The issue of what language to use by whom for what purpose at what level of the education system is an on-going concern that all Pacific member states are attempting to address in different ways. The choice of a language for a specific purpose is a decision that involves a variety of factors, which include not only considerations of political, social, cultural, economic, and educational factors, but an understanding also of the nature of language itself, its socio-cultural roles, particularly its roles in the socialisation process, and the development of cognitive systems.

Importance of the mother tongue
Language is the means through which an individual is socialised into membership of a particular group. In this sense, the mother tongue is considered more important than any other symbol or expression of nationality. The language is, therefore, used as the most visible form of group identity and without it there is neither identity nor nationality. In such cases, the main concerns of countries are with language revival and maintenance.

Language choice
Language, as a type of human capital, is useful in consumption or production activity and therefore language choice is made in many instances in relation to the socio-economic power of the group; people use a particular language, not because it is theirs or because it defines their ethnicity, but because they profit from it. The issue of costs of languages choices have to be balanced against the gains and benefits to be made both in the short and long terms.

National versus individual interests
Education and language are the two most common vehicles used by nations in their attempts to achieve internal cohesion and modernisation. The answer to the question of what language to use at what level of the education system is usually a mixture of political, socio-cultural, and economic factors. Rarely is the answer based on purely educational considerations. Governments and politicians, or those who decide language policies, are often biased towards national concerns but education systems are focused on the business of creating opportunities whereby individuals learn to develop their fullest potential. The language policies that interest national language planners are those that would best serve national interests; education favours those that would allow the individual some measure of control over his/her own destiny.

Individuals adopt a language for their own personal reasons, and at the national and school levels, these reasons can determine whether the individual participates positively to its successful acquisition or negatively to its failure. This is, in the final analysis, the least accountable variable in education and also one of the most commonly neglected features in language development.
**Why choose the vernacular as the medium of instruction?**

The use of vernacular languages or mother-tongues as the preferred medium of instruction in schools has come to be more or less universally accepted ever since the 1951 UNESCO Meeting of Specialists supported it with an official statement to the effect that the best medium, psychologically, sociologically and educationally for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Since, then, research has strongly advocated the use of the mother tongue as the medium of education for at least the early years of primary education, and to teach it both as a subject in its own right and as the foundation for successful second language acquisition.

More recent developments in the recognition of the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples have strengthened the political will of emerging nations to use their own vernacular languages as tools for education and transformation. For instance, Item 3 of Article 4 of the Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities urged that “states should take appropriate measures so that, wherever possible, persons belonging to minorities may have adequate opportunities to learn their mother tongue or to have instruction in their mother tongue.” Similarly, Article 15 of the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms that “indigenous children have the right to all levels and forms of education of the State. All indigenous peoples also have this right and the right to establish and control the educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning. Indigenous children living outside their communities have the right to be provided access to education in their own culture and language. States shall take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for the purposes.”

These recommendations are based on the understanding that language is a manifestation of the underlying knowledge, beliefs, values, etc. of its cultural context. The choice of using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction is, therefore, based only partly on its educational efficacy. A major purpose is the desire to maintain and revitalise both the language and the culture associated with it. At the same time, it is acknowledged that no society today can exist any more in isolation. All societies, irrespective of geographical location or political persuasion, have become part of the global community, particularly of a market-driven economic system. The recent enormous strides forward in information and communications technologies have shrunk the world even further, making it mandatory for any community wishing to participate as equals in the world community to master the tools of wider communication (language, as well as computer literacy) in order to develop the new relationships, networks and linkages necessary for survival and progress in the world of today and the future.

Educationally, the language of the school is chosen to assist in the improvement of access to and equity in basic education, the quality of teaching and student learning, the efficiency of the system by eliminating or reducing failure, and by preserving and revitalising the mother tongue.

**The current research findings**

To assist Pacific countries develop appropriate language policies which are likely to promote increased access to and equity in basic education and to improve the quality of teaching and learning and hence, educational achievement, the World Bank commissioned a draft paper in 1994 (Dutcher *et al.*.) as part of a development strategy on language in education. This paper reviewed the international experience in “The Use of the First and Second Languages in Education” and found the following to be true according to current research:
Children require at least 12 years to learn their first language.

