

## **ESOL AND FIRST LANGUAGE MAINTENANCE: LANGUAGE LOSS OR LANGUAGE GAIN? A CASE STUDY**

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### **Introduction**

In Aotearoa/New Zealand members of immigrant communities are often unaware of the pace and consequences of first language shift. While some communities are able to maintain their own language well in the first generation (the migrating one), others may face rapid language shift. ESOL teachers who are aware of the pressures on new community languages, because they understand the nature and background of the languages, are able to provide a strong base from which bilingualism can be encouraged, so that the outcome is functional proficiency in both the mother tongue and English.

### **Issues**

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, the principle of providing equal educational opportunities (EEO) in language teaching and learning to minority groups has often been generalised across community language groups, school ESOL programmes, new migrants and second and third generation migrants. In the ESOL classroom, the primary aim is to teach English so that any information on the relationship between the students' first and second languages has been gathered by individual teachers. I believe that if we are to provide equal educational opportunities for all then we must acknowledge and cater for the different learning needs of students and make them and their families aware of the principles and benefits of bilingualism. It is important that parents know the importance of fostering their own and their children's oral and literacy skills in both their first (L1) and second languages (L2). In addition to the cognitive benefits of bilingualism, several writers also point out that students' ability to use their first language in an educational setting like the classroom is a basic human right and necessary for social justice (Skutnabb-Kangas and Phillipson, 1995).

Since the 1980s several research projects have shown the success of second language acquisition programmes which encourage, develop and promote mother tongue maintenance (Cummins, 1995). Research evidence strongly suggests that a high level of proficiency and certainly, well developed cognitive and literacy skills in the L1 are likely to enhance the effective learning of a second language (Bialystok and Cummins, 1991). A recent empirical study in Aotearoa/New Zealand involving Samoan high school students with a limited proficiency in English also showed that the students actually benefited from the opportunity to discuss their school work in Samoan even though the instructions, tasks and tests were in

English. In fact those students in the experimental group who were allowed to use Samoan performed better on an English medium test than a matched group of bilinguals who used English (Lameta-Tufuga, 1994).

In the past, the provision of education for students who come from a non-English speaking background (NESB) in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been largely ad hoc with the tendency to perceive students who are not monolingual English speakers as a group of ESOL students who might need to be withdrawn from the mainstream classroom for help with their English proficiency (Middleton, 1995). Although the Aotearoa/New Zealand curriculum framework now provides the chance for teachers to relate English learning to the learning of other languages, there is a need to establish criteria to identify the language needs of specific groups of NESB students and to gear teaching to those needs. This will allow them to participate fully in English-medium mainstream classes and give them the chance to catch up with their more proficient counterparts.

Furthermore, the concept of withdrawal, besides being pedagogically suspect and socially marginalising (Harklau, 1994; Cummins, 1994), is no longer feasible in Aotearoa/New Zealand, particularly in some Auckland schools where minority student enrolments exceed the number enrolled from the 'majority' pakeha group in certain mainstream classes. Although the practice of teaching language across the curriculum has gone some way to redressing the practice of withdrawal of ESOL students from mainstream classes, as Middleton (1995) states, "it is not at all clear that teachers in all subjects across the curriculum are equipped to supervise the language development of their pupils and have an appreciation of the language strategies that are appropriate to EAL (English as an Additional Language) students".

We as ESOL teachers therefore need to know:

- the social, political and linguistic background of students
- the help the students are likely to need given the nature of their L1 and the skills they already have in their L1 and L2
- the teaching methods that will best educate and empower our ESOL students in mainstream classrooms
- the communication strategies and the literacy skills they need to function effectively in both languages.

In the light of this knowledge, we might be better able to provide our students with equal educational opportunities. Currently, both the rationale for having access to a quality and equal education for all and the ways of providing it differ widely between institutions.

### **Relevance of sociolinguistic research to ESOL**

My interest in the empowerment of minorities in Aotearoa/New Zealand originated as a result of a 1991-1995 Wellington study in which I studied patterns of language shift among

members of my own community (Shameem, 1995). It involved interviews with 53 teenage Indo-Fijians and their mothers. All, like myself, were first generation migrants with the majority having arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand after two military coups in Fiji in 1987. The teenagers were either still at school or in tertiary institutions. The youngest had arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand at age six. This study has several implications for ESOL in Aotearoa/New Zealand which will be discussed in the last part of this paper.

