

Indigenous language sustainability during COVID-19

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Abstract

This paper gives insights into the ways an Indigenous group has continued to teach and learn their language(s) during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an insider researcher from this community, I draw upon observations and dialogue among my people globally, as part of an inquiry into our language sustainability. Although social distancing and border closures hindered communal gatherings, this cohort continued to teach and learn their language(s). Many used digital forums such as social media, Zoom and Facebook to facilitate their language transmission. This article shares how this group has been able to maintain and sustain their language(s) in a time of global crisis, may their story support the Indigenous language fight.

Introduction

Research by the main UN agency on languages; UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, shows that the majority of languages in “danger of disappearing” are Indigenous (Papagiannis, 2021). Sadly, Pacific Island languages such as Niuean and Tuvaluan are listed as endangered (Enari & Taula, 2021). Fishman (1991) believes that concerted language initiatives are essential, as failure to implement meaningful language strategies could result in complete language shift and loss within three generations.

Despite statistics and research showing language decline among Indigenous people(s) there has been a global movement for Indigenous language sustainability (Wilson, 2017). Many Indigenous people(s) are engaging in language (re)clamation as a form of decolonisation (Enari & Taula, 2021). The insurgency of language among Indigenous Peoples can also be seen from the Indigenous communities of the Americas to the Aboriginal Peoples in Australia (Mc Carty, 2008). Pacific Island people are also actively speaking their languages, particularly at church gatherings and among their family members (Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017; Wilson, 2017). Many Pacific Island churches can be seen both on the Islands and in diaspora worshipping and

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teaching in their Indigenous languages. Pacific churches have been effective sites for Pacific language exchange as it is an entity which is regularly attended with other activities which require further attendance (e.g., youth group and church dance group). Pacific family gatherings are also a space where Pacific language exchange and teaching occurs, particularly between elder generations who are native language speakers to diaspora born who were raised with English as their first language.

There have also been innovative language initiatives and programs which have facilitated the learning of Pacific Island languages (Faleolo, 2020; Mila Schaff, 2010; Matapo & Teisina, 2020). The establishment of Pacific language weeks by the Ministry for Pacific Peoples in New Zealand have played a pivotal role in sustaining and increasing Pacific language usage (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2021). Through the Pacific language weeks, 9 Pacific languages are recognised for one week each year. These language weeks are significant as they encourage all sectors of New Zealand society to embrace the language of the specific week. One example where this is evident is in politicians greeting parliament in Samoan during Samoan language week. The language weeks also provide a platform for Pacific people to voice their language concerns to mainstream outlets, including their workplaces and the media.

Pacific language early childhood centres such as the Aoga Fa'a Samoa and community language classes have also helped facilitate Pacific language transmission (Ng Shiu, 2011). The Pacific early childhood centres have played a pivotal role in Pacific language sustainability as they embed the child's cultural language at a crucial age. As communal people, Pacific Islander's acquire language through physical interaction with each other (Tuia, 2013). As Pacific people(s) we teach and learn our languages formally by attending language schools and language courses or informally through participating in weddings, funerals, birthdays, and cultural activities (Enari & Faleolo, 2020).

The COVID-19 global pandemic has caused changes to traditional language acquisition practices for Pacific Islanders. The collective nature of language learning among this group was disrupted by international travel bans and social distance laws. However, despite the changes caused by COVID-19, the digital space has allowed Pacific people to continue language learning. Through engaging in the digital space Pacific Island people have been able to sustain language transmission. As a Pacific Islander researcher who is active in my community, I aim to share the innovative ways our language learning has continued during a global pandemic. This paper will present a selection of observations and perceptions about how to sustain their languages in these new spaces.

