

Sa'a fa'aoti le utu a le faimea'

Using the Samoan language in educational research: some tips for first time researchers

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Abstract

The use of the Samoan language in qualitative educational research in Samoa is on the rise. This is because regardless of a researcher's written or verbal Samoan language skills, it is the language preference of the Samoan participants that makes the Samoan language important in educational research today. This paper is the result of a request from some first time student researchers who wanted some advice on using the Samoan language in educational research. The paper briefly discuss the Samoan alphabet, differences between *Gagana K* and *Gagana T* as well as the language of chiefs before highlighting specific aspects of the Samoan language that seemed problematic during the research process and offers some practical tips for first time researchers in Samoa.

Introduction

The use of the Samoan language in qualitative educational research in Samoa is unavoidable because it is the first language of most Samoans in Samoa. Educational researchers and teachers who are doing research in Samoa will encounter participants who, by choice, will respond using the Samoan language. Therefore, researchers will find that their data will be predominantly in the Samoan language, unless they use 'purposive selection' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison 2000) to select their participants with preference for English as a key selection criteria. This paper was prompted by a request from some final year Bachelor students undertaking educational research but has taken time to materialise. It is not written with an academic audience in mind. It targets beginner educational researchers and classroom practitioners who are interested in undertaking some research, either for a higher education course/qualification or simply to improve their teaching in Samoa. Therefore, it deliberately uses a pragmatic style.

This paper is not the definitive guide on the use of the Samoan language in educational research. However, in the absence of any national guidelines on how to deal with the Samoan language in educational research, it is the intention of the author to engage the beginner researchers in Samoa. Metaphorically, this paper can be likened to the *utu* of the *faimea*², the small bamboo enclosure containing tools or practical tips and tested strategies to keep in mind when dealing with the Samoan language in educational research. The Samoan Language Commission (SLC) once it is established and operating³, could address some of the issues raised in this paper. The paper begins by giving a brief background on Samoa before looking specifically at some aspects of the Samoan language that researchers may find problematic during the research process. It then offers some practical tips to help manage if not solve these problems, and concludes with a summary.

Background

Samoa is an independent country in the South Pacific, and is made up of nine islands, four of which are inhabited. In descending order in terms of geographical size, the four inhabited islands are Savai'i, Upolu, Apolima and Manono. The capital, Apia, is located on the island of Upolu. The system of government is based on a combination of the Westminster style of parliamentary democracy and traditional institutions associated with the *fa'asamoa* (Samoan way). The official languages of government and commerce as enshrined in the Samoan constitution are Samoan and English (Government of Western Samoa 1960). The population is 176,710 (So'o et al 2006:23) and according to one source, *gagana Samoa* is the first language of the majority of Samoans (Mugler & Lynch 1996).

The Samoan language

The Samoan language did not exist in the written form before the arrival of the Christian missionaries, so naturally, the histories, genealogies and privileged (or esoteric) knowledge of extended families were handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth. This of course changed, upon the arrival of the first Christian missionaries which marked the beginning of the written Samoan language, as it exists now. The missionaries recorded the first anthology of the Samoan language (Pratt 1862), paving the way for the development of the Samoan alphabet, which allowed it to be written and taught systematically (Pratt 1911).

Samoan alphabet

According to Reverend George Pratt, the Samoan alphabet consisted of fourteen letters: a, e, i, o, u, f, g, l, m, n, p, s, t, v (Pratt 1862). Interestingly, he argued that only one word had the letter 'k' in it; "k is found only in *puke*" (Pratt 1878:1). Over the years, three additional letters: h, k, r, were attached to the Samoan alphabet, which is known locally as the '*P1 tautau*' (Pratt 1911). The additional letters have never been officially inserted into the Samoan alphabet and are left outside as extras to the alphabet, possibly because there is a lack of consensus about where to place them. It is highly likely that the three additional letters resulted from transliteration, which is the method used to translate, or rather create new (Samoan) words based on a similarity of pronunciation to the English equivalents.

