

LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC: THE SEARCH FOR INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

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Introduction

There is a perception that innovative developments in language education originate in the northern hemisphere and that when new ideas finally filter down to the South Pacific region they are slowly and often imperfectly adopted. Is there substance to this view?

One must accept that northern hemisphere countries do possess certain advantages when it comes to exercising leadership in the language education field. With greater resources at their disposal they are better placed to encourage research into effective ways of teaching languages, to support the design of new materials and syllabuses and to exploit the range of technologies now available in education.

However, although specialists in applied linguistics, language pedagogy and curriculum design in countries such as the United States, Canada and Britain have had a major influence on the theory and practice that underpin current approaches to language teaching in the South Pacific region, one must acknowledge that language educators in the South Pacific have also contributed to the advancement of knowledge in the field by refining and adapting the ideas delivered from colleagues elsewhere. In addition, one can point to a number of instances where developments in language education in the South Pacific have attracted world-wide attention.

In this article an attempt is made to draw attention to some of these innovative developments and discuss their significance.

Early Initiatives

There is a long tradition of innovation in language education in the South Pacific. Europeans who came to this part of the world last century to establish the first schools found themselves in a totally unfamiliar environment without any knowledge of how to teach students who had no tradition of schooling, without suitable teaching resources and without knowledge of the local language in many cases. They were forced, then, to use their initiative to construct grammars and dictionaries, to develop texts and readers and to devise methods and techniques that met the needs of their students.

This was the situation in New Zealand where a mission school was opened as early as 1816. The main focus of the mission schools was on introducing Maori students to the scriptures through passages translated into the Maori language. Although this introduction to literacy was confined to a very limited domain, it was undoubtedly very successful. For example, Barrington and Beaglehole (1974) estimate that by the end of the 1840s, at least half the adult (Maori) population could read and write to some extent in their own language. English was introduced into the curriculum in the 1840s as the country became increasingly Europeanised with the arrival of shiploads of Anglo-Celtic settlers. An important contribution to English language teaching when the mission schools were replaced by government schools later in the nineteenth century was made by James Pope, the first Inspector of Maori Schools, who introduced English readers based on situations familiar to Maori students. In 1866 he wrote the *Native School Primer* and in 1886 followed this with the *Native School Reader* in both English and Maori editions - a text consisting of stories and fables with a local flavour. Pope may also be seen as years ahead of his time in advocating in the 1880s a modified form of bilingual schooling (Benton 1981).

The Australian experience in the nineteenth century has some parallels with that of New Zealand. Gale (1990) suggests that in view of the missionary efforts in the early nineteenth century, Australia could be considered one of the forerunners of vernacular programmes for pre-

literate societies. One pioneering missionary with a deep interest in Aboriginal language was Threlkeld who set up a mission at Lake Macquarie in 1825. Through his efforts a grammar and spelling book for the local language, Awabakal, was produced, as well as gospel translations. In 1838 the Lutheran missionaries, Teichelmann and Schuermann began to establish schools in South Australia for Aboriginal children which taught reading writing in the vernacular, though these schools were, in many cases, shortlived. Unfortunately, much of the teaching in Aboriginal languages languished after the middle of the nineteenth century and the period up to the 1940s was marked by sporadic attempts to provide western education for Aboriginal children through the medium of English (McConnochie 1982).

In other South Pacific countries the early missionaries also contributed to vernacular education in the early nineteenth century. However, while vernacular teaching would continue strongly in the eastern region of the South Pacific, where children came mainly from homogeneous language backgrounds (Baldauf 1990), in the western areas of the South Pacific in countries with a multiplicity of languages, such as Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu, the trend once formal schooling became more established in the twentieth century was towards providing education through a colonial language (English or French).

The Post World War II Period

The post World War II period has seen a number of innovations in second language education in the South Pacific region as countries have responded to the need to provide language learning opportunities for rapidly increasing numbers of learners. The development of competence in English or other languages of wider communication has been seen as a priority area. But there has also been growing recognition that the development of competence in a second language should not be at the expense of an indigenous or heritage language.

