LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN THE PACIFIC REGION: ISSUES, PRACTICES, AND ALTERNATIVES [1]

'Ana Taufe'ulungaki

Introduction

The issue of what language to be used by whom for what purposes at what level of the education system continues to challenge Pacific member states. The purpose of this paper is to explore some of the pertinent issues relating to language choices and offer some suggested pathways that could be considered by policy makers and education systems. Part I describes the Pacific language context, and some of the common reasons used by nations to justify language choices. The second part looks at the current language policies and practices in the formal education systems in the region and, in particular, in the context of the relationships between language and culture, and teaching and learning. Part III offers some policy options for future educational developments.

PART I: The language context in the Pacific Region and the nature of language

Background

The Pacific is often spoken of as the most linguistically complex region in the world (Mugler and Lynch 1996), with over a thousand distinct vernacular languages spoken by less than ten million inhabitants. According to Mugler and Lynch, this represents one fifth of the world's languages and the linguistic situation is complex, not only because of the number of languages spoken, but the "number of different unrelated language families represented, the high degree of multilingualism, and the development of pidgins, creoles and similar contact languages" (1996:9). Most of these languages are found in the Melanesian countries:

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800+ in Papua New Guinea, 65 or so in the Solomon Islands, and an estimated 105 in Vanuatu. Because of the geographical nature of the region, the number of speakers of each language is small, averaging around 5,000 – 6,000. The vernacular languages with the largest numbers of speakers are Fijian, with 300,000+ speakers; Samoan, with 250,000+ speakers; and Enga (PNG) with around 200,000+ speakers (Mugler and Lynch: 9). About 170 languages, on the other hand, almost all of which are spoken in Melanesia, have less than 200 speakers. In Vanuatu, there are two languages, which have but two speakers left. The point that is laboured here is that multilingualism is the norm in almost all Pacific countries. If a continuum were drawn, Melanesian countries, which are more multilingual, would be found at one end and Polynesian countries, which have far fewer languages and dialects, would be found at the other end, with the Micronesian countries plotted in between.

In addition to the vernacular languages, indigenous to the region, the missionaries, traders and colonisers who settled the Pacific region after European contact brought their languages with them. They include English, French, Spanish, Japanese, Chinese, Hindustani, Filipino, Korean and German, some of which have become the lingua franca in some Pacific island states. English is by far the most important of the imported languages, followed by French, and both have become the official languages of most Pacific islands nations as well as of regional organisations.

The early contacts between the Pacific vernaculars and the metropolitan languages have resulted in the development of pidgin languages, some of which have become the lingua franca in and between Melanesian countries, and some have developed into creoles, which are the first and only languages of some Pacific Islanders. In fact, the language with the largest numbers of speakers in the region is Melanesian Pidgin, with an estimated half a million speaking it as their first language and another two million who use it as a second language. Bilingualism and multilingualism are the norms and although the language of the school is often different from that of the home, it is just "another language to learn" (Mugler and Lynch, 1996:5).

Because of the complexity of the linguistic situation in the region, 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.

Political factors

The language choices that countries make, whether for national or educational purposes, are justified on a number of levels. At the political level, the two main purposes relate to national unity, with its implications of identity and authenticity, and modernisation. In multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multilingual nations, which often did not have a common, nationwide, ethnic and cultural identity, they had to create such an identity through national symbols that can lead to common mobilisation and involvement beyond pre-existing ethnic-cultural particularities. A national language is often invoked as a unifying symbol and serves the purpose of political integration and establishing a unique and authentic identity. In the meantime, the continuing and efficient operations of government call for a different language policy, with 'efficiency' being the key word. The main purpose here is the establishment of cohesive and administrative efficiency within a divided social, linguistic, ethnic and cultural nation. The main concern is the maintenance of operations of government and ensuring strong links between the governed and the governing and, through those ties, to promote the modern developmental goals of the nation. The first reason is basically socio-cultural while the second is political and the two rarely coincide.

Socio-cultural factors

At the socio-cultural level, language is recognised as a social tool that performs a variety of critical functions, one of which is individual and group identification. 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, with matters of code selection and codification, standardisation and elaboration and with efforts to develop the language for both sentimental and instrumental functions. Countries often have a concern too with language 'purity' in order to preserve the authenticity of the national identity and its uniqueness. At the same time, language must also be the means of modernising a nation. Since languages carry both 'communicative' and 'symbolic' functions, the complex interactions between the two define, in a way, the limitation of the group, and only those who grow up within the community can fully translate the historical and cultural associations embedded in the 'communication' (Steiner 1975).

