Curriculum Development Challenges in Advancing Conversational Languages in Fijian Classrooms

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Abstract

The paper reports on the challenges faced in the development of conversational languages (Hindi and i'Taukei) curriculum for primary school classrooms in Fiji. A qualitative methodological orientation which included phenomenological approach to study was employed. Relevant data was gathered through interviews. The results showed that while Curriculum Advisory Services (CAS) is solely in-charge of the development of the curriculum in Fiji, political and administrative factors have more impact on curriculum development than anything else. Lack of staff expertise, staff employment structure at CAS, unavailability of adequate resource materials, and weak research and consultation with academics, stakeholders and teachers are impediments which affect the development of the conversational languages curriculum for primary school classrooms in Fiji

Introduction

For better integration and a vibrant society Fijians must be able to interact freely with one another. This can be made possible if people are able to express themselves in each other's languages. The principal language are i'Taukei and Hindi. The linguistic ecology of Fiji is characterized by the interaction of the i'Taukei, Hindi and English languages (Chand, 2015). English has been used as the medium of instruction since schooling was introduced by colonial missionaries. Although i'Taukei and Hindi are the dominant vernacular languages in Fiji, the learning of each other's vernacular language was not made compulsory for either group in primary schools in Fiji until recently (Chand, 2015). Now because these are compulsory, both the vernacular languages are taught in primary schools in Fiji.

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The 2000 Education Commission recommended that conversational language programmes in i'Taukei (Fijian) and Fiji Hindi be made compulsory up to year 11 in secondary schools. This has been further strengthened by the 2013 Constitution of the Republic of the Fiji Islands which states: 'Conversational and contemporary *iTaukei* and Fiji Hindi languages shall be taught as compulsory subjects in all primary schools' (s31(3).

Conversational language has been defined as the 'exchange of thoughts and feelings by means of speech or sign language, gifted in the art of conversation' (www.thefreedictionary.com/conversational).

Learning and communicating in the foremost local languages is a major challenge for the people of Fiji. Trim (1999) postulates that the central aim of language in education is to help people articulate and be consciously aware of the full range of their experiences, knowledge and understanding. Language not only helps promote egalitarianism and endows people but it is also a crucial factor for social inclusion in ethno linguistic communities. Alidou, Glanz & Nikiema (2012) state that multicultural and multilingual competencies are viewed as communicative proficiency which is necessary for people to function fully in the 21st century. Pattanayak (2003) posits that in a multilingual setting, learning several languages and the respective cultures simultaneously teaches learners to be skilful communicators in multilingual settings. Carneiro (1996), Geremek (1996) and Stavenhagen (1996) state that policies which integrate cultural diversity is a means of social cohesion as they build on the communicative practices of the society and people.

The world that we populate is increasingly accomplishing interconnectedness through modern economy and technology. There is no escape for us from living together. Whether as families, communities or nations, we have to establish ways to live together socially, emotionally and physically. The need to learn each other's way of thinking is becoming more urgent now than ever before. The most efficient means of learning each other's ways of thinking and feeling is through language. One of the recommendations of the 2000 Education Commission report was to accord languages equal status. The report stated: 'Living together is the most pressing issue, not only for Fiji but also for the rest of the world. Every region of this planet is affected by ethnic and other conflicts, small and large, and great tragedies are unfolding because of the failure of human beings to find meaningful ways to live together' (2000: 296).

The available reports at the Ministry of Education indicate that while significant progress has been made in implementing conversational

languages in primary school classrooms in Fiji, curriculum developers still face significant difficulty in developing conversational languages curriculum for classrooms. This paper examines some of the challenges faced by curriculum developers in developing conversational languages in primary school classrooms in Fiji.

