Teaching English to young learners across the Pacific

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Introduction and definitions

This chapter surveys the teaching of English to young learners in the island countries of the Pacific. It focuses on those states that have either sovereign or self-governing status, listed in Table 32.1, but excludes those that remain dependent territories of countries. The island region is typically considered to be divided into three areas: Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. The countries in Melanesia are by far the largest, most geographically spread out and most linguistically diverse, while those of Micronesia and Polynesia tend to be smaller and more linguistically homogeneous.

English shares either de facto or de jure status as a national/official language with one or more other languages in all countries. These other languages are referred to as the vernaculars. English is a compulsory subject in primary school and secondary school in all countries, beginning from Year 1 in all cases except Tonga, and it is a medium of instruction for a significant part of the formal education system. English is thus being taught to young learners in the Pacific through formal education, starting in early primary school.

Table 32.1 provides an overview of the countries surveyed, including population estimates (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2015), the number of indigenous languages (Lynch 1998) and the policy regarding medium of instruction and which languages are taught as compulsory subjects (based on national curriculum documents and personal correspondence with ministries of Education).

English has two main roles in the Pacific today. Its first role is a language of official written purposes in many institutions, due to the colonial establishment of these institutions. English has been retained in this role to varying extents out of familiarity with the status quo and the perceived difficulties of change (Lynch and Mugler 1999). The second role of English is a means to participate in contemporary transactions that have far-reaching socioeconomic, environmental and political consequences: English is the language through which logging rights and land leases are negotiated with foreigners, small island states plead their case about climate change with the UN, the tourist industry thrives as the major source of income and ties with former colonial powers are maintained in their new roles as major aid donors (along with new donors such as China). In short, English is the language through
### Table 32.1 An overview of the region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Population estimates</th>
<th>Number of indigenous languages</th>
<th>Medium of instruction</th>
<th>Languages taught as compulsory subjects</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Melanesia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fiji</td>
<td>867,000</td>
<td>3 plus Fiji Hindi</td>
<td>Year 1–2: Fijian/Hindi in homogeneous groups (or English in mixed groups)</td>
<td>Year 1–8: Fijian or Hindi Year 1–13: English</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 3–13: English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Papua New Guinea</td>
<td>8,083,700</td>
<td>More than 750 plus Tok Pisin and Hiri Motu</td>
<td>Year 1–13: English</td>
<td>Year 1–13: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solomon Islands</td>
<td>642,000</td>
<td>63 plus Pijin</td>
<td>Year 1–13: English1</td>
<td>Year 1–13: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanuatu</td>
<td>277,500</td>
<td>105 plus Bislama</td>
<td>Year 1–3: Vernacular or Bislama Year 4–13: English or French</td>
<td>Year 1–13: English (or French) Year 4–13: French (or English)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Year 1–13: English</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Micronesia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federated States of Micronesia</td>
<td>102,800</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Transitional bilingual programme from the vernacular to English</td>
<td>Year 1–13: Te taetae ni Kiribati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiribati</td>
<td>113,400</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year 1–2: Te taetae ni Kiribati Year 3–4: Transition from Te taetae ni Kiribati to English</td>
<td>Year 1–13: Te taetae ni Kiribati Year 1–13: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshall Islands</td>
<td>54,880</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year 1–6: Marshallese Year 7–12: Marshallese (social science, health, PE, art); English (maths, science)</td>
<td>Year 1–12: Marshallese Year 1–12: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nauru</td>
<td>10,840</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year 1–13: English</td>
<td>Year 1–13: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palau</td>
<td>17,950</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bilingual programme in Palauan and English</td>
<td>Palauan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Polynesia</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook Islands</td>
<td>14,730</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Year 1–3: Cook Islands Māori Year 4–6: Cook Islands Māori and English Year 7–13: English</td>
<td>Year 1–10: Cook Islands Māori Year 1–13: English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niue</td>
<td>1,470</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Year 1–3: Niuean Year 4: Transition from Niuean to English Year 5–13: English</td>
<td>Year 1–13: Niuean Year 1–13: English</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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(Continued)
which Pacific island countries manage what Crocombe (2008, p. 593) refers to as ‘being small in a big world’.

