *we i stat* wetem **vowel?**	**Ms Vuti:** Very good. Yes **a** and **an** are our **articles. So which** *one comes before a* **noun** *that starts with a* **vowel?**
Ss: (Silence)	**Ss**: (Silence)
Ms Vuti: Karea **do we say an egg** diko **a egg**?	**Ms Vuti:** Well **do we say an egg** or **a egg**?
Ss: *Tija* **an egg an egg** (all shouted together)	**Ss:** *Teacher* **an egg an egg** (all shouted together)
Ms Vuti: Excellent! Why an egg?	**Ms Vuti: Excellent! Why an egg?**
S4: Vowel sound *long* **egg**.	**S4: Vowel sound** *in* **egg**.
Ms Vuti: Very good *from ol* **noun** *we i stat wetem* **vowel letter** *yumi putum* **an** tomua.	**Ms Vuti: Very good** *because* **nouns** *that begin with a* **vowel letter** *we put* **an** before them.

Given the language proficiency level of the children, as ascertained by the picture assessment task, this metalanguage-heavy language learning lesson seemed to be pitched far above their ability to use English for meaningful purposes. Nonetheless, the children still seemed willing to participate actively in this fairly abstract language learning lesson and,

content-wise, it is clear that they did know that it should be 'an egg' rather than 'a egg'. The question was answered in chorus by multiple children, and S4 then managed to supply the reason for choosing one article over the other. There was an effective use of vernacular to talk about the grammar of English, although it is noticeable that S2's contribution about Nduindui words that begin with vowel sounds was dismissed as not relevant.

There is a clear contrast between the meaning-focused activity that introduced grammatical errors in the target language, shown in Excerpt 5, and the language-focused activity that was extremely abstract and apparently well above the current level of the students, shown in Excerpt 7. The mismatch was not only in the proficiency levels, but in the grammatical items chosen for focus, given that both excerpts were taken from the same one-hour lesson. With a very small adjustment to the way the lesson was planned, it seems it would have been very possible to follow up the song about 'greater than' and 'less than' symbols and the practice of those symbols from the Maths segment with a language-focused segment in which English comparative adjectives were studied. Having done that, the lesson could have reverted to the Maths topic, with some new sums solved orally in English to practise both language and content together. This particular suggestion may not fit with the language syllabus for Year 4, but the basic point that language and content focused learning could be more productively integrated would help in realising the development of plurilingual competence for learning – translanguaging to make meaning out of all the known resources, while still building up new knowledge in additional languages.

In summary, the quantitative data shown in Figure 9 and Figure 10 seems to suggest a slightly more plurilingual approach taken in Year 4, with a numerically more balanced use of the three different languages than in Year 1. However, the qualitative data shown in Excerpt 1 to Excerpt 7 does not fully substantiate this. In the Year 4 data, we see that the vernacular had started to become used more to translate content that was presented initially in English – a more reactive, and slightly reductive, use of code-switching used because the medium of instruction was pitched above the level of the children's proficiency. This is in contrast to the Year 1 data, in which small elements of English and Bislama appeared to be integrated into the Nduindui dominant classroom talk in a more proactive, or productive, use of translanguaging.

It must be remembered that the very small amount of qualitative data presented here cannot be taken to be representative of the way languages were used in the classroom over the whole school term or even week. Secondly, without having access to information about the way languages had been taught and used in the classroom over the previous three-year period, it is not possible to comment further on the mismatch between the apparent increase in amount of English used in the classroom by Year 4 and the apparent lack of increase in the children's oral proficiency in this language, although it is clear that simply using English more in the classroom is not leading to greater proficiency in the language (as is the assumption underlying an English-only policy). This may be similar to what has been noted by Heugh (2011, p. 122), based on a review of research across Africa into what happens when children are expected to learn through a second language too quickly: "For a while, classroom observations may reveal superficial spoken conversational language proficiency in the second language [which is then] not matched by grade-level reading and writing proficiencies in the diverse subject areas of the curriculum from about Year four onwards."

