
Compulsory teaching of English: Impacts on learning in a Fiji classroom

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Abstract

English is the second language for the majority of students in Fiji, but it is viewed as the official language of instruction in Fiji classrooms. This study explored the impact of using English as a second language on students' academic performance. The study was conducted in a multicultural school in Labasa, located in the northern part of Fiji. This school consists of students and teachers from multicultural backgrounds. Using a qualitative approach, this study found that 77% of the students do not have problems in understanding and using English in learning. It was also found that, while Fijian Vernacular* is a compulsory subject, 30% of the indigenous Fijian students in this school do not perform well in Fijian Vernacular. One of the reasons is that indigenous Fijian parents speak to their children in English at home, fearing that their children will not do well in school if they do not know how to speak in English. Also, there are not enough qualified Fijian Vernacular teachers. This study recommends that parents be made aware of the importance of the Vernacular in students' learning, and the Ministry of Education should invest in developing the qualifications of Fijian Vernacular teachers. Finally, it is also recommended that a future study be conducted to find out the impacts of the teaching of compulsory Fijian Vernacular to non-indigenous Fijian students.

Keywords: Codeswitch, Compulsory Vernacular, Conversational Hindi, Conversational *iTaukei*, Cultural gap, Cultural literate, Fiji Baat, Fiji Language Policy, Language of Instruction, Multicultural classroom, Scaffold, Shudh Hindi, *Vosa Vaka-Viti*

Terms identified with an asterisk on first mention are explained in the glossary at the end of the article.

Introduction

Fiji is a multicultural country consisting of Indigenous Fijians, Indo-Fijians*, Rotumans*, Chinese and other racial groups. The major ethnic groups in Fiji are the Indigenous Fijians consisting of 54% of the population, and Indo-Fijians consisting of 38% (World Population Review, 2016). These two major ethnic groups both have diverse cultures and languages. The Indigenous Fijians have eight languages (Lewis, Simons & Fennig (eds.), 2016), while Indo-Fijians speak different languages such as Hindi*, Urdu, Tamil and Gujarati (Subramani, 2000a). Language is a vital tool for learning. However, students in Fiji come from a diverse language background and this may be a hindrance to learning in a multicultural learning context.

This paper aims to outline the impacts of teaching in the students' second language on students' academic performance. English is the Indo-Fijian and Indigenous Fijian students' second language. It is a compulsory subject and the language of instruction in all the subjects except Vernacular and Conversational *iTaukei** and Hindi. Since it is students' second language, many students have difficulties in understanding it, and hence this affects their academic performance. To address this issue, a research was carried out in a multicultural school on the second largest island in Fiji, Vanua Levu.

Context

This research was conducted in St Marys Primary School. It is located in Labasa town and consists of 23 teachers and 930 students. The school caters for three streams of Years 1 to Year 8 with a teacher-student ratio of 1:50. It is a multicultural school consisting of students from Indigenous Fijian (45%), Indo-Fijian (35%), Part European (12%), Banaban* (7%) and Chinese (4%) cultural backgrounds. The teachers of this school are of multicultural backgrounds too: 53% of the teachers are Indo-Fijians, 33% are Indigenous Fijians, 7% are Part European and 7% are Banabans. All these teachers have received teacher training and are qualified teachers: 13% hold a Post Graduate Diploma in Education, 40% a Bachelor in Education, 7% a Diploma in Education and 40% a Certificate in Education.

Methodology

Using the Qualitative and Indigenist Approach, data was collected through observation, questionnaires and *talanoa*, an open dialogue where people can speak from their hearts with no preconceptions (Halapua, 2003, p. 18). Information collected was triangulated, coded and analysed.

Language of instruction

All normal human beings are born with a Language Acquisition Device (LAD) which allows them to learn any language (Chomsky, 1968). However, the language learning strategy used will determine how effectively one learns a language (Griffiths, 2004). Fiji uses what Hymes (1972) calls 'communicative competence', a language learning strategy where the purpose of learning a language is to be able to convey and interpret meaning. According to Fiji's 2013 Constitution, "Conversational and contemporary *iTaukei* and Fiji Hindi* languages shall be taught as compulsory subjects in all primary schools". Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi languages are standard informal languages. Conversational *iTaukei* is taught to Indo-Fijian students and other second language speakers of the *iTaukei* language, and Conversational Hindi* is taught to *iTaukei* indigenous Fijian and second language speakers of standard Hindi. Due to the diversity in cultural backgrounds of students in Fiji, these subjects were made compulsory to enable children of different cultural backgrounds to communicate and understand each other. The position of standard Hindi and Fijian in the classroom is not clearly stated in the 2013 Constitution. Indeed, both the 2013 Constitution and the 2013 Fiji National Curriculum Framework are silent about the language of instructions in schools. There is a language policy in Fiji. This policy was created in 1926 and it highlights that students should be instructed in Vernacular in their first three years of schooling, and in the following year are to be scaffolded in learning in the English language. This policy is not visible in the 2013 Constitution, 2013 Fiji National Curriculum Framework or the Fiji Teacher Training Institutions Curriculum. As a result, Early Childhood to Year 3 teachers are unaware of the policy, and therefore, instruct children in Early Childhood to Year 3 in English, a new, strange and confusing language to the new learners.