My contribution to this volume is written based on my experience training English teachers at the University of the South Pacific, a regional institution co-owned by eleven of the countries surveyed, in addition to the dependent state of Tokelau. I currently teach at the University’s main campus in Fiji, from which I make occasional visits to other campuses throughout the region, and I have previously taught English at secondary schools in the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. In writing this chapter, I have accessed official policy texts, syllabus documents and teaching materials from ministry of education websites, contacted employees of ministries of education and their curriculum units, discussed a range of issues with my own students and conducted a literature review of research carried out in the region.

### Historical Perspectives

English has had a presence in the region since the late eighteenth century when the first English-speaking explorers made landfall, although other Europeans had preceded their arrival. Missionaries, sandalwood traders, labour recruiters and plantation owners followed during the nineteenth century, and the increase in European activity resulted in a range of colonial arrangements initiated around the end of the century. The countries discussed in this chapter experienced some form of colonial relationship with one or more of Britain, Australia, New Zealand and the United States, with some also experiencing periods of German or Japanese rule. Vanuatu was administered jointly by Britain and France as the New Hebrides. The New Zealand territories of (then Western) Sāmoa and the Cook Islands
were the first to gain independence, in 1962 and 1965 respectively, followed by all British and Australian colonies between 1968 and 1980, and finally the American territories of the Micronesian region between 1986 and 1994 (Crocombe 2008, p. 405).

By the time of independence, English was well established. Although early missionaries had tended to conduct initial education through the vernacular, the colonial governments had usually replaced this practice with an English-only model of formal education. The English syllabi of several countries were based on the South Pacific Commission (SPC) programme, which combined an oral component referred to as Oral Tate, and a reading supplement of workbooks and storybooks. Even Tonga, which had never been colonised, opted to follow this programme on the grounds that it was designed specifically for Pacific islanders learning English as a second language (Taufe'ulungaki 1979). The programme was based on a behaviourist view of language learning, consisting of scripted lessons for teachers to follow, using chorus drilling and repetition of decontextualised sentences (Vakaruru 1984). By the 1980s, concerns began to be raised about poor educational outcomes, and particularly literacy levels. The challenge was partly due to the rapid expansion of education after independence. While it had been possible to deliver education relatively successfully through English in a well-resourced, expatriate-staffed system that catered only to a tiny proportion of the population, new governments now found themselves responsible for educating the masses while localising their teaching forces. Their aim was to maintain high educational outcomes, while teaching through a medium of instruction that was now the second language of teachers and pupils alike.

However, literacy specialists attributed the problem to the SPC model of language teaching (Benson 1993; Lumelume and Todd 1996), and there followed a shift towards a whole-language approach. A number of reading programmes were trialled, including a shared reading approach in Niue with locally developed materials (De'Ath 1980), the Book Flood Project in Fiji (Elley and Mangubhai 1981), a story listening project in Fiji (Ricketts 1982) and the Ready to Read Project in Fiji, Kiribati, Tonga, Vanuatu, Marshall Islands, Sāmoa and Tuvalu (Lumelume and Todd 1996). The idea was to promote a range of literacy approaches, including phonics, but the emphasis on the acquisition of literacy appears to have masked the concern over whether children were learning to read in their first or second language. An unpublished study by Moore (1987) suggested that there was an enormous gap between the number of words that second language learners of English would obtain through the SPC readers and the number of words known by first language speakers of English. However, this and similar findings appear to have been used to support a shift to a pedagogical approach used in first language English contexts, rather than one designed to support the acquisition of English as a second or foreign language. According to Burnett (2013), relatively little has changed since the 1980s, and this view appears to be confirmed by syllabus documents from across the region that advocate a ‘holistic’ or ‘integrated’ approach to language teaching.

