

LANGUAGES AND FORMAL EDUCATION IN SAMOA¹

Elaine U. Lameta

Education Consultatnt

Education Development for Asia and the Pacific

Extra Skills

Introduction

There is no doubting that at the global level of education policies, governments are committed to improving social and economic equity within Pacific nations through providing better access to education for all students. The concept of equity is taken to mean treating all individuals and groups fairly and justly in the provision of equal educational opportunities. The principles of the New Zealand Curriculum Framework for example, profess a commitment to providing all students with equal educational opportunity, and a quality education for all students in which success for all students is fostered in appropriate and balanced programmes (p.6 & 7). In another example, the Cook Islands education policies maintain that equity must be upheld through policies that treat individuals and groups as fairly as is practicable (p.3). In yet another example, Samoa's education policies state a commitment to policies that promote equitable access to educational experiences, provision of facilities, equipment, curriculum materials, and educational outcomes for individuals and groups (p.11).

A major group for which the provision of equity has to be made, consists of those who must learn another language in order to have access to education. In New Zealand, where English is the majority language, these are students whose mother tongue is Maori, a Pacific Islands language or another community language. In many other Pacific nations these are speakers of indigenous languages who are required to do most or all of their schooling in English. This has been a colonial heritage - the former colonial language assuming importance as the language of power, of economic progress and academic advancement.

But to what extent can education be said to be fair or equitable in practice, under such conditions? In spite of the long standing acceptance of equality of opportunity and improved access to education, education in many of the Pacific Island nations is not fair in terms of the participation, retention rates, and success for groups identified as likely to be disadvantaged, for example, low socio-economic status, girls and women, the disabled, rural dwellers, and indeed, speakers of other languages who must learn through the medium of English. The

¹ This paper was delivered as a plenary speech at the Sixth National Conference on Community Languages and English for Speakers of Other Languages in Palmerston North, New Zealand on 27 September 1998.

academic achievement of children whose first language is not English, has long been a major educational concern. International evidence points to a pattern of failure of students from linguistic minorities in mainstream education. In New Zealand, Maori children as a group and Pacific Islands children do badly at school as do Australian Aboriginal children in Australia, Spanish speaking children in California, and Finnish children in Sweden (Benton, 1989).

This paper is based on the premise that bilingual students having facility in two languages have a number of gates to learning, a gate through using their first language, a gate through using their second language, or both. Either language can be used to understand task requirements, to interact with other learners, and to carry out the cognitive processes necessary for completing academic tasks. The linguistic interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1984) supports this position by claiming that knowledge acquired through linguistic interaction in one language may play a major role in making input in the second language understandable. By implication, the development of bilingual students' conceptual knowledge in their first language through interacting with other students of the same language may facilitate the acquisition of language knowledge, literacy skills, and subject matter knowledge in the second language, English.

There are many models for providing English language instruction to second language learners. They vary from mainstreaming, to transitional bilingual, two-way bilingual, to immersion. It is argued that in spite of a commitment to equity at the global level of education policies, language policies and practice continue to undermine the egalitarian aim of education - 'one in which no group experiences unfair outcomes', because for the most part, the gate through the first language is closed. This paper then is an invitation to re-examine the current language policies and structures in education in light of their underlying assumptions, their pedagogical effectiveness, and in light of their contribution to equity and social justice. It is argued that the issue of equity is not just about providing places for students in schools, but is dependent on improving the quality of education that is offered. Opening the first language gate, is therefore one important quality option associated with equity.

This paper focuses on the language policy and practice in Samoa's formal education system. It is argued that the transitional bilingual arrangement, in a country where an indigenous language is the majority language, needs to be re-examined in light of its assumptions, its pedagogical effectiveness, and its effects on Samoan as the indigenous language.

