The teaching of vernacular languages or mother tongues in the Pacific region is one of the most neglected areas in education. This is borne out by the results of various studies that have been conducted over the years on literacy levels in vernacular languages. For instance, in Tonga, where Tongan is used as the medium of instruction throughout the six years of primary education and is taught as a subject in secondary schools to Form 5, students do better in English than in Tongan in the Tonga School Certificate Examination.

The reasons for this are not difficult to find. The main causal factor is attitudinal. Tongan, like other vernacular languages in the region, is given a very low status in the formal education sector and in government, despite the fact that it is the national language and one of the two official languages, English being the other. However, while Tongan is compulsory as a subject to Form 5 level, it is not a requirement for entry into Form 6, the Civil Service nor most types of employment. Tongan is the language used in the Legislative Assembly but official documents submitted to the House can be in both languages. English, however, is the language used in all other official correspondence. It is the language used in both Cabinet and Privy Council and all submissions to those two bodies must be in English. English is also the language of business.

The commonly held view is that the Tongan language is incapable of expressing complex, higher level concepts and abstract notions and, therefore, cannot be used to teach at senior high school and tertiary levels. While there is some element of truth in these views, particularly in respect of scientific and technical vocabulary, in that the Tongan language does not yet have the vocabulary to express these new ideas, the criticism levelled at the language has little to do with its deficiency or otherwise. Rather, it has to do with the fact that critics are insufficiently competent in the Tongan language to articulate with any degree of clarity their thinking in that language. This inadequacy is transformed into language deficit.

Because such attitudes are prevalent, students, teachers, and parents have come to believe that the teaching of Tongan in schools is a waste of valuable time that could be put to better use teaching English and those subjects that are important for future career prospects, such as computing, accounting and economics. The parents of the students of the Tonga High School, Tonga’s elite secondary school, once petitioned the Ministry of Education to drop the Tongan language from the school time-table.

The status of Tongan in formal schooling is reflected in the timetable. For instance, after Tonga decided to axe its new bilingual language programme in which the two languages were taught through a whole language bilingual approach, it reverted to teaching the two languages separately. English was given the first slot on the time-table every morning, while Tongan was relegated to the late afternoon.

There are other factors which affect the quality of the teaching of vernacular languages. One is the availability of teachers who not only speak the language, but who have adequate training to teach it effectively. In multilingual societies where the number of speakers of a particular vernacular is small, it is very unlikely that there are enough trained vernacular teachers. In such circumstances, the assistance and support of communities is essential. The
work of the PNG Trust Inc is an excellent example of one such community initiative in teaching literacy in the mother tongue.

The assumption that a teacher who is a native speaker of the language can teach it has often proved disastrous. Vernacular language teachers, like all other teachers, require quality training. Unfortunately, teacher education programmes around the region rarely provide this. To take Tonga again as an example, the Tongan Studies Programme is compulsory for all teacher trainees doing the three-year Diploma in Education, whether they are being trained for primary or secondary school teaching. However, the courses tend to concentrate on teaching grammar, orthography, culture and history in fragmented isolation, without much attention to appropriate pedagogy. There is no real attempt at innovation or creativity. The result is that many students are bored with the courses and the programme merely serves to confirm students’ preconceptions about the value of the vernacular language in education.

Even though vernacular language teachers’ courses need improvement in some institutions, at least these institutions are providing training. There are other teacher training institutions in the Pacific that do not even offer such courses. Part of the reason is that vernacular languages are not taught at all in primary schools in some countries, as is the case, for instance, in Solomon Islands. Teacher trainees in that country do not have any formal education at all in their mother tongues.

Even in Tonga, where Tongan is compulsory to Form 5 level, this is the highest level students achieve before they enroll in the Diploma in Education at the Tonga Institute of Education, because Tongan is not offered in Form 6 or 7. The Institute provides no bridging courses in Tongan but instead offers the equivalent of a Form 6 and 7 level course, which is not a tertiary level course. Samoan teacher trainees have the advantage at this level because Samoan is offered as a subject to Form 6 level and beyond, which means that they can do tertiary level courses in Samoan.