Written and spoken

There are two different versions or forms of the Samoan language that all Samoan teachers emphasise to their students - the *Gagana T* (GT) and the *Gagana K* (GK). The *Gagana T* is a term used by Samoan language teachers to denote the written version of the Samoan language. It is called that because the majority of words that contains the letter 'k' when spoken informally, are replaced by the letter 't' when written. *Gagana T* is also used during formal public speaking, and during worship services. It is considered polite to speak using the *GT* when greeting or conversing with older people, those in positions of authority, and strangers. Within the research setting, it is considered polite to use *GT* when engaging participants.

Gagana T specifically involves a lot of words using the letters 't' and 'n' to replace the letters 'k' and 'g' in most words. However, the use of the *GT* does not necessarily negate the use of the letters 'k' or 'g' in some words altogether. There are exceptional

words that use 'k' or 'g' which are normally acceptable in the *GT* or written form. For example, the word *suka* (sugar) is acceptable in written form but never *suta* because the latter, is a silly and meaningless word regardless of whether it is written or spoken. Other examples of *GK* words acceptable in *GT* include *kofe* (coffee) not *tofe*; *keke* (cake) not *tete*; *kava* not *tava*; *koko Samoa* (Samoan cocoa) not *toto Samoa*; *umukuka* (kitchen) not *umututa*; *kapisi* (cabbage) not *tapisi*; *maligi* (shed tears) not *malini*; *kiki* (kick) not *titi*. The list is extensive.

On the other hand, *GK* is a term used by Samoan language teachers to denote the spoken version of the Samoan language that predominantly uses the letter 'k' in its words, especially when spoken informally. It is confined solely to speaking and, as indicated earlier, it involves replacing the letters 't' and 'n' with the letters 'k' and 'g', in most words. This is generally referred to as the everyday language for conversing informally, and for gossiping. I know of some *matai* (chiefs) that use this form for their speeches in traditional ceremonies. They believe that authentic traditional Samoan speeches use this form, and I concur with them because the Samoan language has always been based on oracy not literacy.

It is not until the arrival of the London Missionary Society missionaries in the 1830s that a written Samoan language emerged (Pratt 1879). However, Samoan teachers frowned upon those who use this form (*GK*) for writing purposes. Their argument is that the use of *GK* should be confined to conversing in an informal setting, while *GT* should be encouraged in writing and for conversing in formal settings or when conversing with elders or those in authority. This is supported by the fact that the children learn the Samoan alphabet using the *GT*, not the *GK*. For example, Samoan children learn that the letter 'a' is for *'ato* (basket) not *ako*, and the letter 'e' is for *elefane* (elephant) not *elefage*.

It is evident from the discussion that the main difference between *GT* and *GK* is the predominant use of the letters 't' and 'n' in words used in the *GT*. Meanwhile the letters 'k' and 'g' are predominantly used to replace the letters 't' and 'n' in all words when using *GK*. However, as mentioned already there are some exceptions to these Samoan language 'rules' or protocols. For example, in addition to the ones given earlier, the word *tago* (*GT*) or *kago* (*GK*) meaning 'touch' are acceptable but not *tano*; the word *titina* (*GT*) or *kikiga* (*GK*) meaning 'erase' or 'holding neck tightly' but not *titiga*; the word *palagi* or *papalagi* (*GT*, *GK*) meaning 'white-skinned', 'caucasian' or 'of European descent' but not *palani* (and never *palalani* or *palalagi*); the word *taniga* (*GT*) or *kogiga* (*GK*) meaning 'uniform' or 'same attire' but not *tonina* or *togina*.

Language of chiefs

It should be noted that apart from the *GT* and *GK* forms of the Samoan language that I have already discussed, there is also a more sophisticated version of the Samoan language used in chiefly oratory. Aiavao (2005) refers to this language as "*oratory Samoan*" or "*elite Samoan*". It is considered complex and more advanced compared to the simple and straight forward form described above in *GT* and *GK*. For the purpose of this paper, this latter sophisticated version of the Samoan language will be referred to as *Gagana Fa'afailauga* (*GF*), or oratorical language, or *Gagana Fa'amatai* (chiefly language). This consists of a specific vocabulary of respectful terms that one uses only for certain *matai* (chiefs). The house of an *ali'i* (high chief), for example is referred to as *maota*, and that of a *tulafa'e* (talking chief) is referred to as *laoa*. Further examples can be drawn from the phrases used to respond to a *matai's* speech. The appropriate response to an *ali'i* is to say, *malo le saunoa*, and to a *tulafale*, *malo le fetalai*.

