

Chapter 5

FINDINGS: Language and Cultural Continuity

E au i le tau ola, e au i le fagota

If you follow and learn from the navigator, then one day
you will also become the navigator.

Overview

The focus of this chapter is on Samoan language communication and immersion. The findings are interpreted with reference to related research and theory on learning and teaching in the “mother tongue” and on bilingualism. A key related concept evident in the data analysed from this study is children’s identity. Drawing on socio-cultural theoretical approaches, additional concepts discussed are: tools, artefacts, and mediation.

Observations of Communication in Samoan

Observations recorded throughout the project illustrate how the children’s use of the Samoan language was extended within the centre. For example these observations, recorded as a group of children moved across to the over-2s area, were coded as examples of communication:

“Fa’afetai mo le supo”. (Thank you for the soup).

Lilly looks at the potato and says, “Talo”

“Leai, e le o se talo, o le pateta”. (No, it’s not taro, it’s a potato).

Lilly: “O le pateta”. (It’s a potato)

Faia’oga: “O le a lau mea’ai na e ai?” (What are you eating?)

*Lilly: “O le supo ma le kaloti, ma le moa, ma le kapisu, ma le pateta”.
(It’s soup and carrots and chicken and cabbage and potato)*

Faia’oga: “Teine lelei, Lilly.”. (Good girl, Lilly).

The example shows the teacher using praise and questioning the child, Lilly, to extend her thinking and her communication in Samoan.

The staff member then reflected on these observations and recorded in her diary that Lilly (as observed in the above excerpt) “knew what she was eating in Samoan, except the potato which she mistook for taro.” The staff member also made these reflections on the role of the teacher in children’s Samoan language development:

The teacher was encouraging her (the child in transition) in the use of Samoan language, by questioning and helping her know the difference between some of the vegetables—talo ma le pateta (taro and potato).

Throughout the action research project, observations were consistently recorded that show teachers praising children, as in the above example. Further examples of communication that show a teacher both praising children, and also using strategies to extend children’s thinking in Samoan, are included in Appendix F of this report.

Communication and Language Continuity: Interviews with Children

Teacher/researchers carried out interviews with the children to document and discuss their use of the Samoan language before, during, and after their transition to school. Interviews with 5 children who made the transition to school between late 2004 and March 2005 showed that the children looked forward to going to school, and that they enjoyed communicating in Samoan with the A’oga teacher-researcher when she interviewed them. Another small group of children who moved to school later during 2005 (action research cycle 3) spoke with the teacher-researcher about their cultural identity and language use.

Some children showed strong identity with fa’asamoa. A teacher-researcher (faia’oga) and a child (Jared) who had turned 5 years old was moving to school held a long conversation together, in Samoan, about animals (crocodiles, fish, and snakes):

Faia’oga - *O le a le igoa ole manu na e ai le gata?* (Which animal eats snakes?)

Jared – *Serafi* (Giraffe)

Faia’oga – *Ole a?* (Pardon?)

Jared – *Serafi*

Faia’oga – *Serafi. E tago le serafi ai le gata pe ai e le gata le serafi?* (Giraffe. So the giraffe eats the snake or does the snake eat the giraffe?)

Jared– *Ai le gata le serafi.* (The snake eats the giraffe).

Faia’oga – *E ai ele gata le serafi, a?* (The snake eats the giraffe, does it?)

Jared – *Ioe* (Yes).

Faia’oga - *Manaia. A’o a igoa o isi manu ia?* (Nice/Right. So what are the names of these other animals?)

Jared – *E ai e le Leona le elefane.* (The lion eats the elephant).

Faia’oga – *E ai e le Leona le elefane?* (The lion eats the elephant?)

Jared – Yes.

As Jared showed considerable fluency and understanding, the teacher-researcher commented favourably, and the child explained that the Samoan language was used in the home environment too:

Faia’oga – *Sole, ese lou poto* (Wow you’re very clever).

Jared – *E fa’asamoa a’u i le fale. E fa’asamoa a’u i le fale.* (I speak Samoan at home. I speak Samoan at home).

Faia’oga – *E fa’asamoa oe i le fale.* (You speak Samoan at home?)

Jared – *Ioe.* (Yes).

Faia’oga – *To’aga e fa’asamoa.* (Keep your Samoan up).

The teacher-researcher interviewed Peniamina, another child who was turning 5 years and was about to move across to the primary school (action research cycle 3). He was happy to come to the A’oga and about starting school:

Faia’oga – *Ia, o lea ua fai le ma talanoaga ma le tama o Peniamina. Ua sauni foi Peniamina e alu i le A’oga a tamaiti matutua. Ia, o lea o le a fai a’u fesili i le tama o Peniamina ae tali mai Peniamina.*

(I’m going to talk with Peniamina who is getting ready to go to “big school”. I will ask questions and Peniamina will respond.)