Research Methodology

The challenges faced in the development of conversational languages in primary schools in Fiji is understood best if the viewpoints of those involved in it are considered. This includes understanding their judgment, the discernments and expectations they hold and the contextual circumstances that guide their value orientation. A research approach that aimed to study conversational languages in this way found support in the qualitative methodological orientation, including a phenomenological approach of study. The qualitative methodology relies on words rather than numerical data and allows for exploration of the phenomena using more dynamic, multiple perspective and inductive methods (Creswell 2003, Johnson and Christensen, 2004). Qualitative method was chosen due to the exploratory nature of the study (Creswell 2003, Johnson and Christensen, 2004). The researcher expected multidimensional perspectives to be uncovered, and a qualitative research orientation allows for more specific information to be discovered for each perspective (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Phenomenology seeks to study the phenomena from the perspective of first-hand accounts and the life world of people (Lala and Kinsella, 2011), in this study in particular the experiences of the people in-charge of developing conversational languages for Fiji classrooms. A phenomenological approach is appropriate to elucidate the experiences of curriculum developers in developing conversational languages for primary schools in Fiji since these developers are entirely responsible for the development and the implementation processes.

Participants

Purposeful sampling which involves the selection of research participants according to the needs of the study was used in this qualitative study. Participants included personnel who could best provide information about the development of conversational languages curriculum in primary school classrooms in Fiji.

Data Collection and Analysis

After the formal research endorsement from the Ministry of Education, the availability of the Director of the Curriculum Advisory Services and his staff was sought through phone calls and e-mails and meeting dates confirmed. Data was collected using interviews. Charmaz (2006) postulates that interviews are a powerful vehicle where discovery of peoples 'life worlds' can be understood by exploring meanings of their unique experiences. A non-directive style of interviewing using open ended questions was used. This allowed participants freedom to regulate pacing and responses to the interview topics. When needed, more directed style of questioning was used to seek more clarification of information that was provided by the participants. For a neutral, confidential and non-judgmental environment the interviews were directed in the participants' own offices. Interviews were audio-taped with the use of a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. The data was analyzed through coding and thematic analysis. All data analysis was done using a low-tech method.

Ethical Considerations

Research studies which involve human participants require ethical approval prior to the commencement of the planned study. This ensures that the participant's rights, dignity and privacy are protected and ensures minimum potential risk to the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Formal ethics approval for this research was acquired from both the Fiji National University and the Ministry of Education where the research was conducted. Transcribed data was stored in password protected folders with restricted access and stored in an external hard drive which was only accessible to the researcher.

Results and Discussion

The data analysis resulted in findings to elucidate the challenges faced by curriculum developers in developing conversational languages curriculum for primary school classrooms in Fiji. Five major themes were identified: (i) Leadership at the Curriculum Advisory Services, (ii) Staff expertise at Curriculum Advisory Services, (iii) Staff employment structure at Curriculum Advisory Services, (iv) Availability of resource materials, and (v) Research and consultation with academics, stakeholders and teachers.

Leadership at Curriculum Advisory Services

The Curriculum Advisory Services is headed by a Director; each department is complimented by its own staff. There are two officers delegated responsibility under the supervision of their Senior Education Officers to plan and direct conversational languages in classrooms; one officer is responsible for conversational i'Taukei and the other officer is responsible for conversational Fiji Hindi.

While the power to develop the curriculum rests with the Curriculum Advisory Services, the Minister of Education has much influence on the policy directions of the institution. A lot of changes instigated in the education system is political, hence the CAS work in concurrence with the Ministers directives and Ministry of Education's policy decisions.

Staff Expertise at the Curriculum Advisory Services

The officers in-charge of developing the conversational languages curriculum at the Curriculum Advisory Services neither have formal qualifications in curriculum development nor have maximum qualification in the subject areas to develop the conversational languages. The maximum qualification held by the two is a Bachelors degree in education. Development of the curriculum is more a learning on the job affair.

For development and implementation to be made successful, knowledgeable and experienced change facilitators are required (Fullan 2001). A study conducted by Stein and Wang (1988) showed that teachers can successfully develop and implement necessary changes if they are given appropriate training that provides necessary knowledge and skills development. The staff tasked to support conversational languages at the Curriculum Advisory Services must be given an opportunity to upgrade their qualifications so that they can steer the CAS in the right direction.