The language situation in Samoa

In Samoa there is only one vernacular - the Samoan language. It is the language of the church, of public ceremony, of most daily activities. Its writing system was devised by European missionaries and has been written for nearly two hundred years. It is estimated that about

250,000 people speak Samoan, making it the second most widely spoken indigenous vernacular in the Pacific (Mugler & Lynch, 1996, p.2). Because of the relatively large number of speakers of Samoan, and because of its wide use in most daily activities, it would appear that it has considerable status in Samoa. This observation is doubtful when one considers the pervading language attitudes held by the population and the language choices of individuals. While Samoan language has a degree of official status, in general its use is restricted to particular domains such as religious, ceremonial, social and cultural, but it is excluded from those activities associated with economic progress and academic advancement. Policy statements and institutional practice attest to the dominance and preeminence of English.

Language policy in education

Samoa's Education Policies state that "a prime objective of the Samoa education system is bilingualism: the production of bilingual individuals, fully literate in both Samoan and English" (p.7). "All schools will follow a systematic bilingual pedagogy that recognises Samoan as the first language of the vast majority of students. A transitional arrangement will ensure basic literacy in Samoan will be established before the introduction of English. The development of a literacy programme which ensures the systematic teaching and learning of Samoan throughout primary schooling, and of English from Years 4 to 8, will be priority" (p.5).

Transitional bilingual education is based on the belief that the transition between first language (L1) and English should be gradual and that instruction should be used throughout students' primary schooling to help students develop concepts, literacy, cognition and critical thinking skills in L1. Oral English is gradually introduced. When students demonstrate adequate skills in the L1, they then make a transition to literacy in English. Evidence from research in English dominant contexts (Brown et al, 1997, pp.13,14) suggests that transitional bilingual education can provide students with skills needed to succeed in schools. Students who are provided with substantial amounts of primary language instruction are also able to learn and improve their skills in other content areas as fast or faster than the norming population, in contrast to students who are transitioned quickly into English only instruction.

As with other models of bilingual education, three important principles are at work. Firstly, that children's cognition needs to be developed in the first language without interruption, for long-term cognitive and academic success in the second language, English. Secondly, that the use of the first language enables general learning to continue so that learners do not fall behind their peers whilst they are acquiring English. Thirdly, that English language development for learning is more likely to be successful if it builds on the conceptual and linguistic skills in the learners' first language. The interdependence principle that is evident here is reported in terms of the benefits of first language use to English language development and academic

achievement. Evidence is sorely needed on the development of first language skills in this arrangement.

The policy advocates (1) establishing Samoan literacy first, (2) introducing English at Year 4, (3) teaching Samoan throughout primary schools i.e. up to Year 8. In practice, Samoan is the medium of instruction during the first three years of school. English is introduced orally from as early as Year 1 in many schools. From Years 4 to 6 English is taught as a subject with Samoan being the language of instruction in other subject areas. From Year 7, English becomes the medium of instruction, Samoan language becomes a subject of study. At Year 8, a national selection exam is administered in English. The exam selects students for places in the three main government colleges. Mission colleges may use the same exam for their selection, or use their own selection exam.

Assumptions behind the transitional bilingual model

By ceasing to use Samoan as the medium of instruction at the end of Year 6, a number of assumptions are evident. Firstly, the expectation is that bilingual students will understand and complete task requirements through the medium of English, thereby overlooking the possibility that their first language may have a valuable role to play at various stages in the processes. By assuming that success in classroom learning is to be achieved solely through English, little or no consideration is given to students' proficiency in a first language. The assumption is that the primary language, in this instance Samoan, is not a valid language for the expression of more complex academic concepts and the development of higher literacy, cognitive and critical thinking skills. An associated attitude is that Samoan is of no real value for employment or international purposes. Continued learning using English is based on the assumption that it has the capacity for the development of higher order thinking skills, and as the language of international access and economic progress.

A number of things need to be remembered here. In the first place, all languages have the potential to develop vocabulary for new concepts. In the second place, languages develop in response to the uses to which they are put. The discontinuation of Samoan as a medium of instruction as early as Year 7 affects the degree to which it develops the vocabulary, the structures, and discourse features needed to express the conceptual attributes of other domains. This in turn affects peoples' attitudes to it. On the one hand then the policy has the effect of excluding Samoan language from opportunities to develop the mechanisms for its use in a wide range of contexts. On the other, it has the effect of withholding speakers of Samoan from equal opportunities to use their language to fully explore and develop concepts for learning. The overall effect is a devaluing of Samoan language in the eyes of many children, their parents and the community, to the extent that its structural limitations are accepted as natural, and its minimal role for learning as inevitable.