However, the region has seen a shift towards bilingual education, with an attempt to enable children to at least begin their formal education through the languages they speak at home. Almost all countries surveyed in this chapter now have policies in place to begin instruction through the vernacular, before a transition to English as the medium of instruction in at least some subjects. The result is that English is now theoretically taught as a subject prior to its use as a medium of instruction, and its syllabus should aim to prepare young learners to access content subjects across the curriculum through this language.
Critical issues and topics

English as a first, second or foreign language

The first critical issue is the ambiguity over whether English serves as a first, second or foreign language for children in primary school. The attempt to designate the exact sequence in which languages are acquired is of course problematic, particularly in multilingual contexts in which children simply grow up with two or more languages simultaneously (Brock-Utne 2009; Dewey 2012). However, it remains useful to distinguish between an English as a first language situation in which children are exposed to English from a very young age at home and are completely comfortable interacting in this language by the time they start school; an English as a second language situation in which children hear and see the language used all around them in their daily lives, but do not speak it much at home; and an English as a foreign language situation, in which children’s exposure to the language is primarily restricted to the classroom. The syllabus and methodology used to teach English need to take account of the extent to which children actually use the language outside the English classroom.

Within each Pacific country there is considerable variation. Children who grow up in urban areas are generally exposed to more English than those in rural areas and the outer islands. This is due to the presence of tourism, internationally owned businesses, access to media and new media and, in some cases, the mixing of different ethnic groups for whom English is the only lingua franca. In such urban areas, some children do indeed grow up with English as their dominant first language, with exposure to their parents’ or grandparents’ languages restricted to sporadic visits to the village or island of origin. Many of today’s parents and elders were banned from speaking their own languages in school, during the colonial period or its immediate aftermath, and this experience has impacted the way they have raised their own children, often promoting the use of English even at home. In countries such as the Cook Islands that are in free association with New Zealand, it is also common for families to relocate frequently between the two countries, with children therefore raised with greater exposure to English.

However, national curricula typically refer to English as the second language. For example, the first sentence of Sāmoa’s primary English curriculum states, ‘Sāmoa has two official languages: Sāmoan, the majority language, and English, the second language’, (Sāmoa Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture 2013, p. 7) and the Kiribati and Cook Islands curriculum texts provide very similar statements. These statements cover up the variation in the extent to which children are actually exposed to English in their daily lives, and they appear to be using an idealised chronological definition of the way English should be introduced as a ‘second language’ for all. The language policy of the Solomon Islands is the only text obtained that refers specifically to English as a ‘foreign language’, explaining that the majority of students ‘do not have ready access to spoken or written English in their out-of-school lives’ (Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development 2010, p. 26). Finally, Vanuatu makes use of the terms ‘second’ and ‘foreign’ language in a slightly different way, designating either English or French as the ‘second language’ (i.e., the medium of instruction) and the other as the ‘foreign language’ (i.e., taught as a subject), depending on whether children are enrolled in Anglophone or Francophone schools.

Children who speak English as their first language are generally treated as an exception within these policy texts. For example, the Cook Islands curriculum framework advises that ‘provisions will be made for students whose first language is not Cook Islands Māori’
(Cook Islands Ministry of Education 2002, p. 11); a Tongan media announcement about the change to Tongan-only instruction in the first three years of primary school stated that ‘an exception will be for children whose mother tongue is not Tongan’ (Tonga Ministry of Education 2012); and the Sāmoan primary English curriculum sets out a range of options for dealing with English-dominant children. Even in the very small countries, such as Niue with its single primary school, teachers struggle to deal with both first and second language speakers of English: ‘There is not a strict expectation to only use Niuean in the early years, as we are faced with the challenge of English-speaking children that come to school. Teachers have adapted their methods to try and teach them Niuean’ (Personal communication with curriculum officer, May 2017).

This issue is of critical importance. The syllabus and methodology used to teach English must take into account whether children speak it fluently already, are exposed to it outside school or are learning it entirely through formal classroom instruction. If this issue continues to be ignored, the region will become trapped between two deficit models: in some classrooms, children who arrive without prior exposure to English are considered to need some form of remedial attention in this language. In other classrooms, children who arrive with English only are considered to need remedial attention in the vernacular.

