

Towards the Formulation of a Language Policy for Pacific Preschools: A Survey of Language Use by Parents and Teachers

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Since the Pacific Preschool Council was established in 1980, it has been committed to providing the kind of teacher training that will help preschools become more culturally and socially appropriate to the communities they serve rather than mindless copies of schools in more developed countries. Each community has at least one native language which is central to its culture and the use of this language in the preschool has been encouraged. The Council has not, however, seriously addressed the question of whether English should also be taught. It has known that in most preschools some attempt is made to teach English, probably because, since the missionary and colonial era, any institution calling itself a school would see one of its functions to be the teaching of English. But the Council has not really known how English was taught throughout the region nor during how much of each session English was spoken. More importantly, little consideration has been given to the possible effect the teaching of English may have on the maintenance and development of the first languages of our children. Neither has much thought been given to whether this is the most suitable age for the children to begin to learn a second language, nor to the most effective ways for them to learn that language in a preschool setting, if we really wish them to do so.

This is a report of a preliminary survey I carried out in mainly urban preschools in seven countries of the region. It can be regarded as a first step in providing the information needed to help formulate a language teaching policy. In the research I have been concerned with:

- (a) the home language backgrounds of the children in order to find out who seems to run the greatest risk of having their first language replaced by English or a hybrid form of their first language and English;
- (b) the assumptions parents and teachers are making about the advisability of teaching English at this stage, and
- (c) in a broad way, the manner in which teachers expose children to English.

As a result I have tried to find answers to the following questions:

1. What exposure to their native languages and to English have the children had in their homes?
2. Which languages do parents want their children to learn at preschool?
3. What reasons do parents have for wanting their children to learn English at preschool?
4. What reasons do parents have for not wanting their children to learn English at this stage?
5. What reasons do teachers have for teaching English?
6. What languages are teachers using in preschools?
7. When do teachers use English during the school session?
8. What problems are teachers aware of when teaching first languages and English?

To find answers to these questions two questionnaires were devised and distributed to 194 teachers and 216 parents in seven countries of the region. The distribution and collection were carried out by students in the Teacher Training Programme offered by the Pacific Preschool Council in association with the University of the South Pacific Extension Services, Continuing Education programme.

The data gathered from these questionnaires had to be considered in the light of situational factors which varied from country to country. These are outlined below:

1. Tonga, Western Samoa, Tuvalu, Kiribati and Nauru each had one native language which is used at home and in community activities. In Nauru the majority of the preschools operate as part of the government education system so that teachers feel constrained to introduce English as soon as possible in accordance with official policy. In the other four countries the preschools are not part of the government education system.
2. In Vanuatu and Solomon Islands a great variety of native languages are spoken and a Melanesian Pidgin is the lingua franca. English is also used in this capacity to some extent, but in Vanuatu, a former British/French condominium, the Pidgin (Bislama) has been adopted as the national language. Whereas in Solomon Islands the preschools are not yet part of the education system, in Vanuatu the preschools the Council is involved with in Port Vila are sections of government schools where the teaching of English is encouraged.
3. Fiji is similar to the Melanesian countries in that a number of native languages are spoken, most notably Fijian and Hindi, but also a

number of other Indian, Pacific and Chinese languages. Although preschools are registered with the Ministry of Education, which exercises some supervision over them, there is not the same pressure to teach English as there is in Nauru or in Vanuatu. Nevertheless the multi-racial composition of many classrooms puts pressure on teachers to develop a common language for the sake of communication between children and teachers.

Having considered the data from the questionnaires in the light of the situations briefly described above, I have suggested areas for further research and listed a number of important issues to be addressed in parent and teacher education programmes.

Languages spoken at home

Let us first consider the findings on the languages spoken in the homes of the children, which are summarised in Table 1. It should be noted that the percentages have been calculated on the basis of the total number of questionnaires submitted in any one country and this can be misleading. In Western Samoa, for example, of the 22 questionnaires answered only 11 were from families where both parents were native Samoan speakers. Of the remaining 11, eight were from families who had at least one native English speaking parent. In addition three were from overseas Filipino families. Similarly in Tonga, of the eight families where English was spoken or where English and Tongan were spoken, in four cases at least one parent was a native English speaker. In other words, although Table 1 gives a complete picture of the languages spoken in urban preschoolers' homes, it is somewhat overweighted by the number of overseas children represented. Hence Table 2 is also included to show the extent to which local languages are still spoken at home by local people.