The second assumption is that the 3 years spent in learning English from Years 4 to 6 has adequately prepared students for the increasing demands of academic learning through English. We now know that the language proficiency associated with conceptual and academic learning takes at least 5 to 7 years to develop and students with no schooling in their first language take as long as 7 to 10 years or more to catch up to their English speaking peers (Collier, 1994).

We know also that the instructional context of the content area classroom is typically abstract and cognitively demanding for any learner. For limited English proficient students (LEP), however, learning is even more complex. When instruction is in English, two main tasks confront limited English proficient students: they are required to develop their English proficiency for school learning at the same time as attending to the requirements of content learning. In the content area classrooms, LEP students are expected to use English to reason through to conclusions, read and understand expository texts, develop arguments, analyse, synthesise and evaluate ideas. Furthermore they are assessed in English on how well they express themselves coherently either orally or in writing (O'Malley, 1988). The language associated with such activities is usually reduced in context and the cognitive demands are such that attention and mental processing capacity may be given over to comprehending and producing the complex language required. Less capacity therefore remains to work out effective strategies that will help in processing and learning new information. Native speakers of English on the other hand may not be so preoccupied with language demands and hence may be more able to apply processing strategies to enhance the quality of their learning. By diminishing the role of Samoan in content area learning, the vast majority of students who will only have been learning English for 3 years, are foreclosed from having equal opportunity to learn challenging content and higher skills. Opening the first language gate therefore will enable them to have equity in the acquisition and display of knowledge.

The third assumption is that bilingualism - the production of individuals fully literate in both Samoan and English, is achieved in Samoan language by Year 7 when Samoan ceases to be used as the medium of instruction. By definition, being fully literate in Samoan and English means being highly proficient in the skills of reading and writing in both languages. It requires being able to operate on a wide range of Samoan and English print at different levels of understanding, from understanding literal information to reflecting on the implications of what is stated literally, to thinking beyond the text where inferences are transformed into generalisations. It further requires being able to synthesise and transform information into coherent written texts.

If the goal is high levels of proficiency in Samoan and English, it follows that there must be continuing systematic instruction and use of both languages for learning throughout the schooling experience in Samoa. Language instruction in schools must enable students to

develop the full range of literacy skills in both Samoan and English. It means that Samoan language cannot just be a subject of study. It must continue to be used for learning subject content in secondary education, in addition to focused instruction in English. Bilingual programmes in contexts where an indigenous language is the majority language must be continuous throughout the school system and place equal value on the two languages.

The fourth assumption lies behind the selection examination in English at Year 8. By ranking and selecting students according to their examination performance in English, it is assumed that students' potential to participate in Samoan society can be validly gauged by the age of 12 to 13, in their second language. The life chances of those who do well are pursued through the main colleges, and those who don't, continue with secondary education at a Junior Secondary School terminating at Year 11 usually.

The Western Samoa Education Policies 1995 describe the state of the learning environment in secondary schools as inequitable, inefficient and inadequate for Samoa. At the time of the review (1995), the present dual-stream system of Junior Secondary and Senior Colleges had the following features:

- of those who enter junior secondary schools at Year 9 do not complete Year 11;
- about 75% of the total age-group do not proceed beyond Year 11;
- only about half as many girls as boys gain access to places in senior secondary schools although at the Year 8 exams, girls do better than boys;
- the system had poorly trained staff, a narrow teaching methodology, a curriculum that was irrelevant to village life, and teaching practice which do not facilitate the acquisition of bilingual skills;
- access to senior secondary education is seen to advantage urban over rural students.

I would like to suggest that the Year 8 selection exam in English by its very nature and function reproduces the social order outside the classroom. It is an example of policy and practice which Tollefson (1991) argues, ensures that vast numbers of people will be unable to acquire the kinds of language competence required by modern social and economic systems. He maintains that language is one criterion for determining which people will complete different levels of education. In this way, language is a means for rationing access to jobs with high salaries, thus creating unequal social and economic relationships (cited in Auerbach, 1993, pp.2, 8-9). The Year 8 examination in English is a policy mechanism which advantage students from English speaking backgrounds who are often in economically comfortable environments. It disadvantages the vast majority of Samoan students who will only have been learning English for 3 three years. The overall effect of it is that Samoan students with limited proficiency in English have a diminished power to participate in their society, determined for them at the age of 12 or 13 by a selection mechanism based on examination performance in their second language.

