SFL in Solomon Islands: A Framework for Improving Literacy Practices in Primary School

LSF EN LAS ISLAS SALOMÓN: UN MARCO PARA MEJORAR LAS PRÁCTICAS DE LITERACIDAD EN LA EDUCACIÓN BÁSICA PRIMARIA

LFS AUX ÎLES SALOMON : UN CADRE POUR AMÉLIORER LES PRATIQUES DE LITTÉRACITÉ À L'ENSEIGNEMENT PRIMAIRE

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Abstract

Assessing and reforming classroom literacy has become a preoccupation of nations worldwide, not the least in the Pacific where countries are often working toward literacy in English within multilingual contexts. In Solomon Islands, in 2013, the poor results in regional and local literacy testing precipitated a review of how the English language was taught in primary schools across this multilingual nation. In the subsequent reform of classroom literacy materials and associated training for teachers, a principled approach was taken using a Systemic Functional Linguistics framework. Such an approach uses a model of language instruction based on language strata together with explicit teaching within a learning cycle to support reading and writing. This article describes how such principles from SFL were embedded into new teaching materials for the early years of primary school and the accompanying training for teachers and principals that took place from 2014–2016. The work offers a potential model of reform for other settings where the development of literacy in a non-community language is critical to students' success in schooling.

Keywords: literacy practices; literacy reform; primary school; teaching and learning cycle; SFL; teaching materials.

Resumen

Evaluar y reformar la literacidad en el aula se han convertido en una preocupación de países enteros, especialmente los del Pacífico, donde es común que los países promuevan la literacidad en inglés en contextos multilingües. En las Islas Salomón, en 2013, los malos resultados en las pruebas locales y regionales de literacidad precipitaron una revisión de la forma en que se estaba enseñando el inglés en la educación básica primaria en ese país multilingüe. En una posterior reforma de los materiales de literacidad empleados en el aula y la subsecuente capacitación de maestros, se adoptó un método basado en principios del campo de la lingüística sistémico-funcional. Dicho método usa un modelo de instrucción lingüística fundamentado en estratos del lenguaje y en la instrucción explícita dentro de un ciclo de aprendizaje para apoyar la lectura y la escritura. Este artículo describe la manera
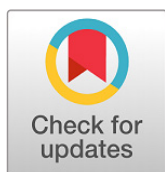
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como se aplicaron esos princípios de la lsf en los nuevos materiales didácticos para los primeros años de la educación básica primaria y la formación concomitante para maestros y directores de escuelas que ocurrió entre 2014 y 2016. El artículo ofrece, además, un modelo de reforma aplicable a otros contextos en los que el desarrollo de la literacidad en un idioma diferente al de la comunidad sea esencial para el éxito escolar de los estudiantes.

Palabras claves: Prácticas de literacidad; reformas lingüísticas; educación básica primaria; ciclo de enseñanza-aprendizaje; lsf; materiales de enseñanza.

Résumé

L'évaluation et la réforme de la littératie en classe sont devenues une préoccupation de plusieurs pays, en particulier ceux du Pacifique, où il est courant de promouvoir la littératie en anglais dans des contextes multilingues. En 2013, dans les Îles Salomon, de mauvais résultats aux tests locaux et régionaux de littératie ont entraîné une révision des modalités d'enseignement de l'anglais dans les écoles primaires. Ceci a conduit à une réforme consistant à réélaborer les textes scolaires pour développer la littératie ainsi que la formation des maitres ; cette réforme a adopté une méthode basée sur les principes de la linguistique fonctionnelle systémique (LFS). Cette méthode utilise un modèle d'enseignement des langues basé sur des strates du langage et des instructions explicites dans un cycle d'apprentissage pour développer la lecture et l'écriture. Cet article décrit comment ces principes lsf ont été appliqués dans le nouveau matériel pédagogique pour les premières années de l'enseignement primaire et la formation concomitante des enseignants et des directeurs d'école qui a eu lieu entre 2014 et 2016. L'article propose également, un modèle de réforme applicable à d'autres contextes dans lesquels le développement de l'alphabétisation dans une langue autre que celle de la communauté est essentiel à la réussite scolaire des élèves.

Mots clés : pratiques d'alphabétisation ; réformes linguistiques ; éducation de base primaire ; cycle d'enseignement-apprentissage ; lfs ; matériel pédagogique.

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Introduction

Like other countries across the world, Solomon Islands Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development (MEHRD, hereinafter) is concerned with ensuring students are equipped with the literacy and numeracy they need to both access curriculum content and use such skills in their lives. However, national literacy testing has shown knowledge and skills in literacy to be weak for primary school children in Solomon Islands (ACER, 2013). Most troubling of all has been the poor results in writing as testing in 2013 showed only 32 % of Grade 4 students at or above the expected standard. Quality control process recommended that "strategies be developed by all contributors to student and teacher learning in order to improve student outcomes in the written form of English" (ACER, 2013, p. 14). The question, then, is: What strategies best suit this context?