Faia’oga – *Talofa Peniamina* (Hello Peniamina)

Peniamina – *Talofa* (Hello [Faia’oga])

Faia’oga – *O a mai oe?* (How are you?)

Peniamina – *Manuia fa’afetai lava M* (teacher) (Very well thank you). (They continue talking - about the sun and a smiley face)

Faia’oga – *E fiafia oe e sau i le a’oga?* (Are you happy to come to the a’oga?)

Peniamina – *Ioe* (Yes)

Faia'oga – *O ai na lua o mai i le taeao?* (Who did you come to school with this morning?)

Peniamina – *O lo'u tama. E nofo lo'u tina i le fale.* (My father - my mother, stays at home).

Faia'oga - *E nofo lou tina i le fale ae sau oe i le a'oga?* (Does your mother stay home while you come to school?)

Peniamina – *Ioe* (Yes).

Faia'oga - *Ia, lelei tele oe e fiafia e sau i le a'oga?* (Good – you're happy to come to a'oga?).

Peniamina (the child) sang a song, and then, as the conversation with the teacher-researcher continued, he expressed some ambivalence about Samoan identity and speaking Samoan at home. It is important to note, though, that throughout several interviews and taped conversations, Peniamina showed evidence of considerable fluency and enjoyment of speaking in Samoan.

There is evidence, in the examples of translated interview data above, in the observations of children in transition, and in extensive transcripts of conversations (see Appendix F), that teachers were using the techniques Baker (2000, p. 140) specifies as supportive in language education. These include:

- indirect error correction and the use of repetition;
- restatement to ensure that children understand;
- role modeling;
- frequent use of praise.

Teachers' Professional Development

During the COI research project, teachers at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa were encouraged to take on further study and to extend their professional development. Two of the staff were studying papers in bilingual education for a Graduate Diploma qualification. They introduced further innovative centre practices to help the children's language learning and to foster language continuity. These included building a new foyer where parents and staff could communicate in English without interrupting the children's Samoan language immersion.

Teachers' Reflections

Teacher reflection was an important part of the COI action research. The teacher-researchers note that, upon reflection, the children's conversations with their teachers showed that the children were confident about speaking in Samoan, and that they were proud of their achievements.

The teacher-researchers applied their knowledge of bilingual education research and theory to the findings on language continuity at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa, for example, the techniques advocated by Baker (2000). They also affirm that our findings are consistent with Genesee's (1987) points, that language learning aims not for grammatical perfection, but rather for meaningful communication, and that meaningful conversations among students and teachers enhance students' confidence and motivation to use their (second) language.

Tools and Artefacts

The curriculum at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa is supported by a physical environment that reflects the country and cultural practices of Samoa (Podmore & Meade, 2005). A circular space is a central meeting and eating area, like a Samoan *fale*, and adjacent to it is a very large sandpit. The development of, and rationale for, the *fale* are explained in this way:

The school prefab that we started in has had a deck built onto it shaped in a circular shape with poles supporting to resemble that of a Samoan *fale*. This provides a uniquely physical space within which to create a strong sense of fa'aSamoa (Samoan culture) to our centre. It was important that the children and families attending the centre could have that special feeling of Samoa even though the centre was a renovated prefabricated classroom. (Taouma, Tapusoa, & Wendt Samu, 2005, p. 6)



Photo 5: Tools and artefacts: A “Samoan corner” in the over-2s building at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa.



Photo 6: Tools and artefacts: The ramp into the over-2s building, showing shell patterns that reflect a traditional Samoan design.

There is a wide range of natural materials and cultural artefacts from Samoa at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa, and these are evident in a number of the observations recorded during the process of the action research.¹

These structural characteristics and artefacts, together with the Samoan language-immersion environment, influence children's sense of belonging, and their identity. This is evident in both the observations and interviews with the children.

Parents' Voices on Language and Cultural Continuity

Parents clearly value having their children experience Samoan language and culture at the centre. This was shown in their responses to a survey carried out in February 2004 (see parent questionnaire, Appendix D). Parents' replies to the parental survey indicate that Samoan was spoken regularly in about half of the homes (17 of 36 replies), and that the Samoan language was very important to most parents. Thirty-two of the 36 families replied that Samoan language was really important to them, or a high priority.

Parents' vision for their children also showed a strong focus on language. When asked "What is your vision for your child in A'oga?" 26 of the 35 parents responding to this question replied that "to speak Samoan" was their main vision, and another 5 families said "Samoan language as well as social skills". In response to the question, "Has the A'oga increased your child's Samoan language vocabulary and understanding?", 34 of the families replied "yes" and the remaining 2 families wrote that, as their babies were very young, it was too early to know.

It was also clear from the information provided in response to the survey that parents were very satisfied with the teaching staff at the A'oga. All 36 responding families replied "yes" to the question "Are you satisfied with the teaching staff at the A'oga?", and many added very favourable comments about the staff.