Arguments against the use of English only

There is evidence from teachers' reports that the use of English in bilingual societies countries can contribute powerfully to problems in maintaining quality in education. Increasingly in the town area parents are speaking to their children in English at home believing that by doing so, children will be better prepared for school learning. The problem however lies in what it means to know a language for learning in school. Evidently where children are exposed to limited models of English instead of the stronger Samoan language, parents may be less able to elaborate and extend the language and thinking of their children and may not be as able to communicate complex ideas as they can in Samoan. Children thus do not develop the quality of language use necessary for school learning in either language.

There is further evidence in some of the classroom practice. The belief of some teachers is that students need as much exposure to English from as early as possible to enhance their educational achievements. The practice then is to introduce English at Year 1 instead of building on the concepts and language skills already acquired in Samoan. The use of English so early can withhold opportunities for important cognitive development that could easily be provided in Samoan. Samoan dominant students then may fall behind their peers whilst acquiring English. Punishing students for using Samoan is still practised in many schools because it is thought to be taking time out of practising English. English teaching is allocated more curriculum time than other subjects thereby taking time which could be spent on content subjects. English itself may not be taught very well, so that poor comprehension of input materials in content subjects leads to low quality learning. The insistence on using English only and favouring its development through unequal distribution of time and resources, represents what Fairclough (1989) describes as taken-for-granted and naturalised practice, which rests on unexamined assumptions which serve to reinforce existing relations of power (cited in Auerbach, 1993).

Evidence supporting the use of first languages in classroom learning

There is evidence from both practice and research that support the use of students' first languages in school learning. In practice, like research elsewhere indicates, the use of [the] native language "is so compelling that it emerges even when policies and assumption mitigate against it" (Lucas & Katz, 1994, p.15). Whereas the official medium of instruction is English, Samoan predominated in the content classrooms where teachers used it to translate terms, explain concepts, provide instruction and so on. Faced with their students lack of comprehension of English, teachers switched to Samoan which means the material introduced in one language was repeated in the other (Lo Bianco cited in Mugler, 1996). Teachers considered that Samoan better promoted the understanding of concepts, for example, scientific concepts, when it is used for discussion, clarification, and relating science to the students' world (Lee Hang & Barker, 1997).

Many studies elsewhere report that students who have developed literacy skills in the vernacular were more successful in English academic skills than bilingual students whose language development in school has focused on proficiency in English. A specific study on Samoan language use investigating the extent to which the language of discussion influenced Samoan students' performance on academic tasks corroborate evidence published elsewhere that students with limited proficiency in English appear to benefit from the opportunity to discuss work in their primary language, even though the instructions, resources, tasks and criterion tests are in English. The students in the experimental group not only showed a better grasp of key vocabulary and a higher level of propositional knowledge, but they also produced more elaborated written answers to content questions. Thus when Samoan is the base language, there is likely to be an increase in cognitively focused work that will have a positive impact on the quality of learning and performance as tested in English (Lameta, 1994). Other studies reveal that the more proficient students were in both languages, the better their achievement scores in subject areas (Brown, 1997, p.9). Other findings (Auerbach, 1993) show that using L1 in classroom learning reduces anxiety and enhances the affective environment for learning, takes into account the socio-cultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners' life experiences, and allows for learner centred curriculum development. Most importantly, it allows for language to be used as a meaning-making tool and for language learning to become a means of communicating ideas rather than an end in itself.

Conclusion

The demands of learning in the content area classroom require students to be able to interact appropriately with others, understand task requirements and the procedures for completing them, understand and assimilate concepts, and to be able to use the language of each subject appropriately. As well as all of this they have to develop proficiency in academic English. Limited English proficient students are unlikely to have meaningful access to the content area knowledge and academic skills without the support of their primary language. To enable them to have equity in the acquisition and display of knowledge therefore, educators must consider students' first language as a key resource for both content and English language learning. The position being argued for here is a dual learning environment, one in which a teacher can provide the best possible input and guidance through Samoan and English, but also one in which bilingual students are able to act in positive ways to augment their own learning through using their primary language in a selective and focused manner.