In situations such as the one faced by Solomon Islands, donor projects typically involve well-funded pilot projects that are then taken to scale nationwide, a process found to have limited success (Fullan, 2011, 2016; Piper et al., 2018). Often, it is the inability to replicate the small-scale, intense support of pilots that leaves stakeholders misunderstanding or rejecting well-intended change. Fullan (2011, 2016) suggests four "right drivers" of change for whole system change: Capacity building, collaboration, pedagogy, and systemic policies. These drivers were considered in designing an integrated program of reform, with particular attention to the choice of pedagogy, identifying appropriate language and learning principles suitable for language and literacy learning in this multilingual context.

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) was taken as the model for reforming language and learning, initially in Grades 1–3. Such an approach draws on the model of language identified by Halliday (1978) and others, with a strong emphasis on explicit teaching proposed by classroom theorists from the SFL tradition (e.g. Christie, 2002; Martin & Rose, 2005; Rose, 2016), within a learning cycle to support reading and writing (Rothery, 1994).

Working from the English as an Additional Language perspective, Coffin (2010) suggests that SFL "can provide both a lens and a set of tools for deepening one's understanding of the role of language in meaning making and in learning" (p. 5), the basis for building teachers' capacity to understand and teach English—with other languages—in the classroom.

This paper provides an overview of the language and literacy learning background in Solomon Islands, including what has been in place for primary school learning from 1995–2014. The subsequent language and literacy reform is detailed, showing how SFL principles were adopted and adapted to the conditions of the local classroom context and the need to support teachers. While little evaluation of the program has been undertaken, some small signs of progress are seen in regional testing. What has been evident through meeting and talking with teachers is the change in practices around working with texts and language. The results from classroom monitoring are provided to illustrate some evident changes.

Solomon Islands education and literacy results

Solomon Islands is a Pacific country of 695 000 people[1] living across an archipelago of over 700 islands. As a less developed nation, the majority of the population is subsistence-based (Solomon Islands National Statistics Office [SINSO], 2017) and donor-dependent in many sectors. Ethnic tensions and violence between 1999 and 2003, and again in 2006, have resulted in a variety of regional assistance programs to strengthen leadership and governance for social and economic stability and growth with a focus on how education might support this process.

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1   Current population projections https://www.statistics.gov.sb/statistics/social-statistics/population

Administratively, the country is divided into nine provinces, but the country is socially and linguistically diverse with 73 first languages (Simons & Fennig, 2017) or "vernaculars." A British colony until 1978, the country retains English as the official language while most people communicate across language groups using the *lingua franca*, Pijin. Official policy allows the use of vernacular languages in schools (mehrd, 2010), yet documentation stresses the predominance of English as the nominated language of education (Solomon Islands Government, 2016). As found in other multilingual settings (e.g. Cincotta-Segi, 2010; Probyn, 2006; Quinn, 2013), teachers in Solomon Islands classrooms alternate with a variety of languages to convey meaning in curriculum subjects.

Nearly 114,000 children attend 503 primary schools (Grades 1–6) across the archipelago with a net enrolment of 86%, with only small differences between boys' and girls' participation (mehrd, 2016a). The survival rate to the end of Grade 6 is 65%. Moreover, at each level of primary school, nearly 70% of children are overage and repetition rates are high. With only 235 junior high schools, the Grade 6 exam is highly competitive; only 59% of students progress to Grade 7, and only 21% advance to Grade 12.

Solomon Islands is not alone in the region in its struggle concerning literacy achievement. The regional Pacific Islands Literacy and Numeracy Assessment (pilna) shows that many Pacific neighbors have similar or lower results (Pacific Community, 2019). More locally, the local Solomon Islands Standardised Test of Achievement (sista) assesses literacy every two years using a national sampling process validated by the Australian Council of Educational Research ([acer], 2016). The test is only administered in English, the language of formal school testing and texts. The results provide the government with a snapshot of student progress and the basis for literacy planning:

> An imperative of the sista program is that it provides the Minister and his policy makers with valid summaries regarding the health of the system and reliable measures of how well students are achieving the intended curriculum of the Ministry (acer, 2016, p. 7)

The results of sista in 2013 prompted a focus on school literacy, particularly in writing. Whereas nearly two-thirds of the students tested reached the identified standard for Grades 4 and 6 in reading, only a third of the Grade 4 sample and a little over a half of the Grade 6 sample were able to reach the standard in writing. Table 1 presents the results across the literacy domains.

Inequities existed within these results: Schools in the national capital saw 79% of Grade 6 students at or above standard in writing while 0% of students in the remote province of Renbel achieved the standard (acer, 2013, p. 47). Such results underscored the need for any reform to address the situation of students in provinces as well as urban centers.

