

Teaching English in Samoa: Coming of Age

Lesley Ljungdahl, University of Technology Sydney, NSW, Australia

Abstract: The expansion of English as a global language as a language of communication involves issues of cultural and linguistic diversity (Cummins, 1997). 21 student-teachers from an Australian university had the opportunity to give English language instruction in four Samoan primary schools. They undertook a 3 week international teaching practicum program (in 2006) and this experience provides the contextual background for an exploration of issues in English language teaching in Samoa. Observations of their teaching experiences showed that communicative language approaches to second language teaching worked successfully. In particular, picture books, language games and the use of songs with their music, rhyme, rhythm and repetition helped the acquisition of English language. Paradoxically, the practicum highlighted the importance of the maintenance of vernacular languages and the costs and benefits of teaching English. The reality of their classroom experiences contributed to reflective teaching practice and a raised awareness of the significance of indigenous culture.

Keywords: English as a Global Language, International Teaching Practicum, English as a Second Language, Communicative Language Teaching

Introduction

THE USE OF English as a global language involves significant issues of cultural and linguistic diversity (Cummins, 1997) as it expands as a language of technology, science, business and communication. In Western Samoa, the first language (L1) is Samoan but English is also used; many Samoans are bilingual, indeed multilingual. In 2006, 21 trainee teachers from an Australian university (UTS) had the opportunity to give English language instruction in four Samoan primary schools when they undertook a 3-week international teaching practicum program. This experience (a practice focus) provides the contextual background for an exploration of issues in English language teaching in Apia, Samoa. Observations of their teaching experiences showed that communicative language approaches to second language teaching worked successfully. Trainee teachers experimented with a range of classroom practices to develop understanding of the English language. Children's literature, language games and the use of songs with their music, rhyme, rhythm and repetition helped the acquisition of English language. The outcomes of their experiences contributed to reflective teaching practice and led to adaptation of their classroom practices.

Context

In the urban primary schools in Apia (population 35,000) on the island of Upolu, English is mostly the medium of instruction but the vernacular language of Samoa provides oral support in the classroom context. Samoan is the national language but English is the official language used for commer-

cial and government business. As Lotherington (1998, p. 69) points out: 'it is unnatural for everyone in the classroom to convert to a second language'. For some Samoan students there was difficulty in speaking English but also some of the teachers lacked confidence in the proficiency of their spoken English skills. The extent of use of English outside the classroom was unknown but church activities and television (e.g. cartoons, sitcoms) often used English as the medium of communication. Lotherington, referring to the South Pacific region, observes that 'socio-cultural values, expectations, activities are being subtly re-educated through widespread English language television viewing' (1998, p. 71). However, the nature of this English (which is not disciplinary-specific or curriculum-based) did not prepare the students for the cognitive-academic language proficiency demands of the classroom.

The teacher trainees (from the University of Technology, Sydney) went to Samoa on a primary school teaching practicum. Of the twenty-one teacher trainees, three were male and eighteen female, the average age being twenty-two. When teaching, they usually taught in pairs and this allowed them to communicate ideas and reflections. An extra non-teaching week allowed some students to experience the Teuila Festival with its Miss Tutti Frutti contest for *fa'afafine* held in Apia in September. Trainees had respect for the *fa'a Samoa* (Samoan way) and the importance of the Church and Samoan protocols in village traditions. They were aware of *alofa* – the generosity of giving which helped foster social ties and the significance of the *'ava* ceremony in which they took part. The majority of the population lives in Apia but there is a significant migration

trend to America Samoa, New Zealand and Australia. As a result, many of the Samoan students have close connections with other English-speaking countries. Interestingly, one of the trainees discovered new family connections in Apia, Samoa (her great-grandfather had emigrated to Australia in 1912). Observing the warmth of this extended family gave the group as a whole a fascinating insight into the Samoan culture and the importance of genealogical ties in Samoa.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