Children do not learn second languages more quickly and easily than adults.

Older children and adolescents are more skilled than younger children in learning a second language.

The development of the child’s first language with its related cognitive development is more important than more exposure to a second language.

Children in school settings need to learn academic language skills, as well as social communication skills.

Children learn a second language in different ways, depending on their culture, their group, and their individual personality.

From the review of the literature, the paper concluded that:

* Development of the mother tongue is critical for cognitive development and as a basis for learning the second language.
* Teachers must be able to understand, speak, and use the language of instruction, whether it is their first or second language.
* Parental and community support and involvement are essential to all successful programs.

From this review, the mother tongue is confirmed as the best medium for teaching a child, particularly in the early years of education, since it is also clear that children do not master their first language until they are at least 12 years of age and that it is critical for both cognitive development and successful second language acquisition. There is an even more compelling reason for its use in schools: to avert language and cultural loss and to assist in the process of maintaining and promoting cultural identity, particularly for small, vulnerable languages and their cultures. It has been estimated that by the middle of the twenty-first century, more than three quarters of the world’s small minority languages will have disappeared.

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What parents and the community must do

It is also clear that, unless parents and communities are actively engaged in the education process, which means giving recognition and respect to the cultures and languages of those communities, where they differ from those of the school, and according them appropriate status within the formal school system, students will continue to underachieve in schools in the absence of such partnerships.

The role of the teacher

Meaningful classroom interactions in Pacific classrooms and, hence, effective learning, occur where teachers capitalise on the wealth of experience, knowledge and skills the children bring with them from their home cultures to the learning process and deliberately use those values, beliefs, world views, knowledge, speech rules and learning systems to organise their classrooms, communicate with and teach their students.

The role of the teacher, then, and the school, in promoting and adopting culturally appropriate teaching-learning strategies that could enhance learning and by implication, his/her education and training, is absolutely critical. The teachers that are needed to teach in Pacific schools must, at worst, be proficient in the language of instruction and, at best, be also competent in the mother tongues of the children, and have understanding of and familiarity and empathy with the cultures of those languages.

The teacher-training programme

Troike & Saville-Troike (1982) argue that the teacher training programme is directed to a certain extent by the ethos of each society and is, therefore, of necessity different in each case in order to conform to the particular requirements of each society, but they maintain that the training of all bilingual teachers must include training in all these four skills in both languages:
* language proficiency,
* linguistic knowledge,
* cultural knowledge, and
* pedagogical competencies.

They also identified three basic requirements:

* They must be able to communicate with students in a language they understand.
* They must themselves know the content of instruction.
* They must be able to transmit their knowledge to students (op cit.:217).

In many Pacific classrooms, teachers are forced to teach in a language they not competent in to students who are forced to learn in a language they are unfamiliar with in a classroom and school context which are alien to their society and culture. In such situations the educational attainment of the children is limited not only by the teacher’s competence in the language of instruction but also by his/her understanding of the children’s cultures and willingness and ability to use appropriate cultural behaviour for teaching and learning purposes. However, it should be stressed that each child is unique with different learning needs, even in classrooms where there is congruence between the language and culture of the home and that of the school. There is an immense body of teaching methodologies, resources, and techniques that the effective and caring teacher could choose from to ensure that students’ needs within the classrooms are met, irrespective of their linguistic, social, economic or cultural background.

**Conclusion**
The language choices and decisions that Pacific countries make, which, in turn, determine educational language policies and practices, depend on their own visions and developmental goals, which would include internal cohesiveness and unity and external participation in the modern global community. What is becoming increasingly clear is that the two are not diametrically in opposition. Language can be both the tool to strengthen individual and group identity leading to high self-esteem and self-confidence, the prerequisites to effective learning, and the acquisition of additive education. By promoting and developing mother tongue education, cognitive development will be enhanced and a sound basis will be provided for the acquisition of a second language, the vehicle of modern development and participation in the world community.

**References**


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