Despite better results for reading and language, closer analysis of the pattern of answers showed that questions that required inferential comprehension or construction of language were weaker (acer, 2013). For example, items that asked

Table 1 Literacy Results from sista 2013, Grades 4 and 6 (adapted from acer 2013, p. 11)

	Grade 4			Grade 6		
	Below expected level: Critical %	Below expected level: Emerging %	At or above expected standard %	Below expected level: Critical %	Below expected level: Emerging %	At or above expected standard %
Literacy	7.6	26	66.4	9.3	28.4	62.3
Reading	14.8	21.4	63.8	10.8	23.8	65.4
Language	9.4	25.9	64.6	9.4	28.4	62.2
Writing	39.6	28.1	32.3	26.2	14.7	59.1

"Why?" (e.g., "Why did Laka pick up the mirror with 'shaking hands'?") were answered correctly only 9%–13% of the time in Grade 6, with similar findings in Grade 4. In the language component, students could identify language items, such as correctly spelled words or the correct choice among pronouns, but struggled to complete sentences with appropriate connectives or vocabulary. The report noted "[items needing] to read and comprehend the information in texts and then to formulate an answer and write a constructed response are generally poorly completed" (ACER, 2013, p. 78). These results suggested that the focus for literacy intervention should include understanding the structures and constructions of English across continuous text to provide greater support for writing and deeper comprehension beyond merely the surface features of language.

Teaching models for literacy in learning materials, 1995–2014

To implement any reform in this situation, it was necessary to explore what understandings of language and pedagogy were in place for Solomon Islands teachers and students. Policy documents, curriculum teaching guides, and the texts that students learned from were analyzed, noting mixed messages about learning, some of which encouraged the sort of transmissive learning (e.g. copying, choral reading) that pervades Solomon Islands classrooms, which did not serve the skills tested in SISTA or PILNA.

Officially, MEHRD had re-oriented curriculum design in 2009, attempting to shift the emphasis from transmission models of classroom teaching to deeper processes. This shift was captured in the aims of the reform in curriculum:

> To shift from a curriculum approach that mainly provides students with a large body of information to one that brings about a deeper understanding of relevant knowledge, and leads to the development of higher order and creative thinking processes and skills, so that these can be applied in everyday life (MEHRD, 2009, p. 9)

In response to this aim, the 2011 draft of the English syllabus (MERHD, 2011) used this application for life beyond school, noting "In English, language learning is a lifelong process and learners should develop essential communication skills and processes required to participate within the school and the wider community" (MERHD, 2011, p. 1).

However, despite the multilingual context of everyday life in Solomon Islander communities, this syllabus draft also foregrounded immersion— "Pupils learn much of their English through immersion in an English-rich environment" (p. 4)—echo-ing the longstanding strategy found in teacher in-service publications: "children can learn to read [in English] in the same natural way as they learn to walk and talk" (MEHRD, 1995a, p. 6). In reality, English is seldom used beyond the classroom and learning to walk and talk (naturally) for these students is typically in a first language, not English. In fact, there is no mention of any other language for learning in these documents.

To support English learning in primary school, a national reading program, *Nguzu Nguzu,* was created in the 1990s by local authors. In Grades 1–3, 120 books consist mostly of stories with some information texts. The settings are strongly drawn from Solomon Islander situations and stories from across the provinces and settings. There is an emphasis on village life and traditional beliefs and morals with some reflecting the urban or town experience, a stated aim of the writers: "These are locally produced story books which reflect the natural environment, culture and experience of the children" (MEHRD, 1995b, p. 44). The texts are richly illustrated to allow verbal-visual links to meaning and to provide a rich resource of relevant and engaging texts for students to learn English.

The accompanying teaching guides were designed with a week of activities for each text. The guides provided a number of language tasks around the text, but, typically, they did not build explicit or systematic language knowledge over the week beyond

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surface features and being able to successfully say the words in the text. In addition, the activities —as well as the format of the books themselves— encouraged the development of particular classroom practices, such as copying and chanting the text. An analysis of one Grade 1 book illustrates this situation.

An early Grade 1 book, *Kima the giant* (Sau & Maui, 1995) presents "a mighty giant" who daydreams of progressively eating more animals ("an enormous whale", "two plump pigs" up to five objects). It repeats structure "I could eat..." which allows for easy patterning despite the unusual English verb group (this was later edited to the more direct "I want to eat"). The book culminates in the giant wanting to eat "YOU!" (the reader). The pictures support meaning with the number of objects represented as well as the giant "imagining" his feast.

The first teaching activity attempts to build the understanding of giants —"Ask the children to tell you any custom stories they know about giants" (MEHRD, 1995b, p. 72)— and encourages teachers to accept responses in any language. The teacher is directed to "discuss the cover" (depicting the giant) and to ask a series of questions about giants, but none of this previews the language that will be found in the text, such as animals or numbers, in English.

In reading the story, the teacher is asked to read the text once for enjoyment, then twice more, encouraging students to join in so that "by the end of the week, the children should be able to join in with the whole story" (p. 73). There is no discussion of the book events or linking text to pictures. Written activities focus on the spelling and writing of the words from the book, but not on returning to the book to see the words in use (i.e., the words are written on the board for students to copy then illustrate). Later in the week, a "shared writing" task is outlined, but it, too, lacks explicit support for construction. Rather, a modeled text is provided, one that changes "I could eat" to "I would

sleep" and suggests "in a deep river, in a tall tree," ignoring the text structure and missing the chance to capitalize on the pattern of number + adjective + noun. The teacher is directed to transfer the model to the board with the following advice:

> Name each letter as you write it.
> Show that the writing starts on the left and goes to the right.
> Show that each sentence begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop. (p. 75)

Students then copy down and illustrate this new story without support for the choice of words, let alone structural elements of sentence or text.

