

The Need for Change in Curriculum to Enhance Progress in English Learning In Samoa

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Abstract

This article proposes that the Samoan system of education needs new approaches and measures to enable further progress in English language learning. It argues that competency in English is essential for our people who seek employment or higher education. To achieve this more emphasis on English is need in primary education levels including the early years, but there is an issue with the extent of English comprehension and fluency among teachers. At the National University of Samoa, where English is mostly the language of instruction and where most learning resources are in English, it has been suggested the ability to confidently read, write and speak in English and comprehend spoken English at a standard expected at tertiary level is weak among some if not many students and graduates. The paper analyses some underlying reasons why this is so. The paper is based on information from online sources, journals, newspapers as well as education report and scholarly publications.

Keywords: Change, Curriculum-Development, Progress

Introduction

Does Samoa need a stronger English language curriculum? This article argues that it does, and that there is a need for a review of the school curricula towards placing more emphasis on English language instruction, to achieve better student outcomes. The majority of our students speak Samoan at home and have no other exposure to English except at school; therefore more time should be given to English instruction within the classroom. Further innovative methods utilizing Information technology is needed to help teachers as well as students.

It might be argued that English is not Samoa's indigenous language and is only of secondary importance, but this argument can be countered by the fact that although Samoa is only a dot on the map, it is substantially affected by globalization. More Samoans live overseas in English-speaking countries than in Samoa and Samoa benefits economically from their remittances. It is likely that migrants with a command of English are better equipped to succeed economically overseas, as well as finding the challenge of living in a new country easier to deal with. Even among those who have not completed secondary education, basic knowledge of English is an advantage in securing a contract to do seasonal work in New Zealand and Australia, an opportunity that is highly sought after. Furthermore, most of our most highly educated people have studied for higher degrees in English language countries overseas which is a pathway to the best paid jobs, or success in business. English is one of the major languages of the world, and fluency in it leads to better communication and knowledge acquisition skills and eventually to better employment opportunities. As the current education policy states, Samoa's education system "... develops in students the skills and attitudes needed to succeed in an ever-changing world" (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture 2006, p. 3).

The current Samoan Primary Education Curriculum, presently being revised, was published 15 years ago (in 2006) and since then, there have been many changes in our country and the global influences on

it, particularly in the area of information and communications technology. Our education systems must adapt to these changes. The Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, affirms the importance of quality, stating that quality is “exemplified by high standards of academic achievement.” The policy also states that “teachers make a difference” and that: “... the Samoan Curriculum recognizes the centrality of highly effective teaching in ensuring quality outcomes for students” (2006, p. 4). It is questionable as to whether these high standards of academic achievement are being met and whether teachers have the high standards needed as stated in the curriculum policy.

An associated issue is the principal of ‘equity’ which “... requires that the system will treat all individuals fairly and justly in provision of educational opportunity” (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture 2006, p. 3). Equity considerations raise the question of whether Samoa’s education system adequately caters for students who lack fluency in Samoan. There is a significant minority of students who do not speak the Samoan language at home but only a few private schools offer instruction in the English language medium, and places in them are scarce.

Studies highlighting issues in education

The PaBER (Pacific Benchmarking for Education Results) Report for the Pacific in 2017, found problems in Samoa’s educational system as well as with teachers. The report was summarized by the Samoa Observer newspaper (Feagaimaalii 2017) and revealed the following findings:

“... most teachers are not able to fully utilize literacy and numeracy resources claiming the language used in the curriculum is too difficult.”

“... teachers have limited capacity and skills to effectively teach literacy and numeracy.”

“... while teachers receive in-service training, most of the training does not specifically address the targeted areas required for literacy and numeracy and there is little or no evidence that these trainings are planned in advance.”

“... all teachers of Samoa must receive professional development and that improvement of teaching-learning outcomes in the classroom will be at the core of education, training and staff development programmes”.

With the evidence provided in the report showing real problems in our educational system as well as the capacity of our teachers, it is imperative that solutions be found to enable progress.

