The Role of Language in Identity and Mediating Connection for Fijian College Students

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The Role of Language in Identity and Mediating Connection
for Fijian College Students

Grace Taito Tora

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Role of Language in Identity and Mediating Connection for Fijian College Students

Grace Taito Tora
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Master of Arts

This study explores the role of language in constructing identity and promoting belonging for seventeen Fijian college students at one U.S.-based university in the Pacific Rim. Focus group interviews were analyzed for how students described the role that language played in constructing student identity and mediating connection. Analysis was grounded in post-structural perspectives of identity alongside vā—the Oceanic notion that encompasses identity and belonging. Students described themes of native language proficiency in reinforcing kinship relationships and in participating in cultural traditions and practices. They also expressed other ways of maintaining vā without proficiency in their native languages. Other students noted the affordances of speaking English to participating in global economies and global cultures, including schooling at the university. Implications highlight the need for educational policies, practices, and pedagogies that empower Fijian students to be successful in academic and public spaces, while helping them maintain connection to their ethnic communities and identities—to promote belonging, and to maintain their positions in the vā.

Keywords: native language, identity, ethnic identity, belonging, vā, Fiji
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My Father in Heaven. He has never failed me. He has always been with me. He continues to guide me. He carries me when I have fallen short. He is my constant.

Na Watiqu, Alfred Tora, who is my biggest supporter and cheerleader. His belief and encouragement were the reasons I chose to pursue a Masters and it has been with his love that I am able to be the best version of myself as a mother scholar. He has been my rock and confidant—taking care of our three energetic boys (Tuikoro, Matakilagi, and Vatudei) and taking over most of the responsibilities at home so that I can do what I love.

Noqu Matavuvale—mum, dad, my siblings, extended family and friends in Fiji and in Utah who jumped in to help with my three boys so that I can focus on school and on my research. My late grandparents who instilled a love of learning and service, and who have always encouraged me to reach for the stars—Yaca and Pa (Grace and George Taito), Nau and Tua (Finau and Atunaisa Qabale), and Nau and Tutu (Lusiana and Eremasi Qovu). I carry you in my heart and in my work.

Dr. Erika Feinauer. From day one she has opened doors into academic and research spaces and with her guidance I have become a better student and academic. My love for research, particularly research regarding my people in Fiji, stems from her counsel and direction as my thesis chair. The completion of my thesis wouldn’t have been possible without her supervision and love. My committee members, Dr. Erin Whiting, Dr. Spencer Scanlan, and Dr. Bryant Jensen. Vinaka vakalevu.

This thesis paper is dedicated to my VILLAG.
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

A Hawaiian proverb goes, “I ka olelo no ke ola, I ka olelo no ka make”—In language there is life, in language there is death. Simione Sevudredre (2023), a Fijian cultural knowledge and cultural leadership consultant and facilitator, quotes Professor Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o (distinguished novelist, activist, playwright from Kenya, Africa) in saying:

If you know all the languages of the world and you don’t know your mother tongue, or the language of your culture, that is self-enslavement. If you know the language of your culture or your mother tongue and add other cultures of the world, then that is empowerment.

These quotes depict the crucial role one’s language(s) plays in the lives of native speakers for Pacific Islanders. The purpose of this study is to investigate the critical role language plays in promoting a sense of connection—to self, to family, in communities, and in academic and professional settings.

Fiji: A Pacific Island Nation

Fiji is a small island nation located in the South Pacific. This Oceanic region is a “vast area of sea in which are scattered many thousands of islands” (Mugler & Lynch, 1996a, p. 1). Called the Pacific Islands by the mostly white colonizers, this area is most often called Oceania by its indigenous and native people (Hafoka et al., 2020). This vast geographic region was divided into three ethno-geographic groups by colonizers—Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. Differences in racial and ethnic background, languages spoken, as well as in their culture and traditions were noted as the basis for grouping island nations into these three
ethnographic groups (Fischer, 2013), though these three main groupings still obscure the vast cultural and linguistic heterogeneity of the peoples of Oceania.

The people of the Melanesian islands (the dark islands) are said to be dark-skinned with tightly coiled hair, ascribed to the inhabitants of Fiji, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, and the Solomon Islands (Burley, 2013). The islands of Micronesia, meaning small islands, include the nations of Palau, Guam, North Mariana Islands, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, and Kiribati. Finally, the Polynesian islands, which means many islands, consist of Hawaii, New Zealand, Rapa Nui, Tuvalu, Wallis and Futuna, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Cook Islands, Tokelau, and Tahiti, and the people are said to be “‘coppery’ toned with straighter hair and different features” (Burley, 2013, p. 437).

Fiji is often understandably mistakenly assumed to be part of the Polynesian ethnographic group, as it is situated geographically on the border of the Melanesian and Polynesian rim. Further, Fiji has had more relational interactions with the Polynesian island nations than those in Melanesia—being situated more proximally to Tonga and Samoa than other Melanesian islands (D’Arcy, 2003). However, Fiji is actually officially part of the Melanesian islands because explorers and colonizers perceived Fijians to share physical traits with Melanesian people rather than the inhabitants of nearby Tonga and Samoa (Burley, 2013). As with any nation in Oceania, the ethnic and cultural makeup of Fiji is complex due to historical, geographical, colonial, and economical forces. Nowhere is this as clearly reflected than in the linguistic diversity of the people in Fiji.

**Language**

In the Oceanic region alone, there are more than 1000 vernacular languages spoken (Mugler & Lynch, 1996b). One example is the Vanuatu nation, which is said to have about 105
languages to which some of these languages have no official name but only an association to a specific region or community (Lynch & Crowley, 2001). The geographical realities have led to each nation having their own indigenous national native language, as well as other indigenous regional vernacular languages (Lynch, 1998). More scholarly attention has been paid to the study of languages in Fiji, as well as the other Polynesian nations (Tonga, Samoa, Hawaii, etc.), and those languages seem to be “quite closely related, so that a knowledge of one makes a good stepping-stone to learning another” (Lynch, 1998, p. 42). Fiji itself is made up of more than 300 islands and consists of a diverse group of multicultural and multilingual people who speak close to 40 dialects and more than five languages (Burley, 2013; Geraghty, 1983).

Most linguists would divide pre-colonial contact Fijian dialects into two main language groups—Western Fijian and Eastern Fijian (Burley, 2013). The Western Fijian language, called the Nadrogā Dialect, is spoken in about 20 villages (Geraghty, 1995b). According to Fijian linguist Geraghty (1983), “all western Fijian languages share more features exclusively with Melanesian than with Polynesian languages” (p. 389), while Eastern Fijian shares more linguistic features with Polynesian languages. Geraghty (1995b) notes that historically, little attention has been paid to the Western Fijian dialect because missionaries had privileged the Eastern dialect, called the Bauan dialect, as the standard Fijian language.

The Bauan dialect is commonly spoken in the Eastern section of Fiji and is now considered Standard Fijian (Geraghty, 1995a). This dialect was chosen by the early missionaries because it was the language spoken by the most powerful chief of Eastern Fiji in the early 19th century, Ratu Seru Epenisa Cakobau (Geraghty, 1995a). Ratu Cakobau was also known as Tui Viti (King of Fiji), a self-proclaimed King of the Eastern region, whose title carried throughout the entirety of Fiji. The Standard Bauan Fijian language includes features of the Tongan
language which were introduced through warfare. Ma’afu—Prince of Tonga—was responsible for conquering a few southeastern islands in Fiji, called the Lauan island group (Spurway, 2015), which influenced Ratu Cakobau’s decision to cede Fiji to Great Britain. Britain was viewed by Fiji as a powerful ally that would aid in Fiji’s fight against Tonga. Thus, although the Lauan language was the first Fijian language learned by the missionaries because that set of islands technically belonged to Tonga, the eventual language of choice shifted to Bauan as missionaries ventured further into Fiji (Geraghty, 1995a).

Current language use in Fiji privileges the use of the Bauan dialect, called vosa vaka Bau, in all public and official spaces. Colloquial Fijian is also based on the Bauan dialect and includes the language most used by everyday Fijians (Geraghty, 1984, p. 49). The Fijian language also includes loanwords from the English language (being a former British colony), the Tongan language, Latin and French introduced by Catholic missionaries, and from Hindi through indentured laborers (Geraghty, 1997). It is common to find that most Fijian words have roots from various native regional vernacular languages/dialects, from standard Fijian, as well as from the English language.