Similar activities recur throughout the program, not encouraging teachers to work closely with the introduced language, but to focus on performative practices such as letter identification and punctuation instead. Repetitive choral reading, ubiquitous across the nation's schools, is encouraged for students to achieve word-perfect production of the text when, in fact, the original in-service materials that accompanied the program advised the opposite: "The children should be given opportunities to use the new language in a meaningful way. Chanting and repeating phrases is not good enough" (MEHRD, 1995a, p. 46). However, classroom observation indicated that in 2014, to "join in" was generally understood as "chant and repeat."

From a practical standpoint, memorizing the story became a necessity since the books were printed only in A4 size and often with print as small as 20-point, which is not adequate for whole-class viewing. Many students simply could not see the books, nor did they have access to models of English. In visiting classrooms across the archipelago in 2014 and 2015, many students were seen chanting the text while looking anywhere other than the book.

The focus on writing how letters and punctuation were formed was also contrary to the original advice in teacher guides which foregrounded meaning: "At the early stage, teachers should give children many opportunities to write

for meaningful purposes, not just for the teacher or from the blackboard" (MEHRD, 1995a, p. 69). However, the actual activities favored blackboard work to model words, sentences, spelling, punctuation and handwriting; more reiteration than innovation. Classroom visits saw focus on blackboard activities that were then copied verbatim into student exercise books.

While this paper is looking at the work undertaken in Grades 1–3, it is worth noting that similar activities are seen in the materials for Grade 4–6 where *Nguzu Nguzu* took the form of a textbook, using a weekly stimulus text and language activities. Writing activities concentrate on generating ideas rather than building language to reflect particular ideas. As an example from Grade 5, the unit named "Modern Heroes" provides students with a recount of the life of the nation's first prime minister and a few comprehension and language activities unrelated to the text, before asking pupils to write "a report" with the following instructions:

> a) Think of someone you would like to write about.
> b) Make a list of reasons why you think the person you have chosen is a hero.
> c) Plan your report by organizing your ideas into sequence.
> d) Write your first draft. (MEHRD, 1995c, p. 5)

Previous exercises are not linked to this written task, and there is no framework for organizing information, particularly because the initial text was a recount and this appears to be an exposition ("make a list of reasons") that would not need to be "sequenced" as much as prioritized. Thus, there is little sense in using stimulus texts beyond establishing topic knowledge, and there is no clear support for the language that might represent the content.

These examples of English teaching advice in primary schools shed light on how the results in SISTA 2013 emerged. Students were not successful in creating texts on the test, and there is little support in the early or later years as to how to work with language to create texts. Relying on teachers

to fill the gaps in the materials with targeted linguistic support has not proven successful since testing indicates that the gaps have not been filled. This points to insufficient teacher preparation for the classroom in general; despite the employment of trained teachers, their own knowledge of English is generally low, particularly in the lower grades where the least experienced teachers tend to be placed.

Thus, to reach the broader understanding of language and literacy needed in a multilingual context, and the achievement standards captured in the testing instruments, a new approach to language learning was needed in Solomon Islands classrooms. Reflecting Fullan's (2016) "right drivers" of reform, several factors were taken into consideration, particularly in considering an appropriate model of pedagogy that would drive teacher capacity building, collaboration, and the implementation of systemic policies. The reform entailed re-working resources (i.e., teaching texts, teaching guides, the syllabus, and language policy). SFL was drawn upon to identify a model of language and pedagogy to underpin system-wide policy and practice for early years classroom teaching and learning.

What SFL offers literacy reform

SFL is a meaning-based model for considering the features and functions of language. The theory proposed by Halliday (1978, 1996) has been built upon by Martin (2009) and many others, initially in the "Sydney School" and now worldwide. Such a model considers language at various strata of language: genre (social purpose), discourse, grammar and graphology/phonology. Choices across these strata build coherent texts that reflect social purposes and situations. This model has been adapted widely for classroom use (e.g., Christie, 1997, 2002; Derewianka & Jones, 2016; Macken-Horarik, Love & Unsworth, 2011; Martin & Rose, 2005) with an accompanying teaching and learning cycle, taken from the work of Rothery (1994) and adapted for classrooms in a variety of contexts (e.g. Derewianka, & Jones, 2016; Feez, 1998).

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The pedagogy is based on building explicit knowledge of language (Martin, 2001; Rose, 2016; Schleppegrell, 2013). Using a shared metalanguage supports "conscious awareness, articulated, and used reflexively as a cognitive tool to construct knowledge about language" (Gebhard et al., 2014, p. 107). Such a pedagogy sees the teacher as central to the role of supporting students and helping them understand the context and language of texts. It also provides teachers with the means of understanding and talking about language. In building linguistic knowledge across the strata, teachers and students can deconstruct texts and, in doing so, better comprehend how texts work to then create texts for similar or various purposes.

Using SFL as the basis for literacy reform in Solomon Islands is an appropriate choice for a number of reasons. Importantly, as the *Millennium Development Goals* bring the focus to quality teaching and a greater emphasis on teachers making a difference to learning (Guerrero et al., 2012; World Bank, 2018), any reform needs to prepare teachers' capacity (knowledge) to implement learning and an emphasis on "having teachers with greater knowledge of the subjects they teach" (Glewwe et al., 2011, p. 41). In this regard, SFL positions teachers as central to the teaching and learning, as those who can model and guide language learning. The challenge is implementing training to provide teachers with the knowledge of how language works to be able to use this in classroom teaching.