Fiji is recognised as a multilingual state in the 1997 Constitution and specifies Fijian, Hindi and English as the official languages with equal status, use and

function (Subramani, 2000b). In practice, English is a compulsory subject from Early Childhood to Year 13 and is the language of instruction for all subjects except Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi in primary school. Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi are only taught up to Year 8. *VosaVaka-Viti** and Hindi are optional subjects and their content includes language, culture and traditions and literature. Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi focus mainly on informal oral communication that will enable any user of the language to get by in daily conversations. No written skills are required and this subject is not examinable. *Vosa Vaka-Viti* and Hindi, on the other hand, are examinable and students are required to develop their listening, speaking, reading and writing skills in these subjects.

According to the participants of this research, the language of instruction in this school is English. However, only 27% of the teachers use it as their main language of instruction, while 7% of the teachers use Vernacular and 66% of the participants code-switch. Of all the teacher participants, 80% teach Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi while the other 20% either observe while other teachers teach, or are assigned to supervise and teach non- and slow readers. In addition, all the participants stated that *VosaVaka-Viti* is compulsory for Indigenous Fijian students and Hindi is compulsory for Indo-Fijian students, but students of cultural backgrounds other than Indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian are given the choice to do either of the subjects.

Impact of English as a compulsory subject

Some of the language problems identified by the participants were as follows: 18% of the participants stated that children in this school have problems with phonics, 26% stated that students have difficulty in spelling, 12% stated that students have issues with grammar, 26% stated that children have difficulty with reading and 18% stated that students cannot read. The basics of language learning in phonetics entails that if children cannot pronounce letters they will have difficulties in spelling words, creating sentences, reading and also writing. Since children begin learning in English, their second language, they are not well versed with their vernacular, and hence have difficulties in learning English, let alone understand it. Vernacular lays a firm foundation for learning other languages, and using it as a language of instruction in school connects students to their language of

home and heart. Since it is the language of school, having a dominant place in their lifelong education (Ouame, 2003), it is vital for cognitive development and a foundation for second language acquisition (Taufe'ulungaki, 2009). But there is a cultural gap between the expectation of the school culture and home culture (Little, 1995). When Vernacular is not put in its rightful place, students find learning difficult and their academic achievement challenging, as proven by studies conducted by Dakuidreketi (2014) and Bakalevu (2008) in Fiji schools.

Fiji is not alone in this language issue; other small island countries in the Pacific share similar concerns. In Kiribati, Samoa, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Tonga, English is one of the official languages and the language of instruction in schools; English also shares the same status as their standard vernacular language. Despite English being recognised as the official language of instruction, teachers in these countries codeswitch to enable students to understand what is being taught since the majority of the students do not understand English. Consequently, students do not enjoy learning in English and eventually drop out of school. Moreover, the status of the local vernacular and culture is devalued, and hence students' discipline is affected (Crowley, 1989; Lameta, 2005; Moseley, 1991; Resture, 2013 and Taufe'ulungaki, 2009).

Impacts of Compulsory Vernacular: *Vosa Vaka-Viti* and Hindi

Indigenous students in St Marys either speak in their own dialect at home or speak in English. However, *Vosa Vaka-Viti* is taught in the standard Fijian language which is a different language from the language children speak at home. As a result, they have difficulty translating *Vosa Vaka-Viti* into their dialect, and therefore get frustrated trying to understand *Vosa Vaka-Viti*. In their frustration, 30% of these students prefer to sit in for the *Vosa Vaka-Viti* class, but request their teacher that they not sit the examination for this subject. In the end, the students' total aggregate examination mark is affected. Another reason these students do not like to learn Vernacular could be that they are taught by unqualified Vernacular teachers. According to this research, only 80% of the teachers are trained to teach Vernacular. In practice any Indigenous Fijian teacher is believed to be able to teach Vernacular, and hence any Indigenous Fijian teacher who does not have a large enough teaching load is usually asked to teach Vernacular to make up his or her

teaching load. Since these teachers were not trained to teach Vernacular, they do not put emphasis on the planning of this subject, and hence teach Vernacular by asking students to read their textbooks and answer the given activities. Less interaction, collaboration and active learning as required in a language class is usually the norm. As a result, students do not see any value in learning their Vernacular and hence are not interested in learning it.