A multipurpose English syllabus

Following on from this complexity, the second critical issue is the set of competing demands placed on the English syllabus. A single syllabus in early primary school is typically expected to cover initial literacy development, explicit instruction in a second/foreign language and academic support for an English-medium content curriculum. This has ramifications in a number of areas.

Firstly, initial literacy is taught through what is a second or foreign language for many, despite rhetoric promoted regionally that ‘children become literate far more readily, and better able to become competent in other languages, when they start school using their mother tongue’ (UNESCO 2015, p. 67). The 2012 Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment results showed ‘an alarming situation’ with only 30% of children reading and writing at the expected level after four years, and 29% after six years (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2014, p. 2). Other measures, such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment, have shown similar outcomes (Toumu'a 2016). Benson (1993), in advocating for a change from the SPC programme to a whole-language programme, had lamented an earlier literacy rate of 85%, and although the data from these periods cannot be compared in absolute terms, it is clear that the whole-language approach has not provided the panacea that was hoped for 25 years ago.

Among others, Fiji has enlisted the help of Australian-funded literacy specialists to tackle the problem. New guidelines and activity booklets for Years 1 to 4 have been produced and piloted, accompanied by informative videos showing teachers demonstrating the activities. However, in a section of ‘notes on struggling readers’, the guidelines state that ‘oral language proficiency comes before reading and writing’, and asks teachers whether they are ‘speaking English every day, all day [so that they are] consistently and frequently providing each child with opportunities to use English’. The paragraph advises teachers to ‘ask parents to speak in English for 20–30 minutes each day – perhaps at breakfast or when getting ready for school’ (Fiji Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts 2017, p. 40). Although the new activities appear engaging and user-friendly for teachers with limited training, they frame the children who do not speak English at home as in need of remedial attention.
Since this position is taken, there is insufficient discussion about how to teach English to young learners for whom it is a second or foreign language. There is a widespread belief that the earlier the language is learnt the better proficiency will be reached, but there has been very little critique of the approach used to actually teach the language. The shift to what is still referred to as a whole-language or integrated approach (Burnett 2013) has meant that there is very little attention paid to the learning of English as a second or foreign language, and school leavers reach secondary school and university with neither explicit knowledge about grammar nor the ability to use English to communicate their intended meaning (Deverell 1989; Griffen 1997). Instead, they have been trained to reproduce exam answers about short stories and the language of sports commentary, relying on rote memorisation of notes that are shared between teachers and schools. Moreover, there is a disconnect between what is learnt in the English classroom, and the purposes for which English is used across the rest of the curriculum.

Teacher training

The third critical issue is teacher training. Teachers responsible for teaching English to young learners in the Pacific may have a degree in primary education from one of the region’s universities, or a diploma from a national teacher training college, but some have no qualifications at all. The Solomon Islands has one of the highest rates of untrained teachers, with only 54% of primary teachers holding any teaching qualification (UNESCO 2015). Secondary teachers are more likely to hold university degrees than primary teachers, and it can sometimes be seen as a promotion to be asked to teach at secondary level. As a result, many diploma-holding primary teachers enrol in degree programmes in order to become secondary teachers, which leads to something of a brain drain from the primary system. Worse still, a number of teachers who complete postgraduate degrees end up leaving the teaching profession and taking up positions in ministries of education. Even within the primary system, there is a tendency for teachers with higher qualifications or greater experience to be given responsibility for the older children, particularly where there is a national exam to pass in order to reach secondary school, leaving less experienced teachers responsible for the early years. In Vanuatu, for example, a survey of all primary schools in 2010 (Early 2015) revealed that only 10% of Year 1 teachers held any form of teaching qualification, while 40% were Year 12 leavers with no further education, 32% had completed either Year 10 or Year 11, and 14% had completed fewer than 10 years of formal education. The first exposure to English may therefore be from a teacher with limited teacher training or experience, and potentially limited English proficiency.