The national goal of equal Competence in English and Samoa

Samoa’s Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture Framework states that the goal for students to: “be equally competent in Samoan and English. This requires that both languages are used as means of instruction as well as the learning of the different features of both languages. Students who are truly bilingual have the advantage of operation both socially and conceptually in either language” (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture, 2006, p.8).

To achieve this goal, students require an equal and consistent use of both languages in the curriculum and classroom. According to one study of English teaching:

“... for Samoan students there was difficulty in speaking English but also some of the teachers lacked confidence in the proficiency of their spoken English skills” (Ljungdahl, 2007, p. 1)

If teachers lack the confidence in speaking Samoa’s second language, it is likely that they will avoid using the English language that they are uncomfortable with. Another article on the results of the Samoa Primary Education Certification Assessment in the Samoa Observer newspaper backs Ljungdahl’s observation, reporting that:

... teachers have in fact indicated that they prefer to work with the Samoan version of materials and also indicated that language and terminology in the English curriculum resources is too challenging to teach... As a result it is highly likely that while a bilingual policy is in place, the majority of teaching and learning goes on in Samoan (Feagaimaalii-Luamanu 2017).

Hours of Instruction

The lack of exposure to the English language is also illustrated in the Curriculum Policy guidance on the weekly hours of classroom instruction. For Year 1 in the current policy on primary education the curriculum allocates the following period of time to subjects.

Table 1: Year One: Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture 2006

Samoan	Poems, Speech Training, Printing	7.5 hours
English	Initially Oral English	1 hour
Social Science	Incorporating Story and Drama	3 hours
Mathematics		5 hours
Science		2.5 hours
Health and Physical Education		3 hours
Visual and Performing Arts	Including Art and Music	3 hours
Assemblies/Recess		2.5 hours

(MESC, 2006, Figure 1 p. 14)

With regards to this allocation of time and the issues outlined above, the question arises as to why English, which is not used in most Samoan families, is only given one hour of study per week? This works out to an equivalent of 12 minutes of English exposure a day, which is clearly insufficient and may only consist of a short song or nursery rhyme such as ‘Humpty Dumpty’ or maybe English greeting. As Ljungdahl pointed out, as previously cited, it is likely that teachers will prefer such an undemanding mode of instruction, especially if many of them are not confident in the English language.

If our children are to succeed in their future educational pathway, they need to learn English at the age where learning is at its highest and when their brains are expanding and developing. As Ruyun Hu (2016), states:

... according to the Critical Period Hypotheses, age is proved to be the myth that young learners stand the advantage stage in second language learning. They will learn [a] foreign language better than older learners in the ultimate attainment, though [the] older learner is regarded as fast and efficient language learner. Immersing young learners into foreign language learning earlier will help them hold the favourable attitude of language learning in the long run. Therefore, we should teach learners' foreign language as early as possible, especially at their early age. When they first enter to the school, the foreign language courses should be introduced for them in class. It would help them form the foreign language belief like their mother tongue (Hu 2016)

Another report also emphasizes this point: "The human brain develops more rapidly between birth and age 5, than during any subsequent period" (Wisconsin Council 2007). This then is a suitable time to begin to expose the child to a second language as a child is born prepared to learn.

Although there is an improvement in the Curriculum Policy for Year 2, as shown below, I also query the adequate and satisfactory learning hours given to the second language. It allocates the following period of time to subjects:

Table 2: Year Two: Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture 2006

Samoan	Poems, Speech Training Printing	7 hours
English	Initially Oral English	1.5 hours
Social Science	Incorporating Story and Drama	3 hours
Mathematics		5 hours
Science		2.5 hours
Health and Physical Education		3 hours
Visual and Performing Arts	Including Art and Music	3 hours
Assemblies/Recess		2.5 hours

(MESC, 2006, Figure 2, p.14)

With 1.5 hours per week, this breaks down to a total of 18 minutes a day or an increase of 6 minutes per day from the previous year. Again, as most of the students do not speak English at home or have English resources such as books in their homes, this is evidently insufficient. An article on English resources by Kruse Va'ai (2016) points out that even though some schools had libraries or collections of books for students to read,

"... many teachers were not conscientious readers and did not engage with reading resources, therefore they did not impart a love of reading nor did they create appealing activities to motivate students to learn and excel in reading" (Kruse Va'ai 2016).