The GF is also rich in phrases, proverbs, analogies, honorifics and genealogies, which have meanings in many traditional Samoan contexts. The most skilled orators will use these to articulate their speeches. Gagana *Fa'amatai* is used to show respect to chiefs or elders and is also the form that chiefs converse in. Whether GK or GT is used does not really matter as long as the appropriate GF is used in the presence of other chiefs.

Examples of the three different forms discussed above can further illustrate this point. It should be noted that the examples in GK looks inappropriate in writing, but they are deliberately placed there to illustrate the difference between the three forms already explained.

Table 1: Examples in Gagana T (GT), Gagana K (GK) and Gagana Fa'amatai (GF) and their English translations (Eng)

Example	GT	GK	GF	Eng
1	Ua ma'ona le matai?	Ua ma'oga le makai?	Ua laulelei le ali'i?	Has the <i>matai</i> finished eating?
2	O fea e te a/u iai?	O fea e kealu iai?	Aeaga'iifea?	Where are you going?
3	E ma'isuka lou to'alua?	E ma'i suka lou ko'alua?	E gasegase lou faletua i ie suka?	Is your wife a diabetic?
4	E te fia ai?	E ke fia ai?	Ua e fia tausami?	Are you hungry?

Designing your research

In the Samoan context, research design depends entirely on research aims and questions. The same can be said about methodology and methods. However, regardless of what the research topic is, it would be advisable to incorporate in the research design, and subsequent proposal, how to deal with the Samoan language, particularly with respect to the participants' language preference. Therefore, it is necessary to anticipate and visualise who the possible participants might be, what their language preference might be, and plan accordingly. Whatever method will be used to generate or collect data, it is important to use letters of invitation, research information sheets, and informed consent forms that are written in both English and Samoan. This not only reflects a well-thought-out research design but also shows that the researcher is mindful of the ethical responsibility to ensure that the participants are comfortable with the study.

Translating

When developing the questionnaire, interview schedule, letter of invitation or information sheet for participants, it is important to have everything in both the English and Samoan languages. This is because there will always be some participants whose limited English or Samoan language skills will not only hinder their understanding of the questions but may also hinder the interpretation of their responses. In educational research, it is always good practice to draft the English version first, and then the Samoan translation.

The important 'rule of thumb' is not to translate word for word, but to translate in a manner that keeps the meaning and essential ideas 'as close as possible' to its original form. It is important to note the use of the words 'as close as possible' here. This is because no matter how skilful any translator may be, no translation can truly convey the intended meaning and essence of an idea more than in the language it was originally stated in. The following are some ideas relating to undertaking translations.

English-Samoan translations

Translating from English to Samoan (E-S), is a matter that the researcher needs to consider early in the planning and design stages of the research project. As mentioned earlier, transliteration is the commonly used translation method in Samoa. It involves using the sound or pronunciation of the English word to create a new similar-sounding Samoan word. For example, the word *'naifi'* is derived from knife, *'sipuni'* from spoon and *'tTpoti'* from teapot. The danger of transliteration is when the newly created word in the Samoan version is used without the English derivative next to it. This is because no one has seen the new Samoan word before, and is therefore meaningless unless its English derivative is placed next to it. But even if the English term is placed next to the new Samoan word, readers will not necessarily know the meaning immediately because they might not even know the meaning of the English derivative word in the first place.

Samoan-English translations

On the other hand, translating from Samoan to English (S-E) is a common concern after the transcribing stage of the research process, when one realises that some if not most of the data collected is in the Samoan language. It is important to provide English translations for those sections of the conversation that are in Samoan. This is a must, especially if one's supervisors or examiners do not speak Samoan. It is important to use simple English and to avoid translating word for word.

