



Educational Policies in Vanuatu and New Caledonia: Challenges for Indigenous Languages

Coraline Pradeau

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The world currently faces a significant loss of linguistic diversity. The Pacific region — home to nearly 20 per cent of the world's languages, many of them highly endangered — is at the forefront of this challenge. Vanuatu and New Caledonia are two emblematic territories in Melanesia where educational language policies intersect with colonial legacies, political aspirations, and initiatives to safeguard indigenous languages and cultures.

There is robust evidence that ensuring every child has access to education in their mother tongue reduces inequalities, fosters inclusion, and improves basic skills such as reading and writing (Hélot and de Mejía 2008). This In Brief examines how schools and universities in Vanuatu and New Caledonia support linguistic diversity despite the complex web of historical legacies and institutional obstacles. The analysis is based on interviews with 31 stakeholders from ministries, curriculum departments, universities, and teacher training institutions in both places (2022–23). This qualitative approach revealed the ideologies, resistances, and aspirations that shape the implementation of language policies.

Vanuatu: The challenge of implementing multilingual education

Vanuatu — with 138 languages spoken by 350,000 people — is one of the world's most linguistically dense nations. The Constitution of Vanuatu (1980, Art. 3) recognises Bislama, English, and French as the country's official languages. English and French are designated the main languages of education, while Bislama is the national language. The constitution also mandates the protection and promotion of vernacular languages as part of the country's cultural heritage, a commitment reaffirmed in the 2020 National Language Policy.

Despite these frameworks, the practical implementation of mother-tongue education faces persistent challenges. In 2012, the government adopted a National Language Policy aimed at promoting Bislama and local languages in early schooling. However, teacher shortages, insufficient training, a lack of educational materials, and the difficulty accessing schools on remote islands continue to compromise efforts to implement mother-tongue education effectively.

Ideological resistance remains strong, particularly toward Bislama, which is often regarded as 'broken

English' or a second-class language. Institutional stakeholders emphasise the need for official standardisation, and the Language Services Department is currently developing such standards.

Institutional challenges also undermine governance and coordination. Several stakeholders noted that communication between educational institutions is weak. In 2023, the then prime minister announced the suspension of teaching in and of Bislama and vernacular languages in schools. This abrupt policy reversal further exposed the fragility of language safeguarding efforts.

These challenges are also evident at the tertiary level. The National University of Vanuatu (NUV), established in 2020, presents itself as one of the few bilingual English/French universities in the world. Yet, Bislama and indigenous languages remain absent from its curriculum — a choice criticised as a missed opportunity for meaningful inclusion (Early 2019). The university's administration justifies this absence by emphasising the global prestige of English and French and the international competitiveness of its graduates. As Vice-Chancellor Jean-Pierre Nirua (Nirua and Vivier 2020) stated: 'Our university's value will be measured by the graduates' fluency in UN languages, not in a language with no grammar or standardised vocabulary.'

Nevertheless, the NUV's language centre has expressed its intention to support researchers and practitioners interested in indigenous languages by [providing resources](#) to facilitate their work. If realised, this would continue the work previously done by the University of the South Pacific through its Pacific Languages Unit.

New Caledonia: Teaching Kanak languages in a decolonising territory

New Caledonia is home to 28 recognised Kanak languages, 18 of which are classified as endangered. As a French overseas collectivity, its political status has been shaped by the Nouméa Accord (1998) and is currently under renegotiation through the Bougival Accord (2025), which envisions the establishment of a 'State of New Caledonia' within the French republic.

Kanak languages have been constitutionally protected as 'languages of teaching and culture' since 1998 (Art. 1.3.3). Despite this recognition and the introduction of Kanak language instruction in schools as early as 1992, participation has remained modest (Fillol 2013). Negative social perceptions, limited

parental demand, and institutional barriers continue to impede their wider adoption. In line with the political commitments of the Nouméa Accord, the University of New Caledonia established a bachelor's degree in Languages, Literatures, and Civilisations in 2001, with a specialisation in Oceanic Languages and Cultures. This degree — the only of its kind in France — reflects the institutional recognition of Oceanic and Kanak languages within the framework of decolonisation.

However, according to a stakeholder from the Kanak Languages and Culture Teaching Department, Kanak languages are often relegated to the bottom of a hierarchy of school subjects, competing with other options and forcing schools to make trade-offs. Communication with families is also weak. Some parents report being unaware of the possibility to enroll their children in Kanak language classes, while others remain unconvinced of their value.

In some regions, educational authorities have even discouraged Kanak language teaching, arguing that endangered languages are not worth investing in. This reveals a deeper contradiction: the government's stated goal of welcoming every child in their mother tongue often clashes with academic practices that deprioritise Kanak instruction. Political polarisation — particularly over independence debates — has further influenced language policy, with political considerations overshadowing pedagogical goals such as inclusion and literacy.

Finally, educational stakeholders underscored the need to strike a balance between institutional demands for teacher qualifications and the reality on the ground, where native speakers of Kanak languages often do not meet formal recruitment criteria (Ihage 2021). This tension illustrates one of the key limitations of the current institutionalisation of Kanak language teaching.

Conclusion

Vanuatu and New Caledonia illustrate both the symbolic achievements and the ongoing challenges of language policy in multilingual postcolonial contexts. In both territories, indigenous languages have been formally recognised and partially integrated into education systems. Yet, implementation remains constrained by entrenched colonial ideologies favouring French and English, fragmented coordination, insufficient teacher training, and limited resources.

These findings highlight a broader lesson: promoting indigenous languages in education requires moving beyond symbolic recognition towards meaningful action. This entails investing in training programs,

providing pedagogical support, and co-constructing policies with communities. Equally important is fostering positive perceptions of multilingualism, including among parents, as societal support is critical for program success. Locally led structures, such as the Kulu Language Institute in Solomon Islands, show that sustainability relies on endogenous initiatives. Teaching children in their mother tongue supports rights, identity, academic achievement, social inclusion, and cultural vitality. While some progress has been made, the impacts of these policies on linguistic rights, educational outcomes, and social inclusion remain insufficiently assessed, underscoring the need for further evaluation.

Author notes

Coraline Pradeau is associate professor of language didactics at the University of Rouen Normandy (France). Her research explores the intersections between language policies, migration, and education. While her doctoral work focused on immigration language policies in Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Quebec, her more recent projects address migrant language training and language education policies in the Pacific, with fieldwork in New Caledonia and Vanuatu.

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dpa@anu.edu.au

dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au

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