Under the current primary curriculum, from Years 4 to Year 8, students receive an equal allocation of 5 hours of Samoan as well as English instruction. In secondary schools from Year 9 to Year 11 students are supposed to receive 3 hours of Samoan and 4 hours of English. The Curriculum Policy states that in the senior secondary Years 12 and 13, "Students must undertake the study of English then choose four

subjects from given options History, Biology, Chemistry, Geography ...” (Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture Framework 2006). However, students at these senior levels are largely still taught in Samoan as many secondary school teachers, like their primary school counterparts, are more comfortable with the Samoan language that is, for most of them, their mother tongue. Yet social science subjects such as history and geography require English because the texts and teaching resource material are in English. In other words, our teachers need the ‘know how’ in order to accomplish this. Elaine Lameta (2006) argues that when Samoan teachers speak or teach in either language, they need to be highly competent in that language so as to act as models for the students” (Lameta 2006). It follows that more support is needed by teachers to improve their own English competencies.

Effects of low English exposure on the quality of tertiary education

The lack of English exposure for our students leads to problems which need to be addressed and solved. By the time students reach National University of Samoa Foundation level, reading and writing levels are very low and do not reach the required standards. Va'ai and Heem (2014) refer to low English proficiency in Samoa in their discussion of a 2010 report by Kral on bilingual policy for the Ministry of Education, Sports and Culture (MESC) which found that:

“... the majority of students performed below the achievement levels targeted by MESC and entering the job market, or university or vocational training, find themselves unable to communicate in English or use the language as a tool for advancement and thus concluded at every level of transition from primary school to high school, or from high school to work place ... remedial training in English is necessary for most of the youth” (Va'ai & Heem 2014, p. 3)

Many students depend on teachers to explain information in Samoan in courses that are written in English and require student to read English texts; few are independent learners able to read and comprehend texts in English, and wait for teachers to clarify information in Samoan. Accordingly, students at university levels tend to prefer bilingual teachers who will offer them a Samoan translation of the information they need to assimilate in order to pass their courses.

Conclusion

English instruction for students in our country of Samoa should begin more intensively at Primary levels or even in preschools, when students have the highest ability to learn. At present pre-school education in Samoa is not offered widely, and often comprises play group activities using Samoan language, rather than offering English language exposure. When children commence primary school at age five the current allocation of time for teaching English is not sufficient to take advantage of the fact that childhood years are a particularly sensitive period for the cognitive and behavioural development of a young child.

Our current curriculum policy discusses several issues such as equity, effective teaching, and equal competence in both Samoan and English. How can this possibly be achieved when such little study time is allocated in the curriculum for the English language as given in the policy? Adjustments need to be made and more time should be given to English instruction within the classroom at the early primary level

and thereafter. Most of our children receive a sufficient amount of exposure to their native tongue within their home, community and Sunday schools and at Primary school they are enabled to build on their existing knowledge so that the child becomes literate in Samoan by adding vocabulary, grammar and reading and writing skills. However In the early primary school years, children need a foundation in English before they can build greater comprehension and literacy, and therefore much more time and teaching resources than is currently offered to them. A balance of exposure is necessary in both languages.

Teacher quality is also important and teachers need to be provided with in-service training to improve their ability to teach English. The curriculum now under revision needs to address this problem and increase the teaching hours for English instruction within the classroom, beginning at primary levels. English competency opens doors to opportunities, so it is essential that our educational system recognizes the need to improve teaching and resourcing of English in our schools.

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