English proficiency requirements for teacher training programmes are low, or nonexistent. A recent pilot of a new English proficiency test at the University of the South Pacific (conducted by the author) revealed that approximately a third of new trainee primary and secondary teachers scored in the lowest three bands out of seven for one or more language skills. The implication is that teachers with relatively low proficiency in English are entering teacher training institutions, possibly unable to cope with the demands of the training, and definitely without formal opportunities to improve their proficiency during the course of their programmes. The graduates of these programmes are then entering the region’s classrooms and struggling to teach effectively. It is often assumed that teachers will improve their English proficiency by taking a teacher training course, as evidenced by views frequently expressed during both internal and external meetings regarding the University of
the South Pacific’s programmes, and by commentary in the media about tertiary providers of teacher training (e.g., Bola-Barri 2015). However, with such limited space in the teacher training curriculum to cover so many different elements, there is no opportunity for additional courses that focus solely on teachers’ own English proficiency.

Current contributions and research

Research can very crudely be divided into three phases: a problem-solving phase in the 1980s and 1990s focused specifically on the teaching of English, and two separate but concurrent phases since the turn of the century that have tackled matters of either education or language, but with limited interface between the two areas.

The earliest, problem-solving phase saw a range of studies conducted into practical ways to enhance the educational use of English (see, e.g., Elley et al. 1996; Goetzfridt 1985; Institute of Education 1981). As noted earlier, the political changes across the region during the 1960s and 1970s had led to significant expansion of formal education, and the continued use of English as the medium of instruction began to be seen as an issue. The University of the South Pacific was founded in 1968, and concerns were raised by the end of its first decade that students were arriving with weak levels of English (Elley and Thompson 1978; Fitzcharles 1983; Deverell 1989). Studies and interventions focused particularly on the use of English as the language through which children learnt to read and write, such as the Pacific Islands Literacy Levels study (Withers 1991). Although a detailed evaluation was conducted of what might be wrong with the SPC programme and its drill-focused Oral Tate component (Vakaruru 1984), no empirical research appeared to be carried out into alternative approaches designed specifically for the teaching of English as a second or foreign language. Instead, Burnett (2009, p. 23) argues that the shifts to whole-language approaches during the 1980s and 1990s were supported only by research conducted in New Zealand, with children learning to read in their first language.

From around the end of the 1990s, the second and third phases of research have tended to tackle education and language rather separately. The education-focused of these phases has been one of rethinking (‘Otu’uku et al. 2014). Concerns were raised at the 1999 meeting of the Pacific Islands Forum that the region’s education systems were failing to meet its human resource needs, due to poor curricula that were insufficiently focused on life skills. At the same time, Pacific academics Konai Thaman, ‘Ana Taufa‘ulungaki and Kabini Sanga were weaving together what would become known as the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative, which helped to see the realisation of The Forum Basic Education Action Plan of 2001, the Rethinking Education Colloquium in Suva in 2001, the publication of Tree of Opportunity: Rethinking Pacific Education (Pene et al. 2002), a regional conference in 2003 on Rethinking Educational Aid in the Pacific and regional and national follow-up conferences, including the Rethinking Education in Micronesia conference in 2004 and the Rethinking Vanuatu Education conference in 2002, and the launching of a new five-year Pacific Regional Initiatives for the Delivery of Basic Education (PRIDE) project.

Puamau (2005, p. 1) opens her paper on ‘Rethinking Education: A Pacific Perspective’ with the following:

A groundswell of opinion on the critical importance of rethinking education in the Pacific is rising from Pacific nations and their educators. They recognise that their education systems are still caught up in a colonised time warp despite the fact that most Pacific nations have been politically independent for some decades.
She later states (2005, p. 4):

It is not hard to understand why colonial practices, processes, structures and ways of knowing and doing continued in hegemonic ways after decolonisation . . . . An example of this is the continuing practice of valuing and elevating English in school, and in the home, above the mother tongue.