The New Zealand experience reflects these concerns. The use of

Maori as a language of everyday communication declined sharply in the twentieth century resulting in only a small minority possessing native fluency in the language by the 1970s (Benton 1979). A number of initiatives have since been taken to support the Maori language. In 1976 a bilingual Maori-English school was opened at Ruatoki and this was followed by other bilingual programmes (Cazden 1989). However, the most far reaching development has been the establishment of *kohanga reo* centres and their extension to *kura kaupapa Maori* which have placed New Zealand at the forefront of immersion approaches in respect to the maintenance of indigenous languages.

The first *kohanga reo* (language nest) was set up in 1982 with the aim of providing total immersion in Maori language and culture for pre-school children in an environment that attempts to replicate traditional Maori home life. The success of these *kohanga reo* centres can be attributed to the involvement of the local Maori community and the ways in which programmes are closely integrated with and supported by the community in all areas of activity from development of resources to overall management. Pressure to continue Maori immersion education from pre-school to primary school levels and beyond has led to the establishment of *kura kaupapa Maori* (schools based on a Maori philosophy of learning) as an alternative to the European-style school system.

In Australia, since the 1970s, bilingual and immersion programmes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have also been mounted (Mills 1982). However, whereas in New Zealand attention in bilingual education has mainly focused on Maori and to a lesser extent Pacific Island languages, Australian bilingual and immersion programmes have been developed in a wide range of LOTEs (Languages other than English), particularly languages spoken in ethnic communities, such as Italian and Modern Greek, following large-scale migration from non-English speaking countries in the post World War II period.

Literacy has been a key area of attention in all countries in the South Pacific region. A number of important curriculum initiatives have

taken place to enhance literacy development of second language learners of English. Amongst the notable contributions one might signal the work of Clay (1985) whose work on whole-language reading approaches, early detection of reading difficulties and reading recovery techniques has had a major influence on reading methods in Pacific countries as well as further afield. Other significant work in the area of English literacy includes the Book Flood conducted in Fiji rural schools in the late 1970s (Elley and Mangubhai 1983) which was based on the premise that second language learners of English who followed an extensive book-based programme with daily shared reading would experience considerable gains in language development. The success of this venture has led to the development of reading programmes using shared book methods in other Pacific Island countries (De'Ath 1980).

There is also international interest in the use of distance education in the South Pacific region to provide language learning opportunities for people in remote areas. In Australia, for example, distance education is well established as a mode of pedagogical delivery for language learning with a large range of language programmes offered by different providers using new technologies such as video text, electronic mail, audio conferencing, interactive video, satellite dishes and telematics. Distance education has also played an important part in promoting language learning in New Zealand and Fiji. The New Zealand Correspondence School, for example, offers a range of languages, including English as a second language and Maori, and employs a wide range of media resources. The University of the South Pacific in Suva also makes extensive use of satellite broadcasts in its distance education network (Matthewson 1994).

The Present Day

The search for innovative solutions continues to the present. Most of the developments referred to in the preceding section are currently being advanced. In New Zealand, for example, as part of the revival strategy for the Maori language increased funding is being provided for *kohanga reo* centres and for *kura kaupapa Maori*. It has been

recognised that the supply of competent teachers is the key to further development of Maori-medium programmes and this is being addressed by recruitment of larger numbers of Maori speaking teachers and expansion of opportunities to upskill the language competence of practising teachers through immersion courses. The publication of resources written in Maori has been another priority area, particularly to assist teaching in content areas such as science and mathematics.

In Australia work continues in developing programmes in schools to extend awareness of the languages of Australia's indigenous peoples as well as in expanding bilingual programmes particularly in the Northern Territory where many Aboriginal children live in traditionally oriented communities (Willmet 1993).