**Ethnic Groups**

Fiji, today, is made up of four main ethnic groups who all have different relationships to the language spoken in Fiji. The largest group in Fiji are the iTaukei, or native Fijians. This group is made up, ethnically, of the people who the British colonized when they took over in 1874. When the British arrived in Fiji, they were largely accepted by the native Fijians because they promised protection from their warring neighbor Tonga. Further, the British granted land ownership to the native group—having learned from their previous colonial experiences. Thus, the iTaukei have historical and legacy ties to the land and the culture and are the main
landowners in the country, giving indigenous Fijians a form of inherited physical power and prestige in Fiji.

The second largest groups are the Indo-Fijians who make up approximately 37% of the overall Fijian population (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2007). They are descendants of the 60,000 indentured workers brought in from India by the British to work the sugarcane fields (Mugler, 1996; Nand, 2015; Voigt-Graf, 2008). Sir Arthur Gordon, the first Governor of Fiji, first brought in indentured laborers from other British colony nations (such as India) to preserve the Fijian way of life (Geraghty, 1984). The concept behind preserving the Fijian way of life was that Sir Arthur Gordon felt that he needed to protect the indigenous people of Fiji and help them maintain their cultural heritage and traditions rather than working the farms and fields as laborers (France, 1968). The early British governors were also instrumental in setting up the ethnic hierarchies that exist to this day in Fiji by granting the native people land ownership and, rather than using the locals as workers in plantations, bringing in a “first shipment of Indian laborers [that] arrived in 1879” (Geraghty, 1984, p. 38). Geraghty (1984) points out that because of Gordon’s policy, 80% of Fijian lands remained with the native iTaukei. However, by the end of the indentured period, in 1916, these Indian laborers settled in Fiji, rather than returning to India, and set up shops and businesses. Although not able to be landowners, they began to make up the largest portion of the merchant class. They moved to other neighboring sites, leaving the plantations and forming settlements of their own—where they speak Hindustani and Fiji Hindi, which includes various forms of Hindi dialects, Fijian, and English words (Mugler, 1996; Siegel, 1989).

Another small but important group in Fiji is represented by the people of Rotuma. Rotuma is about 500 kilometers north of Fiji’s main island, Viti Levu, and is roughly 43 square
kilometers (Tonga, 2012). The small island is distinct from Fiji not only geographically, but culturally—sharing ethnic and cultural traits more commonly found among the peoples of Polynesia. Tonga (2012) adds:

   Our Rotuman culture and the people’s features mostly resemble that of the Polynesians to the east, most noticeably the people of Tonga, Samoa, Futuna and Uvea. Because Rotumans’ appearance and language are so clearly Polynesian, we have become a minority class within the Republic of Fiji. (p. 2)

While Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874, Rotuma was ceded a few years later in 1881 by the chiefs of Rotuma—persuaded, again, by the promise of protection against warring neighbors Tonga. This colonial history led Rotuma to become part of the Republic of Fiji, as it was the closest British colony country, despite important cultural and ethnic differences. Today, the majority of Rotumans live in Viti Levu rather than Rotuma, and English has replaced their native language, Rotuman, as the language of communication in most homes (Geraghty, 1984).

Finally, the last group of Fiji citizens make up an “other” ethnic category further highlighting the linguistic complexity in Fiji. This group includes Fiji Melanesians, descendants of Melanesian laborers who were brought into Fiji through blackbirding—a term used in Melanesia to refer to being enslaved to work either by force or other coercion—to work in coconut plantations, producing copra, or dried coconut (Summy, 2009). Chinese immigrants and their families are included in this group and speak Cantonese and Mandarin (Ali, 2005). Fair skinned Fijians, called kailomas, are mixed race descendants of Indigenous Fijians and White settlers, including descendants of missionaries, beachcombers, traders, and deserters from various European nations as well as the Americas—speaking nationally renowned languages like English and French. Other members of this group include those that have come from small island
nations within the South Pacific like Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu—all of whom have maintained their languages in Fiji (Siegel, 1989).

Fiji’s Education and Language Policies

Language Education in the Beginning

For Chiefly Families. The introduction of formal education to Fiji came through the arrival of Methodist missionaries in 1835 (Tavola, 1991), well before the cession to Britain in 1874. Missionary efforts began in 1836 with the Methodist Wesleyan missionaries in 1836, followed by the Roman Catholic missionaries who arrived in 1844. Schools that were set up by missionaries were mainly for children of prominent Fijian chiefs. Fijian chiefs and other local Fijians were not eager to convert to Christianity, but the idea that they would be able to read and write influenced the establishment of early mission schools (Tavola, 1991).

Tavola (1991) points out that missionaries initially felt that it was better to speak the language of the locals—to connect better to the people as well as translate the scriptures—so that the scriptures were accessible to them. Because of the many dialects spoken in Fiji, missionaries chose to translate in Bauan, which was the language of the Fijian rulers at the time. Bauan, then, became the acceptable language of the church, education, and literature. Through these missionary efforts, as well as the colonial history noted above, Bauan became what is now termed “Standard Fijian” (Geraghty, 1984).

The Catholic missionaries established a much more intensive education program, using European missionaries as teachers. Classroom lessons included English, arithmetic, geography, history, music, religious instruction, and training in singing and liturgical worship in Latin (Foi, 2007). Marist Fathers and Missionary Sisters were part of those establishing the Catholic church in Fiji and were those most influential in establishing schools. The Fathers opened a school to
train young men carpentry, boat building and maintenance, and masonry. The Sisters opened an all-girls school to help students learn English, arithmetic, sewing, cooking, housekeeping, and hygiene so that they could help the people in their communities. English was learned to facilitate communication with the European community, especially the British administration (Foi, 2007).

The European teachers employed by these Catholic schools introduced English as the language of education instead of Fijian (Tavola, 1991). Seeing that the Catholic schools were now teaching curriculum in English, many of the local Fijians saw the need to attend these schools instead of the methodist schools, which provided schooling in the Fijian language (mostly Bauan). They felt that Catholic schools better prepared them for living as a person of the Christian faith, as well as to better serve their communities (Foi, 2007). As a way to compete with the new demand for English, the Methodist church then established a second school that provided instruction in English (Tavola, 1991), influencing students from the earlier established Methodist school, taught in Fijian, to go on strike because they too wanted to be taught in English (Geraghty, 1984).

For the Rest of Fiji. Starting around 1911, schools began to be built for other iTaukei children who were not from chiefly families, as well as for children of Indian indentured laborers (Siegel, 1989). These schools were largely segregated, taught in their native languages, and administered separately for iTaukei and Indo-Fijians. These schools recommended that English be taught as a foreign language. However, as the need for English was increasing with Fiji and Rotuma’s cession to Great Britain, and the bringing of indentured laborers from India and from other Melanesian countries—a language was needed that was understandable by all these emerging communities. The British colonial government took over a few of the established church schools and administrators handed the responsibility of Fiji’s education over to New
Zealand, another British colony (Tent, 2001). New Zealand supplied Fiji with teachers, and the Education Commission was created with conditions of its own—that English be made the official language of instruction (Geraghty, 1984).

In 1969 the Education Commission established by the British administration declared that “English is important not only because it is an international language but also because it is neutral—not being associated directly with any major ethnic group in Fiji” (Siegel, 1989, p. 53). Siegel (1989) points out that this declaration began the official implementation of English as the language of educational instruction for all the children of Fiji. Geraghty (1984) articulated the three reasons for this shift from native language education to English medium education. He noted English was the language of unity between the multiple ethnic groups residing in Fiji, English was the language taught by teachers coming in from New Zealand, and Standard Fijian was not considered suited to the modern demands of ideas and expressions needed in classroom learning. English became and continues to be the official language of instruction in Fiji, as declared by the newly created Education Commission.

Language Education Today

During the amendment of the constitution in 1997, Fiji was officially recognized as a “multilingual state and that the main languages (Fijian, Hindi, and English) are equal in terms of status, use, and function” (Fiji Islands Education Commission Report, 2000, p. 291). This recognition marked a major shift in Fijian language policy. The 2013 Constitution further affirmed that “all Fijians are united by common and equal citizenry” and that it recognizes the culture, customs, traditions, and languages of the iTaukei, the Rotumans, the Indo-Fijians, and the descendants of settlers and immigrants to Fiji (Constitution of the Republic of Fiji, 2013, p. 5).
Native language education policy is a relatively new topic of discussion in Fiji that is particularly complex and has been difficult to navigate because of the multiethnic and multilingual nature of Fiji (Goundar, 2019). Aside from the constitution’s declaration, there is no language policy that incorporates the multiple languages in Fiji and there is no policy to incorporate the nation’s multilingualism (Goundar, 2019). Thus, implementation of Native language education in Fiji has been slow, and widely considered to be, “disorganized, and amateurish, and show[s] lack of real commitment” (Geraghty, 1997, p. 5). Today, it is unclear what an effective language policy would be that would support the linguistic development of all Fijians.

