

CHAPTER 1

Probing the Place of English Language in Fiji Secondary Schools in the Present Day – from English Facilitators’ Perspectives

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Abstract

English language is used either as a second or third language in majority of the Islands nations here in the Pacific, while also in terms of status, use, and function, dominating in the formal arena, education, the media, and parliamentary proceedings. Therefore, the pervasive need to learn the English language falls on the younger generation in the form of formal education. This then reflects language facilitator’s fundamental role in teaching the English language, so learners become competent in both written and spoken English. This paper examines the status of the English language in Fijian secondary schools from the English teachers’ perspectives and also highlights the views of two distinguished professors – Professor Subramani, Professor in Language and Literature; and Professor Tupeni Baba, Professor in Education, at the University of Fiji – about the status of the English language in Fiji secondary schools. It identifies the pedagogies utilised by facilitators of English. The paper rationalises the declined or inclined status of the second/third language. Given the suggestion to raise the standard of English competency in Fiji secondary schools, it is hoped that this study will inform education stakeholders, language programme coordinators at tertiary level, and policymakers about the challenges facing English language facilitators.

Introduction

Fiji is in the process of revolutionising its education sector through the introduction of e-books, tablets, internet accessible classrooms, and use of laptops in learning and teaching in order to increase the ability of students of Fiji to use computers, tablets and smart phones to access information and create content themselves (Deo, 2015). While this may place Fiji on par with the rest of the world in terms of digital literacy, there is also concern that

this may be at the detriment of the English language as printed books will slowly fade out and reading skills of students plummet further (Subramani, *The Status of English in Fiji Secondary Schools*, 2018). Linguistically, English, Fijian, and Hindi serve as the three official languages of Fiji, each having a critical role in the formation of a national identity.

Nemani Delaibatiki writes in a Fiji Sun newspaper article titled “English should be reinforced as number one language” that: “English is the common language now in many countries. It’s a reality that we need to accept. Text books are written in English, teachers and lecturers teach in English and students converse in English” (Delaibatiki, 2015). This indicates that the education system is placing special emphasis on English language. In an opinion column in Fiji Sun, “Why It’s Right, Education Is Now Focusing On English?” Charles Chambers notes that the introduction of English is from colonial times when Fiji was under British rule. With the departure of the colonizer, however, the impacts of colonization remain, one of which is the English language (Chambers, 2018).

In addition, up until the new 2013 constitution, the previous practice in teaching multilingual Fijian children in Fiji primary schools was that Fijians of Indian descent spoke Fiji Hindi (FH) as their mother tongue; learning Shudh Hindi (SH), or Urdu, and English for formal and literacy purposes; and using English and Fijian for interethnic communication. The iTaukei children in Fiji classrooms spoke and conversed in their varying dialects. Depending on the class composition, the teacher then either spoke in Fiji Hindi or iTaukei, but English to some degree. However, the current education policy states that English is now to be the medium of instruction. Today, English is the dominant language of instruction. Thus, this necessitates teacher training institutions in Fiji to address the issues around multilingual education so that teachers/facilitators can with assurance contribute to an educational system which maximizes the use of Fiji’s linguistic resources for the educational progression of all sectors of the country’s population.

Based on the latest United Nations estimates, as of Sunday, July 1, 2018, the current population of Fiji is 912,216. Fiji’s population is equivalent to 0.01% of the total world population (<http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/fiji-population/>) (worldometer, 2018). Of a population of 912,216, 64% are iTaukei, 27% are Fijians of Indian descent, 8% are Chinese, European, and other Pacific Islanders. While various vernacular languages are used during informal settings, English is used as the lingua franca among the multiracial citizens of Fiji. Also, English is the medium of

communication and instruction in 712 primary schools and 167 secondary schools in Fiji.

