

Planning a new Diploma in TESOL¹ for the South Pacific region: Addressing questions of relevance

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What type of language teachers do we need in the South Pacific region?

This is a question that staff involved in teacher education at the University of the South Pacific (USP) are addressing in their review of current course offerings. We have recently completed a proposal for the introduction of an undergraduate Diploma in TESOL to be offered by Distance and Flexible Learning (DFL) mode. This short paper looks at the background to the proposal. In particular it emphasises the recent move away from a primary focus on methods per se to the primacy of *context* in language learning and teaching. This will involve a major paradigm shift in the programme perspective.

Why do we need an undergraduate diploma in TESOL?

In most parts of the world, TESOL is seen as a specialist area, and is dealt with at the postgraduate level. The Pacific is somewhat different. We need a 'specialist' TESOL programme at the undergraduate level because, for the Pacific region,

almost *all* our students are learning in a language other than their home language. Currently, however, our teachers are not being offered a full preparation to teach English in the Pacific classroom. In addition to an emphasis on language issues, there is a strong need to improve the preparation that we give our teachers for dealing with literacy issues, a currently neglected area. Since the 1980s there have been major developments in the field of language and literacy but our current offerings at the University do not fully deal with, for example, developments in the teaching of literacy, genre theory, text analysis, critical literacy, reading/writing in a second language, oral language development and assessment, bilingual education, vernacular education, and new approaches to whole language instruction. These areas will be integrated in the proposed Diploma in TESOL. Plans for the future might then include the development of a Postgraduate Diploma in TESOL (leading to a Master's degree).

What exactly is TESOL?² Is it relevant to regional realities?

The term TESOL is used mainly in the USA to describe the teaching of English in situations where it is either a second language or a foreign language. The British equivalent is ELT, English

1. TESOL: Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

2. These definitions are taken from J.C. Richards, J. Platt and H. Platt. 1992. *Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics* 2nd Edition. Longman, United Kingdom.

Language Teaching. A foreign language is a language which is taught as a school subject but which is not used as a medium of instruction in schools, nor as a language of communication within a country (e.g. in government, business, or industry). English is described as a foreign language in countries such as France, Japan, and China. A second language is a language which is not a native language in a country but which is widely used as a medium of communication (e.g. in education and government) and which is usually used alongside another language or languages. English is described as a second language in countries such as Fiji, Singapore and Nigeria.

Although English does have some official status in all the countries of the USP region, nowhere is it the primary medium of everyday communication, with the partial exception of urban Fiji. This means that, for many students, exposure to English is extremely limited and is restricted to the classroom. Even in the classroom, where in many Pacific school systems English is the official medium of instruction, there is significant use of the students' first language (and/or the lingua franca in Melanesia) alongside English. Given this situation, the preferred term used in our proposal is TESOL. It should also be noted that the distinctions mentioned above have significant pedagogical implications, and these will be addressed in the proposed Diploma.

³ The term 'second' is used here to mean any added language acquired after the mother tongue.

What is the conceptual framework underpinning the proposed Diploma?

The Diploma is underpinned by the principles described below.

Primacy of Context

A prioritisation of context means that we place emphasis on where our students are coming from and what they bring in to the learning experience.

Historically, the field of language teaching has tended to prioritise methodology, and there has been a long search for the 'best' method of teaching second³ languages. A massive industry has built up over the years, promoting one method over another. Course books are produced for the 'global' market, but do not necessarily serve local needs. Currently, however, there is a move towards prioritising

context, and this principle will underpin both the writing and the teaching of the proposed Diploma in TESOL.

A prioritisation of context means that we place emphasis on where our students are coming from and what they bring in to the learning experience. This issue takes precedence over a concern with methodology. When prioritising methodology, educators tend to start with an approach that focuses on what the teacher should do in the classroom. There is of course absolutely nothing wrong with this: however, what the context approach tries to do is to put the issue of context before everything else.

Thus, for example, before we even decide that we should use the communicative approach to language learning, we would want to take

into consideration factors such as: variations in classroom, local and national cultures; group dynamics; motivations of students; and variations in learning styles. These are very important factors in the learning process.

All good teachers would agree that context is important and some may argue that they would take these factors into consideration anyway. However, what a context-based approach does is to make *explicit* and *primary* the factors contributing to the notion of context. In this way context is literally put at the top of the list.

The emphasis on context also supports our view that language is more than just about communication. Rather, it is also the means by which we make meaning and share meaning in our societal groups. Thus, we say that language is *functional* and *socially situated*. A functional approach to language focuses on the functions that language plays in our lives and on the language resources that students need to control in order to use language effectively in a range of situations. It should be clear, then, that if we are to learn how to use language to fulfil a variety of social functions, a strong emphasis needs to be placed on contextual factors, supported of course by other issues to do with methodology.

Integration of Theory and Practice

The programme draws on internationally accepted models of TESOL education as well as an understanding of the needs of our regional students. However, unlike other similar programmes, the Diploma in TESOL consciously works to integrate theory and practice both within and across courses. The focus is on helping students to develop a philosophy of

practice that they are able to justify with a clearly argued rationale. We believe in helping students to construct their own theory of language and language learning that will help them to explain, both to themselves and to others, why they teach in one way and not another.

Integration of Language and Literacy

Language development cannot be considered on its own; this programme is based on understandings of language and pedagogy that integrate language with literacy and other content areas of the curriculum.

As with language learning, literacy learning is also about learning to make and share meaning for a variety of purposes and in a variety of contexts. In the English language classroom it is important that second language literacy be based on the previous literacy knowledge that children bring in with them. The same holds true for teaching adults. Much of what has been learnt in becoming literate in the mother tongue can be transferred successfully to the learning of a second language, and in learning to become literate in a second language. In this way, language is viewed holistically, and its functions in creating meaning extend beyond the spoken word to the written word, and beyond the language classroom to other curriculum areas as well as other societal uses of language. Indeed, a view of language as social interaction to create and share meaning for a variety of purposes is paramount here.

The Primacy of the Home Language/s

We want to base second language acquisition on an understanding of first language acquisition. Teachers of a second language have much to learn from how the first language is acquired. There are many similarities in the processes involved. A whole language approach to second language learning suggests that the teacher works to create, as far as is practicably possible, the conditions present in first language acquisition. This would include factors such as: allowing for errors that are seen as part of the developmental process of language acquisition (approximation); saturating the environment with both visual and aural samples of the target language (immersion); and being able to convince learners that there is a good reason as to why they should take on the learning that is being promoted in the classroom setting (engagement).

At the same time, it is important to consider the differences in the first and second language learning process, and these factors are also important. However, we acknowledge the primacy of the first language, and want to see more focus given to this and to its relationship with culture and schooling in our region. The first language impacts in many ways on the acquisition of a second language, and having an understanding of the first language can often help second language teachers. In the Pacific there is a tendency to promote the view that, when it comes to learning English, the sooner children are introduced to the language the better. But as this programme will try to show, this is an area that is fraught with complexity, and examining the issues carefully will help us

to make better-informed decisions about our teaching as well as our language policy in our various countries.

Who can enrol in the Diploma in TESOL?

The proposal is still being discussed by the University; those interested in further details at this point, however, are welcome to contact the author directly. Once the programme has been finalised, full details will be published throughout the South Pacific region. It is hoped to begin offering the Diploma in 2005.