Staff Employment Structure

Unlike all other staff engaged at the Curriculum Advisory Services, the officers delegated to develop the conversational languages curriculum are employed as per teacher conditions found in primary and secondary schools in Fiji. This means they are employed on school term basis; paid normal graduate salary and take around three months break from duties. As a result continuity in organization is disrupted as planning and preparation takes their valuable time. They must also be involved in profes-

sional development of teachers, and gain valuable feedback from the schools for the improvement and the delivery of the programme.

Availability of Resource Materials

The development of curriculum should be premised on good research practices. The ever growing importance of a library as a resource center is becoming a matter of significance for education. The presence of a research library and a digital library are essential. Bang and Habo (2002) state that research libraries have always been a support to and a part of the existing academic research environment where new knowledge is created. The knowledge created by research ideally trickles down and is disseminated to society by the research environment and the education system, thus preparing the ground for insight and awareness. Kiribige and DePalo (2001) propose that digital libraries have been a feature of gathering information for some time. Accessing digital collection requires different modes of access, equipment and skills for the library users.

The Curriculum Advisory Services does not have either of these types of libraries. Staff at Curriculum Advisory Services have small cabinets at their work stations which contain a few books in their subject areas. Majority of the accessible materials are derived from the electronic platform from the staff's personal computer.

Another major problem encountered was limited availability of text (books) written in i'Taukei and Fiji Hindi. While text books are scarce, the curriculum developers have no option then to use whatever little is available to them.

Consultation with Stakeholders

The Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) states that consultation is an essential component of the curriculum development process. It plays an integral role in establishing the guidelines for the design and development of the curriculum.

The conversational languages staff, like other staff at the Curriculum Advisory Services, are not actively involved in research for the development of curriculum in their respective subject areas. A lot depends on their own values, assumptions and philosophical understandings of the concepts introduced in schools. The conversational language officers are directly supervised by their respective language senior education officers at the unit providing feedback and suggestions on their work towards

curriculum development and implementation in schools.

Consultations with teachers for the development of the conversational languages was confined to Suva-Nausori and Navua schools, largely on account of ease of teacher travels. Very little consultation was carried out with other stakeholders, like owners of schools, religious groups, and local vernacular newspaper and radio outlets. Universities and teacher training institutions were consulted only at a personal level, and that too only with those located close to the Curriculum Advisory Services. The consultation process was not instigated from the beginning; rather it was left to the final stages of the work.

Curriculum Advisory Services must play a proactive role and engage teachers who are part of the implementation process and involve them as much as possible from the initial design to the end product. Teacher involvement will find an easier transition and support from teachers for curriculum materials to be implemented in schools.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to find out the challenges faced by curriculum developers in the development of conversational languages curriculum for primary school classrooms in Fiji. While the role of the Curriculum Advisory Services is to work within the policy directions of the institution, curriculum has become the voice of the government of the day especially the Minister for Education. The policy directives from him are passed to the Curriculum Advisory Services. This is a area which needs serious consideration, particularly on the desirability of directing curriculum amendments from political office holders.

For the subject at hand, it was established that there was a serious lack of professional expertise at the Curriculum Advisory Services. Learning on the job had become the norm. The employment structure for conversational language officers is not supportive enough to provide their full commitment towards curriculum development. Staff were also handicapped in terms of access to resource materials; there was an absence of both a research library and a digital library. Lack of books written in i'Taukei and Fiji Hindi was also a major prohibiting factor.

It is vital that the Curriculum Advisory Services staff engage in research, and involve stakeholders in their consultations. Stakeholders include academics in the field of education, school teachers, school managers, institutions which conduct their businesses in the languages under consideration (like newspapers and radios), religious and social leaders, and parents. Such consultations are particularly important in the devel-

opment and review of curriculum materials that relate to conversational languages.

Addressing the weaknesses identified above are likely to pave the way towards a successful development of quality conversational languages curriculum materials for primary school classrooms in Fiji.

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