Language Policy

The 2013 Fijian Constitution Section 31 states the Right to Education. Section 31, Subsection 3 stipulates: “Conventional and Contemporary iTaukei and Fiji-Hindi languages shall be taught as compulsory subjects in all Primary schools”. However, Section 3 (3) of the 2013 Fijian Constitution stipulates that: “the constitution is to be adopted in the English language and translation in iTaukei and Hindi are to be made available”. Furthermore, Section 3, Subsection 4 stipulates: “If there is an apparent difference between the meaning of the English version of a provision of this Constitution, and its meaning in the iTaukei and Hindi versions, the English version prevails”. This depicts that English Language supersedes other languages, since the constitution is the supreme law of the country. Thus, while Fiji’s 2013 Constitution recognises Fiji as a multilingual state and declares the main languages (Fijian, Hindi, and English) to be equal in terms of status, use, and function, in reality, English dominates in the formal arena, education, the media, and parliamentary proceedings.

Languages in Education

English is used as the medium of instruction from pre-school to tertiary education. English is compulsory in all external exams but local languages are optional. The standardised vernacular languages taught in the schools in Fiji are the Bauan dialect (iTaukei) and Hindi. Other languages taught in schools include Urdu, Rotuman, and French.

Background to the research

This research concentrates on Teachers of English in Fijian Secondary Schools. The research is not based on teachers from a particular area but rather, from all the education districts in Fiji: Central, Western, Northern, and Eastern Divisions. English is compulsory in all the 167 secondary schools in Fiji with a total of 68,776 students (Lutunaika, 2017) undertaking the English curriculum courses from Years 9 to 13. This research does not focus on the students’ acquisition of this second language but, rather, on the challenges faced by the teachers of English in imparting the content to the students.

Objectives

This paper is intended to:

- Examine the status of the English language in Fijian secondary schools from the English teachers' perspectives;
- Identify the pedagogies utilised by facilitators of English;
- Outline challenges faced by the English facilitators, and
- Recommend suggestions provided by the language teachers to raise the standard of English in Fijian classrooms.

Methodology

Journal articles, papers, and education reports published by various local, international, and regional education stakeholders were utilised to compile data for this research. Questionnaires were also distributed via email and SurveyMonkey mobile link (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/KK8633L>) to teachers of English throughout the country to get firsthand information regarding the topic. These teachers are part of the Fiji Association of Teachers of English (FATE). Questionnaires examined the challenges teachers face while teaching English as a second language. Questionnaires included eleven questions pertaining to the teaching of English as a second language in Fijian classrooms. A total of one hundred and fifty teachers were consulted from various schools throughout the country all of whom actively responded. Also incorporated in the questionnaire were suggestions from the teachers of English that policymakers need to consider in order to raise the standard of written and spoken English in the country. Discussions and interviews held with Professor Subramani and Professor Tupeni Baba before the survey form the premise of this research with questions on the survey linked to the Professors' responses. One of the challenges faced while conducting this research was obtaining information from teachers situated in the remote and maritime areas due to limited telecommunication available. It is anticipated that findings from this research will encourage greater effort in relation to raising the standard of written and spoken English through emphasis on all the four communicative aspects of the language: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing.

Significance of the Study

This study is of significance as it aims to highlight the status of English in Fijian Secondary Schools from the English language facilitators' perspective. The study sheds light on the extent to which the English teachers agree with the comments and criticisms of employment providers and university lecturers that the status of English is declining among high school graduates. It also provides insight into the myriad teaching

pedagogies used by the language facilitators, and the factors that affect teaching and learning of this second language. As the expectations of the universities and employment providers continue to increase, this study emphasises the need for thorough consultation with the language facilitators, as well as a consolidated approach towards the teaching of English as a second language.

Findings and Discussion

Findings are presented and discussed below, followed by consideration of some approaches to teaching English, challenges presented in teaching English today in Fiji, and some recommendations.