4.3 Teacher and community beliefs about the policy

At the outset of the research, it was not clear whether the policy was in operation at the case study schools, and, if it was, how much the teachers or community members knew about its rationale or how they felt about it. It quickly became clear that both groups of participants did

know about the policy, so it was valuable to spend some time eliciting their views. This section presents an overview of the key themes that emerged from the teacher interviews and the *hunguhungu* conducted with community members. In summary, community members focused on the cultural benefits of using the vernacular in formal education and the importance of community and parental involvement in their children's education. Meanwhile, the teachers raised the same two points in similar ways, but also put forward pedagogical advantages of the policy, as well as revealing some of the gaps in policy implementation and how they were taking the initiative to overcome these.

It was gratifying for the primary researcher to find that there was an overwhelming support for the policy's rationale in his home community. He returned from fieldwork very taken by the passion and commitment of both teachers and parents about the need to work together to ensure the success of the policy. This commitment was summed up to a certain extent by the following analogy by a parent:

Excerpt 8. A ngwatak na henaka karea [The source of a tasty soup]

Taroki a tisa mo bete na boloki lo English, kita ratama mana retahi tana hango tana viti huri lo leo tatanda mana English. Nonga huhuiana aia hoki na hahalakwai supu nga kwara ne tes ne karea hi tana tau na boniboniki ne karea navanua vu vake lo sekul. Tanahe tanga tambetambeknira tea hini ranahe kikilae tea.	When a teacher gives homework in English, parents should help at home by explaining in both vernacular and English. Their learning of different languages is like adding different food ingredients in one soup pot whereby both the parents and teacher add to the taste of a child's success. If we leave out any required ingredients it can lead to unsatisfactory outcome.

The first point that came out clearly from the teacher interviews and community *hunguhungu* was the belief in the cultural benefits of using the vernacular in formal education. These benefits were connected in the participants' discourse to the themes of cultural identity, sustainability of traditional practices, and the relevance of children's learning. Community members and teachers alike frequently used the phrase 'bohibohi' or 'doridori na vanuada' (identity) when explaining the value of vernacular education, noting that giving children the opportunity to use and share their cultural skills and knowledge would help them develop a sense of identity and pride. Both groups also made strong connections between the use of *nonda leo* at school and the sustainability of traditional practices, highlighting the importance of past practices for children's futures, and underscoring the belief that cultural continuity is embedded in the success of vernacular education. They stressed that this had both communal outcomes for the preservation of Ambae culture and individual outcomes for each child's education experiences, as learning through the vernacular reinforces traditional knowledge and values in classroom interactions through a culturally inclusive approach. They also emphasised that being immersed in a culturally rich environment helped children develop a sense of purpose about what they were learning and who they were. Teachers were clear about the need to use students' own stories as resources to help them develop their cognitive abilities, as they could reflect on their own experiences. They therefore encouraged them to talk about these traditional lived experiences as part of their learning. They also felt that using the vernacular made it more logical to get students to experience in practical terms what was around them outside the classroom – 'ta lae le kamba' (doing with the hands) – instead of restricting learning to writing on the board. They each recounted opportunities to take children to the sea or the gardens to learn about sea creatures and food crops in their own vernacular, while also slowly being able to translate this knowledge into English. These sentiments were echoed by Franjieh et al.'s (2025, this issue) participants from North and South-East Ambrym, and to a lesser extent their

participants from Merei, Santo, where the policy had not been formally implemented. Their main finding was that teacher confidence in using their community languages in the classroom was influenced by the availability of resources and training.