Another reason for choosing SFL is the explicit focus on language at various layers, providing an integrated understanding of how language works. This has been found to be successful in a number of EAL contexts (see Coffin, 2010; Firkins et al., 2017; Lin, 2016) since it helps to reveal the target language and how it works, building on first-language knowledge. SFL has also been the basis for successful intervention in school and systemwide intervention in many language settings (e.g., Brisk, 2014; Forey, 2020; Gebhard, 2019; Gouveia, 2014; Humphrey, 2016), proving to be a viable basis for

use in Solomon Islands. The approach also supports the curriculum goals of MEHRD to emphasize thinking, as "SFL helps us to see (and in some cases 're-see') language as fundamentally a tool for thinking with, a meaning-making resource (as opposed to, for example, a set of rules)" (Coffin, 2010, p. 2).

Thus, SFL provided a point of difference to the ideas about language that had been operating in classrooms and instead gave a consistent model that could be used across policy, pedagogy, materials, and training. This approach was embedded into literacy reform in 2015.

Literacy Reform, 2015

With support from its donor partner, the New Zealand government, MEHRD established a Literacy Unit in order to reform classroom literacy and improve SISTA results, beginning with a focus on Grades 1–3 to establish foundational literacy in schools and provide a basis for wider, systemic reform beyond these early years. In developing an Early Grades Literacy (EYL) strategy, five areas were part of the initial strategy: A model of language, pedagogical principles, teacher training, material review, and the English syllabus (Grades 1–6). Some of these decisions were taken in response to early "field-testing" workshops with teachers across provinces to ascertain what aspects of language teaching teachers needed the most support with in order to understand and use it in the classroom. Assessment was later developed with other ministry staff, but the emphasis was on improving teaching rather than testing. SFL was drawn upon to create the resources now used in classrooms, and the link to Fullan's (2011) "drivers" is used to consider the elements of curriculum change.

Re-working language and learning: Pedagogical basis

To help teachers better understand language, a simplified view of the strata model offered by SFL is used. The levels identified are as follows:

- *Message* (purpose or meaning for the text)
- *Structure* (of the text, of sentences)
- *Vocabulary*
- *Letters and sounds*

While not offering the complexity like that of Halliday and others, it does provide teachers with a way of naming and focusing on particular aspects of a text beyond merely words and letters by including deeper meanings of texts (*message*) and language structures. The model was tested in early work with groups of teachers in the provinces, to gauge how this helped to analyze the books that they already used. A model for *Kima the Giant* is as follows:

- *Message:* Beware! Giants are dangerous
- *Structures*: Text increases in number; sentence *I could eat* + number + adjective + noun
- *Vocabulary:* Animals, adjectives, numbers
- *Letter and sounds*: Alliteration (in most cases)

The area that teachers found particularly difficult was recognizing structures at sentence level. To assist teachers in understanding the constituents of sentences and to teach students how to break sentences into meaning units, an adaptation of David Rose's Detailed Reading[2] was developed. Renamed "Close Reading"—to help teachers and students look "closely" at sentence—the strategy uses a similar method of targeted preparation and task focus to that of Rose's strategy (Rose, 2016). While Rose's third stage, Elaboration, would prove useful to expand meaning, it was felt that teachers may feel unsure as to how to extend understanding further, so the basis of the strategy would be to establish these meaning units. For example, in deconstructing "I want to eat two plump pigs" from *Kima the Giant*, the teacher would say the following:

- "The first word tells us who this is about: What is the word that says *who* is this about?" (I)

- "The next words tell us about what is happening: What are the words that say what is *happening*?" (want to eat).
- "The final words tell us what things he will eat: What are the words that tell us *what* he will eat?" (two plump pigs)

These units are then drawn upon for later text innovation activities (e.g., changing the who, changing what happens).

Having established a way of understanding language, a modification of Rothery's (1994) teaching and learning cycle establishes a way to work with texts:

- *Building the field:* Use the texts, use language that is known, adding English.
- *Focus on language:* Messages, structures, vocabulary, sounds and letters.
- Create new texts

These three phases echo the original model. *Building the field* is found in Rothery's model and *focus on language* is Rothery's *Deconstruction* phase. In *create new texts*, the activity is largely *joint construction*, particularly in Grade 1 and into Grade 2 where the teacher and the students use the reading text as a model for creating similar texts. The emphasis on these innovated texts gives students working in English for the first time strong scaffolding into the new language. Teachers are encouraged to let students choose their own elements to include, and while the risk is that teachers might merely create texts for copying, the guides ask teachers to take input from students for creating the text itself. In the latter part of Grade 2 and into Grade 3, *joint construction* is still included, with more opportunities for *independent construction*, still using the week's text as the resource to draw on language and content.