The Status of English in Fiji Secondary Schools: from the English Language Facilitators' Perspective

The perception of education stakeholders that the standard of written and spoken English is declining at an alarming rate is not surprising given the fact that the reading culture among the younger generation is slowly fading away (Kaur, 2015). Teachers of English have always been under the microscope for many reasons, one of them being that teachers' proficiency and competency in English determine the level of English that the students acquire. According to the Fijian Ministry of Education, students must pass English to have an overall pass in their exams. Clearly, this places a large responsibility on the language facilitators' role in teaching the four communicative skills to the students.

The responses of the English language teachers in Fiji secondary schools on the status of English among the secondary school student show that they agree with the perception of employment providers and universities that the standard of written and spoken English among new graduates is declining. Of the one hundred and fifty teachers who responded to the questionnaires, ninety five (63%) agreed, while the remaining fifty five (37%) disagreed (refer to Figure 1). Therefore, it can be concluded that while teachers have been working tirelessly to raise the standard of English among the younger generation, more effort is also required from other stakeholders including the parents and students

Moreover, Professor Tupeni Baba (2018) of the University of Fiji states that:

The competition for the type of language in the classrooms is quite tight considering the different mother tongues students speak, and whatever mother tongue, the dialects the child speaks and given the competition

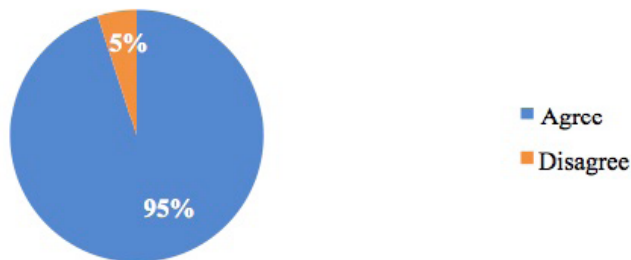
in terms of time, lack of resources and some of the people who are critical of the standard of English spoken in Fiji is largely due to the time they have spent overseas, having grown up during their secondary school days and now returning to Fiji, they need to understand that Fijian classrooms have a real challenge.”(Baba, 2018)

A similar sentiment was also shared by Professor Subramani (2018), Professor of Literature at the University of Fiji, who highlighted that:

Over a period of time, English took over the vernacular, and Fijian and Hindi became marginalised and English became a dominant language. There are many reasons for that: one is parents want it that way and children also want to do it because many of them want to learn English and migrate for jobs. But this is at the detriment of your mother tongue which is the basis of your emotions and feelings, your cultural life. So those who don't know their vernacular will have poor grasp of English. So, all in all, the status of English in Fijian schools is poor. Terrible situation. (Subramani, 2018).

Figure 1. Response from the English Language Facilitators on the Declining Status of English among the Fijian students

Declining Status of English among Fijian students



Teachers' perceptions of factors contributing to decline of English language standards

With the majority of the teachers who responded to the questionnaires agreeing that the standard of English among Fijian youths nowadays is declining, they were also eager to identify factors other than teacher competency that have contributed to this language crisis. These factors were such as Teacher Education Programmes, Diminishing Reading Culture, and English Teaching Pedagogies.

Teacher Education Programmes

Language acquisition best happens in the early years of life and thus emphasis must be placed on recruiting highly qualified teachers of English at primary level (Maharaj, 2018). Three universities in Fiji offer teaching programmes: the University of the South Pacific, The Fiji National University, and the University of Fiji. The nature of courses for Bachelors in Arts (Language and Literature) must change in a bid to produce teachers who are highly competent (Maharaj, 2016). For example, emphasis must be given to language and literature units as these are two distinct branches of English. The language major courses are even unfavorably weighted within the programme. It must be recognised that students majoring in English (and the Vernaculars) are in fact studying two distinct subjects: these are Language and Literature. Therefore, Language and Literature each have a weight of only 12.5% of the entire programme (Maharaj, 2016)