The second point that was raised vociferously by both parents and teachers in the current study was their mutual role in supporting the children's education. Both groups referred to the adage that education starts at home, with teachers acknowledging the vital role that parents play in their children's education, starting from the languages they teach them at home; and parents raising the point that children fall under the care of the whole community while in primary school and not just the teachers. Together, they talked about the importance of engaging students beyond the classroom walls to appreciate the value of their own language and to dispel the notion that education is solely the responsibility of teachers. Some parents expressed how they felt they had failed their children by not spending enough time with them at home and leaving the schools to operate alone. An elder also pointed out that the food their children take with them to school is not the only support they need in order to learn all day; they need to ask them what they have done each day in school. Teachers made similar points about the need to communicate well with parents about what their children are doing, and to find ways to involve the whole community actively in the learning process to create a more supportive and effective educational environment. There was a shared sentiment expressed that the vernacular policy was helping to achieve these goals. These types of reactions have been highlighted consistently by the Education Support Programme's own monitoring and evaluation work since the start of the project (Tamtam, 2015). In addition to the above advantages, the teachers in particular added further points that supported the pedagogical rationale of the policy. All eight teachers from Years 1 and 4 who participated in the study acknowledged the significance of building on students' existing language and knowledge to transition to new language and knowledge. They spoke about how children both understood more of what they were learning and participated more in the classroom when they were free to use their vernacular. They were also aware of the need to teach English more explicitly, since children were only exposed to this language at school, and one teacher spoke at length about the practices she used to do this, as written in full in Excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9. A teacher's approach to using different languages

Nomo huhui hi nu tinakaki lo nonda leo huri nu lengeia kwara te hava leo tea hinea lo **English** va ne matangwasara ne karea lakwa na bulangu rarnatu lo kinao kemo vai tambul taki. Tarok ratuaki hi na viti lo **Bislama.** Nu halebohi tilo langwis kaitol hi nu tanga huri kwara nehe *konfusum* mura tea. Te hava bolok tea ki viti lo nonda leo hi na halebohi tilo **English** kwara vai rana kikilae ne karea. Nu ninik kwara tamo huhui lo nonda leo hi va a rarnatu ranahe mataku tea kwara rana tuku kwaha. Kwara rarnatu rana rongo kiki lak hini lo year **1-3** diko **4** hini tana viti karakara hi lo leo tatanda. Na lo year **4** hi nu kwaha mana rarnatu lo nonda leo randu hi huri rarnatu rao kwaha lae lo nonga leo randu hete English. Nu ninik kwara tamo usim na leo kairura diko kaitolu hini u hango lo halak rusa.

I begin teaching using our local vernacular to ensure any **English** concept introduced is conveyed within each topic while being mindful of incorporating **Bislama** terms where appropriate. I translate between languages fluidly throughout the lesson to facilitate comprehension. Any response or activity in the vernacular is promptly translated into **English** to ensure thorough understanding. I firmly believe that with consistent exposure to the language, students will develop the ability to speak it confidently over time. To aid understanding, I use vernacular signage and cues, particularly in the earlier years from 1 to 3, and even in year 4 where the local language remains dominant. For my year 4 students, I primarily communicate in the vernacular, finding that instructions

Katu kwal hini hango kwara va rana kwiribimbimbi nonda leo bohi bohi lo hala na *sekul*.	delivered this way led to better understanding and engagement. This dual-language approach not only supports their learning but also respects and preserves our cultural and linguistic heritage within the educational framework.

It was clear that the teachers were taking the initiative to overcome any challenges they faced, and they appeared comfortable making their own decisions. They spoke about the strategies they used in their own classrooms to ensure that children understood the concepts well, including creating their own rhymes or translations of songs to make them more relatable, and using pictures and hands on experience alongside oral language. They also spoke of working together before term started to plan their teaching across the year groups and try to make the policy work. For example, one Year 4 teacher felt that she had been trying to teach through English too early, and had adjusted her practices once she realised they were not working, even though she felt some conflict here with the policy.

Notwithstanding this clear commitment, the teachers' discourse revealed that there were some gaps in policy implementation. These related to the language of initial literacy instruction, the timing of the transition, and the teaching of English as a second language. With respect to the first, teachers explained that they wrote exclusively in English on the board, and it was only the oral interaction that would take place in multiple languages. This was borne out by the classroom observations. This means that initial literacy was being taught directly in English, despite the limited oral proficiency that the children had in this language, and despite the policy expectation to teach in the vernacular during the first two years, including for reading and writing. It was not clear whether this situation was due to a lack of confidence in reading and writing in vernacular among the teachers themselves, as highlighted by Franjieh et al. (2025, this issue) on Ambrym and Santo, and to a certain extent by Daly and Barbour (2021) on Malekula, and as explicitly connected in those studies to a lack of written resources in the language, or whether it was due to a lack of understanding of the expectations behind the policy with respect to oral and written instruction.