### **English language proficiency of Indo-Fijian students**

In Fiji, English is used extensively and in fact Fiji English is a variety which is employed regularly among young people in Fiji for communication, regardless of ethnic background (Fijian or Indo-Fijian). Therefore the subjects in the Wellington study were expected to be bilingual, in their L1, Fiji Hindi, and in their L2, English.

The results showed an equal Fiji Hindi-English listening proficiency and a higher English (than Fiji Hindi) spoken proficiency among the teenagers. Fiji Hindi is not a literate language - there is no writing script, and therefore, as expected, literacy was highest in English (Shameem, 1994).

A majority of the teenagers when talking about their arrival and early years when they first started school in Aotearoa/New Zealand, described their difficulties in adjusting to the new environment. Many felt some element of prejudice from the host community and from their non-Indo-Fijian peers at school either towards their accent or when and if they spoke Fiji Hindi with one another (Shameem, 1993; 1995).

A large number of teenagers and their mothers spoke about how they had dealt with the problems at school: encouraged more use of English at home and sent the children to special needs ESOL classes at school. Students who were withdrawn from mainstream classes for specific ESOL instruction were getting the message that their English was still not good enough. To help them with their studies families were using more and more English at home and often Indo-Fijian families scraped money together to employ private tutors for their children.

Although most of the respondents had very positive attitudes towards their own language, Fiji Hindi, the educational, social and economic necessity for English had meant the abandonment of regular Fiji Hindi use at home. The teenagers spoke English almost exclusively when they were talking to their siblings, although some Fiji Hindi was still being used in communication with their parents and quite a lot in communication with grandparents if they also lived in the home. Very few respondents were making a conscious attempt to maintain their Fiji Hindi. Neither the mothers nor the teenagers knew about the benefits of bilingualism.

While in the ESOL field in Aotearoa/New Zealand we continue to be committed to the principles of equal educational opportunities, it appears that there is little real knowledge of what this might entail for migrant groups. The results of important educational research with regards to the benefits of bilingualism had not reached the members of the Wellington Indo-Fijian community.

### **English and first language maintenance**

Research into bilingualism shows considerable evidence of an interdependence of literacy and cognitive skills across languages (Bialystok, 1991; Cummins, 1994). In fact most positive findings of cognitive advantages related to bilingualism have been in studies where children are already competent in their first language and where instruction in a second language has resulted in high levels of competence in both languages (Cummins and Swain, 1986). Bilingual programmes which encourage and promote cognitive skills in the student's first language are also likely to help the students reach academic equivalence in English with their native English-speaking peers.

### **First language skills among Wellington Indo-Fijian teenagers**

Aotearoa/New Zealand studies of immigrant communities have suggested the inevitability of language shift and loss within three generations of migrants (Holmes et. al., 1993). The 1995 Wellington Indo-Fijian study conducted with 53 teenagers showed that in this community this language loss has begun within the migrating generation. The teenagers were experiencing a very rapid shift in the use of their first language. They rarely communicated with each other in Fiji Hindi and their use of it with their parents had also declined rapidly since their arrival in this country. In 1995, a majority of the teenagers studied had lived here for less than ten years and two-thirds of the teenagers had arrived following the 1987 Fiji coups. Within ten years of migration the community had shifted from the use of Fiji Hindi in the home domain to the predominant use of English.

### **Potential for bilingualism**

Having studied in Fiji, having taught English in Fiji secondary schools for nine years and after conducting the 1991-95 research, I believe that the Indo-Fijian teenagers were already fluent oral bilinguals when they arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The problems the teenagers faced were not language problems per se but social ones : adjusting to a new value system, new educational philosophies and social norms and a host community suspicion of migrants in general and 'accents' in particular.

Because of a lack of knowledge of the linguistic background of the Indo-Fijians, the specific needs of Indo-Fijian students were rarely addressed. For example, Indo-Fijian students with literacy problems were often withdrawn from mainstream classes and equated with other ESOL students, coming from strong literate cultures with materials and other



resources available in their own languages. Moreover, the oral English proficiency of the Indo-Fijian students was much higher than that of Asian migrants, for instance, who had minimal use of spoken English before their arrival. Because Fiji English is employed widely for informal communication in Fiji, the Indo-Fijian students were likely to have highly developed interpersonal communication skills in English but need greater support in developing their cognitive and academic use of language.