Initiatives are being taken in both Australia and New Zealand to improve the quality of ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) instruction through changes in teacher training and the provision of additional resources for schools in areas with high concentrations of migrants. In New Zealand, for instance, the Ministry of Education is supporting school-based teacher development programmes to provide additional training for primary and secondary teachers of students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Language Australia (formerly the National Languages and Literacy Institute of Australia) through its National Office in Canberra and its centres in different states is playing a major role in co-ordinating language projects and disseminating information on language and literacy education. A recent initiative in this respect is the NLLIA Development Project which has involved development of bandscales for reporting on the proficiency development of second language learners of English in the school context, together with exemplar assessment activities and observation guides (McKay 1994).

As far as LOTEs (Languages other than English) in Australia or LOTEMs (Languages other than English or Maori) in New Zealand are concerned, the current developments focus on expansion of second language learning at all levels. In Australia increased levels of

participation in the learning of a wide range of languages are a key objective of the Australian Language and Literacy Policy (ALLP) which was endorsed by the Federal Government in 1991. As part of this development there has been vigorous growth in primary school language programmes (Clyne et al, 1995).

Current activities in the teaching of LOTEMs in New Zealand include extending support for community languages through government funding of early childhood Pacific Islands language centres and increasing the number of bilingual programmes for children from different ethnic backgrounds at the primary and secondary levels. While the support for foreign languages has not received the same priority as in Australia there is encouragement for schools to offer a range of languages from the Year 7 level, though this falls short of making such language learning compulsory.

Further advances are also occurring in the area of distance education. In Australia and New Zealand there is a trend towards utilisation of distance education technologies to enable schools to share resources. This may involve a system, as in Victoria, where schools are grouped in clusters making it possible for a specialist teacher in one school to conduct lessons for small classes in other schools through telecommunication links. Use of computer networks and interactive multimedia is becoming more widespread in distance education delivery systems in the region.

In other countries in the South Pacific bilingual programmes involving English as a second language and local vernaculars also continue to show a steady increase. The Tonga Curriculum Development Unit, for example, has published a large number of books in Tongan and English to support its new bilingual, whole-language oriented curriculum. An alternative approach has been the development of 'hand-crafted' books prepared by teachers at regional writing workshops (Moore 1994). The Institute of Education of the University of the South Pacific is playing a major role in literacy development in both English and vernacular languages through its Literacy Centre and its involvement in the Primary Reading and HOLEA (Whole Language

Approach to Teaching English) Projects which have included the trialling of a story-book based English as a second language curriculum in Fiji, Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, Western Samoa and Vanuatu (Moore and Lumelume 1991). The Institute of Education *Waka* series of story books and posters, which had its origins in regional UNESCO book production workshops in the 1970s, now includes a large number of English and vernacular titles which are distributed throughout the region. The *Vanua Readers* (Vanuatu) and the *Nguzu Nguzu* series (Solomon Islands) are other significant local responses to the need for relevant written materials.

Perhaps one of the most important developments in the South Pacific region at the present time is the reform of elementary education in Papua New Guinea. This follows on from the vernacular pre-school programme (*Tok Ples Pri Skul*) which was established in several provinces in the 1980s, to enable children to commence development of literacy skills in their own language before transition to English-medium schooling in Grade 3. This is an ambitious undertaking for a country with over 800 languages and is being watched with considerable interest by educators in other countries.

The Future

There is, as has been pointed out in the previous sections, considerable vitality in the language education sector in the South Pacific. By and large South Pacific countries are aware of the importance of ensuring that the language education system is responsive to the particular needs of students in the region. Wholesale adoption of ideas from elsewhere is to be avoided; the South Pacific is a unique environment culturally, linguistically and socially and must find its own solutions.

However, one must acknowledge that it is increasingly difficult to be innovative without the resources available in more affluent countries. Developments such as the use of computer network technology which has considerable potential in a widespread region such as the South Pacific require a large investment in hardware and software, not to

speak of the costs involved in training teachers in the use of highly sophisticated equipment. One can foresee, then, a greater willingness to share expertise and to co-ordinate language education activities at the regional level.

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