Apart from indicating the presence in our urban preschools of a group of native English speakers whose needs must be catered for and who may be regarded as potential teachers of their fellow students, Tables 1 and 2 suggest several conclusions. It is pleasing to see that, except in Vanuatu, the great majority of local children can be expected to come to school speaking their native language. It cannot be assumed of course that this language is, as yet, fully developed, but if it continues to be used in the preschool and in the home there is a good chance that it will be maintained. In Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Fiji, however, there are small

Table 1
Languages Spoken in the Homes of Preschool Children

	L ₁	L ₁ +E	Bislama	Bislama+L ₁	Bislama+E	E	Filipino
Samoa	41%	13.6%				31.8%	13.6%
Tonga	66.7%	25%				8.3%	
Kiribati	100%						
Tuvalu	80%	20%					
Nauru	93.3%	6.7%					
Vanuatu	23.8%		33.3%	4.8%	14.3%	23.8%	
Solomon Is.	100%						
Fiji	62.6%	23.4%				14%	

L₁ = first language

E = English

Table 2
Languages Spoken in the Homes of Speakers of Local Native Languages

<i>Language</i>	<i>Percentage of speakers</i>
Samoa	81.8
Tongan	80
Kiribati language	100
Tuvaluan	80
Nauruan	93.3
Vanuatu local language	38.5
Solomon Is. local language	100
Fijian	92
Hindi	76

but significant groups of children who have heard both their own language and English spoken at home. Being at a stage when they are learning 'language' rather than distinguishing between languages they may be mixing the two. This is particularly likely in the 88% of cases where at least one parent speaks both languages so that they are not clearly separated for the child. (Unfortunately we do not have information about whether parents regularly address the child in one or both of the languages.) It seems that this group of children in the four countries mentioned are most vulnerable to whatever language input they receive at preschool. There is still a chance that their native languages can be developed, but there is also a possibility that English may become dominant. There is also a strong possibility, particularly if they are

exposed to such a variety of speech outside the preschool and home, that these children are speaking a hybrid version of their own language and English. If this variety of speech is widely used in a community, moreover, we are likely to see much more rapid change in the forms of native languages than we would probably wish.

The majority of urban children studied in Vanuatu do not appear to have much chance to maintain or even to learn the native language of their parents. Only 38% are hearing these languages spoken at home and about 5% hear their own language and Bislama. Moreover, because the teacher is faced with children from many different islands all speaking different native languages, only one of which will be her own, it is an almost impossible task for her to develop the native languages of her students. Added to this is the difficulty she has in teaching English to children who already speak Bislama. They will tend to understand a good deal of what she says in English and may not be challenged to figure out how this new language works and to try to use it in the same way as a child who had never heard English or Bislama before might do.

Languages parents want children to learn

Having identified those groups of children who appear to be at greatest risk of losing their native languages, let us examine what languages parents would like taught at preschool (Table 3) and to what extent parents' wishes relate to the actual practice of the teachers (Table 4).

It appears that very few parents anywhere in the region, except Solomon Islands, where our sample was very small, expect that only the native language will be taught. Teachers who wish to teach only the native language will have a big parent education job ahead of them. In practice, however, it is clear that even fewer teachers teach only the first language.

How and when teachers speak English

It would seem that those children who are at risk of losing their first language on entering the preschool are unlikely to have it become dominant or to have its maintenance greatly encouraged. To get a clearer picture, however, it is necessary to find out how and when English is being used during the preschool session. Is there the same kind of mixing

Table 3
Languages Parents Want Taught at Preschool

	L ₁ only	L ₁ + E	E only	E + Bis	L ₁ + E + Bis	French	E + French
Tonga	8.3%	87.5%	4.2%				
Kiribati		85.7%	14.3%				
Tuvalu*		80%	6.7%				
Vanuatu		4.8%	61.9%	9.5%	9.5%	4.8%	9.5%
Nauru		66.7%	33.3%				
Solomon Is.	40%**		20%				
Fiji***		77.57%	21.5%				
Samoa	4.5%	54.5%	41%				