Unfortunately many of these adjustment problems were attributed to a lack of ability in English and therefore schools, peers and parents placed unnecessary and well-intentioned pressure on the children to assimilate linguistically to this environment. The Indo-Fijians as a social group and Fiji Hindi their first language were particularly susceptible to this pressure for several reasons.

### **Why the rapid language shift?**

In 1987, the Indo-Fijians came to Aotearoa/New Zealand as political migrants after the two military coups. A majority were granted residency status on humanitarian grounds. The desire to integrate, the lack of desire to return to Fiji because of whole family migration and the continuing political instability in Fiji placed tremendous pressure on them to become socially assimilated and accepted in this environment. Part of this involved becoming native-like users of English. A majority of us are now fluent New Zealand English speakers.

The first language of the Indo-Fijians, Fiji Hindi, is a non-standardised, oral language which is used only for informal purposes. In Fiji, English, Urdu, and Shudh Hindi are used in formal contexts and taught in schools. However, very few Indo-Fijian teenagers are fluent Urdu and Shudh Hindi users and prefer to use English for this purpose. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, they use English exclusively for this purpose.

Indo-Fijians have a much more positive attitude towards English than they do towards Fiji Hindi which they perceive as a low status, pidginised language of limited use.

In Fiji, English is the official language and is used extensively in business, commerce, law, education and in the media. In addition, Fiji English is used regularly for communication between the two main ethnic groups, Indo-Fijian and Fijian, by young people, in urban areas and in school playgrounds. The transition from the competent, communicative use of English in Fiji to habitual use in Aotearoa/New Zealand has often occurred without awareness.

Fiji Hindi is a language that developed with plantation language contact early this century and has input from several languages, including English. Code-mixing between English and Fiji Hindi is the norm rather than the exception among Fiji Hindi speakers. For example in my 1995 study when I conducted a test in Fiji Hindi with the teenagers, I found that they

persistently used certain English words (especially nouns and verbs) in Fiji Hindi sentences although when probed most of them knew the Fiji Hindi equivalent. Continuing code-mixing among teenagers will mean that even if productive use of Fiji Hindi continues among the members of this minority group, certain Fiji Hindi lexical items and structures will be lost to the Aotearoa/NZ born generation of Fiji Hindi speakers.

Finally, there seemed to be an almost complete lack of knowledge in the community about the benefits of bi/multilingualism. Neither did the members of this community know of any specific support for their own language from their children's teachers or the schools, or the wider community. Any impetus to maintain cultural and religious institutions in the community came from within the community itself. However, there was little support for specific Fiji Hindi maintenance classes, although the mothers were keen for their children to learn Shudh Hindi (Hindus) or Urdu (Muslims) in classes where Fiji Hindi could be spoken informally.

In summary, it seems that several factors have influenced the shift from Fiji Hindi-English bilingual language use to monolingual English language use in this community. These are internal and external factors: the status and nature of the language, community doubts about its usefulness in the future, the acceptance and frequency of code-mixing, the political nature of immigration, lack of awareness in the community of the benefits of bilingualism and the danger of language shift and loss, no knowledge of any support for first language maintenance, and host community attitudes to hearing a foreign language, or a variety of English, being spoken in front of them.

Moreover, peer and teacher pressure for native-like production of English, the absence of functions for which an exclusive use of Fiji Hindi is desirable and promoted, the irregular use of Fiji Hindi at home and the comparatively higher profile and perceived importance of English in the Indo-Fijian and wider community and in ESOL classrooms have also been powerful factors.

### **First language maintenance**

This study showed that the main factors affecting the amount of Fiji Hindi being retained by teenagers were dependent on their present age, their age at time of immigration and their length of stay in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The least amount of Fiji Hindi was being maintained by the younger migrants (less than 15 years), those who had immigrated before they were ten years old as well as those who had lived here for a longer period of time (4-10 years). These may be good general indicators of factors influencing subtractive bilingualism among new migrants.