The pedagogy of communicative language teaching in ESL education directed the learning/teaching process. CLT develops skills and understandings that encourage students to become creative and more confident communicators. Successful language learning can take place in lessons which focus on the use of children's literature, games and songs. CLT emphasises meaning and engaging in authentic language use (Savignon, 2002; Nunan, 2005; Cummins & Davison, 2007). Littlewood's views still hold true in the contemporary classroom:

A communicative approach opens up a wider perspective on language. In particular, it makes us consider language not only in terms of its structures (grammar and vocabulary), but also in terms of the communicative functions that it performs. In other words, we begin to look not only at language forms, but also at what people *do* with these forms when they want to communicate with each other' (1981, p. x).

Current research documents the spread of English as a global language and the place of CLT in second language acquisition and pedagogy (Cummins & Davison, 2007). While Bax (2003) has criticized CLT for minimizing the importance of the context in which the learning and teaching take place, in this practicum an emphasis was placed on the enhancement of the Samoan students' personal experiences and the link with their everyday activities. Nunan's (2005) view on the importance of context is pertinent: 'We need to look deeply at times into the specific needs of learners in Asia and the Pacific region who we cannot forget are still very much living in local contexts – not only an evidently increasingly global one'.

In the classroom every attempt was made to make the English language meaningful to the Samoan students. Learning of the children's names was considered important. The Anglicised names of the Samoan students, such as *Christian*, *Grace* and *Salvation*, were familiar to the trainees. However, the pronunciation of family names was more difficult

(e.g. So'ataga) proved more challenging since all vowels in the Samoan language are pronounced and the letter *g* is pronounced as a velar nasal *ng*. Trainees stimulated interest in Australian themes and related them to Samoan students' interests. Thus, a lesson on the Australian platypus evoked a lot of interest in the mammal's interesting attributes such as webbed feet, fur, a duck's bill, egg laying, poisonous spur. Students learned a lot of information and useful vocabulary. It was found possible to teach grammatical items and the structure of language through the communicative approach (Thompson, 1996).

Children's Picture-Books

Graham Base's alphabet book, *Animalia* (1986) is a picture book suitable for exploration by primary school children (O'Sullivan, 1987). Wherever possible, expressive body language and demonstration were used to convey meaning. For example, when reading *Animalia*, the students/teachers demonstrated 'yodelling' to illustrate the letter *Y*, adding humour to the situation. While much of the vocabulary in *Animalia* might be considered too difficult and abstruse for a child audience e.g. *impromptu*, *vociferous*, *diabolical*, *gnome*, the pleasure generated by the book and the use of phonics encouraged students to understand the words. For example, the letter *F* generated examples from the class e.g. *fat*, *fish*, *full* and *fast*. While the children were very attentive in listening to *Animalia*, trainees needed to know the book very well in order to answer questions and provide accurate information without too much hesitation. In future practicums it will be possible to supplement the book with additional resources such as the animated children's television series of *Animalia* (Base, 2007).

The language practised was related to the learners' interests (in functions, structures and vocabulary). Sentences were made from a selection of words in *Animalia*, putting them into the Samoan context wherever possible. The introduction of words from the Samoa language was always well received, often with a 'lesson' from the children on the correct pronunciation. The word *iguana* was not familiar but translated to a recognisable Samoan reptile, namely *a big gecko*. In this way trainees were able to make links with the students' prior knowledge. Some models of meaningful sentences were prepared (in large black print) so that students clearly understood the written task of making up new sentences using appropriate vocabulary.

The trainees found the following helpful:

- Clear explanations by the teacher, which built on feedback from students' prior knowledge.
- Checking of students' knowledge by questioning and eliciting their ideas about the texts.