* 13.3% no opinion

** 40% whatever the community thinks best

***.93% no opinion

Table 4
Languages Used in Preschools

	L ₁ only	L ₁ + E	E only	Other combination
Tonga		100%		
Kiribati		100%		
Tuvalu		100%		
Vanuatu		10%	5%	85%
Nauru		73.4%	13.3%	13.3%
Solomon Is.				100%
Fiji	.93%	75.7%	8.4%	15.8%
Samoa	7.1%	92.9%		

of languages as they experience at home or are the languages separated and identified with particular teachers or particular lessons? Table 5 throws some light on this subject. Children in Samoa, Tonga and Tuvalu who are hearing both the L₁ and English at home will be exposed to the L₁ for the greater part of the school day. It is true that 21% of the Samoan teachers are translating from Samoan to English, but the majority are committed to developing the Samoan language and report that the special English lesson is usually only 15 minutes long and in some schools takes place only twice a week. In Fiji where teachers have to cope with a much more complex situation, with the children in the classroom

speaking several different native languages, the risk remains high that children will be hearing a mixture of two languages neither of which is usually specific to a person or a lesson. Indeed they may not hear their own language spoken, except imperfectly by other children, if their own native language is different from their teachers'. Particular notice should also be taken of the fact that nearly fifty percent of the teachers in Fiji are continuously translating from one language to the other, and a number of those who use English only in the special lesson say that they translate at this time. For example, if they tell a story or teach colours or shapes they do so in two languages.

Table 5
When Teachers Use English

	All time to all children	All time with translation	In a special lesson	Not used	Used for Combined Class	All time to L ₁ Eng*
Samoa		21.4%	71.4%	7.2%		42.8%
Tonga			100%			10%
Kiribati			100%			
Tuvalu	9.1%		90.9%			
Nauru	20%	40%	40%			20%
Vanuatu	57.1%	9.5%	28.6%	4.8%		
Solomon Is.			100%			
Fiji	7.5%	48.6%	29.9%	2.8%	7.5%	3.7%

*L₁ Eng = First language is English

To conclude this section it may be stated that possible loss of the native languages in Tonga and Samoa could well be prevented by their almost exclusive use in the preschool, particularly as they are widely used in the community and between siblings. In Vanuatu it is difficult for the teacher to do anything to compensate for the loss, but in Fiji some help could be given even in a multiracial school if it were possible to ensure that preschools were staffed by both Hindi and Fijian speaking teachers. It also seems that Fiji may be an appropriate place to carry out some longitudinal studies of children's first language maintenance comparing different home language backgrounds and preschools where English is used in varying degrees.

Let us now consider those children who have been exposed only to their

native languages at home and the effect preschool language use is likely to have on them. We must bear in mind that when they enter the preschool, or even when they leave it, their language is not fully developed. There is a possibility of it being replaced by English or a hybrid version of English and their own language. We must also recognize a great variety of individual differences between the children in their language learning capabilities and their experiences outside the school and home. All I can do is to suggest some general trends. If English is being spoken at all times to all children in such a way that it is comprehensible to them, they may well develop a home/school bilingualism (See Table 5). It is only in Vanuatu, however, that many teachers use English all the time to all children (57%). This seems to be linked with the problem in teaching English mentioned most frequently by teachers, the difficulty of communicating (See Table 9).

If, on the other hand, English is used all the time but with translation into the native language, the children might well ignore the English as they will be able to manage quite well without exerting themselves to understand it. Merrill Swain,¹ quoting the work of Lily Wong Fillmore, makes the following relevant comments:

... children apparently learn to ignore the language they do not understand. If the same, or related, message is typically given in both languages then there is no motivation to try to figure out what is being said in English. Lilly Wong Fillmore (1980)² describing video-tapes of children in a classroom where a concurrent translation was used, reports the students "alternatively being attentive and inattentive as the teachers switch between languages in their lessons. During the time the language they do not understand is being spoken, the students simply stop listening" (p.29).