Under traditional policies of language in education and classroom practice, the gate through the first language is either firmly closed, or only partially open in arrangements such as in transitional programmes where the use of a first language is seen as a vehicle for enhancing the learning of English. There are two responses to this situation. Firstly open the first language gate to the same extent that English is. Secondly acknowledge the constraints that the use of

English is placing on learning and restructure classroom tasks to offset the constraints. Open the first language gate would be the better policy for it is then that the constraints English places on learning are removed, influencing the way learning occurs. Opening the first language gate further contributes to language advancement through modernisation and standardisation. Ultimately it influences the status of Samoan language through increasing the domains within which it is able to be used.

If we take the notion that the quality on which success in any educational system depends, is the effectiveness with which language is used to convey thought processes in the completion of school tasks, fairness in education must then be viewed in relation to the policies on language use in education. While overarching educational policies demonstrate a broad vision to provide a system characterised by equity, quality, relevancy and efficiency, these become operationalised in the language policies in education. It is the policies and practice relating to language use that impact on the degree to which individuals and groups have access to a meaningful quality education. The way language education is provided can either positively affect equality of opportunities, and access to education, or it can be a barrier to educational achievement. Where students must learn through the medium of a second language, such as English, provisions must be made so that they have the necessary language support to enable access to the curriculum. Equality of opportunity in this sense may mean differential treatment to achieve the same outcomes.

The choice of a language for learning is a value judgement. It recognises the legitimacy and value of students' cultural background in the eyes of the teachers, students, and communities. There is no point in having a bilingual education policy if the choices made continue to advance the development of one language, and the decline of the other. The principle of equity if upheld requires not just access to education but an improved quality of education. Policies which are stated and deliberately implemented play a decisive role in determining the status of a language. The policy of transitional bilingualism is at odds with the broad aims of education for a system characterised by equity, relevancy and quality because it is discontinuous for Samoan language. For quality education, a bilingual methodology conducive to achieving high levels of fluency in both Samoan and English is one that is continuous for both languages. Samoa's language policy in education needs to re-examined in light of its contribution to equity.

Bibliography

- Auerbach, E.R. (1993). Reexamining English only in the ESL classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 27.
- Benton, R. (1989). Will it hurt? Teaching in Maori, or Pitjantjatjara. *Set*, 1.

- Brown, Z.A., Hammond, O.W., Onikama, D.L. (1997). *Language use at home and school: A synthesis of research for Pacific Educators*. Hawaii: Pacific Resources for Education and Learning.
- Cook Islands Ministry of Education. (1997). *Education Policy Draft 3*, May.
- Cummins, J. (1984). Wanted: A theoretical framework for relating language proficiency to academic achievement among bilingual students. In C. Rivera (Ed.), *Language proficiency and academic achievement*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London: Longman.
- Lameta, E.U. (1994). *Using the Samoan language for academic learning tasks*. Unpublished MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Lee H. and Barker, M. (1997). We need to use both - The place of the indigenous language in science lessons in Western Samoa. *Directions*, 19.
- Lucas, T. and Katz, A. (1994). Reframing the debate: The roles of native languages in English-only programs for language minority students. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28.
- Lo Bianco, J. (1988). Language in bilingual classrooms: Samoa as an example. Workshop held at the Pacific Languages Unit of the USP, Port Vila, Vanuatu, 24-28 October.
- Ministry of Education. (1993). *The New Zealand curriculum framework*. Wellington: Learning Media.
- Mugler, F. (1996). Vernacular language teaching in Fiji. In F. Mugler and J. Lynch (Eds.), *Pacific languages in education*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies.
- Tollefson, J.W. (1991). *Planning language, planning inequality: Language planning in the community*. New York: Longman Inc.
- Samoa Department of Education. (1995). *Western Samoa Education Policies 1995 - 2005*. Education Policy and Planning Development Project.