

## Taking an interest: Competence in and affiliations with the expected languages of schooling in Vanuatu

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This chapter reflects on ethnographic research in two school communities in Vanuatu. A key aim of ethnography is to understand the perspectives of those within the communities among whom the researcher is living. We gain different insights depending on which language we choose to use, and depending on how successful we are in utilising and affiliating with the relevant linguistic resources. Here, I consider the way my affiliation with and competence in Bislama, English and French affected my understanding of the linguistic undercurrents of Vanuatu's education system.

### **Highlights:**

- Considers the extent to which competence in the language(s) of the community is important in ethnographic research.
- Suggests that affiliations with the language(s) of the community may be just as relevant as linguistic competence.
- Highlights the shifts in researcher identity that are ongoing throughout the research process.
- Demonstrates that frustrations within fieldwork can provide unexpected insights into the data.

## Context

Vanuatu is an archipelago in the South Pacific. With a population under a quarter of a million, speaking approximately 106 indigenous languages between them, the country boasts the highest number of languages per capita in the world. There are three official languages: English and French as vestiges of a joint Anglo-French condominium, and Bislama (an English-based pidgin) as the ‘neutral’ lingua franca and national language. The linguistic situation in Vanuatu is thus highly complex, and deeply entwined with historico-political intricacies.

Formal education was introduced in Vanuatu by both English-speaking and French-speaking missionaries. The Anglo-French condominium, established in 1906, then cemented the place of both English and French within the islands as languages of education, as parallel education systems developed. Under this arrangement, either English or French was used as the medium of instruction at each school, and matters of curriculum, pedagogy and discipline were heavily influenced by either British or French traditions. At independence in 1980, Vanuatu thus inherited two entirely different types of school, and Anglophone and Francophone schools still co-exist today. Approximately 60% of the country’s schools are currently English medium, presenting a numerical imbalance that has often been seen as discriminatory against those educated through French. The situation is therefore more complicated than the retention of two former colonial languages, as the two are positioned in tension with each other.

Meanwhile, beneath the lingering post-colonial Anglo-Franco politics, there are other long-standing educational issues. Officially, each school teaches through the medium of either English or French, and teaches the other as a ‘foreign language’. Many schools explicitly ban all other languages from being spoken, while others reinforce the same sentiment informally by simply ignoring the remaining languages within children’s and teachers’ repertoires. Unofficially, of course, there is far more to the story: Teachers sometimes either switch to other languages or condone their pupils’ use of them; alternatively, pupils simply get on with the business of learning in other languages, out of earshot of the teacher. It was this unofficial story that I wanted to study. In this chapter, I focus on the way my competence in, and affiliation with, the two school languages played out within my researcher identity as I did so.

My ethnographic fieldwork took place at two schools that I will call Angolovo College (an English-medium secondary boarding school) and Collège de Faranako (a French-medium secondary boarding school). I arranged to move back and forth between the schools throughout the duration of a term, sleeping in dormitories or staff houses, observing classes, attending school activities, and generally hanging around to see how language was being used and talked about. However, I felt I was coming at every problem from only one perspective. I am White, and therefore stand out as a foreigner in Vanuatu. I am a native speaker of English. I had previously spent three years teaching English at Angolovo, and I am thus clearly linked to the educational use of this language in this context. Finally I am British, so I originate from one of the two countries that caused so much of this mess in the first place. How could I

possibly do this fieldwork in a manner that would enable me both to see and to be seen in the same way at each school? I would surely be biased in what I saw (and was able to see), and my two participant communities would surely position me rather differently.

## **Narrative**

### *What I was able to see*

A number of accounts have been written of the challenges and fruitfulness of learning a new language for the purposes of conducting research. Some focus on research in which the language itself is being studied (e.g. Crowley, 2007) and others on fieldwork conducted through the medium of that language (e.g. Veeck, 2001; Watson, 2004). Others consider the complexities of working with and through interpreters (e.g. Edwards, 1998; Leck, 2014) (see also Major & Zielinski, this volume). Throughout this literature, the consensus is that learning the local language is generally considered to be the best means through which to understand local practices and perspectives. The literature said little however about how my language choices might position me as a researcher. In my case, I already had a good level of fluency in Bislama, which was the most effective language through which to talk to my participants, since both sites were multilingual school communities where this was the lingua franca. My concerns rested largely on my ability in French – a language in which I needed to demonstrate competence because it was the *expected* language of one my communities, rather than because it was the language that my participants felt most comfortable speaking. I was also aware of a reported rebuke John Lynch, another linguist working in Vanuatu, had received from the headmaster of a Francophone school for speaking the local vernacular rather than French to young pupils, despite neither the linguist nor the pupils being confident

using this language (Crowley & Lynch, 1986). Although I had a reasonable understanding of French, if I would also be expected to use French at all times, I was not sure whether I would be able to capture the rich detail that is so important in ethnography. I was also concerned that a lack of competence might affect participants' own language choices, and I did not want Francophones to switch from French to Bislama for my benefit, skewing my observations of how the languages were used.

