

Your Word Is My Word—It Is Our Word

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This paper was submitted to the CLESOL (Community Languages and English for Speakers of Other Languages) 2012 International Conference in Palmerston North, New Zealand. Words and language represent beliefs and values, and the culture of people in their community(ies) for sharing ideas and opinions, convey messages to teach, admonish, instruct, and inform people. This paper reports on doctoral research into the importance of the home as the first port of learning and reservoir of cultural knowledge. Home and community provide opportunities to further knowledge of how language is used and to interact with other people. Young members become familiar with the use of words or language and its contextual and cultural meaning(s). From this practice, children will increase their understanding of how words/language is used and help to maintain their language.

Keywords: first port of learning, reservoir of cultural knowledge, familiar and maintain

Introduction

Teaching a child how to pronounce and use the word in a sentence is important, because this is the fundamental skill that requires someone [like a teacher] to grasp in order for the child(ren) to understand how that “word” or that “language” is used. This includes the teaching of a child in his/her first language. Sweet and Snow (2003) explained that it is significant to teach a child in his/her first language prior to the second language as the skills implemented in the first language will be using in the second language. According to Sweet and Snow (ibid) the significance of teaching a child in his/her language provides assurance to the learner to master his/her language. It is a language where the learner begins to wonder how things in the environment will be connected to people in terms of roles and responsibilities. For example, the importance of family to the child is a pivotal educational setting where he/she can live and learn how language is used from his/her parents and senior members of the family. McNaughton (1995) and Rogoff (2003) explained that absorption of how language is used takes place at home amongst parents and their children.

The aim of the study was to look at: (1) What strategies and practices that parents or senior members of the family use to teach children in their language?; and (2) How can children learn their language at home?.

Samoan language is one of the Pacific Island languages in New Zealand that is declining. The study that was conducted in 2002 by Bell, Stark and Taumoevalau on *Languages of Manukau* revealed that Pacific Languages are declining and one of these is the Samoan language with 75% and a further drop of 44% from census by

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Collins (2008). This study focuses on the family environment and church context as institutions where the Samoan language should be spoken. In addition, the study was examining the strategies and practices that might be found in these institutions as methods to maintain the Samoan language.

Importance of the Word(s) or Language

The importance of the word(s) or language to people is that it allows people to communicate and understand each other through expression of views and opinion. The word(s) or language represents people accordingly of who they are. For instance, language represents culture and culture represents language (Amituanai-Tolosa, 2005). It is also explained by Taumoeofolau (2004) and Helu-Thaman (2010) that language has its sets of values, and these values are important to language and culture. For example, in Samoan language there is informal and formal language. The informal language is the use of *g* and *k* in oral form while *t* and *n* are used in written documents. It is believed that *t* and *n* were introduced in Samoan alphabet when missionaries arrived in 1830 (Fouvaa, 2011; Tanielu, 2004; Simanu, 2002; Le Tagaloa, 1997). When they arrived the missionaries began documenting how Samoan language was spoken by using English alphabet. It is probable that the status of Samoan language that was spoken by Samoans then was *k* and *g*. For instance, the word parents in *g* and *k* language or informal Samoan, it is *makua* and when it is spoken and written in *t* and *n* or formal language, it is *matua*. At present, Samoans use the informal language when communicating with each other, while formal language is used in formal occasions and sometimes informal. In addition, almost everyone interacts and communicates using informal language. They believe that using informal language in communication signifies the essence of Samoan language to them and also it is friendlier, whereas in formal language it is more respectful. In *matai* or chiefly system orators believe that using *g* and *k* language will convey the essence of the *faaSamoa* (Samoan way), that is language and culture (Fouvaa, 2011; Fouvaa, Amituanai-Tolosa, & McNaughton, 2010).

Methodology

Prior to the collection of the data, cultural protocol was observed amongst the researcher and the participants. Although it was a mixed method study, but more qualitative approach was employed due to the analysis of the informants' responses from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observations. Questionnaires were modified according to the level of people's understanding of the Samoan language and were written in Samoan with the English translation provided. The participants were from the ages of 11 to 76 years old. This would provide more information from various participants. The participants included were born in Samoa before migrated to New Zealand for a longer period of time and the ones who were New Zealand-born Samoans, especially the youth. Real names of participants involved in the study were pseudonyms.

The questionnaires were analysed according to the responses and views from the participants with further elaborations afterwards. For example, *listening*, *observing*, *sharing* and *discussion*, *using* and *practising*, and *multiple strategies*. The interview questions were analysed based on the informants' views with more elaborations. Such instance included *expression*, *encouragement*, *respect*, *identity*, *familiarization*, and *guidelines*. Observations in the settings were also analysed according to the interactions amongst the participants in the settings. Triangulation was also taken into account of the similarities and the views from informants.