For Indo-Fijians students, Fiji Hindi is the language commonly used at home. However, in school, they are taught *Shudh* (Pure) Hindi. Teachers of Hindi do not even speak Pure Hindi in their homes but only learnt it in school. Most of the students who take Hindi find it difficult and like the Indigenous Fijian students, 30% of the Indo-Fijian students prefer not to sit the examination for this subject. This research also found that 50% of the Indo-Fijian students are not competent in speaking Hindi. Some Indo-Fijian parents have informed teachers that they do not want their children to learn Hindi because they do not speak it at home, and that they prefer that their children learn English because that will help them get a job. Moreover, they do not value Hindi and are embarrassed that their children are learning it.

The students' lack of interest in these subjects is a contributing factor to their futile attempt at learning Vernacular. Since they do not have a strong desire to communicate in this language, they are not motivated to learn it (Rubin, 1975). Furthermore, the students' indifference has also affected their understanding and evaluation of their cultures. Since these students prefer not to learn these subjects, they do not get a chance to learn about their culture. Therefore, their values and attitudes towards schooling are also affected. As stated by 80% of the teachers, discipline is an issue they are facing in this school and this could be due to the fact that students are neither learning about their culture in their homes nor in school.

Language is very much related to culture and development ...
Children who are educated in a foreign language lose their identity and are deprived of the possibility to express themselves in their proper vocabulary. (Küper, 2003)

Fijian Vernacular, like any other Pacific Island language, is defined by the Fijian culture and is value laden; it communicates beliefs, emotions, sentiments, attitudes and behaviours which are purposeful and useful

(Thaman, 2009) for an indigenous child's survival. The Fiji National Curriculum and Language Policy clearly defines the position of Vernacular as a subject so that it can be appropriately taught. In doing so, teachers will know what to teach and how to teach it, and at the same time students will see the relevance of the subject and enjoy the lessons. As a result, they will be able to do well academically and become marginal citizens – citizens who are able to live successfully in both the traditional and western world.

Conversational *iTaukei* and Conversational Hindi

According to the teachers, all the students enjoy Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi. One of the reasons could be that they do not need to sit an exam for these subjects. Also, students get to learn a new language that they can use to converse with students of a different cultural background. Another reason could be that this language is not taught in a formal kind of way like English, *Vosa Vaka-Viti* and Hindi. The students' free attitude in learning a conversational language accelerates their acquisition of a new language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). According to this research, all the Indo-Fijians are competent in Conversational *iTaukei* and all Indigenous Fijians are competent in Conversational Hindi. In learning Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi, students are also able to understand their teachers when they code switch. Previously, Indo-Fijian students could not understand Indigenous Fijian teachers when they code switch and teach in the *Vosa Vaka-Viti*. However, now Indo-Fijian students can understand them and this has helped them in better understanding their subjects. Indeed, Indo-Fijian and Indigenous Fijian teachers, in observing the teaching of the Conversational subjects, have learnt these languages. Therefore, they are able to translate their lessons in both *Vosa Vaka-Viti* and Hindi. Students' perceptions and understanding are improved when teachers translate their explanation from English to their mother tongue.

Language competency

Overall, 77% of the students are competent in Conversational English and 57% of the students are competent in Conversational Vernacular. This to some extent has affected the students' literacy competency. According to this research, the English literacy rate for this school is 76%. With reference to this figure, it could be said that 24% of the students are illiterate. Therefore, it can

be said that it is important that students know their Vernacular. Since these students are competent only in oral English, they have not developed English comprehension skills and hence this has affected their literacy. Furthermore, since more than 40% of these students are not competent in Vernacular, they may find difficulty in learning a second language, in this case English. Since English is the language of instruction in this school, it is vital that all students are competent in English so that they can understand their lessons and perform well academically. Students learn better when they know the language they are learning in and they are learning in a language they speak at home, otherwise learning may become very difficult (Jung, 1997). However, since 23% of the students are not competent in English, this explains students' non-performance and discipline problems in class.

