A Socio-linguistic Outline of Language Policy and Planning (LPP): Reference to LPP in Fiji

Prashneel Ravisan Goundar*
Fiji National University
prgoundar@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper gives a sketch of Language Policy and Planning (LPP) which is becoming a well-researched field for many academics as well as postgraduate students. Here, Fiji is discussed in relation to its LPP, medium of instruction (MOI) and the recommendations from the Fiji Islands Education Commission Report of 2000. Two case studies from Hong Kong have also been highlighted in this paper.

Keywords: language policy, language planning, medium of instruction, Fiji, LPP, language issues.
1.0 Introduction

The past three decades have seen the rise worldwide of concerns about language endangerment, blamed mostly on globalization and the seemingly unstoppable spread of a few large international languages, chief among these English (Ball, 2010). With the spread of English largely due to it being a language for business, governance and for academic excellence there is a threat to the existing languages in Fiji, which include iTaukei, Fiji Hindi, and other minority languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Rotuman, Chinese, to name a few. Further, Ball (2010) adds that the South Pacific has not escaped this trend, and indeed many of the early predictions by linguists and concerned educationalists, often based entirely on the demography of individual languages can; mean doom for the vast majority of languages in the region.

According to Professor Subramani (pers.Comm) of Fiji National University “there has not been educational strategies employed to bring the three languages (English, Hindi, and iTaukei) to the same level which has resulted in an unequal development of languages”. The insightful comments by him is supported by the opinion of past policy makers. In 2005, there was a National Language debate in Fiji, during which the then Minister for Education Taufa Vakatale stated “If Indians in the country lost their language, there is a whole continent of people in India who would still have the language”. She further stated “In the whole world only 330,000 people know how to speak in Fijian (iTaukei) and if it is lost, there is nowhere it can be revived from, that is why the Fijian language is important to preserve” (Word Press, 2009). In light of the perspective of Ms. Vakatale, Professor Subramani (pers.Comm) emphasized in a discussion, that “the iTaukei literature has not grown, if literature does not grow then the language does not grow”. The imbalance is a result of policy planners from the colonial era not being consistent in implementing language policies. According to Professor Subramani (pers.Comm) Fiji Hindi that evolved in the plantation is also becoming diasporic with uprooting of farmers. Furthermore, there are also small number of speakers of Fiji Hindi, and very tiny literature in it.

Moreover, Ball (2010) states “Language death is a concern among speakers themselves, and adults all across the Pacific complain that young people ‘don’t know their language any more’, usually blaming English. While such pronouncements may overstate the seriousness of the problem and reflect in part each generation’s disapproval of any change among the young, the anxiety is genuinely felt and not entirely ill-founded”. A study conducted by Mangubhai and Mugler (2003) titled “The Language Situation in Fiji” presented a historical review of the language policy in Fiji. The study reveals the domination of English language which is obviously because of Fiji being a past English colony (Shrestha, 2008).

Furthermore, the authors bring to light the issue of language loss and conclude that English has continued to dominate the nation. The authors observe that some of the local languages are endangered or are dying and there is a strong tendency of language shift to the dominant languages (Shrestha, 2008). They conclude that the changes taking place in Fiji are due to people’s interest as much as language planning by the government unlike in countries such as Iceland where the government has implemented a protectionist language policy to neutralize the threat of English (Hillmarsson-Dunn 2006).
Kaplan, Baldauf and Kamwangamalu’s reason for the failure of Language Planning
The language issues outlined above plus numerous anecdotal evidence suggest these 12 useful reasons why educational language plans sometimes fail provided by Kaplan, Baldauf and Kamwangamalu (2011). These include:
(1) The time dedicated to language learning is inadequate.
(2) Indigenous teacher training is not appropriate or effective.
(3) Native speakers cannot fill the proficiency and availability gap.
(4) Educational materials may not be sufficient or appropriate.
(5) Methodology may not be appropriate to desired outcomes.
(6) Resources may not be adequate for student population needs.
(7) Continuity of commitment may be problematic.
(8) Language norms may be a problem.
(9) International assistance programmes may not be useful.
(10) Primary school children may not be prepared for early language learning.
(11) Instruction may not actually meet community and/or national objectives.
(12) Language endangerment may increase.

2.0 Linguistic Background of Fiji
Fiji is a multilingual, multiracial country situated in the South Pacific with 10 languages (Ethnologue, 2015) that make up the nation. Bordering both the Polynesian and Melanesian parts of the South Pacific, is Fiji with a number of dialects of Fijian (Geraghty, 1984), and a multiplicity of Indian languages: Hindi, Gujarati, Punjabi, Urdu, Telegu, Tamil, Malayalam (Mugler, 1996), and a number of minority languages, the most prominent being Rotuman. According to Mangubhai (2002), the choice of language X as a medium of instruction or the language of initial literacy for all necessarily advantages the speakers of that language over the speakers of language Y. Furthermore, it is stated that this is a sociopolitical reality for which the solution or solutions are not simple. It is neither as simple as claiming that learners with language Y background will necessarily underachieve in a school system, as other factors, such as, societal attitudes to the group and its language, and the power relationships contribute to the outcomes also (Cummins, 1986). These non-school-based factors need to be kept in mind in a discussion of language-in-education policy (Mangubhai, 2002).

