

The Triple Challenge: Learning Mathematics Through a Second Language in Fiji

Authors:

Evangeline Narayan, University of the South Pacific, Fiji

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Presenter Name: Evangeline Narayan

Abstract

In Fiji's multilingual classrooms, where learners speak languages such as Fijian and Fiji Baat as their first languages, English-medium instruction (EMI) places learners in a submersion model that expects them to learn English as a second language while simultaneously acquiring academic content through it. This challenge is especially pronounced in mathematics, where learners face a triple challenge: learning English, learning through English, and learning mathematical English. Drawing on principles of second language acquisition, this study asks: to what extent are Fiji's EMI classrooms facilitative to the learning of mathematics in a second language? Data were collected from 41 video-recorded lessons across Years 1 to 4 in a case-study primary school, transcribed and analysed using a microanalytic framework adapted from Tsui (1985). Findings reveal a marked imbalance between the linguistic input learners received and the opportunities afforded for language production during whole-class interaction. Classroom discourse was dominated by initiation–response–feedback (IRF) sequences, which constrained learners' output and limited the interactional conditions necessary for meaning-making and mathematical language development. These findings suggest that prevailing interactional practices in Fiji's EMI classrooms do not always align with the linguistic and academic needs of multilingual learners. The study contributes to international discussions on EMI by demonstrating how classroom interaction patterns in linguistically diverse settings can either support or impede learners' access to academic discourse.