Samoan translation that retains English terms

An alternative to creating new Samoan terms is to translate all explanations in Samoan but keep the key words in English. This ensures that the English word and/or concept does not lose its meaning. In the absence of a national body (that is, Language Commission) that creates national standards for language-use, the use of one's own Samoan translation of an English term can cause confusion and will not necessarily clarify a concept. For example, imagine that you are carrying out a study of students' views about photosynthesis. Participants probably would not have a clue as to what the study is about if the researcher uses his or her own Samoan word for 'photosynthesis', like *fotosini* or *fotosiniseti*. It is most likely that the word would be alien to most participants, creating confusion.

Interviewing

When interviewing (Kvale 1996) *palagi* (European) participants - it is most likely that their responses are short, precise and to the point. This is usually not the case when older Samoans are interviewed, their responses tend to be long. Time is usually not an issue for them so an open mind and a lot of patience is required. The indirect and long responses normally contain the answers you are after. They sometimes tell stories and

the moral of the story is related to the answer you are looking for. It is often considered rude to rush participants into giving direct answers to questions (Moli 1993). Patience is very important because there are cultural factors at play here. For example, if the researcher is interviewing a participant at the participant's residence, the indirect and long responses could be influenced by a number of factors such as Samoan customs relating to hospitality (that is, delaying tactics while awaiting a cup of Samoan cocoa or a meal), efforts to promote relationships (that is, getting to know the researcher better), difficulties with recall (the older the participant, the longer it may take them to recall information), exerting dominance through power-relations (that is, just playing politics), and a reluctance to share esoteric knowledge that the researcher is not privileged to know (Filipo 2004).

Given some of the factors mentioned, it might be argued that western-based methodologies are inappropriate for researching Pasifika people. The *talanoa* method has been developed and adopted by several Pacific researchers (Taufe'ulungaki 2005, Vaioleti 2003, Otsuka 2006) because of its flexibility, sensitivity and cultural appropriateness when dealing with Pacific island participants. Other methods or Pasifika research models developed and adopted to research Pasifika issues in Aotearoa include *fonofale*⁵ (Anae et al 2001), *meaalofa* (Seiuli 2003), *fa'afaletui* (Tamasese, Peteru and Waldegrave 2005), *matuaofaiva* (Silipa 2004), *talanoa* (Vaioleti 2006), and *teu le va* (Anae 2007).

Transcribing

Most educational research text books (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000) will inform that all transcribing should be done verbatim - meaning the researcher will write exactly what was said and when. Given this, with the intention to transcribe all data collected and found responses using the *GK* or informal Samoan. What should happen? Does the researcher continue transcribing it verbatim or switch to the written *GT*?

It is common practice to transcribe all responses in the Samoan language using the written *GT*. Janet Pereira did her PhD research on stakeholders perceptions of the Year 8 National Exam in Samoa and she collected most of her fieldwork data from primary teachers, students and parents. When she presented her tentative findings the participants were shocked that she transcribed their responses verbatim (exactly as they said it). Their responses, using the *GK*, were transcribed in that form, causing them to feel embarrassed because their comments did not look good. It seemed inappropriate (Pereira 2005), especially because teachers normally frown upon those who use the *GK* to write. It is discouraged and of all people, teachers have a professional obligation to set good language examples. Therefore, to speak in *GK* during a private informal interview seemed appropriate at the time, it caused some embarrassment when the responses were reproduced on a screen, in a semi-formal gathering of peers. It did not go down well to say the least.

Presenting findings

When presenting findings it is good practice to remove all the gap-fillers, like the 'ahs' and 'urns' from the selected data. As mentioned earlier, it is important to use Samoan comments with the English translations, to still capture the intended meanings and essence of the original comments. It is also good practice and common courtesy to make available English translations of Samoan quotes, but in a smaller font and in brackets after or below the Samoan quote. Using English only translations is not recommended because not all supervisors and external examiners are fluent in Samoan,

hence they will be excluded as audience. Therefore, if unsure, a bilingual approach is always a safe approach, especially when publishing findings and making it accessible to an international audience. However, it is nothing to worry about when a suitable word or phrase in English cannot be found to convey a Samoan idea, as one cannot translate everything from one language to another.