As nearly 50% of Fiji teachers and 40% in Nauru do translate this would be a useful topic to include in teacher education in the future. Perhaps the best we can say for the method is that it poses little threat to the maintenance of the child's first language, but it involves a lot of wasted energy for the teacher. And sympathy must be felt for the teacher in both Fiji and Nauru. In Fiji she is trying to develop one common language in which she can teach both Fijian and Hindi speaking children and others, and in which the children can communicate with each other. In Nauru the teacher feels very strongly the pressure of the Education Department policy to use English, as evidenced by statements like the following:

"I am not doing my job if I teach Nauruan. My duty is to teach them English."

"They need to know more about their second language rather than their own mother tongue which is born with them."

And yet, when the teacher knows the children do not understand, it is a natural reaction for her to translate. Again teachers need help with the methods to introduce English if they feel it must be introduced; and there are no easy answers to how that should be done.

Use of English in a special lesson seems to be the most favoured choice of teachers across the region (See Table 5). If children are exposed to English in this way for the first time, there is a possibility that they will learn English without it becoming dominant or interfering too much with the development of their first language. This is more likely to happen if the English spoken during the lesson is presented in such a way that the children can grasp towards meaning, with the teacher providing strong contextual support but not translation. Ideally the English lesson is taught by a different teacher from the one who speaks to the children in their own language, or if it must be taught by the same teacher, she restricts her use of English to this particular lesson. From the present data we cannot really determine what typically takes place in the English lesson although a number of teachers say that they translate. Obviously this is a matter for training and research.

Parent and teacher views on teaching English

We now turn to the question of why it is considered necessary to teach English in Pacific preschools. Table 6 gives parents' reasons for wanting their children to learn English.

By far the most popular reason parents have for wanting their children to learn English at preschool (42%), is for success in education, some mentioning primary school, others secondary, and still others education in general. The fact that English is an international language was the second most common reason given with 20%, and 12.5% gave communication in the community as a reason. Many respondents gave several reasons rather than just one. Among the teachers' reasons for using English (See Table 7), the most popular overall is communication in the community. If communication with other children, a category not

separated out by teachers, were added to the parents' figure for communication in the community, the result for communication would be similar for parents and teachers, 22% compared to 24% overall. However only 19% of the teachers mentioned success in education as the reason for teaching English, as compared with 42% for parents. It should also be noted that the figures for communication in the community are heavily weighted by the total for Fiji where there is practical need for a lingua franca in everyday life.

Table 6
Parents' Reasons for Wanting Children to Learn English at Preschool

	Samoa	Tonga	Kiribati	Tuvalu	Nauru	Vanuatu	Solomon Islands	Fiji
For success in education	45.4%	20.8%	14.2%	100%	46.6%	57%	20%	38.3%
To communicate in community	9%							23.3%
To communicate with other children	13.6%					4.7%		14.9%
To use the official language								7.4%
To use an international language		33.3%		40%	33.3%	38%		19.6%
To read books/papers						19%	20%	1.8%
It is own L ₁	22.7%	12.5%				9.4%		2.8%
Because children learn fast and easily	4.5%							5.6%
For future success		4.1%		26.6%	33.3%	19%	20%	4.6%
To use Second language of country		8.2%						.9%
To use L ₁ at home L ₂ school								1.8%
Parents attended English-speaking school						14.2%		
To contact other Pacific Islands						4.7%		

Table 7
Teachers' Reasons for Using English

	Samoa	Tonga	Kiribati	Tuvalu	Nauru	Vanuatu	Solomon Islands	Fiji
For success in education	14.2%	20%			33.3%	80%		9.3%
For communication in community								44.8%
To use an international language	21.4%	10%		9%	20%	5%		1.8%
To read books/papers								
Because young learn easily	7.1%		20%		13.3%	10%		3.6%
It is own L ₁ for some							50%	5.6%
To use L ₂ of country		60%			33.3%	5%		5.6%
For future success						5%		4.6%
Parents want it	14.2%	25%						3.6%
To communicate with teacher								5.6%
To learn it properly								4.6%
It is official policy					40%	10%		7.2%
Most speak it								6.5%
To introduce it		25%	60%	9%				
It is L ₁ of teacher	7.1%					5%		
For NES* children	50%	10%						