The recent work of Derewianka and Jones (2016) has denoted the phase of *supported reading* within the teaching and learning cycle; and this is a focus within the activities, though not named as such. Teachers prepare both the field and the language

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in order to read books using shared languages (other than English) to establish what the book is about. Book walks—looking at the pictures and establishing some language in English before looking at the verbal text—are used to move away from guessing the content from the cover. Multimodal semiotics, of course, stress the *interplay* of image and verbal language to make meaning (Kress, 2010; Unsworth, 2008), but pictures linked to talk in a shared language are used in this program to build initial meaning before working with the English written text, reminiscent of Halliday's work in the *Breakthrough to Literacy* reading program that advocated rich oral language prior to written language, particularly around students' experiences (Mackay et al., 1970). It also establishes the role of images in supporting meaning, an element not covered in the earlier teaching guides.

Re-worked activities from *Kima the Giant* illustrate the way language is explicitly taught through the teaching and learning cycle, moving towards a written task, as compared to the original teaching guide outlined earlier. These are shown in Table 2.

In order to capitalize on the rich opportunities provided by the locally produced resource relevant to Solomon Islander children, the literacy unit worked with the curriculum section and other literacy stakeholders to strengthen the existing *Nguzu Nguzu* materials. Some editing of the original texts sought to make meaning clearer and provide longer stretches of meaningful text. For example, the first book of the series, *The Feast* (Murray & Maui, 1995), shows villagers preparing for a feast, with the verbal text only providing noun groups: "Some rice," "Some vegetables," etc. This structure missed the chance to provide a clause as a continuous stretch of language as well as show a marked use of the capital letter for a general noun group. The text was edited to "We need some rice" and "We need some vegetables," which gave the opportunity to model other sentences with various actors and processes: "I need some...," You need some...," etc.

In some texts, pictures carried meaning not expressed in the verbal language, presenting difficulty in establishing meaning in situations where

Table 2 Summary of activities for *Kima the Giant*

Cycle Stage	Teaching Activities
Building the Field	Instructions to the teacher
	In a shared language, tell the students what the book is about (e.g., *This story is about a giant called Kima. In this story, Kima is hungry, so he thinks about all the things he could eat*), and discuss what giants might eat; show the words mighty and hungry and the thought bubbles on pages 2/3, and explain that the book will tell us what he is thinking about eating, then preview the pictures, establishing the animals in English.
	Read the book in English.
	Discuss the meanings in shared language and English.
	Message: *Giants are frightening, beware!*
	Discuss other stories about giants to compare to this one.
Focus on Language	Over the week, activities taught the following language modelled in the book:
	Sentence structure: *I want to eat...* + noun group
	Matching numerals to words, 1—5; comparing to numbers in Pijin *wanpela, tupela,* etc., that English does not use *pela*.
	Letter focus: k, m. Recognizing shape, sound in words in the book and extending to other words.
	Full stops to delineate sentences.
	Ordering adjectives and nouns (noun group formation).
Create New Texts	The shared writing task
	Innovating the texts with numbers 1—5 (e.g. *I want to eat one yummy crocodile*) and extending up to 10 (e.g. *I want to eat ten delicious pineapples*) to create a class book.

students could not see the pictures. For example, the Grade 2 book, *Seva and the Turtle* (Zikuli & Misite'e, 1995) presents Seva, who befriends a turtle. When the turtle goes missing, Seva searches the village until the last page explains, "Seva found his friend on the sand near the village." However, only by careful observation of the picture does the viewer see a spear pierced through the turtle's neck. The verbal language neither provides the story resolution nor any reaction to Seva's find, as would be expected in a narrative (Rothery & Strenglin, 1997).

To build better links between the image and verbal text, the final page was re-cast to say, "Seva found his friend on the beach. Sadly, his friend could no longer play with him. He had been killed by a spear. Seva no longer had a friend." This ending provides the language to resolve the story and the opportunity for discussion of how Seva would have felt (inferring meaning). Edits such as these were used carefully to avoid disrupting teachers' long-standing familiarity with the texts while providing language that could be referred to in comprehending the texts and used in composing from the texts.

To enable better access to written language, texts are now in two formats: large (A3) format with print up to 60 points enabling whole-class viewing and smaller (A5) for individual or pair use. Teachers can now work with the text during reading or language-focused activities. Print has also been enlarged in the A5 books, taking into consideration low lighting in classrooms (no electricity in most classrooms) and the opportunity for students to better isolate words and letters on the page.

Developing a cohesive view of language that could re-orient texts and how they would be used in the classroom was the main driver for the reform with other "right drivers" following this pedagogical lead.

Teacher Training: Capacity Building

Typically, teacher training is undertaken once new initiatives or materials have been developed. In this case, once a model of language was identified, training began by working with the existing reading materials but offering new practices. Initial 2-day workshops were designed to give teachers the security of using familiar materials while building knowledge of language and a widely-spread shared understanding of how language teaching might look. Existing practices were interrogated and weaknesses identified (particularly in terms of the effect such strategies had on student learning and achievement), and new practices were modelled and then attempted by teachers. Thus, when these practices appeared in the new teaching guides, they were already familiar to teachers.