The other important variables in socio-cultural factors are attitudes and motivations, which determine in many ways individual language choices.

Economic factors

The modernisation of a country is usually equated with economic development and Edwards (1985:85) argues that language decisions are more often made "on economic (at least pragmatic motives) than is commonly supposed" and that decisions to adopt a language of wider communication (LWC), such as English or French, were made in the name of "linguistic practicality, communicative efficiency, social mobility and economic advancement". Such choices relate to the view

that language is a resource and a 'product', which can be manipulated to achieve behavioural change. Thus, the language behaviour of groups of people is seen as a national resource in the same way as technical skills or numbers of workers and, therefore, it is an important instrument to achieve certain results. Individuals and communities make language choices based on what Rubin and Jernudd (1971) call the "concept of opportunity". Thus, language, as a type of human capital, is useful in consumption or production activity. Therefore, a language choice is often in relation to the socio-economic power of the group, and 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.

Education factors

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, on the other hand, 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. The national planners are concerned with po1icies—the education system with implementation and the factors that would guarantee to some degree a successful language programme, such as whether there is evidence of standardisations in the form of orthographies, dictionaries and grammars; whether there are language materials appropriate to the pupils and their particular conditions; whether there are trained language teachers; and whether there are support services and resources available.

It is possible, of course, that the language aims of the nation are congruent with those of the individual members of the society and, in meeting the interests of the nation, the needs of the individual are being served too. But it is possible that the two could conflict, and where this occurs, it is the individual needs that are more likely to be sacrificed.

The education services of nations are expected to serve the needs of individuals but this poses conundrums for nations with limited resources. The costs of language development, and indeed education as a whole, have to be measured against other forms of development within the nation. In education, it is not just a simple matter of mother tongue education versus an LWC. There is also the issue of language development versus other national goals: capital investments (more classrooms, libraries, laboratories), teacher training, curriculum development, as well as the area of non-formal adult education versus the formal education system. The competing variables that have to be considered are often so complex that many nations have no choice but to base their educational language policies on expediency.

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 in 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.

Part 2: Pacific language policies and practices in the context of the nature of language and its relationship to culture, teaching and learning

The rationale for mother tongue education

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 UNESCO Meeting of Specialists (1951) supported it with an official statement to the effect that the best medium,

psychologically, sociologically and educationally for teaching a child is his/her mother tongue. Since then, research has strongly advocated the use of the mother tongue as the medium of education for the whole of primary education or, at the 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, as previously discussed in Part I, it is acknowledged that no society today can exist 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.

Language policies in the region

In countries where there is relative language homogeneity, as is found in many of the Polynesian countries of the Pacific, such as Samoa and Tonga where there is one dominant vernacular language spoken by almost the entire population, the mother tongue is accorded high status, is recognised as the national language and the official language co-jointly with English, and further, is officially designated as the medium of instruction for all or a part of primary education. It is taught as a subject not only at primary but also at secondary level and beyond, and is often used unofficially alongside English as the language of instruction, as teachers code-switch between the two in attempts to clarify new or complex concepts and ideas. However, in countries where there is not one or two but hundreds of vernacular languages, as is the case in Melanesian countries, the issue of what language to use in the school is highly complex and the decisions, therefore, as to what language to use by whom for what purpose at what level of the education system are often made on grounds other than educational.

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 and Tucker) 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 social and cultural 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, which are in grave danger of being lost. 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. It is 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 these differ from that of the school—and according them appropriate status within the formal school system, students will continue to underachieve in schools.

Pacific states have adopted a variety of language policies. They vary from country to country, depending on each country's linguistic heritage, its political goals and visions, educational philosophy and ethos, socio-cultural context, colonial history and economic capabilities. The use of the mother tongue as a medium of education can be plotted along a continuum with Tokelau and the Polynesian countries, such as Samoa and Tonga, at one end and Solomon Islands, where no vernacular is used at all at any level of the education system, at the other end. The Melanesian, Micronesian and remaining Polynesian countries are found in between these two extremes.