The lack of coherent language policy supporting native languages is a concern to Fijian educators and policy makers because language is intrinsically connected to identity. Norton (2013) argues that identity refers to “how a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is constructed across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 45). She continues by citing Heller (1987) who says that language is the medium through which a person negotiates their sense of self across different arenas and at different times. According to Norton (2013), language is how “people gain access to—or are denied access to—powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak” (p. 45). Language is not only how one communicates but is how one is able to access resources and power (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). Language being a tool used to access resources and solidify relationships is a notion particularly important for Fijians because the Fijian language is the medium through which Fijian culture is preserved and transmitted (Milner, 1984).
Statement of the Problem

There is much to be discovered about how language education policy and practices in Fiji impact how iTaukei Fijians, Indo-Fijians, and other Fijians navigate their sense of identity (Norton, 2013) within the public and private spaces in their lives. Language education policy may promote linguistic proficiencies that provide affordances and access to specific linguistic discourses and networks. Specific power structures in Fiji, including educational systems, may influence how people see themselves as belonging and having access to public and private discourses. The cultural ways of belonging and identifying as a Fijian must be considered when thinking about the role of language Fijian lives. The purpose of this study is to investigate the role of language in connecting Fijians to their multiple identities and in mediating connection, especially for the multiethnic students in Fiji who are trying to navigate their relational and communal spaces.

Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this descriptive–interpretive qualitative study (Elliott & Timulak, 2021) is to investigate the role that language plays in constructing the identities of Fijian college students and how it mediates connection for them in ethnic, cultural, academic, and other spaces. This study especially focuses on the role of language in supporting or undermining feelings of belonging to one’s ethnic group, as well as in school spaces for the multiethnic students in Fiji, trying to navigate their relational and communal spaces. Engaging post-structural notions of language and identity (Pavlenko & Norton, 2007), as well as Oceanic notions of belonging (Anae, 2010; Mila-Shaaf, 2006) this study has implications for language education policies in Fiji that work towards opening a space for bilingual and multilingual youth to embrace their multilingual and multicultural selves.
Research Question

My research question is: How do Fijian college students, at one U.S. university in the Oceanic region, perceive the ways that language constructs their identities and mediates connection?
CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study is to investigate the role language plays in connecting Fijians to their identities, including ethnic, cultural, academic, and other. This study especially focuses on the role languages play in supporting or undermining feelings of belonging to one’s ethnic group, as well as constructing identity for the multiethnic students in Fiji. My research question is: How do Fijian college students, at one U.S. university in the Oceanic region, perceive ways that language constructs their identities and mediates connection? In this chapter, I briefly outline the conceptual frameworks that underlie my research project as well as relevant research literature.

Conceptual Framework

This paper draws on post-structural and sociocultural notions of identity and language, as well as theories of belonging and Oceanic concepts of identity and belonging—vā. I will briefly describe the main concepts in each of these frameworks below as they relate to my research focus. I will draw on these theories to inform analysis and interpretation of the Fijian student voices related to my research question stated above.

Post-Structural Notions and Perspectives of Identity

Post-structural notions of identity underpin this study, with a specific focus on language as a site of identity construction and possibilities for belonging (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2016; Bernstein, 2016; Holland et al., 1998; Kramsch, 2009; Pavlenko & Norton, 2007). Post-structural conceptions of identity include seeing identity as dynamic, ever-changing, and continually reconstructed through daily experiences and social interactions (Bernstein, 2016). For example, Holland and her colleagues (1998) present the notion of cultural worlds in which individuals engage to construct their identities, and where identity is not predetermined but is actively
developed through interactions, roles, and experiences. Norton (2013) defines identity as “the way a person understands his or her relationship to the world, how that relationship is structured across time and space, and how the person understands possibilities for the future” (p. 4).

Central to post-structural identity theories are concepts of subjectivity, positioning, and agency. Subjectivity (Weedon, 1997) points to the social and relational construction of identity, where a person’s identity is understood as either being subject to or a subject of a relationship. This conception of identity construction takes into account the positions of power in relationships that necessarily make such relations sites of struggle and negotiation for the self. As relationships change and evolve, subjectivity within them is also multiple and constantly changing (Norton, 2010).

Related to subjectivity, positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) includes understanding identity as the positions people take up, depending on their intentions, desires, alongside what discourses are made available to them by those around them and by larger communities (Bernstein, 2016; Davies & Harré, 1990). The notion of positionality exerts a significant impact on an individual’s sense of self and capacity for action, as they are tasked with harmonizing their personal viewpoints and aspirations with the requisites and limitations imposed by their designated role.

Agency is also a key tenant in post-structural notions of identity. Holland et al.’s theory of identity emphasizes agency, which refers to an individual’s capacity to act and make choices within their cultural context. Her theory acknowledges individuals inhabiting distinct roles within various cultural realms, which come with their respective duties, responsibilities, and anticipated behaviors. Agency is not solely a personal attribute but is influenced by the cultural
worlds in which one exists and involves navigating and negotiating one’s identity and actions within these worlds.

**Language, Identity, and Belonging**

In socio-cultural and post-structural notions of identity, language acts as the primary cultural tool through which an individual constructs his or her identity (Gee, 2000; Norton, 2013; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Heller (1987) writes that “it is through language that a person negotiates a sense of self within and across a range of sites at different points in time” (p. 45). Specific to second language learners, Norton (2013) presents the notion of investment in (rather than motivation for) language learning that includes the understanding that learners are able to “exercise agency, claim their right to be heard, change persecutions and institutional prejudices, and strive to become whomever they want” (p. 195). Learners must be confident that the languages they are learning and the identities they are creating will be a life-long investment that will benefit them in the ways they can hope for and imagine (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Norton, 2010). Language learners can exercise their agency to imagine themselves to be part of different communities, depending on their linguistic proficiencies as well as the identities they construct through those languages (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

According to these perspectives, identity is neither fixed nor static. Rather, people are regularly negotiating their identities through linguistic interactions with others depending on the affordances and constraints of their environment (Gee, 2000; Norton, 2013). While linguistic interactions shape the way one views the world, they also impact how one views themselves (Haque, 2012). Language is used to mediate and socially enact identities, where “all people have multiple identities connected not to their ‘internal states’ but to their performances in society” (Gee, 2000, p. 99). As Bonnie Norton (2013) further notes, “language is not only a linguistic
system of words and sentences, but also as social practice in which identities and desires are negotiated in the context of complex and often unequal social relationships” (p. 476).

Human relationships are crucial for well-being (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Myles et al., 2019). Baumeister and Leary (1995) have even claimed that belonging is a primary psychological need and that it relates broadly to the human experience. Lack of belonging can be seen in physical effects such as fatigue and susceptibility to illness. Negative social behaviors like crime and substance abuse can also be attributed to a lack of belonging (Allen & Bowles, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Language socialization theories offer a powerful perspective on ways language can act as a powerful tool for inclusion and exclusion (Haque, 2012). Language socialization scholars (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986) note that as a person is socialized to a community through the use of the language of that community, language acts not only as a communicative code, but also as a marker of belonging in that specific group. Participation (through language) in a speech community (including ethnic and cultural groups) may offer access to important resources and power structures within that community. Language and identity therefore have a reciprocal relationship, one that indexes why speakers speak differently in social contexts through an active process of establishing and maintaining social relations through the use of language (Abdalla Ali, 2022). Grosjean (1992) adds that one makes a choice to use a particular language or mix languages to suggest solidarity to a group or to declare ethnic identity, which is an intentional course of action—a discourse strategy—made by the speaker. Language is crucial for possible participation and is considered a necessary precondition to belonging to specific social and cultural groups (Lave & Wenger, 1991), as well as means to connect to groups and into the spaces of communities of practice (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It is
through language that a person gains access to—or is denied access to—powerful social networks that give learners the opportunity to speak (Heller, 1987, p. 45) through various discourses and social practices, where identities are defined, negotiated, resisted, and performed (Bakhtin, 1981; Baxter, 2016; Holland et al., 1998; Kramsch, 2009). Thus, language is not only a communicative system, but provides resources and power (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004).

These above cited frameworks are powerful for investigating ways that language might open up participation in discourses of academic success, cultural acceptance, and belonging in academic and professional spaces where English is the lingua franca (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Norton, 2013).