- Visual aids such as the detailed, imaginative illustrations from *Animalia* and flash cards prepared beforehand and placed on the board for reinforcement of understanding of the text(s). Having the same vocabulary duplicated on large white flashcards made it simpler for students to see and understand.
- Working in pairs allowed trainees to read to smaller groups e.g. the class could be divided to share the same text or different stories such as *Eight Enormous Elephants* and *Koala Lu*.
- Cloze exercises assisted understanding of vocabulary and the narrative sequence.
- Aids to teach the alphabet in A-Z charts around the room. For example, the creation of an original A-Z display chart using selected words with sentences from students. This was useful as a follow-up lesson.
- Involving students by physical movement in the classroom e.g. directions to sit/stand in alphabetical order.
- Stimulating curiosity in the text by 'looking for the boy' in *Animalia*. The author, Graeme Base, has included an elusive child in his illustrations.
- Particular attention to spelling, handwriting and punctuation (capital letters and full stops) when writing on the board. Some trainee teachers recognised that they themselves needed extensive practice and preparation to ensure accuracy of notation on the board.

Selection of Books

The following texts, mostly with an Australian theme, were used in the classroom. The illustrations, humour and narrative structure appealed to the students.

Animalia
Dreamtime stories
Eight Enormous Elephants
Koala Lou
My Place
Possum Magic

Dreamtime Stories

The telling of Dreamtime stories by an indigenous Australian trainee was of particular interest to the Samoan students. The chosen story about the creation of the Jenolan Caves, a rock formation in the Blue Mountains area of New South Wales, Australia, appealed to the children. Photographs were used in the classroom but these were too small for effective illustration. As Wright points out, visual resources contribute to interest and motivation; the sense of the context of the language; and a specific reference point or stimulus (1989, p. 2). It is advisable to use

larger poster size visual aids if these can be located or made, so that students can see them well.

The lesson was linked to similarities in the Samoan context, namely, caves and creation stories. Creation stories from around the world allow students to find out about different cultures' explanations for human existence and phenomena (Hamilton & Moser (1988). Relevant words and sentences were written on the board, drawn from the student's background knowledge. A dot painting made by the trainee teacher was admired and its features studied such as how the technique was carried out, and why particular colours were used. Painting a creation story encouraged social interaction and practised additional language features. The personal nature of the teaching aids gave students the impression that the trainee teachers were interested and engaged in their learning process.

Jenolan Caves, Another Story

Long ago in the Dreamtime, many of the animals now on Earth were men. They were possessed with magic power, which allowed them to move mountains and make rivers.

Gurangatch was half fish, half reptile with shimmering scales of green, purple and gold. His eyes were like two bright stars. In the mid-day sun he basked in the shallow waters of the lagoon returning to the depths at nightfall.

Mirragan the tiger cat would not trouble spearing small fish but would wait for the largest and most dangerous.

HYPERLINK "<http://www.kama.com.au/crc/geology/gurangatch.html>" <http://www.kama.com.au/crc/geology/gurangatch.html>

Language Games

Games provided meaningful practice in language learning. Learners were entertained, challenged and motivated by the surprise element of game. Others were motivated by the competitive factor. Simple word games such as *I went to the shop and bought...* were successful communicative activities, helping students to revise and remember vocabulary and improve their listening skills, by the repetition of words and sentences (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 1984, p. 119). Students provided the various items in turn, whilst remembering the previous items, helped them to remember vocabulary. Students repeated *I went to the shop* and continued with *and bought a banana, a pawpaw....* If this proved too difficult, the items could be written on a flash card and the student was required to remember one item only. Samoan students introduced words in the vernacular such as *fai* (banana), *esi* (pawpaw), *talo* (taro, root vegetable).

Bingo was popular and used to advantage with language learning and numbers (Wright, Betteridge & Buckby, 1984, pp. 113-115). Writing on the board or with flash cards that could be put on the board, proved useful when carrying out the game of bingo.. Trainees found that in some classes the students subtracted by counting out the numbers one by one, without the automatic recall that is sometimes drilled into students. Language games allowed students to introduce vocabulary that was meaningful to them such as *mo'o* (gecko), *umu* (underground oven); and loan words from English such as *kirikiti* (cricket), *kofe* coffee, *ti* (tea). The difficulty of language learning was leavened by the humour, activity and fun engendered in classroom games.