Methodology: Participant Observation and Talanoa

It is important to accurately capture the voices of this cohort in an appropriate manner. Therefore, the use of qualitative methods and narrative inquiry allowed us to gain a better depth of understanding of Pacific perspectives and experiences, captured through observations and dialogue. During the transition of language learning into online spaces, I attended family, church and community events that had been organised by, or involved, Pacific Island informants. As a Samoan Chief, who was raised in Australia and active among the Pacific Island community, I was able to gain rich insider data. During the events I attended as a participant-observer I was able to actively interact with those I observed (Singleton & Straits, 2010, p.365). My insider status as a Samoan speaker allowed for me to gain access to the cultural nuances and language patterns that would not be accessible to a non-Samoan, either by way of language incompetence, or outsider researcher status. Many of the study participants were also generous with what they shared, as they wanted my research to make a positive difference in our community.

Talanoa is a culturally appropriate and responsive way of communicating among Pacific people. As a result, I have used talanoa as a way of communicating with those who were observed. It is important to understand that talanoa differs from a semi structured interview (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014), examples of the difference include opening our sessions with prayer, to invite the spirit world to participate in our conversations and acknowledge our ancestral lineages as a form of Pacific appropriate greeting. Through talanoa both myself as the researcher, and the study participants were able to co-construct knowledge through speaking to each other (Clandinin et al., 2006, cited in Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017). Vaioleti (2006), who was instrumental in bringing talanoa into academia believes it requires a deeper level of engagement from the researcher as opposed to merely being an observer. Talanoa requires the researcher to be vulnerable and share their own personal experiences, to build trust and ensure the conversation is rich, meaningful and true. Through both physical and virtual interactions with the study participants, I was also able to observe their behaviour and actively ask questions during online language classes and discussion forums on Facebook, Zoom, and Messenger throughout 2020. During the study, it was evident that COVID-19 had changed how Pacific languages were sustained.

COVID-19 disrupts Pacific language(s)

International border closures and social distancing restrictions have limited the ability for Pacific Island people to hold communal gatherings, which normally facilitate language

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transmission. The social distancing rules meant that Pacific Island people were no longer able to physically congregate and learn how they traditionally have, through engaging all their sensory receptors of sight, touch, feel, smell, and taste (Tuia, 2013). This not only changes how transmission of Pacific languages occurs, but also disrupts the foundation of Pacific knowledge exchange. Stacey, a Samoan who resides in Brisbane, Australia and a second language learner, also believes that usage of all senses are important in language acquisition:

When the lockdown first started, I thought of my Samoan language learning and how it would suffer, because I am always learning it among other people, through weddings, funerals, and our regular language classes once a week. That's how our people learn, by being together and learning from one another.

The decrease in communal gatherings, particularly affects those who don't live with other Pacific language speakers. As further explained by Stacey:

It's even harder for people like in a house where no one speaks Samoan. It's hard because before the social distancing rules and limits on the number of people that could congregate, I was always able to learn from hearing and talking to other speakers at these events with Samoans but now with the number limits I can't.

As Pacific people, we are collective in nature and learn by attending communal life events (Enari, 2021; Fa'aea & Enari, 2021; Niuatoa, 2007). Through giving speeches at family weddings and doing performances with cultural groups, we are able to both teach and learn from each other. It is important to note that we are not individual learners, who learn in isolation from our fellow man and the environment (Matapo, 2018). Instead, we encompass all our surroundings both environment and human, living and non-living, when we acquire knowledge (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Matapo & Enari, 2021). Although we were physically restricted to practice our languages in person, we were innovative in how we continued our (mother) tongue.

Pacific language innovations during COVID-19

Despite the decrease of communal events due to COVID-19, Pacific people have found different ways to continue teaching and learning our languages. As the world has increased its participation in the digital space due to COVID-19, so to, have Pacific Islanders. Interestingly, Pacific Islanders have also been able to use the digital space to continue language transmission (Enari & Matapo, 2021; Enari & Rangiwai, 2021). We acknowledge that Pacific people had previously used the digital space to teach and learn Pacific Island languages before the COVID-19 pandemic (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). However, we believe the border closures and social distancing rules from the pandemic have

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meant Pacific people have increased their usage of the digital space for language learning. Several Pacific Islanders that I had both observed and had talanoa with have spoken on how their Pacific language learning journeys have continued, through the digital space during COVID-19.