The teachers were also sure that the policy expected them to teach in English only from Year 4, although the official policy had by this time been supplemented by a more flexible multilingual approach during later primary. These points suggest the need for ongoing awareness and in-service training to help teachers fully understand the policy and know how to fulfil all parts of it. Again, this finding mirrors the situation described by Franjieh et al. (2025, this issue) in other schools in Vanuatu, as well as Galokale (2023) in a vernacular-medium school in the Solomon Islands.

In a separate study in the Solomon Islands, an evaluation of the Temotu Literacy Support intervention (where the vernacular policy has not yet been implemented), Early (2020) found that teachers were generally unaware of MEHRD policy directives on languages in education, with 93% admitting no knowledge of what the policy might say, 40% assuming incorrectly that Pijin was prohibited, and 65% assuming incorrectly that the vernacular was not encouraged. However, despite this lack of awareness, the teachers felt that greater use of the mother tongue would be beneficial and, once supported to incorporate vernacular literacy into their teaching, they spoke convincingly about its positive impacts on attendance and engagement.

When asked more specifically about the teaching of English, the West Ambae teachers' answers were the least confident. They spoke in general about the need to ensure that children would be ready for the transition to English in later years, to appreciate all three languages equally in the process of language acquisition, or to work together whenever they faced

challenges. However, they did not give very specific answers about how they actually taught the new language in any principled way. Instead, the discussions with both teachers and community members tended to elicit views about whether Nduindui should be used for a longer period of time or whether English should be introduced earlier, suggesting that the use of English as medium of instruction was conflated with the teaching of English as a second or additional language. As a result, it seems there may be some teachers who assume using English as much as possible across the whole curriculum is the most effective way to teach English (the philosophy underpinning the previous policy), while others are introducing only a few phrases here and there in the new language without any principled approach to guide them. As one teacher pointed out, the policy focuses on how much, but not how, each language should be used.

The results of Kwao et al.'s (2021) study with teachers in Ghana are similar. While teachers in their study appeared to speak quite cogently about the benefits of using the vernacular in the classroom, their reasons in support of using more English were quite vague and framed mainly in terms of the long-term benefits of knowing English. From the excerpts presented by Kwao et al., it seems that teachers had limited understanding of how using English for learning would support pupils' acquisition of that language. Closer to home, Quinn (2021) describes how an intervention intended to support the learning of English in the Solomon Islands, which appeared to be well-designed and framed by appropriate principles of multilingualism, was soon undermined by a lack of support. MEHRD (2019), in evaluating the vernacular pilot project in the Solomon Islands, also noted that greater support for the teaching of English was one of the main gaps noted by teachers. A lack of clarity in vernacular policies over appropriate ways to support acquisition of English and French may be one of the greatest barriers to success, and is therefore in need of further attention.

5 Conclusion

This study used three separate methods to gather data about the way the vernacular education policy is being implemented in selected schools on West Ambae. The picture-based trilingual language assessment conducted with all Year 1 and Year 4 children at two schools revealed a dominance in the vernacular (Nduindui), and minimal proficiency in English, with Bislama showing a more mixed profile. There was very little difference between the levels attained by the two year groups, suggesting that limited second language acquisition had occurred during the first three years of school. The classroom observation data indicated that Nduindui was the predominant language used for oral interaction but that English was the only language written on the board. While all four classrooms were highly interactive and engaging, it became clear, particularly from the Year 4 classrooms, that the vernacular was often treated as a language to fall back on when English was too challenging, rather than part of the developing plurilingual repertoire. Through both the classroom observation and discussions with teachers and community members, it was clearly shown that there was widespread support for the vernacular policy, but there were indications of some gaps in implementation.