Apart from two countries, namely, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, the official language policies of Pacific countries recognise the importance of using vernacular languages as a medium of instruction, particularly in the early years of primary education. This is nowhere more strongly evident than in Papua New Guinea, where the government has made the courageous decision to use mother tongue as the medium of instruction for the first six years of basic education and where community support has been very strong. For instance, the PNG Trust Inc, formed in 1989 by community organisations, "has conducted training with the support of communities so they could design their workbooks and story-books in more than 300 of the 869 plus languages of PNG" (Abare and Manukayasi, 1996: 144). As the authors state "people thought, and many still think, that 100 per cent literacy is impossible in PNG because of the hundreds of languages... We, PNG Trust, have proven that the number of languages is inconsequential in the literacy equation." (*op cit*:145-146).

There are clear differences in the official language policies of countries and actual classroom practices, in which teachers and students throughout the region have been regularly found to code-switch between the official medium of instruction and a language of mutual

understanding in attempts to ensure that classroom interactions are meaningful and lead to quality learning and achievement.

Culture and its relationship to language use

Thaman (1998) defines 'culture' from a Pacific perspective as a "shared way of living of a group of people, which includes their accumulated knowledge and understandings, skills and values, as expressed and constructed in their language, which is perceived by them to be unique and meaningful." Bisch (Groupe de Fribourg 1996: 2), from a western perspective, uses 'culture' to apply to the:

> ... values, beliefs, languages, arts and sciences, traditions, institutions and ways of life by means of which individuals or groups express the meanings they give to their life and development... The term "cultural identity" applies to all cultural references through which individuals or groups define and express themselves and by which they wish to be recognised; cultural identity embraces the liberties inherent to human dignity and brings together, in a permanent process, cultural diversity, the particular and universal, memory and aspiration... A "cultural community" is a group of persons who share those cultural references that comprise a common cultural identity, and which they wish to preserve and develop, as essential to their human dignity, in the respect of human rights.

In this universal sense of 'culture', both Pacific and western perspectives acknowledge that language is embedded in culture.

Thus, all communicative acts, both verbal and non-verbal, take place within a socio-cultural context. The socio-cultural context determines, to a large extent, not only the communicative conventions adopted but the meanings and interpretations of the interactions. Differences in the ways groups think and act are more than a matter of using different words or performing different actions for the same purposes. The behaviour of people varies, and the beliefs, values and assumptions that underlie behaviour, which are culturally determined, differ as well. Culture influences both behaviour and the psychological processes on which it rests. Culture determines the value systems of a group, its world view,

the nature and structure of knowledge, and how it creates shared meanings, transmits knowledge, skills and values, and these are articulated and manifested through the group's language. Language is, indeed, the universal instrument for transmission, promotion and transformation of culture. In other words, language cannot be used in isolation as merely a tool of education divorced from its underlying foundation, the culture of its speech community.

There are several cultural elements which have direct bearing on language and communicative behaviour and which have implications for formal education and classroom interactions: the value and belief systems of a group, and the informal learning strategies usually employed by the group in traditional education contexts. The value and belief systems of any cultural group determine not only the speech rules governing use of language and its purposes, but also the learning strategies commonly used by the group for purposes of cultural transfer and transformation. For example, in western societies, the individual and his rights, his competence, skills and products are highly valued. But, in addition to cultural values, each culture has its own beliefs about knowledge, which are linked to the key values of the culture and these, in turn, influence the way knowledge is created, validated, transmitted and used.

Western systems

In western culture, in correspondence with the value of individualism, knowledge is believed to be an open system, with distinct forms that are hierarchically structured, through which human experience is articulated and made intelligible. Education is a process whereby knowledge is transmitted but through the acquisition of knowledge the mind itself is transformed and this, too, is considered an end in itself.

The central function of education from this perspective is the introduction of pupils to those forms of thought and knowledge which society values. Language is seen as a key player in the development of thinking and understanding and in the transmission of these to

succeeding generations. How schools transmit knowledge is based on the previously stated assumption that knowledge has distinct irreducible forms, which provide the basis for subject divisions, and competence in a subject is gained serially and learning is seen as an ordered progression through a hierarchy of knowledge and skill, mediated through language.