**Vā—Oceanic Notions of Identity and Belonging**

Vā, or va, is a pan-oceanic word and similar words are found across Oceanic communities and cultures and are found in many Manoan languages. It references the secular and spiritual dimensions of relationships and relational order that facilitates both personal and collective well-being (Anae, 2010). Mila-Shaaf (2006) describes vā as, “the space between, not space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the unity that relates, giving meaning to things” (p. 8). To understand vā and its meaning in the Oceanic context, one must look at specific Pacific Island societies and the relationships that exist, acknowledging that these communal relationships are the most influential when shaping one’s identity in cultural society. For inhabitants of Oceania, vā is belonging and it is not an entity of choice but rather of being—it is to be human, it is to be involved in connection with others, it is to be meaningful and whole (Koya-Vaka’uta, 2017). The concept of vā being as this space between people or things is known in Samoa, Tonga, Rotuma, and Tahiti as vā, while in Aotearoa and Hawaii it is known as wa (Ka’ili, 2005).
The Samoan conception of vā describes the Samoan self as reliant on relationships that occur in vā and Autagavaia (2001) adds that through vā, “the self does not exist alone, and the Samoan individual does not survive in isolation” (p. 59). Vā, in Samoan definition, highlights the spaces that exist in various relationships and the work that is required to maintain such positions. Samoan notions of vā entails va fealoa’i, va tapuia, and teu le va. Va fealoa’i refers to relationships or connections between people that reflect the importance of social bonds and interactions. Va tapuia can be translated to sacred relationships or sacred connections that reflect the importance of the interconnectedness and reverence for relationships, including those with nature, ancestors, and community. Lastly, teu le va which is the “valuing,” “nurturing,” and “looking after” of these relationships (Anae, 2010; Duranti, 1981; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2004; Shore, 1982). Relationships in such spaces differ for every Samoan self and it is the responsibility of the Samoan self to maintain harmony and balance in their position as a member of the community, denoting a sacredness in maintaining vā as it connects ancestors with progeny.

A Tongan perspective of vā associates the concept to principles of balance and harmony in relationships and the natural order of human interconnections and relationships (Mila-Shaaf, 2006). Vā in Tongan discourse is intertwined with the word tauhi va which is “to take care, to tend or to nurture” (Ka’ili, 2005, p. 92) and is often defined as the value and practice of maintaining good relations with kin and friends. Ka’ili (2005) adds that kainaga (family) members in Tonga are “geologically woven together” (p. 90) and that existing kinship relations are tied to both the people and the fonua (land). It is also said that the identities of Tongans are determined by their genealogical connections to the land, the people, and their kin members. Not only is vā associated with spaces and relationships, but it is also connected to the construction of identities (Ka’ili, 2005; Mahina, 2010).
Oceania notions of vā are found in Fiji as well, though the word itself is not. Rather, related ideas are reflected in iTaukei concepts and values that are core to Fijian culture. These values, which include veiwekani (relationship building), vakarokoroko (respect), veitokoni (reciprocity and sharing), veikauwaitaki (caring for one another), and veiqaravi (sharing), influence Fijian students’ need to connect to their people through language and through tradition (Cammock & Andrews, 2023; Nabobo-Baba, 2008). These values are deeply rooted in Fijian traditions and connected to the vanua (land)—which represents the people and cultures who inhabit that geographical space. Values and vanua are the means through which the principles of sharing and caring are put into practice in Fijian communities (Ravuvu, 1983). Ravuvu (1983) adds that like the other Pacific Island nations, our vanua (land) is the sacred space or place where connection to others across time and generation happens, making this sacred and an integral part of identity and belonging. He states:

Its [the vanua’s] social and cultural dimensions are a source of security and confidence. It provides a sense of identity and belonging. One feels good and comfortable when he feels that he belongs to a particular vanua or social unit identified with a particular territorial area in which its roots are established. It is the place where he or his forebears were born and brought up, and where he prefers to die. In its spiritual dimension, it is a source of mana or power to effect things. It is the place where his ancestors preceded him and in which their spirits or souls linger and watch over the affairs of those who come after them. The vanua contains the actuality of one’s past and the potentiality of one’s future. It is an extension of the concept of the self. To most Fijians, the idea of parting with one’s vanua or land is tantamount to parting with one’s life. (p. 70)
Like vā, the vanua in Fijan culture signifies the importance of relationships and community. Vanua is considered an extension of the self and an important component of their identity. For many Fijians, parting with their vanua, or vā, is like losing a part of themselves, highlighting the deep connection that is linked to their identity as a member of the Fijian community.

In terms of identity and belonging, community and family is more important than place (Freeman et al., 2022) and language is an instrument of connection. Language and communication are vital tools which allow vā between people and their communities—nurturing, strengthening and restoring (Mila-Shaaf, 2006). For an Oceanic people connected by genealogies, histories, and knowledges (Hau’ofa, 1993; Lopesi, 2018) being able to understand and communicate using one’s indigenous languages allows exploration and celebration, which deepens vā through cultural identity and strengthening home and communal relationships (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017). Autagavaia (2001) believes that Oceania relationships cannot survive alone without strong communal and familial relationships. Such relationships and connections are just as important for children and adolescents who are trying to navigate the world while trying to create identities of their own, and vā influences these family and community relationships for members of Oceania (Freeman et al., 2023; Lee, 2011; McGavin, 2014).

This study investigates ways language constructs Fijian students’ identities and mediates connection. As noted, a lack of linguistic ability or proficiency in a native language may preclude a person from participating, negotiating, or performing the identity of that language. This study investigates how this might impact Fijian’s students’ subjective sense of self—especially in terms of how they forecast their future—as well as how language shapes Fijian student identities and belonging in important ways.
Review of Existing Literature

Broader Oceanic Context

The most relevant studies for our purposes are framed within a broader Pacific or Oceanic cultural context. Language, identity, and belonging in the Oceanic region is most often understood in relational, rather than individualistic terms. This is due to the Oceanic cultural context and notions of Oceania cultural identity (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017). Identity among the peoples of Oceania is considered culturally as a collective rather than it is individualistic.

Several studies done in the South Pacific highly support the role language plays in solidifying cultural identity and belonging, or vā (Daly & Barbour, 2021; Kennedy, 2019; Matika et al., 2021; Rahman, 2010; Webber, 2012). Kennedy (2019) interviewed students and teachers in Aotearoa, New Zealand, about their experiences regarding the Pacific language education program, focusing on how the program explores connections between language, identity, and relationality. Kennedy (2019) discovered that implementing such a program for Tongan and Samoan students living in New Zealand allowed them to build bridges with parents and grandparents because they were able to use language to learn and communicate—closing an existing generational gap between the older and younger generation. Participants pointed out that the program also provided opportunities for students to discover and nurture vā among themselves. They also shared how learning their native languages required effort and an investment of time, of selves, and of interest. They recognized how their investment resulted in good grades, being bilingual and having good communication with family, and that they were able to contribute to their family dynamics by being translators. They also expressed satisfaction in knowing that the program helped them explore their relational Oceania identity through
language, reminding them of having an indigenous Oceania identity and all the benefits that it brings.

Matika et al. (2021) examined the relationship between language, identity, and wellbeing for Māori (the Indigenous people of New Zealand) and Pasifika (Pacific Islander immigrants) living in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Participants reported a connection between their community languages and their ethnic identity, specifically showing that those of Māori heritage could speak their languages and saw themselves as being more authentic and valued than those who could only speak English. The same was shown for Pasifika participants who were bilingual. This study highlights how crucial language is in supporting the formation of a positive ethnic identity, particularly for members of the Māori and Pasifika communities.

Rahman (2010) assessed various factors that influenced student retention and learning for indigenous high school students in Australia, members of the Aboriginal community. Her study found that one of the most important factors for student retention was positive cultural and academic identity. Students reported that when they had a strong sense of their cultural identity, they felt confident that they could succeed in the classroom. Findings from this study support the notion that a positive indigenous identity is related to academic success and school competency. A major factor in building student cultural identity was the use of their native indigenous languages in the classroom.

Daly and Barbour (2021) examined how teachers in Vanuatu, another island nation in Oceania, with 1000+ languages, perceive language and its role in student identity and belonging. Their study found the need for children to be literacy proficient in their local language for the “long-term maintenance” (p. 1422) of their languages. They also highlighted the close
relationship language has with identity because their language identifies who they are as a people and where they are from within the island nation of Vanuatu.

Webber (2012) expands on racial-ethnic identity and its impact on Māori adolescents in Auckland, New Zealand. Her study reported the importance of racial-ethnic identity because it influences how students see themselves, who they are, how they belong, and in turn influences their academic identity—that they are able to attain the best education despite ethnic stereotypes towards their Māori identities. She also points out that by having a strong racial-ethnic identity, resilience is enhanced, and it provides students with the ability to prevent negative pressures from interfering with their achievements and aspirations.