Results

There appears that home is the most important place of teaching and learning the Samoan language. This is according to the participants and their views. For example, one of the questions that asked in Samoan was that: *O le a le tāua o le talanoa o matua ma fanau i le fale?* (What is the importance of sharing and discussion of parents and children at home?). According to the participants it is important for the parents and children to share and discuss at home, because this is an opportunity for the family members to listen to each other's views and to understand what that "view" is for the well-being of the family. For example, almost all young people (96%) stated that sharing with parents at home gives them an opportunity to listen to them how language is used. One of the young members stated:

E tāua le talanoa ma mātua e fa'alogo ai i le fa'aogāina o le gagana, fa'apea foi le fa'atonu mai o matou. (Sharing with parents is important as this is an opportunity to listen to the use of the language and teach us on everything.)

Perhaps the statement from this young person conveys an important message highlighting the essence of sharing with parents, because they think that without parents no one will share together with.

All parents (100%) support similar view stating that it is an opportunity for parents to teach the children about "everything". This includes the use of the Samoan language, instruct them about family routines, and admonish them about their school work and future careers. Parents stated that:

O se avanoa lelei lea e a'oa'o ai le fanau i le gagana Samoa ma fa'aogā le gagana, fa'apea foi le fa'atonu ma apoapoa'i i latou auā a latou ā'oga ma le lumana'i manuia. (This is an opportunity for the parents to teach the young ones not only for the use of the language but also to advise them on their educational goals to be achieved and for future endeavours.)

Parents' views reveal that one of their roles and responsibilities as parents is to teach children not just the "use" of the language, but everything in the family. This includes the well-being of the family and people's roles that needed to play in the family. This creates unity in the family and appreciates their healthy living environment.

Discussion

Current strategies and practices that were explained by the participants as their views included "listening, sharing, and using". Accordingly, listening plays an important role in the family environment and of course to other contexts. This is where members of the family should listen to other members what their views on any issue are, and how that issue is solved. From this stand-point, family members are not only viewing the opinions and thoughts of individuals, but more significantly is the use of the language, especially for the young members or children. For instance, one of the young persons stated:

O le aogā o le talanoa ma mātua, e fa'alogo ai i le "upu". (The importance of sharing with parents is to listen to the "word".)

What indicates in this young person's views is that sharing with parents provides more opportunities for them to learn everything. This is especially teaching them and modeling them how the family duties should be performed as well as how language is used when sharing ideas. More on the stated view from the young person is that the only way for them to receive knowledge and understanding from parents is through listening.

One of the active methods to learn the word(s) and language is sharing that takes place at home and other communal settings. It is an opportunity for everyone especially the young ones or children to interact and share with their parents. The sharing and interaction can be on any issue that affects their well being. In addition participation and involvement in family sharing should take place for the children to listen to the word(s) and the language from their parents and the senior family members. Rogoff (2003) and McNaughton (1995) emphasised the significance of the involvement of children in family activities, because this provides children opportunities to learn from their elders, especially the use of language.

It is with that understanding and recommendation from the participants that the suggested strategies and practices for the Samoans to utilise in order to maintain their language is through listening, sharing, and discussion of ideas. In so doing it, people should also be encouraged to express their views in their language, and it will become a continuous practice until they are familiar with the correct use of their language especially the young ones or children (Fouvaa, 2011).

In addition, once they are familiar with their language, then chances of interactions amongst people in their communities will be increased as well as respecting each other. Also echoing Samoan language as part of their identity becomes a pivotal aspect as they are the prospective citizens of their language, especially the young members or children that are fed with words while youngsters of birds are fed with berries. In Samoan it means that “*o le tama a tagata e fafaga i upu ma tala a’o tama a manu e fafaga i fuga o laau*”. The expression relays that the importance of teaching Samoan children in their language as they grow up will be remembered and remained in them. Likewise this will shape up pathways for their future endeavours.

Moreover, the importance of “word(s)” conveys feelings, thoughts, and emotions which reveals concerns, happiness, unity, or reconciliation. For instance in Samoan culture, there is a “*ifoga*” (traditional practice of forgiveness) for a serious event which involves families or villages and districts. The traditional practice is that the head of the family (usually the *matai* or chief) of the offender will lead the *ifoga* seeking the concerned family for forgiveness. This traditional demonstration is affiliated with the polite oratory language, which soothes and diminishes the violence and fierce rages of the victim’s family (Aloalii-Temese, 2005). The orator who is leading the submission or *ifoga* should be very well equipped with the language and use the right choice of polite terms to iron and settle this kind of serious matter. Words of forgiveness will be spoken as well as reconciliation between the two families. From this event, people can learn how words will be used, especially the young ones, because they are the future speakers of their language. In all, the Word of God is the main source of Words and teaching to His people.

Conclusions

The significance of the study to the Samoan people especially those who reside abroad provides them “wake up call” in terms of utilizing their Samoan language in their homes and other communal settings. This provides opportunities for the young members or children to learn and appreciate their language as well as culture, because these two aspects (language and culture) must go together. Perhaps if Samoan people utilise the stated strategies and practices when communicating and interacting with each other daily, then the chances of maintaining Samoan language will be increased. Furthermore, these strategies may become important words to admonish the young generations about everything at home and in community(ies). These strategies are your words and our

words that remain forever in our children and all citizens for the well-being and welfare of our families, churches, nations, and our world.

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