Communicative interactions, and teaching and learning strategies, are also consistent with people's values and belief systems. In western-style schooling, the key value of individualism drives the emphasis in classrooms on individual performance and achievement. Thus, the individual and his/her learning needs become the focus of classroom activities and competition is a strategy that is often used to promote and enhance individual success in verbal and non-verbal interactions, question and answer routines, and the performance of tasks. Verbal direction and instruction in which explication, elaboration and expansion, which gradually progress into increasingly abstract and decontextualised use of language, become the major classroom teaching strategy.

This western view of knowledge and education has come to be accepted without question as universally applicable to all accounts of all possible forms of education, rationality or thought. However, in more recent years, Keddie (1977: 9-22 cited in Jenks 1977: 4), among others, has argued that such an assumption is ethnocentric since both knowledge and education are "no more (but no less) than the socially constructed outcomes of the practices of members in particular socio-cultural contexts". In fact, rationality and knowledge are concrete features of the practices of all societal members and are, therefore, culturally based.

Pacific systems

In Pacific cultures, which value respect, generosity, loyalty, cooperation, sharing, humility and fulfilment of mutual obligations, among others, the nature, forms and structure of knowledge are perceived differently. This, in turn, give rise to different speech rules and communicative behaviour and, consequently, teaching and learning strategies. The thinking of

Pacific islanders is said to be right-brain-dominated, tending towards the creative, holistic and spatial; divergent instead of linear logical; interpersonal, which favours group activities, spoken over written language, and demonstration and doing rather than verbal direction; and kinesthetic, which lends itself to physical activities. Such thinking styles are manifested in a number of ways in Pacific cultures.

In Polynesia, knowledge is validated by corroboration and consensus rather than by the status of the individual bearing the knowledge, and scepticism of new knowledge is the norm (Levin 1978). Some cultures, such as Tongan, make a clear distinction between knowledge (*'ilo),* which is acquired through learning (*ako),* and wisdom (*poto)*, which is the "beneficial use of *'ilo* or knowledge" (Thaman 1998a, 1988b). Clearly, knowledge is not expected to be achieved for its own sake but only if it is worthwhile and benefits others. Three basic contexts have been identified for informal learning in Polynesia: (a) the desire for social cohesion through the maintenance of good relationships, which takes the form of cooperation; (b) closed knowledge systems, which affect the way knowledge is viewed and linguistic rules for knowledge transfer and use of questions and answers; and (c) the significant role of peer groups in fostering learning.

Learning strategies

These contexts give rise to certain learning strategies: observation, participation and imitation (Ritchie and Ritchie 1979; Jordon *et al.* 1981). Lesa (1995), for example, in his study of the learning styles of Samoan students, reported that 62% identified with the participant learning style and another 21% identified with the collaborative learning style. Both of these styles characterise 'group' learning. Thomas (1978a, 1978b, 1979a, 1979b) in a number of studies of Samoan, Fijian, Cook Islands, Maori and Pakeha children, reported parallel findings as did Levin (1978a, 1978b) in her studies of Tahitian children. Thomas found, for example, that there is a high degree of sensitivity to social cues and the emotional tone of the interaction, low intensity of communication between parents and children, as parents were less involved in looking

after children and a high degree of interaction between family members besides mother and father. Whereas Pakeha children were predominantly individualistic and competitive, Pacific Island children demonstrated sharing and cooperative behaviour. Similar findings were found by Ninnes (1991) in the Western Province of Solomon Islands.

The common learning strategies that emerge from this specific cultural context are: observation, imitation, listening, participation, and asking. The questions are the type that seek information and technical advice. In the Pacific, where behaviour is mostly governed by the need to maintain group harmony, the values of cooperation, good relationships, consensus and respect lead naturally to congruent learning strategies, such as the preference for working in groups, interacting with peers, and learning through observation, imitation and doing. These are in stark contrast to classrooms where the stress is on teacher-directed individual achievement, competition, inquisitiveness, extended verbal interactions and decontextualised pupil participation.