Locating training within province-based clusters of co-located schools encouraged Grade 1–3 teachers to learn in teams (in staff teams and in year level teams). This training organization supported the cluster model that MEHRD had been moving toward (away from centralized training), to "create teacher support systems (peer-to-peer learning) and improve teacher effectiveness" (MEHRD, 2012, p. 10), providing the opportunity to discuss how local languages might figure into teaching. This initial training reached about 75 % of all teachers in Grades 1- 3 across the nation. Including the school principal in training activities not only provided knowledge of the program and support for early years literacy; it also made practices more broadly available across the primary school: Principals in Solomon Islands are typically the Grade 6 teacher, and they were given specific advice as to how they might use strategies into their own classes.

In partnership with the central literacy unit, provincial education authority literacy leaders were trained and resourced—with funds, materials, and support—to make follow up visits to schools in order to monitor how teachers were engaging in new practices. The focus in monitoring activities was to identify where teachers were struggling with new practices and to support change.

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The new teaching notes were moved to inside the back cover of the large-format books (as opposed to a separate teaching guide). These notes are semi-scripted, providing teachers with examples of what to say and examples of writing models, as seen in the earlier example from *Kima the Giant*. Scripted lesson plans have been critiqued in some places as stifling teachers' creativity (e.g., Commeyras, 2007; Dresser, 2012), yet in settings with low teacher training in English language education—such as Solomon Islands—they have been found to provide high support to guide teachers into new ways of teaching (Schneider & Krajcik, 2002). Practicing teachers seldom have the time or opportunity to engage in the extensive training needed to understand all the underpinning principles to design their own lessons: semi-scripting provides the basis for the lesson which teachers could expand or adapt to their situation if confident enough to do so or as they learn more about language.

In terms of language uses, the teaching notes provide explicit advice on translanguaging between shared languages and English, to leverage linguistic resources in making meaning in English (García et al., 2017). Importantly, such strategies are designed to give "permission" to the teachers to work between languages, removing the idea that teachers are "smuggling in" (Probyn, 2001, p. 257) the vernacular or Pijin. Coding indicates particular language patterns of use: V/P (vernacular/Pijin), E (English), V/P+E (use vernacular/Pijin predominately and introduce English elements) and E+V/P (use English with vernacular/Pijin as support for meaning).

Typically, discussions to build or establish the field are in V/P with the reading of the text in E; reviewing the story in the first instance would be by V/P+E; and focus on language elements would use E+V/P. In fact, the policy for using vernacular language (MEHRD, 2010) allows for multilingual practice, but the idea of "immersion" in English has been the informal policy of classrooms despite community practices that see movement between various languages, including English. Translanguaging has been found to fulfill communicative and learning goals in many bilingual classrooms (Choi et al., 2020; Creese & Blackledge, 2010; Cummins, 2005), and giving specific advice to teachers as to how and when to move between languages aims to reach learning goals for children in Solomon Islands classrooms.

Making it Official: Systemic Policy and Collaboration Across Programs

This reform was built on strong collaboration between the central and provincial education leaders as well as the various private education authorities—predominantly church organizations—to build a consistent way of working with language in all settings. Most educational leaders proved happy to see explicit support given to teachers, who, in turn, provided positive feedback to practices taught and the ways of working together. The literacy and language model was further extended into a New Zealand-funded literacy teacher support pilot in 2015 (see Johansson-Fua et al., 2020) and forms the basis of the current literacy activity as part of donor funding (e.g. Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade [DFAT], 2019; MEHRD, 2017).

A newer program, Leaders and Education Authority Project, launched nation-wide in 2017, also uses the current materials as the basis for leadership in literacy, helping to embed new ways of working within the larger system. The multilingual orientation and the reported success of other smaller multilingual projects (see Early, 2020) are changing the way multilingualism and English literacy are linked in Solomon Islands.

The new understandings of language and pedagogy have the potential to move beyond the foundational years into the latter years of primary school. Literacy leaders who had been part of the EYL program participated in workshops to understand the issues for middle years learners and re-design the program with a stronger text-based, explicit language focus for Grades 4–6. While not yet completed, these texts will provide a cohesive, system-wide language program across primary school and the opportunity to observe the effect on students' learning and achievement.

In terms of educational policy, the final element of the initial reform activity was to embed the principles of the reform into the English syllabus. Working with curriculum staff and other stakeholders, the new syllabus contains a multilingual and SFL-based orientation to language learning. This means that, within the particular culture and situations of Solomon Islands, the following is foregrounded:

> The model of language that this syllabus supports is one that integrates the skills of English into context-based learning. In this approach, language is situated in the context of use, or its function: how English can be spoken, read and written for various purposes and situations (MEHRD, 2016b, p. 4)

In learning English, the syllabus notes that Solomon Islander languages are vital, with the aim that "[students will] recognize the links and differences between various languages—in Solomon Islands and more widely—in order to understand the way English is structured and how English is used." (p. 4). The greater emphasis on text structure and meaning is seen, for example, where the sub-strand "Learning to write facts" is explained: "In this sub-strand, learners begin to understand the various types of texts that they can use to express factual meanings, understanding the link between purpose and text organisation" (p. 29) Throughout this syllabus, the focus is on identifying and using language. This focus on use and context links to both the earlier curriculum policy of application to the real lives of students (MERHD, 2011) and the policy of using vernacular languages (MERHD, 2010). In this way, the language reform is supportive of existing systemic educational policies and supports the wider goals of the education ministry.