The Fiji Education Commission Report (2000) infers, there is a plurality of knowledge and each knowledge system has a historical and cultural context. In Fiji’s education system there are fragments of Fijian (iTaukei), Indo Fijian (Fijians of Indian decent) and other minority knowledge systems that have come from different cultural and political circumstances. During the colonial era the knowledge systems of Fijians, Indo Fijian and other minatory groups were subjugated. The report goes on to say that now, they are beginning to be reclaimed, partly through learning various languages and studying local historical experiences.

Further, English has become the dominant language in Fiji despite the three-language policy. The younger generation are unable to read the Devanagari Hindi script and iTaukei has no evolving written literature; both are serious concerns as indications are that both languages endangered vernaculars. Therefore, an urgent need arises to look into the language issues that Fiji is facing and develop a clear framework to outline the solutions.
3.0 Language Policy and Planning Study in Fiji

In the research carried out by the Fiji Islands Education of 2000, through interview process and based on the narratives provided in the consultation process; six key observations were made for considerations on Language policy in Fiji to be taken up by policy makers. The findings revealed the language issues in the country and five of the six observations have been summarized as follows:

3.1. All languages should be accorded equal status. This goes with the principle of giving equal opportunities to all students from different ethnic backgrounds. At present, the languages are unequally placed for historical and economic reason.

3.2. The concept of mother tongue should be redefined, taking into consideration regional variations. For the vast majority of Indo-Fijians (Fijians of Indian descent) the mother tongue of Fiji Hindi. Fiji Hindi should be recognised as a distinct language with its own grammar; eventually it will have its own literature. Standard Hindi should be introduced as a subject in the post-primary curriculum and studied in relation to Fiji Hindi. The same should apply to standard Fijian. The second observation concludes by stating that any language policy that is formulated should support students’ self-esteem and their respect for the language of their family and community.

3.3. The teaching of Fijian (iTaukei) from pre-school to the tertiary level, preparation of qualified teachers to teach Fijian, research and scholarship and encouragement of publication and literary activities in the language should be given high priority in the allocation of resources. There is a rich tradition of oral literature that ought to be adopted for use in the curriculum. The existence of this oral tradition and literature is a reminder that oracy should not be neglected in the curriculum, Fijian culture is characterised by its orature.

3.4. This particular observation highlighted that English should remain a major goal in the multilingual programme and stated that specialists in teaching English as a Second Language should be appointed so that students could benefit from greater professional attention. It further elaborates that tertiary institutions should ensure that all teachers, not only those who teach languages, have a general understanding of the problems of learning and teaching in a second or a foreign language. There ought to be greater cooperation among language teachers in the teacher training institutions for the purpose of research into multilingualism and teaching of a second/foreign language.

3.5. The language policy in Fiji should recognise and promote the philosophy and practice of multilingualism. Language planning ought to deal with its complexities, bearing in mind the need to balance the dual objectives of national cohesion and linguistic diversity. An important policy change that is recommended in this Report (2000) is the active development of multilingual, multicultural education at all levels of the school system. Programmes in conversational Fijian and Hindi and some of Fiji’s languages (Rotuman, Urdu, Chinese, Tamil) should be developed and be available at all levels of the school system. Finally, it infers that skilled personnel from local communities could be recruited and trained to teach these programmes. (Fiji Island Education Commission Report, 2000, p.298-300)
4.0 The Case Study of Hong Kong LPP Research

Lin (2015) explains that in the early 1980s, Britain, preparing for its retreat from Hong Kong, began introducing some democratizing elements into its political system and expanding a largely English-medium higher education system, formerly elitist two-university system to eight publicly funded universities (Hult & Johnson, 2015, p.26). Given the long term English medium higher education policy in most universities in Hong Kong, a symbolic market formed in which literacy in English became a key to socio-economic advancement (Lin and Man 2011). Lin (2015), states that these forces have significantly shaped the socio-economic contexts of language-in-education policies and practices in Hong Kong. On July 1, 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was formally handed over by Britain to China as a Special Administrative Region (SAR). The status of the English language in Hong Kong has remained as important, if not more, as in the pre-1997 years, and there are recurrent public discussions on “declining English standards” (Hult & Johnson, 2015, p.26). Due to the declining standard, in September 1998 the postcolonial Hong Kong government issued ‘mandatory’ guidelines for the medium of instruction (MOI) for secondary schools and streamed all publicly funded secondary schools into English-medium school (114 schools) and Chinese-medium school (over 300 schools) (Hult & Johnson, 2015, p.26).

Two recent studies carried out in Hong Kong pertinent to LPP will be highlighted in this paper. It has been summarized from Lin (2015) which was discussed in depth in Hult & Johnson (2015, p.27-28).