Scholars argue that cultural knowledge is a necessary requirement for academic success (Harrison, 2004; Rahman, 2010). This project calls attention to the vital role of language in supporting student cultural identity, as well promoting feelings of connection and belonging in academic and schooling spaces. Language use and linguistic practices are connected to a child’s sense of identity, belonging, inclusion in social groups, and how students navigate the school setting (Blum et al., 2004; de Jong et al., 2023; DeNicolo, 2019; Feinauer & Howard, 2014; Hamman, 2018; Reyes & Vallone, 2007; Whiting et al., 2021). The language of instruction in school spaces may have important implications for student ethnic identity development, as well as for promoting school belonging. This study will look at how Fijian college students view the role of language in their daily experiences, particularly how language impacts their identity and mediates their connection to the communities to which they belong.

Fiji

Literature review searches of studies specific to Fiji failed to yield any studies that looked at how language impacted Fijian students’ identity or mediated connection to their various ethnic
groups and communities. There are several studies that look at language use, attitudes towards multilingualism, language proficiency, and linguistic and academic outcomes (Hopf et al., 2019; Shameem, 2002a, 2002b; White, 2002). For example, Shameem (2002b) examined linguistic outcomes in Fiji Hindi, Standard Hindi, Urdu, English, Fijian (Bauan) and Fiji English for Indo-Fijian students. Interestingly, Shameem found that Indo-Fijian students who come from wealthier families have lower proficiency in their mother-tongue, while students in rural areas have a stronger linguistic proficiency in their native languages. This raises questions about how different contexts in Fiji, (e.g. rural versus urban; different socioeconomic sectors) might play into language education.

Chand and Chand (2022) assessed stakeholder perspectives—including principals, teachers, and community members—about the use of Standard Hindi and Fijian Hindi (a local dialect) in school spaces. They noted a preference for Standard Hindi in school and other formal settings while Fijian Hindi was preferred for informal or social settings. Hopf et al. (2019) examined the predictive power of English and Fiji Hindi on English language proficiency outcomes for Indo-Fijian primary school students. They found that speaking English at home was predictive of better English outcomes in Grade 1, however by Grade 4 students who spoke Fiji Hindi at home performed better on English proficiency tests. This study points to the importance of considering students full linguistic repertoires and home language resources in designing curricula for multilingual students.

White (2002) echoes the views that many Fijians have about the English language. His study highlights that while students label prominent-English speaking peers as via via kaivalagi (wanting to be European), there are many important and relevant benefits to speaking English. His work suggests that Fijians view English as a language of power—the language of
communication with people from other countries and the language of accessibility in places of employment that favor the English language. These studies reflect the attitudes about incorporating the English language as the language of instruction, however research is lacking that connects multilingualism, language proficiency, and linguistic and academic outcomes to identity outcomes or cultural processes.

Other school-based studies examine code switching between English and native languages in the classroom and social contexts, highlighting how code switching can promote academic achievement and learning across content subject areas (Boufoy-Bastick, 2003; Hopf et al., 2016, 2018; Narayan, 2019). Hopf et al. (2016) examined students’ language use in their friendship circles within a multilingual school environment, where students spoke Fijian and Hindi, as well as English. Students demonstrated proficiency and use of Fijian and Hindi but also noted that English was heavily relied on by these students as the language of inclusion (when not everyone spoke the same native language) and to facilitate friendly interaction. While students still maintained proficiency in their main home language, code switching was encouraged and reinforced in their school environment. Hopf et al. (2018) further inquired into the linguistic multi-competence of Fijian students and the role of code switching and found that being multilingually competent did not necessarily equate with equal proficiency across languages. The varied levels of language proficiency directly impacted their participation in school and in professional venues. Students’ perceived need to code switch was driven by the various social and cultural contexts, potentially increasing opportunities for academic attainment and maintaining social relationships.

Narayan (2019) assessed the role of code switching in the classrooms and if it increased student interactions in their learning processes. He found that code-switching between students’
first and second languages could be strategically used to increase student language use, proficiency, and competency. He also found that code switching promoted increased academic achievement. English-only instruction format was not preferred by any of the study participants, who appreciated the opportunity to use both languages through code-switching. The study concluded by arguing for code-switching in the classroom to promote linguistic and academic achievement and aid learning for multilingual students.

Boufoy-Bastick (2003) studied how teachers used English-only instruction in Fijian-rural schools and how it impacted students’ learning and language proficiency. Her study indicated that students learning through English was more limited to instruction based on memorization, and that students lack the proficiency in English to fully express themselves or their own thinking. Using code-switching between the native languages and English was found to facilitate learning and promote understanding of content material. These above studies are focused on English learning outcomes, for multilingual speakers in Fiji. These studies are all important and helpful for educators in Fiji, however, they do not attend to the role of language as a site of identity development or to mediate connection in the ways theorized above.
CHAPTER 3

Methods

I start this chapter by restating my research focus and research questions. I then explain the setting for the study and describe the participants. I follow this with descriptions of the demographic information survey and the focus groups interview protocol. I then describe the procedures for recruitment and data collection. Lastly, I describe the data analysis and how I answered my research questions.

In this study, I address the following research question: How do Fijian college students, at one U.S. university in the Oceanic region, perceive the ways that language constructs their identities and mediates connection?

Participants

My research is part of a larger study that was conducted at one university in the Pacific rim, focusing on identifying the connection between ethnic identity and a sense of belonging for Oceania college students. I joined the research team during the preparation and planning phase, allowing me to be part of data collecting, transcribing, and preliminary analysis.

A snowball sample of 97 Oceania university students participated in the larger study, of which I am using a smaller sample of only Fijian students for my study. Recruitment to the project began with handing out flyers on campus and through email. We posted recruitment flyers all over campus, including in the student union building, near social and eating establishments, outside campus life offices, and other high traffic areas around campus. The email, with the recruitment flier attached, was sent to a faculty member in the Student Life Department and then dispersed to the campus cultural club leadership who then distributed it via email to their club members. The flier had an attached link and QR code directing them to a
Qualtrics pre-registration survey asking basic qualifying demographic information. This was done to ensure that we only included Oceania students above the age of 18. The survey also asked for contact information, how they would like to be contacted, and available days and times to attend a focus group (see APPENDIX A).

Recruitment also occurred through the referral of friends. We asked those who pre-registered to bring a friend or two that also met the criteria of being an Oceania student on campus over the age of 18. Because we received personal contact information through the pre-registration surveys, we also reached out to participants through text a day or 2 before their focus group time to remind them about the focus group meeting. A small map was attached to these reminder texts, directing students to where the focus groups were being held. This was to help students locate the room because some students found it difficult to locate the room.

Out of the 97 Oceania students who participated in the study, 72% were female and the large majority were between the ages of 21–25. All three Pacific Island groups—Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia—were well represented in our sample, the majority being from Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga. This information was collected through a demographic’s questionnaire, which participants filled out once consent forms were signed (see APPENDIX B). The purpose of the main research project was to investigate the constructs of, and connections between ethnic identity and school belonging for Pacific Islander college students in Hawaii.

Out of the 97 Oceania participants, 36 \((n = 36)\) claimed Fijian citizenship. These students ultimately identified themselves ethnically as iTaukei, or native Fijians \((n = 23)\), Indo-Fijians, or Fijians of Indian descent \((n = 4)\), while nine fell into an “others” category of mixed ethnic backgrounds including Rotumans, Tongans, and those of European descent. Their ages ranged
from as young as 19 years old to 37 years old, and they were all undergraduate students at the selected university.

Responses from this subset of Fijian students from the larger study will be the focus of my analysis for this study. There were 36 Fijians in the larger sample. From these I chose to analyze data from 17 students who participated in 6 focus groups that consisted primarily of Fijian students. This purposeful selection allowed me to include voices to represent the three main demographic groups in Fiji (iTaukei, Indo-Fijian, and mixed). All participants in the sample for my thesis study were born, raised, and attended school in Fiji before coming to university. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the Fijian participants in the analytic sample.