English has never been rejected by this rethinking movement. Burnett (2013, p. 351) explains that ‘[t]he importance of English is difficult to dismiss regardless of a wider Pacific culturalist discourse in education that links an at times over-emphasis in formal school curriculum on English literacy with neo-colonialism, Pacific Vernacular decline and cultural anxiety and loss’. However, the space for treating this language as a subject of research was perhaps narrowed by the drive to ground education in indigenous values. Although a number of articles and workshops focusing on language issues emerged as part of this general movement (e.g., Mugler 2005; Taufe'ulungaki 2003, 2005), they tended to focus on the role of the vernacular languages in early education, and the culturally embedded patterns of interaction that might be more conducive to learning, rather than tackling any questions about the role of English and what outcomes were intended to be met by an appropriate English syllabus.

The third phase of research, which has run concurrently with the second, has focused on language issues (including within classroom contexts), but with a descriptive, rather than critical, slant. For example, in an interesting descriptive study from Fiji, Shameem (2002) shows that primary teachers frequently underreported the amount of English they were using in their classrooms, while Franken and August (2011) report on another study, this time from Papua New Guinea, in which primary teachers underreported the multilingual strategies they used to help children learn English and transition to its use as the medium of instruction. A range of studies on classroom codeswitching have described the way the vernacular and English are used in tandem (e.g., Tamata 1996; Tanangada 2013; Willans 2011) while, outside the classroom, scholars have described the emergence of new Pacific varieties of English (e.g., Biewer 2015; Green 2012; Wigglesworth 1996). Such studies bring context to our understanding of language-in-education issues, but they remain separate from attempts to change or enhance the way languages are used or taught.

At the present time, it appears that transformation within the domain of language teaching is limited to short-term projects coordinated by donor partners, leading to relatively surface-level changes including reorganisation of curriculum contents into new strands, or their light repackaging according to new trends such as outcomes-based learning. There is very little new research being carried out into the way English is being taught to young learners, or how literacy acquisition occurs in a language that may not be spoken at home, or how an English syllabus can be brought to life with the help of other languages. In short, there is a lack of critical evaluation, and rethinking, of this aspect of education in the Pacific.

Recommendations for practice

Given the range of curriculum contexts across the Pacific, it is hard to give specific recommendations for the teaching of English that will apply in all countries. However, this section will present broad recommendations that apply across the region.

The first recommendation is that English be taught as a subject by designated teachers who have been trained specifically to teach English. The more typical arrangement currently
is that one primary teacher is responsible for teaching all subjects across the curriculum to one class (often in multigrade classrooms). The result is that literacy acquisition and language teaching are often meshed together, along with socialisation into the practices of formal education. Where policies stipulate that literacy is taught through the vernacular, as is the case in most countries now, it would make sense to keep English as a separate subject. Moreover, by changing the division of labour slightly, it would be possible to deploy one teacher at each primary school to teach English across all grade levels, while the remaining teachers covered the content teaching of the same classes, without changing the total number of teachers required.

The second recommendation is that English is taught orally only during Years 1–3. While there is no clear evidence that children will gain any advantage from starting formal instruction in a second language right from the start of school, at the age of five rather than, say, the age of eight (Ortega 2009, p. 17), there is societal and political pressure in most Pacific countries to provide this. A principled syllabus of oral English for a few hours a week will provide a base for more formal study of the language from about the fourth year onwards, once children have mastered reading and writing in their own language. The specific syllabus and approach used to teach English must then be tied in with questions of medium of instruction across the content curriculum. If English will become a medium of instruction from the later stages of primary education or early secondary education, then an early English syllabus must adequately prepare children to learn through this language. In an ideal situation, English will be used alongside the vernacular in a plurilingual model of teaching and assessment, so the English syllabus should support readiness for such a scenario. The longer that children can learn English as a separate subject first, the better chance they will have of using it to engage critically with the content curriculum.

The third recommendation is that the selection, training and support of primary teachers is made a priority. If teachers are to teach English, or teach through English, it is important that they already have good proficiency in this language before entering a training programme. An incentive scheme may be needed to encourage proficient speakers to consider primary teaching an appealing career option. The curriculum for the training of primary teachers then needs to take into account the roles that they are expected to carry out. If one teacher is expected to be responsible for all subjects, including initial literacy and the teaching of English as a second or foreign language, then the curriculum will need to ensure that these elements are given sufficient attention. If specialised primary English teachers are to be trained, then a separate curriculum will be needed.