Songs

Songs, music, rhyme, rhythm and repetition, appealed to the Samoan students. As a communicative activity, singing a song helped children with pronunciation, practice of syllable stress, and aided the memory of language structures (Murphey, 1992; Williamson, 2006). Rhyming and repetition helped focus the children's listening skills. The fun aspect of singing songs created a happy atmosphere that was conducive to learning, enhancing the children's confidence, which was sometimes lacking in conversational English. While the songs reflected the Anglo-Australian culture of the trainees, some also had particular resonance in the Polynesian context. The simple songs selected could be easily imitated - the well known action song, 'Hands on shoulders', was sung in both Samoan and English. Songs to commence lessons often worked well and helped the students to focus and concentrate on learning tasks.

The range of songs provided many opportunities for teaching idioms, vocabulary and grammatical items such as parts of speech, tenses and number (Silberstein, 1994). Miming the actions added hilarity to the learning of songs and props/realia reinforced meaning e.g. hats, thongs, the Samoan *puletasi* (the long skirt and tunic) or the *lava-lava*. The words of the songs stimulated interest in the writing of verse by the children.

A trainee noted the new strategies needed for teaching students with very little English:

Language was a barrier and I used a lot of art, drama and music in my lessons. Teaching the students songs and showing them the actions was a great way to introduce new vocabulary. The Samoans are great singers and I've never heard "Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree" sung with such passion and gusto.

Drama activities complemented the music and songs. As Maley and Duff observe, such activities 'draw

on the natural ability of every person to imitate, mimic and express himself or herself through gesture. They draw, too, on the student's imagination and memory, and natural capacity to bring to life parts of his or her past experience that might never otherwise emerge...Each student brings a different life, a different background into the class' (1982, p. 6). The Samoan students were most imaginative in their actions to illustrate songs and this contributed to their language learning by reinforcing the meaning of words such as *clap*, *laugh*.

To teach the songs, the trainees usually sang a song in its entirety first, then asked the students to join in a refrain, gradually building up knowledge of the song. Mostly the words were written on a chart, easily read by students. Sometimes the words were written out on a board or sheet and these were progressively erased as the children learnt the words. Trainees ensured by questioning and asking for words in sentences that the students understood the meaning of the songs. Modelling a sentence first gave the students an appropriate model. In a large class, there was a need to check that all were participating, not just whispering or mouthing the words.

Selection of Songs with Actions

The following songs are suitable for the primary school classroom since they have a strong rhythm and easily understood lyrics. Using actions to accompany the singing helps to reinforce language learning.

Dr Knickerbocker
Give me a home amongst the gumtrees
Hands on shoulders [in Samoan and English]
Hokey pokey
If you're happy and you know it
Kookaburra sits on an old gum tree
Never smile at a crocodile
Nutbush
Rainbow song
Show me the way to go home
Who's the king of the jungle?

Reflections

Trainee teachers reflected on their lessons and wrote perceptive observations about what could be done to improve their success. Excellent observations were made on 'what' happened and during the course of the practicum there was increased proficiency in working out 'why' something happened. Reflective practice in writing evaluations helped them make sense of what was successful/unsuccessful in a day's lessons e.g. the relative difficulty of group work. These were discussed by the trainee pairs and the supervisor. Trainees also wrote comments on strategies they intended to refine/use e.g. to try to

have an actual product at the end of a unit of work or a lesson – a piece of work that children could display or ‘publish’. For example, an alphabet class book was produced from the *Animalia* lesson. The comments of the teacher trainees, written after the practicum, reveal the extent of their positive feelings about teaching in Samoa ([HYPERLINK “http://www.uts.edu.au”](http://www.uts.edu.au) www.uts.edu.au).

