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UA MALIE TOA UA MALIE TAU

STUDENTS WITH SILVER TONGUES WHIP THE

TAIL: Enhanced Teaching and Learning of Reading

Comprehension in Samoan Bilingual Classes

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**A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Education), The University of Auckland, 2005**

Abstract

The achievement of Samoan students in English reading comprehension has been identified as a major challenge for the education in New Zealand. This study examined the effectiveness of reading comprehension instruction in the context of six Samoan bilingual classrooms in two schools in South Auckland. The quasi-experimental intervention involved two phases over three years. One was the development of an inter-school standardised process of administering and scoring assessments to identify student weaknesses and strengths. The other involved 10 professional development sessions over the year built around the profiles of teaching and learning collected in the first year. Systematic observations of teacher instruction were carried out in both phases. In addition to the English reading comprehension measures, there were specially designed assessments of students' oral language and reading comprehension in Samoan. These assessments enabled relationships to be examined between students' Samoan oral language and reading comprehension and their English achievement. In addition, teachers were interviewed about their ideas of reading comprehension from a cultural perspective.

Three approaches were used to judge the effectiveness of teaching. These showed that teaching became more effective generally when examined for students in a longitudinal cohort, but also for new cohorts in Year 1 and Year 2. In addition, the results showed that students in the bilingual classrooms had initially lower levels in reading comprehension in English but made more rapid gains with the intervention and reached comparable levels earlier. These gains are linked to specific changes in the teachers' instruction. Analyses showed that the focus of instruction, for example, instruction which increased general awareness was prominent in raising reading comprehension levels. Three teachers who attended professional development consistently showed more gains at the end of the study than the other three teachers who inconsistently attended. However, despite the gains achievement of bilingual students were still below national norms.

At a general level, no relationships were found between Samoan oral language and reading comprehension and English reading comprehension but the presence of relationships between Samoan reading comprehension and English reading comprehension and between Samoan reading comprehension and English reading comprehension vocabulary at year 6 suggests a transitional effect particularly at the level of word knowledge. This effect might explain the lagging behind of achievement in English from year 4 and year 5 and a catching up at year 6. Teachers' placing more emphasis on vocabulary instruction evidenced in the observations suggests that this is an urgent need.

While there was great variability in reading comprehension instruction, teacher ideas also add to the complexity given teachers' understanding of what comprehension is from the Samoan concepts of 'iloa' (know) and 'malamalama' (understand). Teachers differed in their understanding of these two terms.

These findings suggest that low achievement in English reading comprehension can be changed, but there is more research that needs to be done to expand our knowledge of how Pasifika students in schools comprehend English texts but specifically how they should be taught.

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Mihi Atu.

Some say that a good choice is measured by its outcome. Others say that a good choice can also be measured by how the outcome benefits others. Anything other than that therefore, some would probably say, does not make a good choice a right choice. But I say that, no matter how much one thinks about whether a choice is indeed good or right, success depends on the expertise, guidance, support, encouragement and insight of those who had created opportunities to make that choice both good and right. This work is the outcome of that choice – a good and right choice, and an outcome that has been a culmination of the outstanding and supreme guidance and encouragement by the special people acknowledged here.

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Dedication

“And if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God” (Proverbs 2: 3-5)

To my children:

Fiona Ulla Toloa

Alaifetu (Fetu) Kini Toloa

Taeofalaula Toni Freya Toloa

Fedora Toloa

Your maternal grandparents planted two seeds in me: One was God the other, Education. Out of both comes respect. I have taught you to respect both. This work dedicated to you is a reinforcement of that teaching. I set for you an academic pathway, an invaluable legacy that you and those who might come after you might one day be able to pursue.

I lovingly dedicate this also to my elderly mother and my late father for giving me life and to my brother Gafa and sister Vaiomana for their support in more ways than one.

A special dedication to my husband Terry for standing by me in his support especially his part in taking care of our children during this endeavour and my family for their tolerance and understanding during these long years of study.

Preface

The title of this thesis in three parts incorporates three sources: The first part “*Ua malie toa. Ua malie tau*” is taken from a Samoan legend of bravery and heroism of two Samoan brothers, Tuna and Fata. The story goes that King Tala’ife’i’i of Tonga’s reign in Samoa for four hundred or so years had been too oppressive. Tuna and Fata decided to do something about it. They fought the Tui Tonga valiantly and bravely resulting in the crushing defeat of Tui Tonga. The King admired and publicly acknowledged their gentle courage and uttered these words when he conceded defeat, “*Ua malie toa. Ua malie tau. A ou sau ou te le toe sau i le ao uliuli tau a e o le a ou sau i le ao uliuli folau*”. The English translation is, “Gentle warrior. Gentle fight. When I return no longer will I come in the black clouds of war, but will come in the same clouds of sail”.

The second part of the title particularly, “*Students with silver tongues...*” is taken from a character description of Samoan orator and diplomat of the highest calibre, Namulau’ulu Mamoe Lauaki. He was known as the man with the ‘silver tongue’ not only because he could speak several languages including English and German, but he was also able to use his ‘silver tongue’ to mediate between Samoans and foreigners imposed foreign issues that he saw as hindrances to the Samoans and their way of life. As Samoa’s leading speaker and political negotiator, he formed the *Mau a le Pule* (Mau movement) in 1908. A master of Samoan history and legend he earned the reputation of “Kingmaker”. For this he was also known as a visionary – attributes which posed some real threat to the foreigners. For that, he was exiled to Saipan in 1909 never to go home again. In 1914 he was given permission to return, but on his way back died of dysentery on Tarawa. Nowadays, efforts are made to find and return his remains.

The achievement of Pasifika students including Samoan bilingual students has been known to be in the bottom tail of literacy achievement both here in New Zealand and internationally. “...*Whip the tail*” is an indication that the achievement of these students after the intervention, had moved upwards as shown in the considerable gains they had made. This shows that achievement is neither inevitable nor immutable when goodness is also present.

The third part of the title “*Enhanced Teaching and Learning...*” is borrowed from the overall project initiative in which this study posits. Generally, it covers all schools in the Mangere cluster involving approximately 60 teachers and about 1900 students.

Together as words of admiration, they are used here to pay tribute to the Samoan bilingual teachers for their gentle courage and bravery, their determination and patience to make an impact on every child’s life especially through their language. A tribute also to the school

principals and their management teams for their support of bilingual teachers and students in the belief that Pasifika students including Samoan students deserve a fair and better education by accommodating bilingualism and biliteracy in their schools. *Fa'amalo le tauivi*

In searching for a way to contextualise the thesis, I reclaim the word “coconut” to examine the effectiveness of teachers through the achievement of bilingual students by going through each layer to get a multi layered overview but also to bring together the past and the present to understand our teachers and students.

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