However, perhaps the most important recommendation that can be made for the region is that a far greater body of research is needed that is situated in the Pacific context, for which serious capacity building is needed. As Liyanage (2009, p. 737) notes with reference to Kiribati, ‘before instigating major changes such as restructuring curriculum and mass teacher training, a comprehensive body of research is required regarding socially situated and preferred practices of learning and teaching’. National ministries of education therefore need local advisors who are well versed in research in fields of English teaching, language acquisition, literacy and multilingual education, and who can lead new research driven by questions that make sense in Pacific classrooms. We need contextually relevant data, both qualitative and quantitative, and we need the directions for such research to follow national and regional priorities.

Driving such a research agenda must be a series of questions that ask what English is doing in the Pacific in the first place, why it is so important to learn and how the language
fits into the multilingual landscape of the region. More critical discussion of the place and power of English is needed within the wider Rethinking Education Initiative, so that practices that value indigenous languages and cultures are not pitted against those that promote proficiency in English.

**Future directions**

Recent developments suggest that some positive change is in progress. Firstly, most countries have now shifted, or are in the process of shifting, towards a bilingual or multilingual model of education through which English is recognised as an additional language. The positive impact this has on the perceptions held towards Pacific languages also helps shift the perceptions held towards English. Students at the University of the South Pacific who study either linguistics or a Pacific language as part of their teacher training discover that English is no different to any other language from a linguistic point of view, but has simply become dominant in the Pacific and worldwide due to colonialism and globalisation. Understanding that English is bound up in some of the darkest periods of Pacific history, but that it is still an important language in the present, helps to demystify the language and remove some of the fear surrounding it as a compulsory school subject. Teachers become more confident in talking about the language, and taking ownership of it as second language speakers. Similarly, as many children now learn to read and write through their own languages first, they are introduced to English as an additional language that is useful to add to their repertoires, rather than the only language through which life beyond the village is supposed to operate.

Secondly, the University of the South Pacific, responsible for training a large proportion of the region’s teachers, has made good progress recently in restructuring the teacher training curriculum for secondary English teachers as well as introducing a new postgraduate diploma for English teachers of all levels. With these developments now underway, it is hoped that the primary teacher training curriculum can also be given some attention to ensure that teachers are trained to deal with the complexity of their roles – whether as specialist English teachers or as cross-curriculum teachers. Again, there is work to be done but, if carried out with good cooperation between the different groups responsible for teacher training and curriculum development, this work is not so complex.

A major barrier to positive change is political instability. With constant changes in government across the region, it can be hard to implement and support effective change. Moreover, given that many of today’s leaders and senior civil servants are the success stories of colonial education that was delivered entirely through English, it can be hard to raise the issues of medium of instruction and the teaching of English as problems that even need to be addressed. It is too easy to blame falling standards of English on poor teachers or inadequately resourced schools, rather than ask difficult questions about the systemic issues that have been inherited from the colonial period and that are only beginning to make themselves fully known 40 or so years later.

A second barrier is the continued reliance on external assistance in the education sectors of most countries, which is not matched by the amount of empirical research within the region. When national education policy is shaped to such an extent by aid donors, international consultants and supranational targets, it can be hard to ensure that the right priorities are met, and that innovations are sustainable. A focused human resources plan is needed in all countries, through which an effectively trained workforce of researchers, analysts and policy advisors in the relevant areas can be produced.
Further reading


   This paper examines the apparent reluctance in the Pacific region to engage with critical approaches to the teaching of language and literacy.


   This edited collection summarises a decade of research and theorising within the Rethinking Pacific Education Initiative.


   This paper examines a range of issues relating to language choice in education policy in the Pacific.

Related topics

Contexts of learning, multilingualism, policy, assessment, difficult circumstances

References