Coming of age in Samoa (1928) by Margaret Mead describes the community of Luma in Ta’u in the 1920s. This text provides a caveat about understanding the complexities of culture and the importance of perspective. Mead herself was aware of the need to avoid presuppositions about cultural practices (Mead, 1972). Freeman, however, showed the flaws in her anthropological study (1983; 1999). The UTS teacher trainees were clearly aware of the challenges in teaching in a different context and the dangers of making superficial judgements.

Teaching was a challenge but it was also a fantastic experience. The school I was at was nothing like I have experienced in Australia.

We had the most amazing experience in Samoa, the people, the scenery and the schools were all so different to what we were used to and provided such a rich learning environment. I feel we have learned to really appreciate another culture by seeing it firstly through tourist’s eyes, then as we became part of the teaching community we could embrace its uniqueness and were more in tune with the fa’ Samoa - Samoan way, mostly related to respecting elders, important people, including teachers.

Samoa is the most amazing country I’ve ever been to. The people are so friendly and welcoming, the scenery is amazing and the whole experience is one I will never forget. I’ve taken away so much from it - not just what I have learnt about teaching but a whole new outlook on life.

The Samoa practicum was the most amazing cultural experience of my life. It was incredible to see that an entire school and local community could be so welcoming and generous to guests from overseas. The classes in the school were large and often had over 45 students but each of them was always eager to learn and went to a lot of effort to ensure we were welcomed into the classroom as teachers.

The Samoa trip was one of the most amazing experiences of my life - learning about the culture, meeting the locals, seeing beautiful beaches and tropical rainforests - but the thing that has stuck with me the most is the great opportunity we had to work in the primary schools. The schools are completely different to what we’re used to at home, yet we felt connected with them straight away. Watching the Samoan kids’ beautiful faces light up as we taught them and played with them will stay with me forever.

I would definitely recommend an experience like this to anyone studying to be a teacher.

One day we were walking back to our hotel and we waved to this little boy on the other side of the road, his sister was they’re holding his hand. She called out to us and asked us if we would like to have “a walk around her village”. To say it was beautiful was an understatement. I can’t get over the friendliness, trust and innocence of the Samoan people. At school it was exactly the same - each day during “interval”, the students would come up to us and give us their food to eat, and would just want to have a little conversation with the little English that they did know or even just stare.

Challenges

Corporal punishment is banned in government schools in Samoa but, nevertheless, was sometimes observed. When seen, this distressed trainees and they were not sure when they should intervene in a different cultural environment. When possible, they tried to prevent physical contact, often with success, but felt themselves to be in an untenable situation. Trainees referred to how the Samoans loved children and grappled with any dissonance. They tried to understand different perspectives on how disobedience should be managed even though they rejected the idea of ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’, as advocated in, “He that spareth his rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes (diligently)” (Hebrew, Old Testament or Proverbs 13: 24, King James’ Version of the Bible).

Classroom management could be challenging with large classes. There was some difficulty in moving up and down the aisles for supervision of class work or for the group work in communicative activities. The number of students in classes was larger than the 32 maximum the trainees were familiar with. On some occasions the size of the class (often 45-70 children) affected the teaching/learning process in various ways such as assessment practices. The marking of lesson books was time-consuming but strategies to do some assessment in class were recommended. Classroom management skills were implemented and trainees avoided raising their voices and competing with the class in volume. Praise and encouragement were used as often as possible with techniques to engage the students’ attention e.g. clapping, repetition of words. Careful planning and a calm manner enabled the trainees to handle difficult situations.

Observations

While communicative language teaching worked successfully, it was essential to communicate clear expectations about the sequence and content of les-

sons. Some students believed they would not have to complete a writing task that might be assessed in class; others believed they could commence it and that would be sufficient, intending to finish the task at home. Trainees sometimes drew a time-line on the board to show the expectation that writing and assessment would be done in class after reading the story.