Table 1

Frequencies of Background Characteristics of Sample Respondents (n = 17)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>iTaukei</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Indo-Fijian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixed*</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Some participants have multiple ethnicities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable Name</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>18-20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31+</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Setting

The data for this research project consisted of focus group interviews with Fijian college students at one small private university in Hawaii. Data were collected during the summer of
2022, and is part of a larger research project looking at school belonging and ethnic identity among Pacific Island college students. A total of 18 focus groups were conducted, each consisting of two to eight participants, for a total of 97 participants in this larger study. Focus groups were held in the evening in a campus classroom and lasted anywhere from 60 to 90 minutes. Dinner was provided and all focus group interviews were video recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

There were always two members of the research team present for every focus group, and an insider/outsider approach was intentionally used for facilitating the focus group interviews. Two members of the research team are themselves of Oceanic heritage. Researcher 1 is a U.S. citizen with Samoan and Tongan ancestry, who attended primary and secondary school in the Oceanic region and is currently an Assistant Professor of Psychology in the U.S. I am Researcher 2, a graduate student, born and raised in the Oceanic region, with Fijian, Rotuman, and European ancestry. I attended primary and secondary school in Fiji and have continued all my post-secondary education in the United States. The third member of the research team is a white middle-class woman from the western part of the United States and currently an Associate Professor of Teacher Education in the U.S.

Because of the unique understanding and perspectives Researchers 1 and 2 have as members of the Oceania community, one of them was nearly always the lead as main facilitator for each focus group interview. Researcher 3 was present for every focus group interview but only took the lead in facilitating in focus group interviews when the Oceania members of the research team had conflicts of interest with participants (family members, close friends, or students). Thus, each focus group interview was facilitated by both an insider and an outsider to the Oceania community and culture helping to elicit both insider knowledge, as well as
explanations to benefit the outsider researcher. This approach was deliberate, because there is limited research on how Oceania students perceive and experience a sense of belonging. These focus groups were further constructed to ensure participants had the opportunity to share all aspects of their sense of belonging that otherwise might be missed due to cultural ways of doing, thinking, feeling, and connecting. Unfortunately, one recording of a focus group with five participants did not record any sound. As a result, Researcher 2 emailed these participants and asked them to email their answers to the questions directly to her. Their responses were added to the rest of the transcripts that are being stored on a secure drive.

Data Source

The original semi-structured interview protocol is made up of three sections, ethnic identity having seven questions, school belonging having six questions, and academic achievement/attainment having three questions. Researchers noted the theme of language mentioned throughout the initial focus groups. As this is my main area of focus and interest, I worked together with the principal investigators (Erika Feinauer and Spencer Scanlan) to add specific questions about language to the existing interview protocol. I added the following questions:

1. What role does language play in your ethnic identity?
2. What role does language play in your sense of belonging at school? (Does/did your home language match the language of your schooling? What was the experience like?)

The first question was added to the ethnic identity section, and the second question was added to the school belonging section. The facilitation of focus groups followed the same structure of asking each question in the same order from the semi-structured interview protocol. Students were allowed to respond to and then elaborate on what they felt most important about for each
question. Students were also directed to respond to these questions referencing both their past and current educational experiences and contexts as they desired.

**Measures**

*Demographic Questionnaire*

The participants completed a demographics information survey that included factors such as gender, age, religious affiliation, ethnicity, where they were born, where their parents were born, and where they graduated from high school (see APPENDIX B).

*Semi-Structured Focus Group Interview Protocol Questions*

The focus group interview protocol questions were divided into three sections: *ethnic identity*, *school belonging*, and *academic achievement/attainment* (see APPENDIX C). As mentioned above, for the purposes of this thesis project, analysis focuses on responses given by participants with Fijian citizenship to the language question included in the ethnic identity and school belonging sections.

**Procedures: Qualitative Data Analysis**

The 18 focus group interviews were transcribed and de-identified. All the data were transcribed by two researchers, another student who later joined us in the analysis phase and me. Both transcribers were of Oceania heritage, which allows us to have an insider’s perspective to correctly transcribe various words and phrases in various Oceanic languages. I then selected 17 Fijian student voices for these analyses, as described above.

As noted, I analyzed a subsection of the overall data collected, focusing on the responses by the 17 Fijian students in the sample. Further, I attended to student-talk and focused my analyses on responses to the two questions I added to the focus group interview protocol, as well as any other time in the interview where participants talked about language. Dr. Feinauer and I
met to code these data through an iterative and collaborative process (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Saldaña, 2015). Data were analyzed using a qualitative analysis program, MAXQDA (Gizzi & Rädiker, 2021), to organize and code student focus group interview data. We met together after first identifying initial emergent codes separately from a portion of the data, and through discussion, reached initial convergent agreement about coding. We separately coded the rest of the data and then engaged in an inductive coding process, where we met to discuss emergent codes in order to determine themes and organize the data. We attended to instances where codes co-occurred or overlapped. After we had identified emergent themes, interview data were further analyzed using axial coding, looking for ways that students construct their identity, coding for subjectivity, positioning, and agency, as outlined in my literature review. We paid particular attention for the ways students talked about belonging through their cultural context of vā. These data were coded en vivo—vā—and included reports of the importance of language in creating and maintaining a connection to their native identity and to their ethnic group. Table 2 shows the iteration of emergent codes and the process of data reduction to arrive at the final themes.

Table 2

Data Reduction and Analytic Strategy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Round 1 – Initial Emergent Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● Linguistic discrimination,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● English proficiency as facilitation,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Lack of English proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ embarrassed/ lost/ bad feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ barriers to school success</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Native language as facilitating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Native language as identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ language shouldn’t be the only identified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● lack of native language proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ embarrassed/ lost/ bad feelings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ compensating through family/ cultural traditions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
● lack of Hindi for Indo-Fijians prohibits belonging

● At BYUH
  ○ English language used to communicate
  ○ native language experiences with peers
  ○ English as language of instruction

● Before BYUH
  ○ native languages as language of instruction
  ○ English as language of instruction
  ○ context of language experiences,

● Taking initiative to being proficient by learning

Language affords participation/ allows belonging

**Data Reduction**

● We decided that maybe context and time wasn’t important to consider when coding and removed that.

● Took the remaining codes and we grouped them again.
  
  Indo-Fijian In-betweeners
  
  Lack of English as barrier to school success
  
  Hegemony of English, English proficiency provides access
  
  Native language as facilitating
  
  NL as Identity
  
  ■ (NL shouldn’t be the only identifier)
  
  ■ Toxic
  
  Lack of NL proficiency:
  
  ■ embarrassed/ lost/ bad feelings
  
  ■ compensating through family/ culture traditions

Language affords participation/ allows belonging

● Put them in two categories:

  Role of English (Hegemony of English, English proficiency provides access, lack of English as barrier to school success)

  Role of NL (NL proficiency identifier of group membership, NL shouldn’t be the only identifier, NL facilitates participation/ belonging, regret embarrassed for lack of NL, Indo-Fijian In-betweeners, Vā.

**Final Themes**

● Removed the categories and let the themes be independent. Collapsed a few themes and merged them.
  
  ○ NL proficiency reinforces kinship groups
  
  ○ NL facilitates participation in cultural traditions and protocols
  
  ○ Lack of NL proficiency
  
  ○ NL should not be the only identifier of Ethnic Identity
  
  ○ Hegemony of English
  
  ○ English proficiency as gatekeeper

● Axial codes were based on the framework used
  
  ○ Identity
    
    ■ Positioning & Agency
    
    ■ Vā /Belonging
Table 3 shows how the codes were organized within the final themes. I also include illustrative example in Table 3 of student responses that represent our coding decisions. Finally, Table 3 shows how I applied the axial codes for identity (subjectivity, positioning, and agency) and vā.

### Table 3

*Organization of Codes and Themes Table*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Illustrative Excerpts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NL proficiency reinforces kinship groups</td>
<td>Across Oceania</td>
<td>“You get to see the similarities between cultures, especially the language. Because growing up you only hear Fijian, now you come here, you hear Tongans and Samoans. Most of the words are similar”</td>
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<td>Axial Code:</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Identity: Positioning</td>
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<td>- Vā</td>
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<tr>
<td>Within and throughout Fiji</td>
<td></td>
<td>“One thing that’s unique about the Fijian tradition is we have the [commonly used] Fijian dialect which we call the Bauan dialect and then we have different dialects from different provinces back home. And even back in Fiji, our dialects define us. If there’s a Fijian in the crowd hearing me speak, he’ll know or she’ll know that this guy is from this [specific] place in Fiji. That’s what language does, it really defines you, who you are, where you are from, and even where you’re from in Fiji, if you use your dialect.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Axial Code:</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Identity: Positioning</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Vā</td>
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</table>
| NL facilitates participation in cultural traditions and protocols | Cultural Traditions and Protocols | “Language plays a much bigger role in our protocols. When we go to different settings or different villages, we have specific protocols. In those protocols, we [use] formal Fijian. It’s not normal Fijian we use to converse with each other, but [we use] specific Fijian words that you use [to] show which lineage you come from and you wanna try and connect it with the visiting party. So there’s specific words that you use in those settings. You can’t just use normal
Fijian words that you converse with. There’s only specific formal words that you use and those languages [formal Fijian words], if learned, it’ll really help you as a Fijian to connect with everyone in different protocols that we do.”

Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning
- Vā

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of NL proficiency</th>
<th>Indo-Fijians as In-betweeners</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“It’s like I don’t know the exact word, but like if you’re here for us, especially from the Indians from India don’t necessarily accept us cause we don’t speak their language, and the Fijians don’t accept us just because we don’t speak the language, we don’t know Fijian. We don’t have a place.”</td>
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Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>embarrassed/lost/bad feelings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“You’re also ridiculed for losing touch in your language. Even though you speak Fijian, if you don’t speak the dialect where you come from, that’s a totally different story. Your own island, where you’re from they’ll also make fun of you as well. They will say to stay in touch with your island so you can know who you are or the languages that your ancestors speak so it’s not just speaking Fijian, but it’s speaking your dialect.”</td>
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Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning
- Vā

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>compensating through other family/culture traditions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“I needed to learn more. … My dad comes from a long line of fishermen. So I was able to learn a bit of trade before I [left home for 2 years] and when I came back I saw the need to continue do[ing] that. And that was gold when I used to go out fishing with my dad and his brother. His brother took the reins of being a full-time fisherman. They used to go out and they used to teach me the trick of the trade. And these were the things that no one else could teach. Inherited from their dad and learned as they were younger so, I was so happy and blessed to learn a few things from them. I may not be strong language wise but I make up for it by trying to be a part of who I was supposed to be. It kind of covers for the embarrassment of not really knowing the language.”</td>
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</table>
Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning and Agency
- Vā

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>NL should not be the only identifier of Ethnic Identity</th>
<th>Toxic</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I just want to say that language play[s] a big role in our ethnic identity but when we start looking at it [in] a negative way like if you don’t know the language then you’re not part of us. I think that’s toxic, like what you are saying [is] if you don’t speak it then you are trying to be somebody else. My dialect is different from [theirs]. I don’t need to know their dialect to converse with them. I should know Fijian [the most common dialect], yes, but once you put knowing the language as the perfect example to explain that if you don’t know [the language] you’re not Fijian, I feel like that’s where I feel like it becomes something negative.”</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning
- Vā

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hegemony of English</th>
<th>Hegemony of English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Back in Fiji, the education system, it’s mandatory for us to take English classes, whereas the Fijian classes aren’t mandatory. So it’s up to the student and the parent whether they would like to practice them or not in class.”</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>“In Fiji, parents talk to their kids in English. That’s how dis-attached we are from our own culture. Indigenous Fijians in Fiji speaking to their kids in English. Why? Because in schools we are told not to speak your language or you are going to get into trouble if you speak your language.”</td>
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Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English proficiency as gatekeeper</th>
<th>Lack of English as barrier to school success</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“When we speak to other people from other countries, you know we worry about our English, how good it’s gonna be, you know that’s one of the things that would stop us from sharing our opinion just because of our language and grammatical mistakes that might come up.”</td>
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Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning
English proficiency provides access

“I think that’s why most families are leaning towards speaking in English. When you’re good in English, it will take you places.”

“English is a universal language. It is important to know.”

Axial Code:
- Identity: Positioning, Agency

Attending to Ethics and Equity

My research is part of a larger ongoing research project that had already been approved by the BYU-Hawaii IRB (see APPENDIX D). Dr. Spencer Scanlan (Psychology, BYUH) was the lead principal investigator (PI) for that protocol as BYUH faculty, and he was currently collaborating with the co-principal investigator Dr. Erika Feinauer, faculty in Teacher Education at BYU. I had completed my CITI training prior to the collection of data and was added as a researcher to the IRB protocol. Approval to the amendment and approval to join the team as a researcher was given before I began helping with data collection.

All participants were invited to sign a consent form (see APPENDIX E) to ensure that all ethics and equity were met. Facilitators were advised to ask to follow up questions for clarity and to ensure understanding. At every introduction, students were invited to share freely when self-prompted and they were welcome to leave at any point of the process. We also emphasized that their data could be withdrawn at any point if they so desired, that data would be de-identified and stored in a secure server, and that what was shared would not be discussed to parties outside of the research team.

During data collection, there were times when I had friends and family from home attend as participants. When this happened, I would recuse myself from leading the focus group, and Dr. Feinauer would take the lead. All interview transcripts were de-identified and stored in a
secure server accessible only by the PI and research assistants. Fijian pseudonyms are used to honor these students’ backgrounds while still preserving anonymity when reporting illustrative findings about the role of English and the Native Language for ethnic identity and belonging. All findings are reported with accompanying Fijian demographic group, gender, and age.
CHAPTER 4

Findings

Overall, findings from my analyses reveal that Fijian students in this study clearly expressed ways language—English and their native language—constructs identity and mediates connection. Emerging codes highlighted the role language plays in these Fijian college students’ lives, particularly in building and maintaining their ethnic identity, as well as cultural notions of belonging—vā. Emergent codes from the 17 Fijian students’ data were organized into emerging themes in relation to research questions about the role of language in identity and connection:

“native language proficiency reinforces kinship groups,” “native language facilitates participation in cultural traditions and protocols,” “lack of native language proficiency,” “native language should not be the only identifier of ethnic identity,” “the hegemony of English,” and “English proficiency as gatekeeper.”

These six themes are defined and described to answer the study research question: How do Fijian college students, at one U.S. university in the Oceanic region, perceive ways that language constructs their identities and mediates connection? In the following section, I will describe the themes using illustrative data from student voices. I will present the emergent themes, as well as describe when axial codes co-occurred with the emergent themes to connect student voices to vā, belonging, positioning, and agency.

The first four emergent themes highlight the role the native language plays in identifying and connecting to one’s ethnic identity as well as facilitating participation and belonging in vā. Tapping into the Oceanic concept of belonging, vā, I noted instances when language was identified as a means to reinforce participant’s sacred connection to the vā. I noted how my Fijian participants recognized how language facilitates participation in cultural traditions and
traditional protocols. While the use of the English language had clear connections to school belonging, the native language was more clearly connected to vā.

The last two themes highlight ways in which English is used by and matters to Fijian students, particularly the power that the English language holds in students’ ability to engage in academic and professional discourses. Students also talked about negative consequences they experience from a lack of proficiency in either language, English and/or the native language, as well the emphasis on language not being the only identifier of ethnic identity. This included instances where participants stated the power and positionality that are tied to their use of the English language.

**Native Language Proficiency Reinforces Kinship Groups**

When describing the role of the native language in promoting belonging and ethnic identity, students most frequently described how language marked their membership in ethnic groups in Oceania. Student voices revealed how their native language positioned them and connected them to vā. For these students, speaking in their native languages revealed kinship groups and belonging relationships within and across islands—directly facilitating belonging in multiple ways within their ethnic communities. Native languages acted as a powerful tool for inclusion and identified how they were connected, in relation to the larger Oceanic groups. As well as to other specific subgroups within Fiji.

Fijian students clearly described how the native language positioned them in cultural traditions and protocols that are used to highlight and reinforce existing kinship relationships built and maintained throughout generations. For example, one student described how “specific Fijian words that you use shows which lineage you come from. … an important aspect because it identifies my kinship to their people” [Kini, 25-year-old male, iTaukei]. Language helps Kini
make connections to other Fijians he interacts with, links that exist within his tokatoka (family units), within his *mataqali* (a clan that is made up of several close family units), within his *yavusa* (several clans who trace their lineage to a common ancestor or ancestor gods), within his *vanua* (a confederation of clans that reside on land to which they support and defend), within his *matanitu* (alliances across *vanua*), and his *tauvu* (two groups of people that share ancestry—based on the belief that they come from the same *vu* or ancestor) relations. Speaking in the native language is not only a means of communication, but also strengthens allyships and kinship relationships that exist within and between various parts of Fiji, affirming relationships that transcend time. Kini points out that a proficiency in the native language allows him to maintain his position in the vā, and it positions him as a connected kinship member linking him to the relationships that exist because of his lineage.