My concerns were for the most part unfounded, from a practical point of view at least. Bislama dominated much of the spoken interaction at both schools, so I felt able to use this language myself. While this, of course, came as a relief to me, it also threw into question many of my assumptions about what I was supposed to be researching. I had been expecting (indeed hoping) to find a carefully protected monolingual zone of *Francophonie* (cf. Heller, 1995) in close proximity to a bastion of Englishness down the road, with both at odds with daily life outside school. But the reality was that the two schools were not so different, either from each other or from the world outside. Textbooks and classroom explanation were delivered in either English or French, but the daily flow of school life proceeded through multiple languages.

The classroom proved to be the only domain that lived up to the anticipated institutional norms. However, I was relieved to find that, even in Collège de Faranako's classrooms, I found few difficulties in understanding the teachers, and in some cases I actually felt that I gained a very important insight by having a less than perfect knowledge of French. Early on in the fieldwork, I wrote the following:

10.55: I've been in class since about 8.00 listening to French and trying to write notes. I've learnt about force and pressure, grammatical agreement of French subjects and verbs, the Holy Trinity, and breeds of cattle. I'm zoning out, possibly after not enough sleep. Tells me what it's like to be a student as the French is easy to understand if I force myself to focus but it's v. easy to let it wash over me.

I realised that I was gaining an understanding of what it is like to learn through a second language, which I hadn't fully appreciated whilst teaching at Angolovo College. As a researcher, I had a vested interest in concentrating as hard as I could in the classroom and it helped that I was an adult who already knew much of the content of what these students were learning. However, even though I didn't find the teachers' French particularly difficult to comprehend, I still found it incredibly tiring to focus on understanding what they were saying for such a long period of time and about so many different subjects in succession.

There were other insights that I gained. I began to appreciate the disconnection between subjects, as the bell would ring and we would simply stop doing Religious Studies and start doing Agriculture. Of course, this is a typical feature of curriculum and timetabling in most schools (and I suppose I remember this from my own schooldays), but the use of a second language seemed to make each subject seem that little bit more alien. Most importantly, I began to feel a serious lack of connection between French lessons and the ways of learning in all other subjects. When the Religious Studies teacher entered the classroom and *used* French to tell us about the Holy Trinity, the French lesson that had occupied the previous 45 minutes was already a thing of the past. The French teacher had asked us to correct the subject-verb agreement within sentences that had no links to the topics covered in Physics the period before, or in Religious Studies the period after. Meanwhile, no other teacher made any explicit reference to language within his or her lessons. It appeared that they expected the French teacher to prepare us to survive in their classes as French-medium learners, while the

French teacher gave no indication of what we were supposed to do with the grammar she was training us in.

I also realised just how difficult it was to participate actively through a second language.

Ethnographers often distinguish between observation of an event and participant-observation within that event. Given my previous teaching experience in Vanuatu, I sometimes found myself participating more actively than intended in English lessons at Angolovo, as the teacher would often call on me to provide an example, or confirm something she said. I sometimes felt uncomfortable when these episodes occurred at Angolovo. I didn't want to be positioned as an expert who was able to validate the teacher, and I sometimes found that I was buried in my fieldnotes and not fully concentrating. However, at least I possessed the capacity in English to apologise for missing the question and to seek clarification. As a native speaker, I was also immediately aware that I was being addressed, and alerted to the fact that the flow of classroom teaching had been momentarily interrupted in my direction.

At Faranako, I lacked this capacity. On one occasion, I was observing an English lesson (conducted through the medium of French), when I suddenly realised that the teacher was looking expectantly at me. I had been in the middle of writing a memo sparked by something from the lesson and I hadn't realised that he was addressing me until it was too late. In the ensuing confusion, the teacher asked "*Ou ce n'était pas correcte?*" (Or was that not right?), assuming that my blank look derived from the substance of his explanation about English. I looked desperately at the blackboard for clues, and I saw a verb table. In the left-hand column

was written ‘like’, ‘hate’, ‘love’, while in the right-hand column was written only ‘dislike’/‘don’t like’.