Reciprocating

In educational research, it is an ethical requirement to give something back to the community or to the participants for their time and effort. This does not necessarily mean paying participants to give information. But rather, it means to 'give back' something as a gesture of goodwill or a token of appreciation for the participants' assistance in the research. This is where the concept of reciprocity or *fa'ataualofa* becomes part of the research process.

Fa'ataualofa is considered a core value in the *fa'asamoa* (Samoan way of life). It does not mean 'the buying of love' although it is a common mistake made when considering the literal meaning of the two words that constitute *fa'ataualofa* (that is, *fa'atau* meaning 'to buy', and *alofa* meaning 'love'). The true meaning of *fa'ataualofa* lies in the phrase *fa'afetaua'i le alofa*, which simply means *alofa atu - alofa mai* (the exchange of alofa through the act of giving) (Efi 2006). For example, during a family *fa'alavelave* (cultural obligatory) like in a *maliu* (death of a relative), all friends and extended families of the deceased would come to show their respect and love by giving a *si'ialofa* (gesture of love). It could be monetary or fine mats or both. In return, the immediate family of the deceased would reciprocate by giving food, fine mats and money. The money represents a *lafa* (for the orator) and *pasese* (travel fare).

Pereira (2005) states that she met her reciprocity obligations by donating books to school libraries, giving money as *meaalofa* (gift) for staff morning tea and sometimes for *pasese* (fares) for some participants. In addition, she gave public presentations of her findings. Another alternative is to incorporate the reciprocal gesture within the research design so that during the research process both the researcher and participants benefit from the exchange. When undertaking research involving teachers, for example, incorporating an in-service workshop (Lee Hang 2011) can provide high quality data due to greater interaction with participants, and at the same time the participants are empowered with the new ideas and skills for their professional development.

Conclusion

When using the Samoan language in educational research, one needs to be familiar with the basic protocols on the use of GT and GK. The researcher must be aware that there are different ways to translate work using the Samoan language. *Gagana T* must be used consistently in all the written texts (including translations of cover letters, informed consent forms, information sheets and questionnaires), as well as interview schedules, the interviews, transcribing interviews and the presentation of research findings. Ways to reciprocate the participants must also be considered.

This paper is my *utu* of trialed and tested ideas on the use of the Samoan language in educational research. It is hoped that new studies in educational research in Samoa will continue and that beginner researchers will find some of the ideas in this paper useful. When the Samoa Language Commission becomes fully functional it will be helpful to researchers but Samoan education researchers also have a part to play in documenting language issues and tested ideas for the benefit of beginner education researchers in Samoa. This paper is a small contribution to that end.

O lena ua sa'a fa'aoti le utu a le faimea. A aoga, le/el. A leaf, sagai ane e fa'asoa mai lau utu.

Notes

1. This Samoan proverb means 'The fisherman's bamboo canister has been emptied'.
2. The fisherman's bamboo canister containing used spare fish hooks that are still useful for others to use.
3. At the time of this paper, the SLC has been established but not fully functional.
4. This was quoted from Pratt, George. 1878. *A grammar and dictionary of the Samoan language*. 2nd ed. London: Trubner & Co., Ludgate Hill. (Waikato University Library Call Number: PL6501.P77). In addition, a footnote to this particular quote by S.J.W. also known as Rev. S. J. Whitmee - the editor of the second edition read as follows: "To a person now for the first time visiting Samoa this would appear to be incorrect. He would hear k used by most of the natives in their ordinary conversation in place of t. But this is a recent change. When I went to Samoa in 1863 I heard k used only on the island of Tutuila, and on the eastern portion of Upolu. - S.J.W." (Pratt 1878: 1).
5. This model has been attributed to Pulotu-Endeman (2001) in Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu and Finau (2001).

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