On the other hand, for the Wellington Indo-Fijian teenagers, the high enclosure of the community has provided some support for language maintenance. Regular religious and social gatherings ensure that Indo-Fijians meet and use Fiji Hindi informally. Although the

children who attend speak mainly English, the mothers speak mainly Fiji Hindi, so that the children have receptive if not productive use of the language on these occasions. Early childcare in the community is provided by Fiji Hindi speaking grandmothers, while mothers work. Parents with very young children, particularly those who belong to Muslim and Hindu religious groups, also have access to older Indo-Fijian women who function as care-givers in the community. This is informally arranged within these groups.

Religion and marriage also contribute to first language maintenance in this community. Marriage outside the Indo-Fijian community is rare and arranged marriages with Indo-Fijians here, in Australia, in Canada and in Fiji are common. Religion plays a crucial role in the choice of a suitable partner. A majority of Indo-Fijians are Hindu with the remainder being Muslims and a very small minority, Christians. Cross-religious marriages are never arranged. Religious divisions also limit the number of occasions when Indo-Fijians may meet as a whole group. Religious gatherings in smaller groups are far more frequent than non-religious ones.

The stronger loyalty to their religious group over loyalty to the whole Indo-Fijian community has various linguistic implications. It means that the language associated with the religion will always have a higher status than Fiji Hindi, despite any contribution that Fiji Hindi might make to Indo-Fijian identity, and that parents will desire that their children first learn the religious language before the lower status home language, Fiji Hindi. Hindus would prefer their children to know Shudh Hindi while the Muslims want Urdu language competence. Few teenagers will ever reach the same degree of fluency in Shudh Hindi or Urdu as they have in English and Fiji Hindi.

Despite the learning preference for the religious languages in this community and the higher level of English (than Fiji Hindi) oral proficiency among the teenagers, the survey data demonstrated that these Indo-Fijians identified strongly with their ethnicity, history and culture.

For some, Fiji Hindi was an important symbol of a unique 'groupness'; for others, identity was realised by their strong sense of belonging to this particular community over other communities of Indian origin in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Most Indo-Fijians deliberately distanced themselves from the local Indians and Indian immigrants. They also preferred to have their religious rituals and prayer conducted by a fellow Indo-Fijian even though the Shudh Hindi/Urdu ability of the prayer conductor might not be perceived to be as fluent as a native speaker's.

Home language use patterns suggest that the home language situation in this community is in a state of flux - a case of Fiji Hindi/English bilingualism without diglossia, which Fishman (1972) suggests is typical of newly immigrant communities undergoing rapid social change. If the situation was one of stable bilingualism, then Fiji Hindi and English would be in a diglossic relationship, having specific roles in defined situations. This does

not appear to be true for this Wellington community and in fact English was reported as being used more and more to fulfil even those functions for which Fiji Hindi may have been used exclusively in Fiji. The most frequent and regular use of Fiji Hindi was among the older members of the community. Despite the shift in language use among the younger respondents and their siblings, group members still reported high levels of Fiji Hindi proficiency which suggests that it is still not too late for this community to revive interest in and maintain their first language.

### **The future for the Wellington Indo-Fijians**

In the Wellington Indo-Fijian community a knowledge of Fiji Hindi is considered desirable, if at all, for family and personal reasons rather than for its wider positive benefits. That shift in use may lead to loss had not been considered by many of the respondents. There was also little awareness of what maintenance attempts could entail and that it would mean the constant and consistent use of Fiji Hindi, especially in the home, and if possible the establishment of Hindi schools which consciously taught Fiji Hindi in addition to Shudh Hindi and Urdu/Arabic skills.

The current situation seems to be that, unless the individual or the community as a whole makes a conscious decision to maintain their language, Fiji Hindi proficiency will continue to decline and almost certainly the language will not be spoken at all by the next Aotearoa/NZ-born generation of Indo-Fijians in Wellington. Since the community itself is unaware of the issues and costs involved, members are often unable to make informed choices regarding language and culture education for themselves and their children.