I was doing well in Tongan language class and then when the social restrictions happened, I thought I wouldn't be able to improve my Tongan. But wrong I was, because I can just turn on my Wi-Fi and get access to other Tongans. It's so awesome I can literally learn my language from the comfort of my own home. Technology is great. (Jacob)

The internet is so good, I'm glad I can keep learning Fijian in the comfort of my own home. I don't need to go out of my house to learn. I can do it all from the convenience of my own house. (Lina)

Learning Cook Island Maori can be difficult because I only know a few people who can speak it. But with the internet I am able to watch YouTube clips, join online language conferences, and read online language resources. It truly is a blessing during this COVID-19 lockdown. We can be locked down for another couple of years and I will still be able to improve in my language learning journey. (Timothy)

Pacific Island people have used applications like Zoom, Messenger, and Skype to regularly exchange knowledge pertaining to their languages. This cohort has also used Facebook groups to foster discussion on ways to sustain and maintain Pacific Island languages.

Some Pacific language classes have even had more students attend their virtual Zoom classes during COVID-19 than their classes on campus before the pandemic. The digital space is becoming increasingly important during a COVID era. It allows people to remain connected to language learners and teachers, whilst also allowing people to continually access language resources without having to physically meet. A Samoan language teacher Dr. Salainaoloa Wilson (2017) believes the digital space provides a new platform for Pacific language initiatives to thrive. The unprecedented accessibility and interconnectivity that is afforded through the digital space means language learning is not confined to just those within close physical proximity. Instead, one has access to a global community of teachers and learners via the World Wide Web. We are now seeing Samoan language classes taught online from Samoa, with Samoan students located in Australia, New Zealand, America, England, and Fiji. The ability for a single teacher to reach a wide number of students internationally is unprecedented. With the availability of the digital space during a global pandemic, this can be an effective way to ensure the sustainability of our languages.

Pacific Language(s) Moving Forward

O le tama a le tagata e fafaga i upu ma tala, the offspring of men are fed with words.

(Akeripa, 2017, p.12)

Throughout COVID-19 Pacific people have been able to continue their language practices through the digital space. The speed, interconnectivity, and availability of the internet changes the way Pacific languages are transmitted. The digital space collapses physical boundaries that were previously upheld. The accessibility and speed at which information is exchanged in the digital space allows for instant language learning. Luckily, there are now resources online that help Pacific Island people learn their languages. From online dictionaries, live language tutorials, and YouTube videos. The digital space is a new sphere which differs from the traditional ways of physically gathering and learning. Despite the increased interconnected nature of learning through the digital space, there are also potential shortcomings. There are benefits of face to face and interpersonal learning that cannot be replicated in the digital space, such as physically embracing students whilst teaching and interactive group activities that require learners to be physically present. This article does not advocate for complete reliance on the digital space, but to highlight the opportunity and effectiveness of both traditional, physical and virtual teaching in language sustainability (Enari & Matapo, 2020). The importance of the digital space for students as a means of language learning has increased during the COVID era of self-isolation, border closures, and social distancing.

It is envisioned that Pacific people in a post COVID-19 era will continue to nurture language learning in the digital space, whilst also improving the effectiveness of interactions that will occur in physical formal and informal spaces, where our languages are learned. This opens an opportunity for collective community dialogue on new effective ways of teaching and learning our languages.

In closing, this paper has presented insights into how Pacific Island languages have continued to be taught during the global experiences of COVID-19. Future language initiatives should consider how the transmission of Indigenous languages would be affected by social distancing rules and further global crises. Despite the need to readjust language teaching practices due to COVID-19, our Pacific languages still endure. It is my humble prayer that our languages may continue not only for our generation, but the many to come. The survival of our Indigenous languages depends on us. Let's do our part.

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