I applied the best logic I could muster and assumed he was explaining that we do not form negatives such as ‘don’t hate’ or ‘don’t love’, so I attempted to agree with him. Whether through recognition of my discomfort or through a loss of confidence in the point he had been trying to make, the teacher moved on and the incomplete verb table was abandoned. Later, he revealed that he had paused to remind students that they need to pronounce the initial phoneme of ‘hate’, and he wanted to check with me that his pronunciation was correct. On this occasion, I felt we were each grappling with the expected language of the other, both well aware that we fell short of the expectations of our teenage audience. I also understood what it was like to want to ask for a question to be rephrased in Bislama but to know that this was not allowed.

### *How others saw me*

What became of increasing interest was also the way that others would comment on my competence in French. Early in the fieldwork, I attended a presentation at the Ministry of Education. I introduced myself in Bislama to a ni-Vanuatu director, and explained about my research. I was unsurprised to be asked, “*Be yu toktok Inglis o Franis?*” (Do you speak English or French?). More surprisingly, an advisor from France, who I had previously interviewed in French, interjected and said “*Les deux*” (both). I suppose I was pleased that he was validating my attempts to speak French, and I thought no more about it at the time.

I then started fieldwork at Angolovo College, where former colleagues were intrigued to hear I was also visiting Collège de Faranako. They commented that this was important work, given that nobody seems to take an interest in both streams of the education system at once but, more than this, they seemed genuinely impressed that I thought French was important. When I observed my first English lesson at Angolovo, the teacher introduced me to the class, saying, “She is from England. And she speaks French too.”

Comments about my interest were also marked linguistically. The night before my first visit to Faranako, I said goodnight to two Angolovo teachers. As was common practice, I said “Bongarea” (“Goodnight” in the local language), but the response immediately came back that I should say goodnight in French<sup>1</sup>:

Me: **Bongarea** tufala.

**Goodnight** both of you.

R: Na mas talem BON NUIT nomo nao. *French gal!*

*Nah you should say GOOD NIGHT now. French girl!*

S: Awo, mi jalus long yu yu save Franis.

Wow, I’m jealous of you because you know French.

Me: Honest. Yu jalus blong smol Franis nomo. Lukaot i no naf!

Seriously. You’re jealous of a small amount of French. What if it’s not enough!

S: Na be yu save Franis. Yu intres long hem. Yu fit.

Nah but you know French. You're interested in it. You're fit.

In this extract, the first teacher (R) links my physical journey to the Francophone school to my symbolic transformation into a French speaker, and jokes that I must say “*Bonjour*” now (thereby overriding the linguistic value of “*Bongarea*” in what would still be the local language in the area surrounding Faranako) while the other teacher (S) makes clear that it is my *interest* in French that marks me out among Anglophones as knowing French. Her jealousy is thus somewhat paradoxical. She laments her own lack of competence in French (demonstrating an interest in knowing it) and yet is willing to ascribe this competence to me based purely on such an interest. I began to notice this recurrent theme in otherwise unremarkable episodes. Anglophone participants would tell others that I spoke French, or would congratulate me on doing so, despite me never actually uttering a word of the language in their presence! A French teacher at Angolovo later asked me if I would teach one of her lessons in order to show her students that it was possible for Anglophones to speak French.

So, what happened at Collège de Faranako, where I had assumed French would be strictly enforced? On arrival, the principal addressed me in Bislama. He commended me on the standard of my French in the letters I had written in advance, noting his surprise that they had been written by an Anglophone. He also told me that, prior to granting me permission to do research, he had checked with someone at Angolovo that I spoke Bislama, as he was nervous

that they would have to speak English. Clearly, he hadn't anticipated a French-speaking Anglophone.

When I observed one of his lessons on the first day, he switched from French to Bislama at the end to tell me that I could come to the front to introduce myself. I presumed this switch sanctioned the use of Bislama, but I felt I should address the class in French, and did so. As we left the classroom, we reverted to Bislama, and he commented on how good my French was, adding after a pause, "*blong wan Anglophone i yusum French*" (for an Anglophone to use French). There it was again, the surprise that an Anglophone should speak (or *choose* to speak) French.

Thus, the way I was positioned linguistically at both schools both intrigued and surprised me. Participants were aware that the status of French has been undermined within the country, whether deliberately or through greater links with other English-speaking countries. I might have expected Anglophones to dismiss the importance of French, and Francophones to defend it fiercely, legitimating the existence of their school as a Francophone institution (cf. Heller, 1995). However, Anglophones and Francophones alike were insistent that English and French were of equal value, a discourse that was not necessarily reflected in actual usage. As an Anglophone, I started the research wondering why so much money was spent on ensuring the maintenance of both English and French within the education system but, through my emergent role as a French-interested Anglophone, I began to see that there was rather more to ni-Vanuatu affiliations with their unusual post-colonial heritage.