### **Implications of this study for ESOL teaching in Aotearoa/New Zealand**

The positive cognitive effects of bilingualism have been well documented in research and literature in the last two decades. In particular, research has concentrated on the relationship between the two languages in a bilingual's speech repertoire, to optimise the cognitive development of the individual. For example, research into bilingualism indicates that users of strongly literate languages with academic traditions are able to transfer useful skills into learning their second language (Cummins, 1994). By implication therefore, the speakers of non-literate, low status languages which are used only for informal oral communication will have few skills to transfer in order to enhance their language proficiency in their second language. If a certain level of first language development is a necessary prerequisite to experiencing cognitive benefits in a second language, then Indo-Fijian students might be disadvantaged by the pre-literate, non-standardised nature of their first language.

While community attitudes to a first language may be positive, as was the case with the Wellington Indo-Fijians, the promotion of the use of Fiji Hindi to discuss, for example, homework with parents might be looked upon with suspicion by a community which has in



the past suffered prejudice because of their ethnic background and language. As Crowley (1996: 259) suggests for the use of vernacular languages in education in the Pacific, more than perceiving a language as being a viable subject of study, individuals need to see it as being worthy of study. While he suggests that we should train young Pacific Islanders to discuss their language intelligently in their own language, I suggest that for a Pacific language with minority status in a largely monolingual country like NZ, it is also important to urgently communicate to our students and the community, the benefits of maintaining and using a mother tongue specifically in relation to cognitive and academic performance in a second language - leading eventually to a greater empowerment of the minorities.

Although research shows that minority group parents perceive English language competence as being the key to success in the Aotearoa/New Zealand education system, few are aware of the relationship between mother tongue maintenance, English language competence, the interdependence of literacy-related or academic skills across languages (Cummins, 1994) and the positive consequences for metalinguistic development in children (Bialystok, 1991). Community education classes which give this information are desirable but difficult to establish and maintain. Parent-teacher interviews and student-teacher conferences might be the best time to discuss these issues. Teacher training and inservice courses also need to routinely identify strategies teachers can use with NESB students to determine their linguistic and social backgrounds and therefore cater more effectively for specific language related needs.

An awareness of the language background of the student will be a useful diagnostic clue to student performance. If the primary aim of our ESOL classes is to foster additive bilingualism then teachers need to be aware of variations in the linguistic background of their students and the implications of these. For example, some first languages are better maintained than others and while some languages are standardised with an orthography, others might be pre-literate languages with an oral tradition. In these situations the skills which might be transferable across language backgrounds would vary widely. A teacher who is unaware of the language needs of Indo-Fijian students might not be giving appropriate help with cognitively demanding reading and writing tasks in English because of their display of surface English language fluency. Specific problems that Indo-Fijian students are likely to have with English would be with pronunciation, appropriacy of variety to Aotearoa/New Zealand context, awareness of formal and informal use and register. Those students who come from out-of-town areas (outside Suva and Lautoka) may have difficulty with both fluency and accuracy in spoken and written contexts since the exposure to and use of English in the rural areas are more limited than in the urban (Siegel, 1987). Reading and listening ability would be advanced since all schooling in Fiji from age eight is conducted in English.

If both languages are to be important linguistic resources then the use of the first language regardless of the diversity of languages spoken in the classroom, needs to be validated frequently and promoted so that parents and students use it regularly and comfortably along

with their learning and use of English. The social and personal costs of losing one's language can be devastating, particularly when the language is the mother tongue of an already oppressed people. Legitimising and including all languages and cultures within the ethos of the classroom and acknowledging the normality of all cultural and linguistic norms is an essential first step to giving first language support to those needing it.

## Conclusions

Although the general trend for language loss in Aotearoa/New Zealand is three years, in some communities, because of the background and history of the group and the nature of their first language, shift and loss may occur at a faster rate. In these groups, ESOL teaching is unwittingly contributing to subtractive bilingualism.

While bilingual education is an option for larger and more visible language groups like the Maori and Samoan, there are many more language groups for whom it is not and in fact these groups have little knowledge about the principles and consequences of bilingualism or the necessity for it. It is therefore important that the linguistic and social background of the students be identified so that teachers across the curriculum have ready access to a knowledge base. This could include the nature of the languages known, the type of first and second language skills the students are likely to have and the expected and attainable competencies in known languages. This type of database will benefit individuals and communities in the long run as it will allow the teacher to gear instruction to the specific language related needs of NESB students.

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