The first of these gaps related to the language in which initial literacy was intended to be taught. It was apparent from the two case study schools that all reading and writing was being done in English, while the content conveyed via these texts was then talked around in Nduindui, thus missing the point of initial literacy acquisition in the most familiar language. Secondly, the teachers felt that the policy expected an abrupt transition from the vernacular to English at the start of Year 4, rather than the more gradual and flexible transition that was by then envisaged by the implementation team. Thirdly, when asked specifically about how they helped the students to develop proficiency in the new language of English, the teachers were least

confident in their answers. This may go some way to explaining why the Year 4 children showed such limited proficiency in the second language after three years of school.

It should be noted that, shortly after the fieldwork for this study had been completed, the Ministry of Education and Penama Provincial Education Office held a literacy training programme on Ambae, at which the teachers from this study were able to participate, focusing on some of the above issues. At the time of writing, there has not been the opportunity to follow up with either the trainers or the trainees about how this may have changed the situation described in this paper. However, it is clear that teacher training does need to be enhanced to ensure that primary teachers are cognisant of the policy, have a good understanding of best practices for media of instruction in multilingual contexts, and are well trained to introduce new languages via appropriate pedagogy. This point applies both to pre-service training and to ongoing professional development.

It is also clear that further research is needed. Small-scale insights from classroom observation and language assessments such as these could be fruitfully followed up in other language areas and via longer periods of observation, in both rural and urban areas. Recording and taking the time to understand the lived experiences of students, teachers and communities is invaluable when any new education policy is implemented. Moreover, the Ministry of Education and general public alike are clamouring for hard evidence from assessments that the policy is or is not working. While assessment-based evidence needs to be handled carefully to ensure its validity, it is clear that we do now also need to have more ready access to large scale assessment data that can start feeding into the evaluation of the policy.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the teachers, students and community members who participated in the research, as well as MFAT, New Zealand, for funding the Master's scholarship under which this research was completed.

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Appendix: Criteria Used to Assess Listening and Speaking Skills

Adapted from Council of Europe (2020). Common European framework of reference for languages: learning, teaching, assessment. Companion volume. Available from https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/cefr-descriptors

Table A1: Listening skills

Pre-A1	A1			A2			B1			B2
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Demonstrates difficulty understanding very short statements or questions, even when enough time is given for processing.	Can follow language which is very slow and carefully articulated, with long pauses for them to assimilate meaning. Can recognise concrete information on familiar topics encountered in everyday life or pointed to explicitly in the picture, provided it is delivered slowly and clearly. Children at the early stages of A1 (level 1) need extra time for processing, while children at the later stages of A1 (level 3) demonstrate understanding more readily.			Can understand phrases and expressions related to familiar topics from their own experience or indicated on the picture, provided people articulate clearly and slowly. Children at the early stages of A2 (level 4) need occasional prompts or clarification, while children at the later stages of A2 (level 6) respond without such prompting.			Can understand the main points made on familiar topics from their own experience or related to the picture, provided people articulate clearly. Children at the early stages of B1 (level 7) need occasional clarification checks, while children at the later stages of B1 (level 9) are able to follow independently.			Can follow extended discourse and complex information, provided the topic relates to their own experience or something shown in the picture.

Table A2: Speaking skills

Pre-A1	A1			A2			B1			B2
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Demonstrates difficulty producing any spoken utterances, even when enough time is given for processing.	Can produce simple, mainly isolated phrases about either themselves or something shown in the picture. Children at the early stages of A1 (level 1) speak slowly and with hesitation, while children at the later stages of A1 (level 3) begin to deliver these utterances more fluently.			Can produce simple phrases and sentences to describe things from their own experience or shown in the picture. Children at the early stages of A2 (level 4) need occasional prompts or clarification, while children at the later stages of A2 (level 6) can speak with minimal prompting.			Can reasonably fluently sustain a straightforward description of things from their own experience or related to the picture. Children at the early stages of B1 (level 7) need occasional encouragement to continue, while children at the later stages of B1 (level 9) are able to speak independently.			Can give clear, detailed descriptions, with relevant examples and detail, related to their own experience or the picture.