Submission to the Education and Science Committee
Inquiry into Pacific languages in early childhood education

23 June 2012

This submission is from the national organisation representing teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) in Aotearoa New Zealand. We are a membership-based incorporated society of around 500 members, and involved in teaching, teacher education, and research throughout the education sector. We have an elected National Executive who has prepared this submission in conjunction with members involved in early childhood education.

Children from Pacific backgrounds in Aotearoa New Zealand can be regarded as ESOL students if they speak at least one Pacific language as their first language (or mother tongue).

TESOLANZ wishes to make the following comment:

Supporting the learning of young children from Pasifika backgrounds through Pacific languages benefits their English language acquisition, and provides considerable academic and social benefits.

International evidence underpinning this comment:

1. *Learning two languages is as natural as learning one language.*
   In fact, children who are highly proficient in two languages have been shown to have cognitive advantages in certain problem-solving tasks. Most (if not all) bilingual children will be more proficient in one language than the other, which may be their Pacific language or English. Evidence shows that very young bilingual children can use both of their languages appropriately, and code-mixing (mixing both languages in the same sentence) is the way they use their linguistic resources to maximise their communicative ability with other bilinguals. Children’s use of a Pacific language together with English shows that they are developing their bilingual linguistic competence.

2. *Wherever possible, young learners should acquire literacy in their first language.*
   Parents are able to give a rich oral language input in their home language, for example, the telling of traditional or Bible stories which is a strong part of many Pasifika families. However, parents may be less confident in a second language such as English. Gaining confidence in family literacy practices in their own language will provide benefits for the development of Pasifika children’s general academic literacy and other academic skills.

3. *Children need to learn through the medium of a language they understand.*
   For many Pasifika children in early childhood, the language they understand will be a Pacific language. Learning in this language will facilitate their learning in all areas, including in English. International evidence is clear that supporting the first languages
of young children has benefits for a second language such as English. Successful learning builds upon prior knowledge, and therefore the literacy skills learnt in one language can be transferred to another language. For example, letter-sound relationships learnt in the home language can then be applied to the learning of English.

4 It is important that parents are partners in their children’s literacy development in both their home language and in English. This enables the development of their children’s identities from a strong foundation of cultural norms and values, which in turn facilitates the children’s engagement in other academic learning. Early childhood education environments need to be set up in a way that allows this partnership with Pasifika parents, whatever the parents’ own educational experience and proficiency in English.

5 Children learn best when their home culture is valued, and their language is an intrinsic part of the culture. This means that bilingual education should have the aim of achieving and maintaining proficiency in both Pacific languages and English. A transitional or “subtractive” bilingual approach (in which the children’s home language is eventually replaced by English) has been shown to have less positive long-term academic and social outcomes than an “additive” bilingualism approach (in which children gain and maintain proficiency in both languages). Language cannot be taught in isolation of culture, and this means that Pasifika communities must be meaningfully involved in all aspects of the provision of early childhood education for Pasifika children.

Conclusion

International studies have shown that the use of first languages in early childhood education will result in better overall social and academic outcomes for children, including children from minority groups such as Pasifika children in Aotearoa New Zealand. Encouraging the use of Pacific languages in early childhood education, particularly through well-supported bilingual programmes, will also result in better levels of English proficiency. This will enable Pasifika children to best participate in and contribute to education and life in the wider society of Aotearoa New Zealand.

References