## **Lessons**

### *Relax about the problems*

The first lesson to be learned was, reassuringly, to relax and not worry so much about potential problems. As Hymes (1996) notes, we cannot avoid partiality but we can learn to account for it in our interpretation. When I became comfortable in my researcher skin as a Bislama-speaking Anglophone who was interested in French, I began to avoid the concern with being an insider or outsider within each of the communities (see also Kearney, this volume). I did not need to see and hear everything, as there is neither a single inside view nor a single outside one (Wolcott, 1995, p.131), and I could simply describe what I saw from my particular perspective. I also came to understand that my researcher identity shifted constantly (Besnier, 2000), as I physically moved between and outside the two sites, as I deepened my understanding of the way languages were being used and claimed, and as I occasionally came completely unstuck in moments when I really did wish I had greater competence in French.

### *Turn research problems into research insights*

Going beyond this, the second lesson I learned was to turn my research(er) problems into research insights. I started out thinking that my position as an Anglophone would lead participants to recast their views about English and French in Vanuatu, depending on how they viewed me. However, as Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) state, we should learn from

participants' reactions to our presence in the field rather than trying to minimise them. Once I began to rethink myself as a French-interested Anglophone and I could see the positive reactions that this identity heralded, I began to understand the importance of French in Vanuatu. It is not numerically equal with English, and it unlikely ever will be again, yet it is clear that Anglophones and Francophones are united in assigning symbolic value to the two former colonial languages. I learned that any new language-in-education policy must recognise the way these two languages interact with all the others, making space for all of Vanuatu's languages instead of pitting them against one another. The reflexive notes I kept about my own discomfort with my lack of competence in French enabled me to approach the complexity in a rather different way, presenting insights into the emblematic functions of linguistic competence and affiliation.

### *Tune in to others' ways of seeing*

I also gained unexpected insights into the L2 medium educational experience from a student's point of view. Returning to the distinction between observation and participant-observation, I felt comfortable enough with French to be a competent *observer* of classrooms at Faranako but I felt unable to *participate* actively. The implication I drew was that many students were in the same situation. They understood much of what was taught but they acted as observers, rather than participants, in their own lessons. Ironically, my inability to understand everything in French-medium classrooms has taught me far more than I could have hoped about what really goes on in such environments. This observation alone surely suggests that reflexivity about the process by which education data is collected is of equal value to the data itself.

## **Annotated bibliography**

Crowley, T. (2001). Language, culture, history and the fieldworker: What I did on my Christmas holidays on Malakula (Vanuatu). *Anthropological Forum: A Journal of Social Anthropology and Comparative Sociology*, 11(2), 195–215.

Crowley gives an account of his first visit to a village in Vanuatu, where he surprised villagers by reading aloud extracts from traditional stories, written in the local language by an anthropologist seventy years earlier. Reactions to his apparent proficiency in a language that they didn't expect him to speak (and which he did not in fact speak or understand) pitched Crowley into an unexpected role. The key point highlighted is the inseparability of the researcher's presence, and others' reactions to this presence, from the events being documented.

Gent, D. (2014). Finding fluency in the field: Ethical challenges of conducting research in another language. In J. Lunn (Ed.), *Fieldwork in the Global South: Ethical challenges and dilemmas* (pp. 49–58). Abingdon: Routledge.

Gent gives a detailed account of the dilemmas she faced in choosing the right linguistic resources for her research. She makes clear that successful communication in the field is rather more complex than knowing which language to use.

Srivastava, P. (2006). Reconciling multiple researcher positionalities and languages in international research. *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 1(3), 210–222.

This article discusses the complexities of multiple researcher identities and positionalities, and the issue of researching in multiple languages. Using examples from her own experiences conducting research in Uttar Pradesh, India, Srivastava discusses the way she used different “currencies” to mediate her own positionality vis-à-vis those of her wide-ranging participant groups.

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Watson, E. (2004). 'What a dolt one is': Language learning and fieldwork in geography. *Area*, 36(1), 59–68.

Wolcott, H. (1995). *The art of fieldwork*. London: AltaMira Press.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this extract, I use bold type for the **Northeast Ambae** language, regular type for Bislama, capitals for FRENCH, and italics for *English*.