Intercultural communication in a development project in Samoa

Fran Byrnes

Abstract

Through the study of selected project events and their associated discourses this research explores how participants in a development project used cultural and professional resources, including communication resources; and the consequences resulting (for them and for others) from this use. The project is explored as a 'soft' system of social interactions and processes; and as a 'Third Space' (Bhabha 1990) where traditional boundaries of socio-cultural organisation, or of professions, are destabilised and where newly-constructed practices, orders of discourse, identities and representations are required. The research takes a critical and ideological stance, underpinned by a belief in the value and possibility of social action. While not primarily a call to action, the study presents its interpretations in the context of larger ethical and political challenges, with a view to informing change, specifically what deliberate action might be taken to improve processes and practices in future projects. Recommendations for change, based on the research findings, are concerned with determining principles and codes of practice for: (i) identifying and developing intercultural competence in project situations (ii) training for intercultural project work, including ongoing participant research (iii) improving project systems and (iv) using relevant approaches/techniques in organisational change management.

KEYWORDS: REPRESENTATION, CONTEXT, IDENTITY, CULTURE, POWER, METAPHOR, INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE, REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Affiliation

Department of Linguistics, Building CSA, Macquarie University, NSW 2109, Australia.
email: fbyrnes@laurel.ocs.mq.edu.au

Subject and aims of the research

The research was an ethnographic study of communication between Samoans and visiting consultants in an educational development project in Samoa, designed to produce materials for Samoan primary teachers and students and to train teachers in the use of these materials. The aim of the research was to describe and interpret how the project was realised in the local context and the relationship of the project to the broader socio-cultural, (inter)national and professional context.

The specific objectives of my research were to identify difference, record how it manifested itself and how it was perceived and described by participants. The research was underpinned by my belief in the value of change, and the potential for change through social action, specifically what deliberate action for change might be taken by all 'players' in a development project. Clearly, every development project presents a unique set of circumstances, however, this research makes some generalisations from the Samoan project to future projects – both in Samoa and potentially in other educational and development project situations.

The project

The Australia Samoa Project (ASP) was a joint venture by the Australian and Samoan governments and its implementation involved collaboration between the funding agency (AusAID), the managing agency in Australia, the host institution (Samoan Department of Education), the consultant team (visiting advisers from Australia and New Zealand) and the Samoan counterpart team (local Samoan teachers). The project was based in Apia, within the grounds of the Samoan Department of Education 'compound' at Malifa. The project goals, as set out in the Project Implementation Document, were:

Provision of materials

- *to produce teacher manuals and pupil work books*
- *to enhance classroom teaching and learning processes through the use of audio materials*
- *to supplement locally-produced materials by distributing limited quantities of teaching and learning aids*

Training provisions

- *to support and monitor the effective use of materials disseminated through in-service and pre-service work*
- *to promote the professional development of [local Samoan counterparts] through on-the-job training, computer courses and attachments*

Project management

- *to provide effective and efficient administrative support for the project.*

(Project Implementation Document 2000:9, quoted in Byrnes 2005: 11)

From 1996 to 1999 I worked as a visiting consultant on the Australia Samoa Project. Originally I did not plan to use the project as a focus for research, however, in 1999 the project was extended, and I saw this second phase (1999–2003) as an opportunity to undertake formal PhD research into phenomena I had observed (and experienced) during ASP Phase 1. These observations concerned issues of culture, identity and power, and the interconnections between them, specifically how ASP participants made sense of the intercultural environment of the project, how they managed ambiguity and difference, and how they negotiated meaning.

Theoretical and methodological concepts underpinning the study

This research was concerned with the consequences of both social and discursive practices. It engaged with methodological principles based on the nature of language in use and its relevance in understanding. To this end the study drew on sociolinguistics and theories of language as a social system, the functional relationship between language and social structure, and on theoretical perspectives of pragmatics relating to the interactive nature of language and the contextualisation of meaning and understanding.

The study used a theoretical and methodological framework provided by the ethnography of communication tradition but it included more recent developments in the social sciences, particularly postmodern ethnography. In addressing issues of planning, design and implementation, the study explored how a 'social constructionist' view of multiple realities might inform project practice. Such a view includes the concept of identity as contingent, and 'society as a vast argumentative texture through which people construct their reality' (Laclau 1993:341).