According to the Ministry of Education's policy that each secondary school teacher must have two teaching subjects also contributes to the deteriorating language situation in Fiji. Teachers of English are also required to teach Social Science/Geography, Vosa Vakaviti, Hindi, or History. Thus, much of trainee teacher education courses are comprised of education units and a second teaching subject which leads to a lesser grasp of English teaching courses than is desirable. Furthermore, teachers, through the survey, highlighted that English teachers and programmes at university level should have a fair distribution of language and literature units. One participant, a retired high school English teacher and a former Vice Principal, points out that, "If a teacher is insecure in some aspect of the language, that aspect will be overlooked for the most part". Thus, the language programme coordinators at universities must strike a balance between the language and literature units offered to aspiring teachers of English.

According to Subramani "there needs to be strict monitoring of the English language in other departments in universities". Subramani (2018) highlights that "in the Universities, only LLC department is there, but in the science and administration, they don't care. As long as students have written something, they just give some marks. They don't care about their grammar and presentation because they themselves don't know (Subramani, 2018). This perspective suggests that as education providers, universities must step up to ensure that the standard of English among graduates improves.

Diminishing Reading Culture

Reading is an important gateway to personal development, and to social,

economic, and civic life (Holden, 2004). However, it comes as no surprise that the reading culture among the secondary school students is slowly fading away (Kaur, 2015). Teacher respondents perceived that students nowadays show less initiative in reading, largely due to the increase in technological gadgets. In an interview, Professor Subramani (2018) noted that “to learn a language one needs to develop in the reading culture and teachers must put emphasis and inspire students to read to get the deeper meaning of the language”. He further claimed that students nowadays are more engaged with their technology and books are being ignored. Reading through books has a different meaning than reading e-copies. Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, during a book launch at FNU, Natabua Campus, stressed that there is a more urgent need today than ever before to produce more local literature. Launching “Writing and Publishing in Fiji: Narratives from Fijian Writers”, Nabobo-Baba highlighted the decline in reading culture and emphasised the need to create a platform for local emerging writers to publish their work so that our children can familiarise themselves with local literature. To engage students in the reading culture, the curriculum must be conducive. Subramani (2018) highlights that:

Curriculum needs to put more emphasis on reading...a lot and not only reading silently. Teachers got to read [aloud]. And you can then cultivate your listening skills. The listening skills are very poor. They don't listen. They find it very difficult to listen. They are more into internet and not in the listening culture.

In conclusion, these respondents' and interviewees' perception is that, to uplift the standard of spoken and written English, students must be encouraged to read printed books and materials in their leisure time.

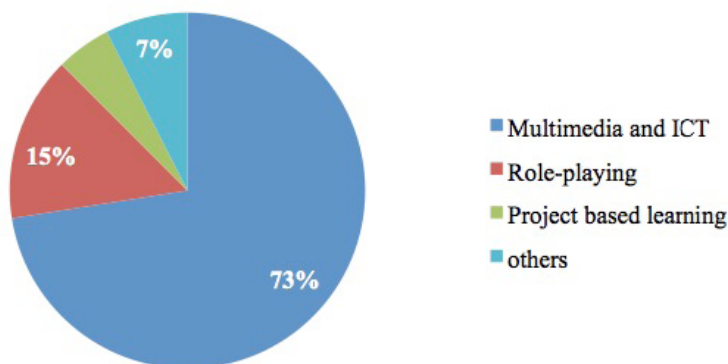
English Teaching Pedagogies

Analysis of the questionnaire responses shows the various pedagogies that teachers use in Fiji classrooms to teach English. Out of a hundred and fifty (150) teachers who responded, seventy-two (48%) use multi-media and Information and Communication Technology to teach English. Technological devices such as laptops and projectors were utilised by teachers of English in their respective schools. A further fifteen (10%) respondents choose role-playing for their English classes mostly for literature from Year 9 to Year 13 and oral assessments for Register Studies in Years 11, 12, and 13. Senior stream language teachers, who account for twenty percent of respondents, provide project-based learning opportunities for their students. A further seventeen percent of all teachers interviewed, stated that they utilize library resources, giving self-directed learning opportunities and group work while

teaching English. The other pedagogies used by teachers include the use of integrated approach, innovation and creativity through charts, visual aids, and cross-cultural approach (refer to Figure 2).