Language and classroom interactions

One of the major reasons for the attention paid to the vernacular and its role in classroom interactions is the search for solutions to the continuing high failure rate of Pacific Island children, not only in mainstream classrooms in developed countries such as New Zealand, Australia and the United States, but, of more serious concern, in their own Pacific-controlled schools. Jordon *et al.* (1981), for example, reported that, according to the Stanford Achievement Test of 1978, "45 per cent of Hawaiian students in grade 4 performed below average in reading, compared to 23 per cent nationally [and] at grade eight, 69 per cent were performing below average" (Thompson and Hannahs, 1979). In New Zealand, Churchward (1991) wrote, "There have been many attempts to address the problem of the Maori education crisis. Many of these attempts to initiate change were aimed at changing the Maori individual. This was usually because the 'problems' were deemed to arise from the pupils 'Maoriness'." Reports from around the region show that Pacific schools are not doing much better. In Fiji, for example, Mr Rogovakalali,

the Divisional Education Officer Western, told participants at a recent conference that 30 per cent of primary school pupils drop out before they reach Year 8. He said that in the " light of findings of the effectiveness of primary education, head teachers should view with concern the plight of children who have gone astray during their primary education." He called for programmes that would cater for the following: "school code conduct, communicating in other languages, respect for the environment" and for families to participate in the education of their children (Rogovakalali 1999).

Similarly, the Pacific Islands Literacy Levels Study (Withers, 1991) found that, although overall 71.9% of the selected sample of primary pupils were considered to have achieved literacy in two languages (vernacular and English/French), there were relatively high percentages of primary pupils in some countries who have *not* achieved basic literacy in their own vernacular languages, which gives rise to speculations about the quality of learning in the schools and the language policies adopted by those countries, despite the assurance from the literature that for many Pacific Islands children the language of the school was "just one more language to learn" (Mugler and Lynch 1996).

Classroom communicative conventions

The classroom represents a special socio-cultural context with its own communication conventions, which are teacher controlled and directed. Classroom discourse presents children with the challenge of learning new rules for communication. The use of formal language, teacher control of verbal exchanges, question-and-answer formats, and references to increasingly abstract ideas characterise the classroom environment. To the extent that these new rules overlap with those that children have already learned, classroom communication is made easier. But children whose past experience with language is not congruent with the new rules will have to learn ways to make meaning before they can use language to learn in the classroom. However, it should be noted that the culture of the school has unique features, which make it quite distinct and different from that operating in the larger society, even in western

societies. Children from such cultures still have to learn to adapt, too, to the culture of the school, although the degree of difference is less, of course, than that between the cultures of non-western societies and western-style schools.

Pacific children will bring to the school the values and belief systems of their home culture, including beliefs about knowledge, their own language, the speech rules of their culture, their own learning system and their own style of thinking. The traditional culture of non-western students will have profound effects on their learning performance in western-style classrooms. These effects are seen in communication patterns between teachers and students, in the way students respond to classroom management practices, in the way students interact with each other and in the way students approach learning tasks (Ninnes 1991). Where these differ from the expectations and practices of western-style classrooms, breakdowns in communication occur, with subsequent failure of learning. These breakdowns are in addition to the difficulties that arise from teaching the children in a language other than their mother tongue.

Jordon *et al.* (1981) have argued that the difficulties encountered by Pacific Island children in western-type classrooms, to which their failure in the school system could be largely attributed, is not so much the language which they bring to the school, but the "existence of differences in communicative conventions" which are culturally determined. Thus, the many instances found of miscommunication between classroom teachers and Hawaiian students are due to the fact that the "classroom is an interface between two different sets of values, those of the Hawaiian subculture and those manifested in the state-run school system." To be successful in the classroom, the child must not only know the content of the correct answer, which is transmitted through language, but also present that answer in a way that will be socially acceptable to the teacher.

Appropriate teaching and learning strategies

Studies of teaching-learning interactions in the Pacific suggest that Pacific children learn and respond more effectively to teaching strategies which employ interactions congruent with those in the children's cultures. The KEEP programme in Hawaii was successful because it incorporated a number of features of communication, teaching and learning common in Hawaiian culture.

- It allowed children to teach and learn from peers.
- It emphasised the importance of *mutual participation* in learning situations.
- Learning involves actually engaging in the task or skill to be learned, rather than talking about how to perform the task, with the main primary teaching technique used being personal demonstration and learning is primarily through participation, observation and imitation.

Verbal competence is considered differently from culture to culture, as is also the way children acquire verbal competence. Children in Polynesia develop competence through elicited imitation whereas western children usually do so through expansion (Jordon *et al.* 1981).