The social constructionist focus was balanced with the view that people and actions are, nonetheless, 'stabilised' within social and organisational structures, and it is in these structures, that power is identified/recognised and played out. ASP participants came from a range of cultural and professional backgrounds, and complex interpersonal factors influenced individual expectations and approaches. Despite these differences, project design and implementation documents took collaboration for granted, even in relation to the most challenging communication and interactional skills, such as the interpretation and understanding of project tasks, goals, processes, accountability and evaluation; the rules of interaction, participation and personal contribution; and the recognition and management of change and possible conflict.

Research data

Records of both formal and informal events and interactions were built up over four years from observation, interviews, document analysis. Data sources included project policy and implementation documents and formal reports; informal written texts such as emails and memos; formal interviews; field notes and 'records' of observations and informal spoken communications.

Formal interviews, which were recorded, were conducted with participants as well as with 'experts' and interested external parties. Transcripts of interviews and audio recordings of meetings form a significant body of research data.

The range of empirical material presents and describes processes and practices, specific moments and meanings in the project, opinions and reactions as well as perceptions, representations, reflections and interpretations, including my own personal reflections. As both a researcher and a member of the project team, I was also a primary source of data.

The events chosen for analysis included: (i) two project meetings; (ii) a written text from the project management and team to all teachers in Samoa;¹ and (iii) project activities and interactions involved in the process of translating project-produced material from English into Samoan. These events and their associated texts provided a lens through which to view the structures and design of the whole project, its ideologies, processes and practices.

The selected events contained the voices of all project participants – those clearly present and those peripherally present. They were seen by participants as 'crucial' sites of engagement, within which were critical moments (Scollon 1998, Candlin 1997), i.e. they encompassed engagement, interaction and texts in which participants perceived competing perspectives, or contradictions that challenged accepted beliefs and/or practices.

Fieldwork/observation

Observations were recorded as ‘descriptive field notes’ or ‘research journal entries’. I recorded instances of what was said (what I *heard*) and what was done (what I *saw*) as well as personal impressions of behaviour. I recorded my observations, using verbatim quotations and ‘flat’ (or unadorned) descriptions (Silverman 2001).

Field notes were made during or immediately after an observed ‘event’.

Examples of field note entries

I asked YY to explain what she meant by the ‘right way of talking’. She said ‘Delivering your message in a soft way is acceptable but if you say it in a loud voice all you get is punches and hair pulling everywhere.’

VV mentioned that she had spoken to MM about leadership and what it means for Samoans. She told me: ‘I said to her E le fu fa’amauga se tagata – You can never stand by yourself.’

Research journal entries were personal reflections on the project and on the research, noted at a longer distance from the event.

Example of research journal entry

Today XX talked about Meeting B. She told me that in the meeting she spoke up about the need for Samoans to give their support and loyalty ... to the [project] team and management – rather than to the Samoan Department of Education which did not provide any training for teachers.... She said she believed that the young Samoan teachers in the project team had improved their chance of getting a [teaching] job [in Samoa] because of the skills they demonstrated on the project, not because of [the usual] seniority or status.

These two ways of recording fieldwork/observation data reflected, from the outset, my concern with the distinction between the nature of data and research practice. The research journal represented a kind of preliminary, reflective analysis of data, as it was being gathered.

The research process

I saw the research as a cooperatively achieved and emerging ‘text’ – part of the communicative processes of the project. Emphasis was on observation and understanding over time, and the goal was ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973). The research incorporated the subjective experience of the researcher, multiple

voices, many versions of experience, and ambiguity in texts – essential qualities of successful interpretive ethnography.

My initial conceptualisation of the research began with questions concerning difference – *In what project situations are cultural differences most obvious? What is the nature of these differences, and how do they manifest themselves in project events and interactions? How can an understanding of intercultural interactions and project processes inform the design and implementation of future intercultural project work?* In the course of the research, these original questions were expanded, re-phrased, developed or modified to include emerging data and research concepts, e.g. *What do I include as part of the project event? What 'other ways' of perceiving project reality are evident? Is it possible to identify the role of culture in different 'ways of thinking' or different responses to project experience? Is achievement or performance valued in terms of a cultural identity? Are compromises made to accommodate perceived difference? What do participants 'learn' or perceive they can learn from each other? What is revealed about power as a creative and positive force (i.e. reducing uncertainty or conflict) as well as an exclusionary or silencing force?*

Analysis proceeded from the general observation that, in talk, participants display their understanding of the context, of their relationships and of the emerging processes. The research foregrounded participant orientations, exploring and interpreting selected interactions, decisions and negotiations, the meanings that individuals brought to them and those that were created/generated within them. Triangulation was used to explore participant perspectives on their own and each others' practice and to combine these with researcher accounts and interpretations.