¹ Two closely related socio-cultural constructs emerging from, and embedded in, the data on language and cultural continuity are *tools* and *artefacts*. Vygotsky (1978) saw language as a psychological tool (i.e., a psychological tool as contrasted with material tools). Recent research also demonstrates the importance of mediation of material tools and artifacts to learning and teaching, in studies of young children and of older students, across a range of cultural contexts (McDonald, Le, Higgins, & Podmore, 2005).

As the research cycles progressed, on several occasions an expanding group of parents became actively involved in the focus group meetings. During the second cycle of the action research, the facilitator of the focus group prepared a set of short questions for parents of children who made the transition to primary school (on the same block of land). The open-ended questions were designed to hear about parents' perspectives about both transition to school and language and cultural continuity (see item 2, Appendix D). Parents' voices were also recorded as part of the focus group meeting notes.

From the parents' perspective, language continuity was certainly important. Several talked about the continuity of language across home, early childhood centre, and school. Their comments are presented below:

We continue fa'asamoa at home, however we are concerned that some of the Samoan language may be lost in the bilingual unit (depending on future staffing there). It's still too early at this stage to note the impact on our child [who has just started school].

How is the Samoan/English structured at the school?

[The transition is] just a continuation of [our child's] Samoan language. The support from the teachers was great. [Our child] has made steady improvement, and we are generally happy with her development!

I felt the transition impacted negatively on [our child's] language as the English component (60:40) is too high for children coming from an immersion environment. [Our child] speaks much less Samoan at home now, and it is quite hard to encourage him to speak more. Language continuity is helped by being in an environment where they can continually hear and practice speaking it, as well as expressing thoughts and ideas.

Through the use of the questionnaire, and the recording of parents' perceptions at the focus group meetings, the research yielded more in-depth information on parents' views, experiences, and aspirations regarding transition to school and their children's Samoan language continuity.

During the process of the action research, changes were made in the primary school to enhance the practices that promote children's Samoan language continuity. This happened partly because representatives from the school heard the parents' views on language continuity expressed at the focus group meetings. After the data presented above were collected in October and November 2004, a new teacher/team leader was appointed to the primary school, to work with the older children. From that point, the teachers in the new entrant class all had (or had had) children attending the A'oga Fa'a Samoa. The centre manager made the following comments, that were verified by the school principal at a focus group meeting on 17 March 2005. These comments referred to the class that the children move on to from the A'oga: "*They are very keen to initiate 80%:20% Samoan: English, and so teachers are using Samoan every day with the children in the school classroom*". During 2005, the bilingual class at the school did change to 80%: 20% Samoan: English.

Then in 2006, a "past pupil" of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa was appointed to the bilingual class at the school. This teacher is also the daughter of a senior faia'oga (educator) at the A'oga Fa'a Samoa. Her appointment provides an example of the changes made in the school to promote greater language continuity. Furthermore, it is an example of one Pasifika child's success in education and life, illustrating how one of the first children to attend the A'oga Fa'a Samoa subsequently succeeded in education (by successfully completing secondary school, then graduating with a teaching degree, and being appointed to a teaching position in the school). Her continued service to immersion/bilingual education in the community also shows the *aiga* principle and the values of the A'oga Fa'a Samoa in action: love, respect, and service.

Summary of Findings

What has the COI done for children's and adults' learning in the areas of language and cultural continuity?

- The vision of the Samoan grandparents who had the idea of establishing the A'oga Fa'a Samoa centre, the language and cultural immersion policy enacted at the centre, and international research findings on bilingualism (Meade,

2005), all support the importance of young children learning to communicate competently in their mother tongue or heritage language.

- The A’oga Fa’a Samoa, located on the same block of land as a primary school, has close links with the school communities on site, especially the bilingual Samoan class in the school. The COI research, tracking the children’s transition to school, shows that physical location and transition practices, together with the language immersion policy at the centre, served to support and strengthen the confidence and Samoan language competence of the children making transitions. It also led to changes being made in the school to extend the continuity and quality of the children’s Samoan-language experiences.
- As part of being a COI, the staff/teacher-researchers at the A’oga Fa’a Samoa carried out observations (working alongside the research associate) and reflected on the data. This led to teachers and management making further changes to enhance language continuity. For example, changes were initiated to ensure that learning increasingly took place in Samoan. These included improvements to the structural layout of the centre, and then our changed practices ensured that Samoan immersion really happened. Much more of the centre became designated as Samoan-speaking-only areas.
- The A’oga Fa’a Samoa teachers took on more study in immersion and bilingual education, and there is evidence in the translated interview data, and in taped conversations of small groups of children with a teacher, that teachers were using techniques Baker (2000) specifies as supportive in language education.
- The teacher-researchers, reflecting on the children’s conversations with their teachers (including those presented in this report), were convinced that: *“the children are confident about speaking in Samoan, they have meaningful conversations among themselves and with their teachers, and they are proud of their achievements”*. Further evidence supporting these comments is

presented in Appendix F, which provides additional examples of conversations among a teacher and groups of children.