In summary, most Pacific Island children learn best in teaching strategies using strong peer orientation, and affiliation, cooperation and mutual task performance, where the operations learned are clearly related to the final goal. The studies discussed have highlighted the differences in the norms of their cultures and those of mainstream societies or those practised in western-style schools. Obviously Pacific children learn to communicate and participate, teach and learn, in patterns and conventions which are quite distinct and different from those of western-style schools and these differences are in turn the manifestations of the distinct values, beliefs and patterns of behaviour integral to those cultures. These have obvious implications for structuring the teaching and learning in Pacific classrooms and, particularly, for teacher training, both pre- and in-service training, of Pacific teachers for Pacific classrooms.

Implications for teacher education and training

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. Thomas (1978a, 1978b) found in his studies that the students showed dramatic gains in classrooms where teachers were using cooperative and interdependent learning groups. They improved their school achievement and attitudes to school, the teacher and other children. Commenting on the brain drain, which Thomas (1978a, 1978b) believes is partly attributable to the competitive and individualistic learning styles taught in western-style schools, he said that one possible answer to the problem is removing the extreme emphasis on individualistic and competitive orientation from 'imported' education systems, and retaining instead the knowledge necessary for any Pacific country to remain viable and internally controlled and developing the 'Pacific way' as an effective technique for the transmission of knowledge. It is worth reiterating that one of the main aims of adopting a vernacular or mother tongue medium of instruction is to contribute to the maintenance and promotion of community languages and cultures, which define individual and group identities.

Part 3: Some policy options and actions for future language developments

While the adaptation and adoption of culturally congruent communicative behaviour and learning styles have been effective in improving educational achievement and learning in Pacific classrooms, it should not be forgotten that the purpose is not merely educational but also pertains to the larger picture of cultural survival. Such adoptions should not lead to the destruction or demise of Pacific cultures in the

quest for successful western-type schooling. To avoid this undesirable outcome, several alternatives have been proposed in the literature.

'Both-ways schooling and two-ways approach'

Harris (1980) suggests the 'two-way' and 'both-ways' schooling. In the former, he recommends a complete separation of the two cultural domains, Aboriginal and western, which means teaching the two separately in the schools without any reference to the other.

In the 'both-ways' alternative, recognition is given to the significant differences between the two cultures but the emphasis will be on developing bridges between them. Ninnes (1991) proposes how the 'both-ways' model could be further modified as an adaptive model whereby the home culture is adapted to the school system, such as the content to suit local culture; the administrative procedures to suit local decision-making processes, for instance, of consultation and consensus in Solomon Islands; the time-orientation to suit indigenous values and needs, that is, the school accommodates itself to local, seasonal, and culturally important events and behaviours through a process of consultation, cooperation and flexibility, which is enhanced by local control of the schooling process.

In this process of adaptation, classroom learning can be viewed as a role play and certain learning behaviours are overtly taught within particular contexts, such as the analytical, abstract, probing and deductive thinking required in science classes in contrast to the unquestioning concrete contexts in which indigenous learning occurs. Students need to clearly understand the value of their own culturally-defined ways of learning and thinking and to be taught the contexts in which the contrasting western method is appropriate and useful.

Diglossic bilingual approaches

Such strategies seem fairly similar to what has proven effective in maintaining small, vulnerable languages at risk. The 'two-way' approach is comparable to diglossic bilingual situations in which the uses to which the two contending languages are put are quite separate with very little or no overlaps in language function (Ferguson, 1972; Giles, 1977). Where the functions of the two languages have been kept separate with clear domains of usage for both, vernacular languages have been found to fare better than in bilingual situations where both languages are used indiscriminately in a number of overlapping functions. Inevitably the LWC, over time, gradually encroaches on the functions previously dominated by the first language, thereby threatening its survival and could in the long-term spell its demise. It would also appear from the studies discussed that children are quite flexible and versatile in acquiring and adapting to new learning strategies and can also keep the contexts of such learning separate. For instance, in the Thomas (1979a) study, Fijian students could be quite individualistic and competitive in the classroom but revert easily to cooperative performance of tasks in informal education contexts outside school. He also found in his other studies that the more urbanised (and presumably more westernised) Pacific families are, the more readily the children adapt to western-style learning strategies, such as competition, but it should be noted that this achievement is made at the cost of their own cultural identities.

Building on commonalities

Where Pacific cultures exhibit traits that are similar to western-style behaviours and values, students tend to cope better in schools. Howard (1970), for instance, in his study of Rotuman children, found that one of the possible reasons that could account for their ability to adjust better and do well in western-style schools in comparison with other Fijian students is the fact that children orient more strongly toward adults than their peers, as sibling care-taking is not used as much in Rotuman society

as in other Pacific cultures. In the Ninnes (1991) study, he found that, while asking questions is a normal learning tool in informal educational contexts in Solomon Islands, students refrain from using it in the classroom where knowledge is considered sacred.

