

Language education needs for multilingualism in Fiji primary schools[☆]

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Abstract

This paper looks at current practice in teaching multilingual Indo-Fijian children in eight Fiji primary schools. Indo-Fijians speak Fiji Hindi (FH) as their mother tongue, learn Shudh Hindi (SH) or Urdu, and English for formal and literacy purposes and use English and Fijian for interethnic communication. The current education policy states that children be taught in their mother tongue for the first 3 years of primary school before English becomes the medium of instruction. This practice was not apparent in the schools. In all 24 observed classrooms, English was the dominant language of instruction. There is an important need in Fiji for teacher training to address the issues around multilingual education so that teachers can confidently contribute to an educational system which maximises the use of Fiji's linguistic resources for the educational advancement of all sectors of the country's population.

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1. Introduction

In Fiji, as in the Pacific, much emphasis has been placed on teacher education in the last century as the key to producing a literate and educated society, one of the indicators of a nation's healthy socio-economic index. Unfortunately, and given that most islands in the Pacific are multilingual, little attention has been given to teaching in languages other than English. Indeed the drive for English language acquisition has been intense and focused and has been strongly influenced by British, Australian and New Zealand (NZ) education systems. Pacific education systems have had long and strong ties,

particularly with educational policy in Australia and NZ. Neither of these two countries has historically been supportive of the indigenous languages in their own nations.

This article first of all looks at the trends for language in education in the Pacific and specifically in Fiji. Change has come slowly to this island nation and a history of colonialism, ethnic politics and three coups in its recent history have severely hampered economic advancement and educational reform (Lingam, 2004).

In order to place this study in context and to justify my conclusions, I look at the theories, principles and best practice associated with teaching multilinguals. In particular, the practice of teaching English to young learners will be looked at since, in Fiji, English is learnt as a second or third language at school.

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To justify teachers' need for knowledge of language teaching theories and principles and their application to multilingual, young learner contexts, I look at the nature of language proficiency, formal and informal classroom language use, the types of classroom materials and activities teachers use in language and Maths classrooms and attitudes of research participants to known languages in 24 Fiji classrooms (eight schools) on the main island of Viti Levu. The four monoracial schools are predominantly Indo-Fijian; the multiracial ones have Fijian, Indo-Fijian, Fiji Chinese, Rotuman and part-European children. Four schools are outside the city and the other four are city based. Forty-eight students, their teachers (24) and headteachers (8) were interviewed and all their classroom interactions observed and audio and video-taped.

2. Trends for language education in the Pacific

Pacific education has been heavily influenced by European contact. The advent of missionaries, sealers and whalers in the Pacific heralded a period when tradition changed to accommodate the new influence on society. Literacy became important to enable Bible reading. As [Mugler and Lynch \(1996, p. 3\)](#) point out, no Pacific Island language was written before Europeans came to the Pacific. Writing systems were devised by European missionaries using the letters of the Roman alphabet. Then came the colonists and the languages of the colonisers—English, French, German, Japanese and Spanish depending on the period in history and the nationality of the coloniser.

Educational and linguistic change was inevitable in the Pacific. [Male and Lameta \(1999, p. 2\)](#) write:

In most Pacific Island nations, the colonial heritage of educational policies has redefined the baseline of a worthy education, changed the way people participated in that education and the way they related to each other.

These experiences have not been unique to the Pacific and indeed the influence the colonial languages continue to have in Pacific education systems have long been felt elsewhere ([Pennycook, 1998](#)). English and French remain important in the Pacific in the present time.

Australian, British and NZ experts, educationists and teachers have also left a profound educational and linguistic legacy in the South Pacific. Curriculum and assessment procedures for the Pacific were

based on these systems for many years. [Lingam \(2004, p. vii\)](#) points out that curriculum development since colonisation has been slow and sluggish:

The administrative system and related context, delivery and assessment elements established in education during the colonial period have been retained and not attuned to contemporary Fiji needs despite the changing times.

[Lotherington](#) writes that in the past, teachers having to prepare students for external exams set in Australia, NZ or Britain found themselves using outdated and non-contextualised materials and curricula and that subsequent change is still only with materials rather than philosophy, pedagogy or curriculum ([Lotherington, 1998b, p. 61](#)). The English language continues to be a prerogative for any who want to achieve within this system. It serves as gatekeeper for those who want access to further education or to white collar jobs.

The use of the vernacular was banned for many years in many schools around the Pacific. In NZ, use of Māori, the indigenous language was actively discouraged at school even for social interaction ([Benton, 1996; Durie, 1998](#)). This educational policy has directly threatened the position, role, proficiency and use of Māori in NZ ([Benton, 1981](#)).

The cases of Māori and immigrant Pacific Island languages in NZ, Cook Island Māori and Chamorro in the Marianas illustrate the vulnerability of Pacific Island languages to language shift and death—even in nations where they are the native language and the first language of a large number of people ([Davis, 1998; Day, 1985; Durie, 1998; Jamieson, 1980; Lameta, 1997; Shameem, 1995](#)). The legitimate roles that various known languages have in a range of functions have never been explicitly acknowledged. English has easily become the language of wider currency and education in the Pacific.

3. Current considerations

Although multilingualism is a more common feature in the Pacific than bilingualism, much of the literature to date has focused on the case for bilingual education and the relationship between English and one vernacular. [Lotherington \(1998a, p. 66\)](#) believes there are three trends of bilingual education in the Pacific:

- i. Transitional bilingual education (switch to English only from vernacular after 3 years).

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