Figure 2. Teaching pedagogies utilised by English teachers in Fijian classrooms

Pedagogies used by English teachers in Fijian Classrooms



Approaches to Teaching English in the Present Day

Most of the English language teachers in the world today are either second or third language speakers of English (Richards, 2017). Competency in English language teaching draws on content or subject matter knowledge, teaching skills, and the ability to teach in English – a skill that is usually viewed as being influenced by the teacher’s language proficiency (Richards, 2017). Gone are the times when second language learners were taught by native speakers. Native speakers who speak English as their mother tongue or as their first language are at an added advantage when compared to Non-Native Speaking Teachers of English. In the present-day scenario, in the Fijian context, many students find it difficult to speak fluent English mainly because there is little interaction at home, in communities, and in school in the English language. In an interview with Prof. Subramani, (2018) it was highlighted that “for a second language learner in countries like Australia and New Zealand, English will be acquired easily as they are exposed to the language everywhere, whereas in Fiji, English is only spoken in schools and during business dealings”.

Constructivist theorists contend that children are active participants in their learning in that they actively construct new knowledge whenever they interact with their environments (Bakhurst & Shanker, 2001). Thus, in Fiji

teachers of English must contextualize the subject matter so that students are able to process information mentally. In doing so, teachers will be able to aid the students' cognitive development through social interactions.

Furthermore, according to Shunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008), the principal theoretical perspectives that must be used by teachers are:

- Readiness (Piaget);
- A spiral organisation of content and activities (Bruner);
- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky);
- Scaffolding (Vygotsky), and
- Cognitive development happens in a social space where people influence each other (Bruner, Piaget, and Vygotsky)

Through the use of such theories together with Maslow's motivation theory, not only will there be a "paradigm shift" in the way English is taught in Fijian secondary schools, but classroom practice will also shift from a teacher-centered class, to teacher-learner interaction, to learner-learner-teacher interaction with the teacher's role being that of guide or facilitator. The findings suggest that, due to time constraints, teachers at times fail to utilise the above theories. It was further revealed that the pressure from school administration with regard to completion of coverage diverts teachers from using the theories in their classrooms.

In addition, According to Khan et. al (2017) the four communicative skills need to be taught thoroughly in schools with help provided to struggling students through literacy intervention programmes.

Baba (2018) states:

A lot of emphasis needs to be given to reading. Three places where reading needs to be impressed upon is: home, school, and media. Reading: we need to create interest in the children. We need to ask how many schools in Fiji are investing in their school libraries, with interesting reading materials. How can children read at home? Do parents at home appreciate them reading? Is media supportive of the language we promote? The role and impact of television, for instance. Also, we need to investigate other media platforms and its bearing on English language, and at this day and age the vast technological gadgets have a profound impact on the English language. The M.o.E should encourage the home and the school to provide a supportive

environment for children to nurture their reading.

Challenges of Teaching English in Fijian Classrooms

According to the teachers who responded, there are more challenges to teaching English at the present time than in the past. These challenges are perceived to contribute to the declined status of English at secondary school level.

Responses from the questionnaires indicate an increase in the number of non-readers and non-writers enrolling in secondary schools. Most non-readers and non-writers are identified in Year 9. Teachers interviewed were asked to outline suggestions for improving this scenario and the most common suggestion was for parents to continuously engage in their children's education through regular consultation with the teachers.