What is clear from the literature is that schools should base their teaching approach to the multicultural classroom on the already proven pedagogical base of building on the students' repertoire of existing knowledge, skills and experience to add on new skills and knowledge. Such a strategy would be very much along the lines that Swain and Lapkin (1991) describe as 'additive' education. This is a bilingual language learning strategy in which the acquisition of a second language is a process of building on the existing competencies of the child in his/her first language, which minimises detrimental or negative effects on the first language. Instead, second language acquisition becomes a mutually enhancing process for both languages. Similarly, when formal education is contextualised and acculturated, school attainment is significantly raised while failure is minimised.

The critical role of the teacher

The role of the teacher 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, also competent in the mother tongues of the children, and have understanding of and familiarity and empathy with the cultures of those languages. In other words, it is not an unrealistic expectation for Pacific teachers to be literate in the cultures of the children in their class, if the school goals are to ensure that those children succeed in school as well as the survival of their cultures and languages. Troike & Saville-Troike (1982:199) writing on the subject said:

> Being a teacher has never been simple. Being a bilingual teacher is at least twice as complex. Preparing a bilingual teacher must certainly take account of this complexity if it is to adequately fulfil its purpose.

> If the teacher is the principal figure in the educational process, mediating between the learner and the curriculum, his/her role becomes even more central in a bilingual program. For here the teacher must serve not only to represent the adult world and interpret the world to neophyte learners from the same or closely similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but must represent and interpret a different cultural world through the means of the learner's language, at the same time attempting to teach the language which is the medium of that other cultural world. Training should minimally serve to prepare the teacher to handle these complexities.

Troike & Saville-Troike argue that the teacher training programme is directed to a certain extent by the ethos of each society and, 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 will require training in all these four skills in both languages:

- language proficiency
- linguistic knowledge
- cultural knowledge
- 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).

The training of teachers is, therefore, critical for what teachers practise in their classrooms is influenced not only by their education and training but also by their personal beliefs in particular practices which are in turn partly inculcated by their education and training and partly by the kind of educational ethos held by their societies. Franklin (1984) in a naturalistic study of literacy in bilingual classrooms demonstrated that literacy instruction varied in accordance with the literacy instruction beliefs held by teachers. From the results of her study, she argued that the literacy failure of children in schools is largely attributable to the literacy

practices of teachers, which are in turn the manifestation of their beliefs that are derived from those of the larger society; beliefs and practices which fail to build and expand on the children's extensive existing knowledge but which instead impose too many constraints on the children's learning in order to force them to conform to the literacy strategies which accord with the beliefs and practices dictated by the teacher and the school.

The argument can be extended to include all pedagogical activities in the classroom. The implication is that how teachers create a learning environment, how they interact and communicate with their students, the language they use, the questions they ask and the responses they expect, their methods and classroom organisation, the pacing of the lessons, the activities designed, the time allocated to tasks and how those tasks are executed and evaluated, etc. are all derived from the teacher's personal repertoire of pedagogical attitudes and beliefs.

One of the oft held beliefs is the notion that the language the child brings to school is deficient and is, therefore, partly responsible for his/her lack of success in school. This has been disputed by many studies. Barnes *et al.* (1969) demonstrated that children from working class backgrounds were not handicapped by the fact they did not speak the standard dialect required by the schools but by the ways in which the teachers use language in the classroom, their methods of teaching, their failure to capitalise on the children's language experiences and cultural mores. It is a generally felt that, where children come from a low status group, they are disadvantaged when they have to adapt to the mainstream, higher status culture.

One of the most regrettable aspects of such attitudes is that teachers and the school systems have succeeded in transferring such attitudes to the speakers themselves so that they too believe in their inferiority and handicaps. One of the strategies that has worked well is for schools to enable children with such disadvantages to add on to their linguistic repertoire a socially acceptable dialect or language. Nor must his/her other activities be made to suffer in the process of acquiring this dialect

or language. The training of teachers capable of such understanding is again a crucial factor. Teachers should be trained to be flexible and open in their approach, sensitive to the needs of students from other languages and cultures. They should also be trained to observe and note how children from such cultures interact and learn, and draw from the vast array of valid teaching-learning strategies, approaches and techniques those that suit the needs of particular pupils in their class.