Conclusion

Figure 1: Summary of language-related education problems

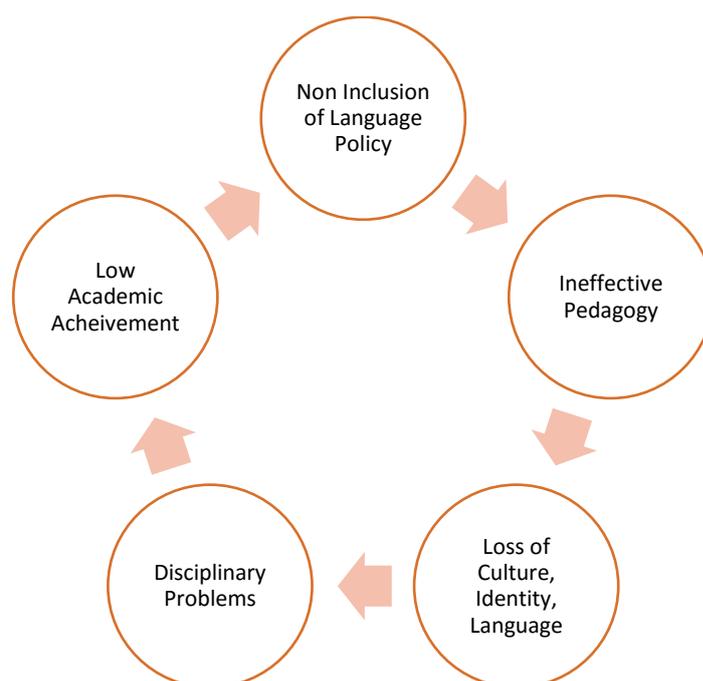


Figure 1 above summarises the impacts of the non-inclusion of the language policy in the 2013 Fiji National Curriculum Framework and the teacher training institutions' curriculum. The non-inclusion of the language policy in important educational policy documents has created confusion amongst teachers. This has also affected the language of instruction used by teachers in schools. This in turn has contributed to the students' negative attitudes

and performance in school. This research found that, though Vernacular is supposed to be the language of instruction in the first three years of schooling and students are to be scaffolded in learning in English in Year 3, this is not the practice. Students are instructed in English from Early Childhood and are sometimes confused and frustrated in the learning process because they find the language new, strange and difficult. In addition, this research also found that 30% of both Indigenous and Indo-Fijians do not do well in Vernacular because they think it is not an important subject. Their non-performance in Vernacular has not only affected their academic performance but their discipline too. However, all the students enjoy learning Conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi because students do not have to sit an exam for these subjects and also because students are able to converse with students of a different cultural group. Students' competence in conversational *iTaukei* and Hindi has helped them understand subjects that teachers code-switch in.

Recommendations

To improve learning in multicultural classrooms in Fiji, a few things need to be put right. First, the 1926 Language Policy should be reviewed and made visible in the Fiji National Curriculum Framework and the Teacher Training Institutions Curriculum. This is to enable teachers and teacher trainees to know the language of instruction in schools and use the appropriate language.

Second, Vernacular should be made compulsory in primary schools and, instead of Indo-Fijian students learning *Shudh* Hindi, they should learn Fiji Baat because this is their mother tongue. In addition, the primary school learning years are the early years when children are supposed to be spending a lot of time at home learning their culture, and hence learning Vernacular in school during these years will help the students to learn and understand their culture. However, teachers need to be culturally literate and know appropriate pedagogy to use in teaching Vernacular. In doing this, students will enjoy learning because the language they are learning is relevant and practical, and the teachers are using suitable pedagogy.

Third, more research in this area should be conducted, and teachers, parents and stakeholders need to be made aware of the findings. In doing this, they

should be able to know the significance of the role of Vernacular in students' academic performance and their behaviour.

Finally, language is an important tool in learning, and without knowledge of the language of instruction, students will not perform well academically. Hence, having a relevant language policy that will enhance learning in a multicultural classroom is vital. Without this, learning is impractical and a waste of time.

Glossary

Banabans: Fijians with cultural roots to Banaba Island, a solitary raised coral island 1,550 km to the north-west.

Conversational Hindi: Conversational Standard Hindi taught to Indigenous Fijian students, or second language speakers of Standard Hindi, as a compulsory subject.

Conversational *iTaukei*: Conversational Standard Fijian taught to Indo-Fijian, or second language speakers of Standard Fijian, as a compulsory subject.

Fiji Hindi, Hindustani, Fiji Baat: A lingua franca spoken by Indo-Fijians at home. The language consists of a mixture of Hindi dialects, Urdu, Tamil, English and Indigenous Fijian words. This lingua franca was created to suit the new environment the Indo-Fijians are living in, and to also make conversation easier.

Hindi: Hindi Vernacular taught as a subject in the Shudh (Pure) Hindi language (formal Hindi language used in India)

Indo-Fijians: Fijians of Indian descent

***iTaukei*:** indigenous Fijians

Rotumans: the indigenous inhabitants of Rotuma, a small island group forming part of Fiji

Vernacular: The standardised varieties of Fijian and Hindi used in the schools

***VosaVaka-Viti*:** Fijian Vernacular taught as a subject in the standard Fijian language. It is a language created by the Colonial government in the 1800s to enable the indigenous Fijian people to communicate with each other since there were about 300 communalects in the Fijian language and it was difficult for indigenous Fijians from different parts of Fiji to understand each other.

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