Research challenges

While this study relied to a large extent on observable, situated activity, it also involved phenomena that were not directly observable, e.g. attitudes and beliefs as opposed to utterances or responses.

The research was carried out in a complex environment of already existing representations and understandings of project and culture:

- Samoans remain 'the best documented' and 'most analysed' of all Pacific Island ethnic groups (Macpherson 1999:51) and existing 'constructions' of Samoan culture and identity loomed large in the attitudes and approach of non-Samoan participants. At the same time Samoan 'culture' was not represented in project policy and implementation documents as relevant to issues of communication or professional cooperation.

- ‘Accepted’ representations of international development projects, focussing largely on abstract concepts, obscured day-to-day interactional behaviour essential for sustaining, reproducing and modifying project ‘design’ and practice.
- Although the project comprised many of the professional aspects of a ‘workplace’, the distinctions between the social and the institutional were often blurred. As a result, visions, symbols and constructions, overlapped or were in conflict, and those of certain groups or individuals were more powerful than others, i.e. they exerted greater influence over the meanings attributed to project actions and events.

While my thesis/research report uses the global discourse of NGOs and international development projects (appropriate for its audience), I felt that to use this language in the research process would have risked creating confusion or misunderstanding. So I strove to make principles and operations clear and linguistically explicit. At the same time, I did not want to limit my language, perceptions and explanations to those that I believed participants were familiar with and/or considered valid. To avoid this, I explored whether, and to what extent, different terms were used to denote the same concepts/ideas/events. As a project team member myself, I shared goals and interests with my research subjects and was also able to use formal terminology and metalanguage for perceptions and opinions, e.g. *negotiating change, experiential learning, reflective practice, reframing, planning in action, principles and codes of practice*.

Both the critical strength and the challenges of the research came from my dual role as researcher and team member.

- Since I began with the premise that all knowledge is ideological and interested (Canagarajah 1999:39), I was conscious that my own values, interests, presumptions and expectations as a researcher motivated, guided and were reflected in the study.
- Although they were complementary, there was a clear distinction between my role as ethnographer, concerned with understanding patterns, and my interest in applying my research, i.e. in drawing conclusions about potential reform.
- I had to negotiate and manage different ‘researcher’ identities, e.g. insider, outsider, agent of change (Sarangi and Candlin 2003). These required ‘different levels of participation and involvement, trust and accountability with research subjects’.
- I was aware that the research process could trigger unintended consequences.

- I wanted to avoid 'transforming' what I observed. I assumed that different perspectives could or should be aligned, which would imply 'mutuality of experience' with the research subjects; and this 'begs the questions a) what is knowable from various positions and through various metalanguages and b) who makes the assessment of ... sameness of judgement' (Sarangi and Candlin 2001:379).

Findings and interpretations

The research revealed the intercultural project as a 'Third Space' (Bhabha 1990) in which traditional boundaries were destabilised and newly-constructed practices, orders of discourse, identities and representations were required. Learning how 'to be' in this 'Third Space' emerged as fundamental to successful project practice.

Both individually and in groups participants perceived selectively and made judgements about what was happening – 'judgements of both 'facts' (what is the case?) and value (is this acceptable or unacceptable?); envisaged acceptable forms of the many relationships they had to maintain over time; and acted to balance those relationships in line with their judgements' (Checkland 1999:A41).

Analysis of the research data revealed that processing frameworks acquired in one culture persist and influence behaviour even when contextual circumstances change (Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn 2001:277). Project participants (re)constructed realities and (re)described events in different ways. These different conceptualisations, perceptions and representations provided insights into attitudes and tensions around culture, roles and identities, the management of difference, sources and use of power and the knowledge and authority in which it was based. Below are some examples of these.

Existing or 'accepted' representations of Samoan culture (drawn from sociological and anthropological research) were revealed in project interactions and in encounters with the researcher, and they emerged as an significant influence on project policy, management and participation. These representations distorted or obscured the reality of everyday interactional behavior that was crucial to the realisation of project work. The generalised or stereotypical dimensions of existing 'constructions' of *Samoan-ness*, and their accompanying conclusions, were not always consistent with this research.