*NES = Native English Speaker

The interesting thing about the reasons given by both parents and teachers is the underlying, unstated assumption that to begin the process of learning English at the preschool age is more likely to bring success. A few parents, however, in Tonga, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji gave reasons for not wishing English to be taught (see Table 8). The strongest reasons were expressed by Tongan and Solomon Island parents who fear a loss of their children's ability to speak their native language. In indicating the disadvantages and problems they see in teaching English, a small number of teachers in Nauru and Fiji mentioned the possibility of

the native language being lost. On the whole, however, it seems that neither parents nor teachers have much awareness of the effect the teaching of English could have on the maintenance of native languages. Neither do they mention the mixing of languages that is likely to happen nor do they entertain the possibility that it would be better to leave the teaching of English until later, except in a very few cases. The possibility that the introduction of English at preschool age could, in some cases, have an adverse effect on the cognitive growth and future educational success of the child was not suggested either, although some research evidence supports this view (Cummins, 1981).³

Table 8
Reasons Parents Do Not Want English Taught at Preschool

	Tonga	Tuvalu	Vanuatu	Solomon Islands	Fiji
Loss of L ₁	37.5%	6.6%	9.4%	40%	6.5%
Loss of customs		6.6%	4.7%		
L ₁ not fully developed	20.8%		4.7%		1.4%
Too young				40%	
Parents can't speak it	10.4%				
Grandparents can't speak it	12.5%				

Table 9
Disadvantages and Problems Teachers See in Using English in Preschool

	Samoa	Tonga	Kiribati	Tuvalu	Nauru	Vanuatu	Solomon Islands	Fiji
Loss of L ₁					13.3%			13%
Loss of customs		15%						2.8%
L ₁ not fully developed		30%					100%	1.9%
Hard to communicate	50%	25%	60%	9%	33.3%	40%	100%	29.9%
Lack materials				18%	6.6%			1.9%
Lack training				36.3%				2.8%
Not used at home	28.5%	45%		27%	13.3%	40%		8.4%
Children lose interest	7.1%	5%			13.3%			4.6%
Learning slow					13.3%	25%		5.6%
Pronunciation difficulties				27%	6.6%			1.9%
Hard when young		10%						
Not teacher's L ₁		5%		36.3%				4.6%

I shall now make some suggestions about areas for specific research and list the issues which I feel should be addressed in teacher and parent education programmes.

Research: I would recommend that the Pacific Preschool Council:

1. Carry out longitudinal studies of the native language development of groups of preschool children in Fiji and Vanuatu, since these are the two countries in which children seem to be most likely to lose their first language. Children from homes where both their native language and English are addressed to them indiscriminately should be studied in preschools where English is spoken all the time, all the time with translation, and during a special lesson. The results should be compared.
2. Observe what typically goes on in the special English lesson in a number of countries and find out how effective the methods are over a period of time.

Teacher and parent education: I suggest that the following issues be addressed in the light of the findings of this introductory study and of current research on second language acquisition in children:

1. The danger of children losing their native language and having it replaced either by English or by a hybrid version of their own language and English.
2. The possibility of the widespread use of the hybrid language bringing about rapid changes in the native language.
3. The possible social and cognitive effects on a child of introducing English before the first language is well established and how these might influence his overall educational progress.
4. The most appropriate age at which English might be introduced.
5. If English is officially required, as in Nauru and Vanuatu, or is a social necessity as in Fiji, the most effective way of introducing it at this age.
6. The desirability of English being spoken without translation; during a particular lesson; and if possible, by a particular teacher who engages the child's active cognitive and often physical involvement.
7. The possibility of native English speakers among the children spontaneously becoming teachers.

Notes

1. Merrill Swain (1982) *Bilingualism Without Tears*. TESOL Conference.
2. Lily Wong Fillmore (1980) *Language Learning through Bilingual Instruction*. Berkeley: University of California, Berkeley.
3. James Cummins (1981) 'The Role of Primary Language Development in Promoting Educational Success for Language Minority Students.' *Schooling and Language Minority Students*. State of California, Department of Education.