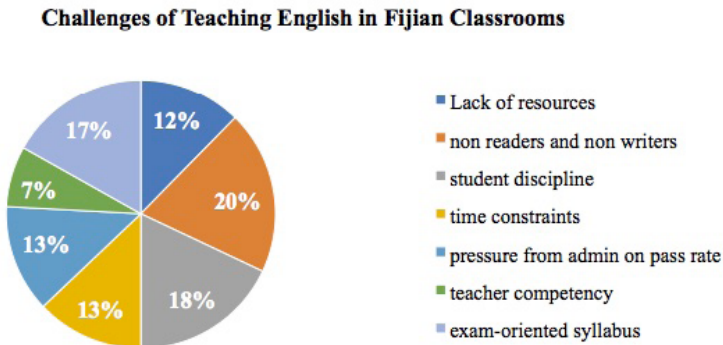
Another major challenge faced by teachers is student behaviour in schools. A lot of the teachers perceive that students' attitude towards their studies has been deteriorating.

Other challenges identified by teachers include:

1. Lack of reading resources
2. Time constraints: teachers are given only two terms to complete their coverage, thus, they tend to rush through it
3. Pressure from some school administrations with regard to the pass rate in English, and
4. Teacher competency, with teachers saying that this is an area that needs to be addressed to improve the standard of English in schools.

The aforementioned challenges highlight some of the issues that need to be considered in a bid to improve the standard of English. However, there may be other challenges that teachers around the country face while teaching English and a nationwide consultation with the English language facilitators is urgently recommended to raise the standard of English language among the younger generation (refer to Figure 3).

Figure 3. Challenges faced by English language facilitators in Fijian classrooms



Suggestions by Language Facilitators

Given the declining status of the English language among secondary school students in Fiji, the suggestions provided by the teachers of English may be useful when considering means of raising the status of the language. These suggestions include:

1. Revision and effective planning of curriculum from Year 9 to Year 13.
2. For Year 10, more time should be given so that teachers do not rush to cover the syllabus in two terms, leaving out the most important aspect of teaching English. Because the system is exam-oriented, teachers teach only what is tested, rather than teaching concepts holistically.
3. Literature texts should be contextualised and emphasis given to text written by local writers.
4. Every child's formal education should begin in their native or first language. Acquisition of the first language strongly increases the likelihood of successful acquisition of a second language, like English.
5. Teach only Literacy and Numeracy from Year 1-2 and then introduce other subjects once reading, writing, and numeracy skills have been mastered.
6. Have conversation classes where students can read and speak more.
7. Students should be molded from lower classes so when they reach higher level, they are competent.
8. Reading must be encouraged at home and in schools.

9. Syllabi at primary level should be reviewed. The basics need to be taught well so that the foundation of students' knowledge is strong and they can learn.
10. Test theory and knowledge-based questions rather than essay writing.
11. Teachers to be trained in teaching second language speakers of English so that they can teach it well for they themselves are second language speakers of English.
12. Treat literature as a separate subject.
13. Engage teachers in the consultation process.
14. English as a second language must be made enjoyable by encouraging students to enact genres such as drama and short stories and also by having poetry recitals. Reduce the amount of poetry and the numbers of short stories in Years 9 and 10.
15. Specialised teachers are needed for non-readers and non-writers; and
16. More workshops for teachers of English and sufficient resources should be made available.
17. Teachers of other subjects to also take ownership and not rely on only English teachers to teach English. For example, Geography and Basic Science teachers should also highlight the importance of the correct usage of Grammar in essays and penalise students with incorrect grammar.

Summation

It is evident, then, that the declining standard of English in the country is perceived by these professionals (professors and teachers of English) to fall on every sector. The atmosphere and the environment needed to promote English in Fiji are lacking. Media houses, to university programmes, to the education system must change to solve the language crisis in Fiji. The efforts by the English teachers in the country must be acknowledged and teachers must be consulted in the curriculum development process. Parents must also take a proactive approach to immerse their child in vernacular before they are made to learn a second language. Finally, major work is needed in the way English is taught in Fijian Secondary Schools. We need to teach English as a language rather than teaching it as a subject.

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