Clear practicum guidelines needed to be conveyed to the Samoan staff in order to prevent misunderstanding. Issues such as the rationale for trainees teaching in pairs; assignment to a particular class; the importance of having a Samoan teacher within the classroom; or what to do in the case of a teacher absence, all required explanation and discussion.

A strong attempt was made to make the lessons varied and the content well-structured. Preparation of lesson notes (using a proforma) prompts beginning teachers to consider all elements of a lesson, e.g. relevance of topic which provides information and is of interest to students, initial motivation, scaffolding required, work done by students, assessment strategies, and resources needed. While the format of an alphabet picture-book such as *Animalia* determined the structure of a lesson to some extent, it was important to have clear models of the activities in order to facilitate student achievement and to encourage them to respond positively. For example, activities associated with *My Place* (Wheatley, 1996) which runs chronologically from 1988 to Aboriginal Dreamtime, needed good models of handwriting on board or paper, indicating the correct spacing, use of capitals, upper and lower case letters, full stops and punctuation. This was particularly important for junior grades. Where photocopying was available, there was the opportunity to provide children with prepared work sheets instead of work being written on the board.

Timing was often a difficulty and trainees sometimes found that they had done a lot of planning for a lesson but sometimes managed to carry out only part thereof. They needed to accommodate to the extra time required to ensure students understood the task; management of large groups; and seeing that students began and completed an achievable task in the specified amount of time. Trainees tried to establish a good rapport with students and to be patient in the timing of tasks and to circumvent any avoidance techniques by students by good classroom management. For example, students were encouraged to start writing when requested, concentrating on creativity rather than spending the time ruling lines or making decorative borders. Good models helped them achieve the desired result.

Positive interaction between the teacher trainees and the Samoan students was the aim so that learning

and teaching could take place. Trainees were advised by the UTS practicum coordinator to minimise the use of colloquial language such as the unmarked plural of the second-person pronoun *you guys* and the contractions of *gonna, wanna*. However, informal language was regarded as conventional speech rather than as careless pronunciation. Trainees needed to design activities and devise ways for the children to take an active, participatory role. The aim was to increase the ratio of student talk rather than having a teacher-centred classroom. Teacher trainees need to project their voices and to speak clearly with accurate English pronunciation and intonation.

Including assessment within lessons was regarded as important in order to check understanding and learning. The aim was to increase the English language knowledge of structures and vocabulary and to foster an environment where children would speak with confidence. The trainees were conscious that much of the content and some of the teaching strategies were new to the Samoan students so that additional efforts had to be made to encourage children to become involved.

Recommendations

The teacher trainees, and the practicum coordinators who had observed lessons, suggested the following strategies which would be suitable for those undertaking an international teaching practicum:

1. Communicate clear expectations
2. Organise and structure content
3. Make optimal use of learning time
4. Facilitate active and positive interaction
5. Acknowledge and reward learner effort and achievement.

Conclusion

For all teacher trainees, adapting to the unexpected was crucial. The trainees learned adaptability and the ability to address problems (such as shyness or the reluctance to practise oral English) with new strategies, mostly drawn from communicative language pedagogy. Children's picture books, language games and songs were used to stimulate interest in learning English. The trainees gained an awareness of how to make English relevant to student interests and frames of reference in Samoa. While the English language instruction centred on oral communication, the use of the vernacular was welcomed as it enhanced and facilitated communication. The outcomes of the practicum will lead to more effective and relevant teaching strategies in the under-researched area of primary school classrooms in Samoa.

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About the Author

Dr. Lesley Ljungdahl

Dr Lesley Ljungdahl is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her latest publication (3rd edition) with Winch et al. is *Literacy: Reading, Writing and Children's Literature* (OUP). She has a keen interest in ESL education and overseas practicums.

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