Effects of the Reform

At the time of writing (mid-2020), no research had been published as to the effectiveness of the reform except that the reading program continues to be used, albeit without the development of the materials for Grades 4–6.

Table 3 Comparative results for PILNA literacy, 2012-2018 (MEHRD, 2019)

Grade 4 Students at or above expected proficiency level			Grade 6 Students at or above expected proficiency level		
2012	2015	2018	2012	2015	2018
50 %	50 %	54 %	67 %	66 %	70 %

The latest published literacy testing results, 2018 PILNA testing, shows that there has been a small increase in achievement in Grade 4 and Grade 6, after little change between 2012 and 2015 (see Table 3). Since the training for teachers commenced in 2015 and the new materials were distributed in 2016, any impact of these changes to language understanding and teaching would only have been evident in 2017, and largely at Grade 4, though it is not possible to derive a direct causal correlation.

The results for SISTA 2017 and 2019 have yet to be publicly released. In terms of judging the success of literacy reform, the results for writing would be useful in analyzing the way that students are able to compose texts.

In terms of data as to the effect of the new program, teacher practices were tracked in the early stages of the reform through classroom observation. During visits, literacy unit staff and provincial staff recorded the use of strategies taught—book walk, use of other languages, small group activities, reading to rather than choral, composing rather than copying—and worked with teachers to further implement new practices. From the early data, some practices were taken up by teachers, such as using the big book where available, following the activities from the guide, and the use of languages other than English, though often as translation rather than a way into English. However, choral reading was still strongly evident in classrooms. Having established the story through discussion, teachers appeared to like to hear everyone saying the words. As literacy staff

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members commented, the choral reading sounds like everyone is participating, even if it provides little in the way of interacting with the text.

There was also much copying in evidence. The staff, having been asked to do a "Three-book-test" where they chose three exercise books from the class, compared pages from a particular date to ascertain if work had been copied or composed. By an overwhelming margin, the writing was copied, sometimes including any mistakes in the teacher's own use of English. While copying provides a time-effective way to ensure all students have writing in their exercise books, it provides little in the way of quality or interaction with the process of meaning making through language.

Notwithstanding, in later visits to schools, the longer new materials had been used, the more examples of target practices began to emerge, often in settings where Australian or New Zealander volunteer teachers or other literacy leaders were able to work with local teachers to model and support new ways of working with texts. In one church authority school, teachers proudly showed the writing their young students had created, each one different, through using a recount stem: *I am going fishing; I am playing with my sister.* Nonconventional spelling indicated that students were drawing on language knowledge to engage in writing. Teachers were shown how they might then support students into more conventional spelling once the ideas were written down.

In another example, a rural provincial Grade 1 classroom contained multiple children's texts using the book about *Gordon the Gecko from Gizo* who lists the food he doesn't like till he finds something he likes. In response, writing was generated with various new characters—*Jennah the pig from school; Tom the dog from school*—and stories of food they liked and didn't. Some students retained Gordon, but they changed the items from the story. The same teacher has many samples of writing on display that were inspired by other *Nguzu Nguzu*

books, but now new texts written by individual students or class during shared writing lessons.

What was evident in many cases was that a teacher who was using the texts and teaching guides to generate writing—such as the one above—would have a neighboring class where the exercise books contained copied work throughout, indicating that the practices were not necessarily adopted as a schoolwide reform. While this points to a staff that is afforded some autonomy, it undermines the consistency of teaching and learning at a school level. With time and the support of literacy projects in the country since the implementation of the program, there may be more confidence in adopting the strategies offered by the program, giving consistency of practice across all schools. Ongoing capacity building and collaboration have been needed to make the pedagogical change part of the system.

Implications, for Solomon Islands and Other Similar Settings

The decisions outlined in this paper concern issues that many other countries or school systems face. Small nations are often vulnerable to the decisions made by international donors—governmental and organizational—importing programs and structures designed for other children in other countries (Brock & Crossley, 2013), creating what Burnett (2009) warns may be "just another Western metanarrative" However, in considering SFL for the basis of reform, its principles of functional and meaning-making provide the scope by which local meanings and context drive the way language is understood and used. Indeed, the adaptations of some of the underpinning frameworks associated with language and pedagogy—strata as well as teaching and learning models—have served to respond to the needs and context of teachers and students at a particular time. The adaptations have simplified but retained the core ideas of being able to identify language and explicitly support learning.

Strategic plans of donors are typically concerned with budgets and how programs will be administered, with the assumption that good management improves results. New Zealand and Australian program reports into Solomon Islands education (e.g. DFAT, 2019; Catherwood & Haggland, 2019) outline the need for widespread and sustained improvement, but they make no mention of how language or literacy will be conceptualized. Decisions about the nature of language and literacy support for children need to be made considering not only the gap in results but the use of a principled approach to what language is, how languages work together and what students need in order to be able to access and use language. SFL presents a viable and valuable theory for implementation in Solomon Islands education, a way of understanding and implementing "right drivers" (Fullan, 2016), and may be further adapted to other settings requiring a cohesive and coherent model of language and literacy learning.

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