Another crucial factor is the curriculum. Only a few Pacific countries have developed formal curricula for vernacular languages, Samoa and Tonga being two of them. A quality curriculum in the vernacular language could compensate in some ways for untrained teachers but unfortunately there are very few such programmes in the region. The Tongan Studies programme for secondary schools was developed with assistance from the University of the South Pacific and is one of the more innovative but, as with many curriculum reforms, the end product failed to match the original conception and the implementation has been patchy, with some schools doing very well while many others continue to treat it as a ‘second class’ subject with consequent poor results.

Poor implementation is not assisted by the dearth of printed materials in the vernacular languages at all levels of the education system. In most countries, only the Bible and some religious materials are published in vernacular languages. There are very few countries which use their vernacular languages in official documents and as a working language in government and business. Even the media, whose primary role is mass communication, mostly use English or a non-vernacular language. The Pacific vernacular languages are, therefore, used for little more than informal communication among the speakers of the language.

At the primary level, various national and regional attempts have been made to produce more reading materials of good quality in the various Pacific languages. The Tupu series from the New Zealand Learning Media Centre is one such attempt. The University of the South Pacific’s Institute of Education has also published a number of stories written in the vernacular languages, and some Pacific countries have initiated their own publishing programmes. But these efforts are still largely
uncoordinated and piecemeal, and have a long way to go before meeting the demands for quality reading materials. It is hoped that the many training programmes conducted to help Pacific teachers write stories and materials in their own languages for use in their own schools and possibly for translation into other Pacific languages will soon bear fruit.

What has been said so far is nothing new or dramatic. The difficulties affecting the teaching of vernacular languages in the region have been known for many years and many solutions have been tried. What has always been lacking and is still lacking is the political will and commitment to the development and promotion of vernacular language programmes, both in formal education and for the larger society, which is manifested in the allocation of sufficient financial resources to support:

- the quality preparation of pre-service teachers and the upgrading of serving teachers,
- appropriate remuneration for such teachers and equal status with English language and other ‘high’ status subject teachers,
- the development of a quality curriculum, which takes into full account the cultural contexts of the language, and which uses culturally appropriate teaching and learning strategies, classroom organisation and communicative conventions and interactions,
- the development and publication of sufficient quality multi-media materials, such as children’s stories, non-fiction materials, plays, novels, poems, myths and legends, history, reports, etc.,
- the development of standardised grammars and orthographies, and monolingual dictionaries,
- the training of writers, researchers, radio and video producers, graphic artists and editors, etc.

Such support must be accompanied by policy decisions at the highest level:

- according the vernacular language higher status on the time-table in the early years of primary education and equal status with English in the senior years,
- making the vernacular language an academic subject at the senior secondary school and tertiary levels,
- making it a requirement for employment purposes,
- using it as a working language of government and business,
- using it as the language of mass communication in the media, wherever this is appropriate, as in countries where there is one dominant vernacular language.

These new domains require considerable development of the vernacular languages to ensure that they can cope with the demands of their new functions. Research into threatened languages where language shift occurs from the vernacular to a world language indicates that when the two languages are used for distinctly separate functional purposes, such as English being used only in schools and in business and Tongan being used only for informal oral communication, vernacular languages have better chances of survival in the diglossic situations so described. However, where the world language or the dominant language slowly encroaches on the functional domains of vernacular languages, such as the language of the home, policy interventions have to be put in place to protect and maintain vulnerable vernacular languages, if they are to survive.

Pacific countries will have to make realistic choices as to what their goals are for themselves and their linguistic heritages, that is, whether they want their vernacular languages to survive by developing quality school programmes and teaching them in the formal school system, or allow them to die, together with their associated cultures.