In many Pacific classrooms, teachers are forced to teach in a language they are not competent in, and students 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.

Framework

Given the complex relationship between culture and language, and culture and teaching-learning strategies, the following principles are offered to provide a conceptual framework for the education and training of teachers to try to bridge the gaps between the children's cultural backgrounds and school objectives. Institutions responsible for the education and training of Pacific teachers should include the following values, beliefs, knowledge, skills and attitudes among the array of those with which teachers must be equipped to be effective in the classroom:

- To establish a basis for communication with the children teachers must negotiate and develop shared meanings with the children within the classroom. To achieve this goal successfully, teachers need to be proficient in the first language of the children or a language common to both. If this is not possible, the teacher could still promote mutual understanding and effective learning through the development of interactive styles and contents that are familiar to the children and by using culturally appropriate styles of classroom organisation, communicative conventions and patterns, teaching and learning. These entail understanding of the children's cultures and their relationships with language development and acquisition and how language is used for teaching and learning purposes.

- School learning is most likely to occur when values reinforce school expectations. Parents and other community members must view school achievement as a desirable and attainable goal if children are to build this into their sense of self. Interpreting the school's agenda for parents is one of the most important tasks for teachers. But to be successful in this role, it is assumed that teachers are literate in the children's cultures and can employ appropriate strategies for building bridges of understanding between the two.

- When differences exist between the cultural patterns of the home and community and those of the school, teachers must deal with these discrepancies directly. Teachers and children must create shared understandings and new contexts that give meaning to the knowledge and skills being taught. At the same time, the teachers must ensure that in the classroom the children's cultural values, beliefs, knowledge, speech rules and learning systems are recognised, valued and built upon. Learning mediated by teachers who are culturally sensitive and literate, affectionate, interested, and responsive is likely to be more effective than learning mediated by an adult who is perceived as uncaring and ignorant of the values of the communities from which the children come.

- For children from different racial and ethnic groups, meanings of words, gestures and actions may differ. Assessment of learning outcomes presents a formidable problem when children misunderstand the teacher's requests for information or demonstrations of knowledge and skills. Formal assessment should be delayed until teachers and

> children have built a set of new meanings and later such assessments
> must be sensitive to cultural differences and the values such cultures
> bestow on various matters, which could be completely different from
> school expectations and goals. (Adapted from: Bowman, 1990[2])

Teaching and learning obviously can never be standardised in a bi-or
multi-cultural community. But caring and competent teachers can use
their linguistic and cultural knowledge and skills to make the new
context of the school meaningful to students whose cultures hold
different values and practices from those of the school to safeguard the
self-confidence of children and their pride and security in their own
languages and cultures which are integral to their development of a
positive sense of self and individual and group identities.

Institutions in the region responsible for the training of teachers must
provide their teacher trainees with the following minimal skills and
knowledge:

- high competence in the language of instruction;
- where this differs from the mother tongues of the children,
  competence in the language of the children or at least in a language
  common to both;
- knowledge of the values, and belief systems of the children's home
  languages; how knowledge is derived, created, validated, transmitted
  and used in those cultures; management and decision-making
  procedures specific to those cultures; the speech rules of those
  communities; the teaching and learning strategies of those cultures
  and the learning systems the children bring with them;
- understanding of the differences that could exist between these
  cultures and that of the school;
- competence in selecting appropriate teaching and learning strategies
  and styles that the children could add on to their existing repertoire
  which would enhance their concept of self, and maintain local
  cultures and languages and improve their scholastic attainment;

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[2] The editors apologise for not being able to give full bibliographical details in
the reference list for this source.

- the ability to create the contexts in which the new knowledge and teaching and learning strategies could occur in the classroom and developing bridges between the different cultures;
- sympathetic and positive attitudes toward the different cultures;
- competence in appropriate assessment and evaluation procedures that take into account cultural differences.

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Conclusion

The language choices and decisions that Pacific countries make, which, in turn, would 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 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.

Recommendations

It is recommended that Ministers:

a) note the contents of this paper;

b) consider adopting national language policies as part of the education planning process; and

c) request PRIDE to hold a follow-up regional meeting on language policy and practice for senior education officials.

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