Study One: Measuring the effect of the medium of instruction (MOI) streaming policy on the academic sources and psychosocial indicators of English medium instruction (EMI) and Chinese medium instruction (CMI) students

The study was commissioned by the government in 2002 using a sample of 100 secondary school students. The tools that were used in the study included academic tests and questionnaires on self-image and language attitudes. The hypothesis of the study was: CMI produces better achievement in science and social studies, while EMI produces better achievement in English. The results in general support the rationale behind the government’s 1998 MOI streaming policy: that mother-tongue education produces better content learning results than EMI (Hult & Johnson, 2015, p.27). On the contrary, Lin (2015) asserts the content learning benefits were not able to counter the negative labeling and self-fulfilling prophecy effect on the self-image of CMI students, as it was also found that CMI students reported very negative attitudes towards learning English (e.g. showing phobia and lack of interest and confidence) and negative self-image (e.g. reporting that they would want to switch to an EMI school if given chance).

In study one, the approach that the researchers adopted was positivist research paradigm whereby an external outsider position as subjects of knowing examining the effects of MOI on the academic results and self-reported attitudes and self-image of students. The main focus was on measuring the effect size of the independent variable of MOI (i.e. EMI or CMI) on two major sets of dependent variable: (1) students’ test scores in academic subjects; (2) students’ responses to questionnaire items intended to measure their self-image and attitudes toward learning English (Hult & Johnson, 2015, p.27).
To sum up, Lin (2015) states that in the positivist research paradigm there is no place or position from which to consider the agency and the transformative potential of social actors located in the reified categories of CMI and EMI variable and the possibilities of local social agents (e.g. students and teachers) in transforming these deterministic laws.

**Study Two: Ethnography of a class changing from Chinese medium instruction (CMI) to English medium instruction (EMI)**

The second study was carried out by Lee (2002) using ethnographic research design in which a CMI secondary school started to convert some formerly CMI classes into a total English immersion mode starting in September 2001. The research was done by interviewing the students and the content teachers as well as through observations of their lessons. The results showed that many of the students were struggling with total English immersion due to their limited English proficiency.

In concluding the findings of the study, the researcher stated that it is a cruel fact that the students did not have a good foundation of English. Furthermore, from the interviews with the subject teachers, it was found that teachers’ expectations were not well matched with students’ expectations and abilities. Such a mismatch only leads to more frustration for both teachers and students. (Lee 2002, 67-68; cited in Lin and Man 2009, 98).

The interpretive research paradigm was used for this study in seeking to describe the actions of the school participants (teachers, students) and the meanings given to these actions from their own perspectives (i.e. the ethnographic perspective). According to Lin (2015), the school participants were described as being trapped in the institutional arrangements—the school’s policy of selecting one best class to immerse them in EMI. Hult & Johnson (2015, p.28) the teacher's’ actions (e.g. having high expectations of the students in this class) and the students’ actions (e.g. becoming quiet for fear of making mistakes and being teased by others were described with sympathy).

**5.0 Medium of Instruction in Fiji**

As the colonial government gradually took over control of schools from religious organisations, the use of various vernaculars as languages of instruction decreased (Mugler, 1996, p.276). The role of English increased dramatically as a consequence of a 1916 Education Ordinance policy whereby the government provided financial aid to independent schools on the condition that they taught some English (Mangubhai, 1984). The 1926 education policy, with the initial mother-tongue instruction being phased to English by Class 4 has influenced Fiji’s ‘transitional education system’, a term which refers to a system where students are expected to transition from their mother tongue to the language of instruction (Nicholls, 2014). Fiji primary schools are run by religious, community and parent-teacher committees who determine and make decisions on the language of instruction used for the schools (Shameen, 2002, p.390).

Similarly Mugler (1996, p.282) shares, reliance on vernaculars an informal languages of instruction is facilitated in Fiji, particularly in rural areas, by the traditional segregation of “Fijian” and “Indian” schools, which to a certain extent persists to this day inspite of efforts in recent years at making schools “multiracial”. It appears that the 1926 policy may be in place but it is not being followed to the letter. There seems to be some confusion on the
actual policies that need to be used. Accordingly to Mugler (1996, p.283-284) the fact that teachers are left to their own devices may well be the most pragmatic way to deal with the issue of language diversity in the classroom, but the lack of a clear policy and of adequate training and the limitations of current materials must surely limit the efficacy of teaching, whether it is teaching the vernacular as a subject or using it as a medium of instruction (MOI). The 1969 Report of the Fiji Education Commission which examined the system of education recommended that English be the medium of instruction from Grade 4, which was put into effect when Fiji became independent, has been the guiding policy up to the present time (Nicholls, 2014).

6.0 Conclusion
Language Policy and Planning (LPP) is an emerging field in particular for the Pacific region, it is still an unexplored area of study in many polities. Future research should look at how the language policies in Fiji have or have not been able to work out in practice and provide suggestions on how new policies will improve the imbalance of languages in a pluralistic Fiji.

* Prashneel R. Goundar is a Lecturer in Language at the School of Communication, Language and Literature, Department of Language and Literature, Fiji National University. The views expressed are his and not of this newspaper. For comments or suggestions please email prgoundar@gmail.com
References