For non-Samoans 'project' was defined by project roles, activities and situations. For Samoans the idea of project was mediated through a Samoan cultural model that saw the project team as a family and project roles and relationships in terms of family models. This 'project-team-as-family' metaphor conveyed certain expectations about how the team would be managed and how things

should be done. For Samoans there were clear ontological links between roles and relationships perceived in the domain of family and roles and relationships in the domain of project team.

Non-Samoan concepts of self as unique, assertive and self-directed contrasted with the Samoan understanding of actions and feelings as separate or distinct from a central controlling self. Much of what non-Samoan consultants experienced as an aspect of their own agency, Samoans seemed to experience as an external presence, 'acting upon them from without' (Shotter 1993:37). There was a tendency for Samoans to explain individual behavior in terms of external forces which impacted on the concept and practice of responsibility for action.

Differing views of 'legitimated' authority created difficulties for project management and organisation and contributed to conflicting participant evaluations of project success. 'Accepted' authority determined which voices came to dominate project events, 'reframing' who had the 'power' to speak and to be heard. This regulated and legitimised the nature of the talk and the kinds of spaces constructed for interaction (Bernstein 1996:12). Samoan cultural authority was not accorded the same status as project-assigned authority – set out in the project design documents. For the most part, non-Samoan participants remained unaware of, or failed to value, Samoan authority in the project; and Samoan participants failed to demonstrate how the traditional Samoan culture they valued could be a legitimate part of a twenty-first century project.

Project meetings were clear examples of shared concepts but unshared knowledge and this empowered participants unequally. Non-Samoans expected project meetings to 'exemplify [the] basic values of pragmatism, task orientation, efficiency, and rationality' (Schwartzman 1993:38). The rules and rituals of Samoan meetings reflected different notions of purpose and outcomes and governed much more strictly authentic, 'audible' forms of talk, who may speak and in what order, who would speak for others and who could participate only passively. Concepts embodied in the Samoan notion of *tapua'i* or passive participation became apparent in project meetings and interactions. Samoan counterparts engaged in silent 'involvement' not understood by Australian consultants who frequently read this as failure to participate and/or lack of interest. The phenomenon of linguistic politeness or gratuitous concurrence, used by Samoans to maintain harmony, was also interpreted negatively by non-Samoan team members and often resulted in serious miscommunication. What non-Samoans interpreted as passivity was, for Samoans, an active avoidance of public dissent, a demonstration of respect and the essential condition for successful interaction.

Materials developed by the project team were produced first in English and then translated into Samoan. Samoans believed that decisions about transla-

tions should be made in collaborative discussion with Samoans outside the project, individuals whose knowledge and expertise was grounded in Samoan historical and cultural traditions. This view contrasted with the official project definition of 'experts' as academically qualified and bilingual in English and Samoan and with the project team structure that included one individual as the 'expert' Samoan translator.

Significance of the research

Despite the wide range of methods, goals of analysis, theoretical frameworks and styles of presentation used by ethnographic researchers, relatively few studies engage in 'applied' research, or discuss the implications of their research for policy or practice. This study is an example of qualitative research that is evaluation and policy oriented, addressing implications (drawn from knowledge gained in the research) for future project policy and practice.

This study offers empirical support for the view that discursive and non-discursive practices produce different forms of subjectivity. In its recommendations for change, the research argues for collaborative leadership in intercultural interaction and suggests how leaders operating as *enablers*, rather than controllers, can make sense of emerging events for others, and facilitate change. It also calls for the inclusion of local research as a legitimate project task, to inform evaluative processes and to create a framework for change. In the complex system of the international project, where change often emerges in unexpected ways, participants have to balance familiar socio-cultural and professional 'frames' with creative, proactive initiatives. This adjustment requires new ways of applying knowledge, a process of subjectivising practice, increased cultural awareness and skills in strategic planning and negotiation and intercultural communication.

About the author

Fran Byrnes works at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia in the development and delivery of distance and online courses in post-graduate Linguistics. Her interest and expertise are in inter- and intra-cultural communication, specialised discourse, English in business and the workplace, and teacher/trainer education in particular the theory and methodology of language teaching and adult learning.

Notes

- 1 In both (i) and (ii) the use of metaphor, in particular Samoan proverbial expressions, was the dominant discourse.

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