Another student, Timoci, also noted how hearing lots of native Oceanic languages across campus at the university helped position himself as part of the larger Oceania or Pacific Islander ethnic group. He noted how “you get to see the similarities between cultures, especially the language. Because growing up you only hear the Fijian [language], now you come here [the university], you hear the Tongans and Samoans, and most of the words are similar” [Timoci, 25-year-old male, iTaukei]. Timoci now recognizes how interconnected the Pacific Island nations in the South Pacific are and that the native languages of Oceania depict this relationship. It is important to him that there are more similarities in the languages than there are differences—helping him feel like he belongs to this larger pan-ethnic group. This relationship shows that vā not only exists within Fiji, but that it spans throughout the Oceanic region. When other Pacific Islanders speak their native languages, they too are able to maintain their positions in the vā.
Students also highlighted how speaking in their native languages revealed to other Fijians where they were from—particularly how their specific Fijian dialects pointed to where in Fiji their families lived. One student stated:

One thing that’s unique about the Fijian tradition is we have the [commonly used] Fijian dialect which we call the Bauan dialect and then we have different dialects from different provinces back home. And even back in Fiji, our dialects define us. If there’s a Fijian in the crowd hearing me speak, he’ll know, or she’ll know that this guy is from this [specific] place in Fiji. That’s what language does, it really defines you, who you are, where you are from, and even where you’re from in Fiji, if you use your dialect.” [Josua, 24-year-old male, iTaukei]

Josua clearly describes how he sees language positions in connection to who he is as a Fijian. He states that his native language defines who he is, and who other Fijians are, by the dialect that they speak. He points out how using his agency to speak the native language provides his peers with context to where he is from. Hearing the native Fijian vernacular languages helps him recognize the positions his peers are in—in terms of where they are from, and who they are, according to the languages and dialects they speak. He not only knows they are Fijian but can distinguish where in Fiji they are from. These regional differences—marked by native vernaculars and dialects—are markers of belonging to either the Western part of Fiji or the Eastern part of Fiji.

Native Language Facilitates Participation in Cultural Traditions and Protocols

The second theme that emerged was called “native language facilitates participation in cultural traditions and protocols.” There were eight instances where students talked about how their proficiency in the native language allowed them to participate in traditional protocols which
helped them feel more connected to their Fijian communities. Since specific verbiage is needed to execute traditional protocols, proficiency in formal registers of Fijian allows students to communicate with and be respected by elders in their Fijian communities who are the executors of traditional protocols. For example, one student noted:

There’s a ceremony in the Fijian village, a traditional protocol. I didn’t really practice back home, like the formal use of [the] language [traditional language used in traditional practices]. When I came here, I learned it and it is one of the highest levels of respect there is back home. [Marika, 24-year-old male, iTaukei]

Marika clearly believes that by being proficient in the Fijian language, especially proficient in formal Fijian language that is appropriate and accepted during Fijian cultural traditions and protocols, he will be respected by his elders—members of his community that are revered and admired. His proficiency in formal ceremonial language, like the sevusevu (presentation of an introductory gift), ai lakovi (an engagement), bulubulu (reconciliation), tevutevu (gifts to a newly married couple), and reguregu (paying of respect during a death), positions him as a cultural knower and legitimizes him as a member of his Fijian community, especially by his elders. He also noted that he was never interested in being proficient until he had left home. In fact, leaving Fiji motivated Marika to exercise his agency in a way that allowed him to stay connected to his ethnic communities. He uses his agency to stay connected to vā by choosing to participate in those traditional protocols when he is away from home, which requires a proficiency in formal Fijian. He recognizes that when he lacks the appropriate formal language used in traditional protocols, he is unable to participate in cultural traditions and protocols. This lack of proficiency in his native languages erodes his connection to his Fijian community and to the vā.
Semisi [32 year-old-male, iTaukei] further pointed out how a proficiency in the “proper Fijian language” will legitimize him in the eyes of his elders. He said, “when we speak fluently in the proper Fijian language, our elders admire us for how we present ourselves in the culture, [especially] when we speak Fijian well to the older generation.” A proficiency in proper Fijian positions Semisi in better standing with members of his community, especially by the elders and the older generation whose admiration and respect are highly sought after.

Another student also pointed out how language plays a huge part in his participation in Fijian traditional protocols, particularly protocols that include multiple parties in attendance. He said:

Language plays a much bigger role in our protocols. When we go to different settings or different villages, we have specific protocols. In those protocols, we [use] formal Fijian. It’s not normal Fijian we use to converse with each other, but [we use] specific Fijian words that you use [to] show which lineage you come from and you wanna try and connect it with the visiting party. So there’s specific words that you use in those settings. You can’t just use normal Fijian words that you converse with. There’s only specific formal words that you use and those languages [formal Fijian words], if learned, it’ll really help you as a Fijian to connect with everyone in different protocols that we do. [Jone, 32-year-old male, iTaukei]

Jone clearly describes how a proficiency in Fijian, particularly in executing specific verbiage used in traditional protocols and practices, allows participants to signal boundaries of belonging that exist between the two parties involved. He knows that by using the right language, which incorporates colorful metaphors, and by following the correct process in executing traditional
protocols, he is positioned to provide identification of his lineage, showing conformity to the standards of the community while creating a connection with everyone involved. Speaking formal Fijian also increases Jone’s position as a legitimate member of his Fijian ethnic community maintaining connection to the vā.

Other students also noted how native language proficiency allowed them to converse and be involved with other Fijian students at the university, affording themselves a place to belong—in terms of veiwekani (relationship building) and veiqaravi (sharing). Marika [24 yr old male, iTaukei] declared that “language is really crucial in terms of wanting to belong or being part of a community.” Another student said:

For me growing up, one of the things I realized is that in order for me to afford a place belonging to my people, I had to learn the language. If I didn’t learn the language, then I wouldn’t [be] where I [am] today. The same with the Fijians. If I didn’t know how to speak Fijian, I probably wouldn’t be as involved with the Fijians [at the university]. Because I can speak these languages, I’m lucky I now have a position [to] be in those [social] circles. So just [from] that experience alone, you can see how important language is, not just to yourself ethnically, but socially, and how you find belonging. [Kini, 25-year-old male, iTaukei]

Kini shares his understanding of the positionality that is afforded to him by being proficient in his native language and in English. He recognizes that if he wasn’t proficient, he wouldn’t be as involved with the Fijians at his university—limiting his social connections. He specifically points out his positions in the social circles he is currently involved in is due to his language proficiency in Fijian and considers himself lucky to have that proficiency and be part of the
Fijian social group. This positioning allows him to maintain connection to vā within his Fijian community at his university and to his community in Fiji.

**Lack of Native Language Proficiency**

The third theme that emerged is the “lack of native language proficiency.” There were eight instances where participants shared about their lack of native language proficiency and how that has impacted their sense of belonging as an iTaukei, an Indo-Fijian, and as a student of mixed ethnicity to their ethnic groups. Students talked about having feelings of regret and embarrassment about not speaking their native language. They also expressed feelings of not truly belonging or fitting into their various Fijian ethnic groups because they weren’t proficient in the language.

Students’ feelings of regret and embarrassment were related to the notion that by not being proficient in their native languages it was delegitimizing their position as an iTaukei, an Indo-Fijian, and as a person of mixed ethnic groups in the ethnic groups they belong to, as well as in the vā. They noted how they felt embarrassed by being unable to participate in discussions where their native languages are used and how this puts their position in vā at risk. Tomasi described his perspective about not being able to speak vernacular dialects, saying:

You’re also ridiculed for losing touch in your language. Even though you speak Fijian, if you don’t speak the dialect where you come from, that’s a totally different story. Your own island, where you’re from they’ll also make fun of you as well. They will say to stay in touch with your island so you can know who you are or the languages that your ancestors speak so it’s not just speaking Fijian, but it’s speaking your dialect. [Tomasi, 35-year-old male, iTaukei]
Tomasi described the responses Fijians are most likely to receive when they fail to maintain their native language proficiency. They are made fun of, and this not only happens to those who are not proficient in their native languages but also their specific dialects. Students articulated being in a position where they feel that their Fijian identity has been delegitimized because of their lack in native language proficiency. This lack of proficiency in both the Fijian language and in their regional dialects invalidates their positioning as a member of their communities—as a Fijian and a member of their individual regions—in the vā. They sense the need to learn their native languages, as well as their village dialects. If they are not constantly learning and practicing these languages, they are ridiculed and made to feel inferior as members of their specific Fijian communities.

Eddie articulates a similar insecurity about not speaking his own native languages, as well as feeling deep regret at not being able to pass them on to his children. He described his experience saying:

I am kind of mixed. My dad is from Tuvalu and my mom is from the Solomons, but they both grew up in Fiji. I don’t speak either language. I only speak Fijian and English. When I was younger, I didn’t really pay attention. My dad speaks fluently, my mum doesn’t speak Solomon. I didn’t pay attention when I was younger and that is eating me now, not really knowing my language. I picked up a few words and unfortunately, I can’t teach it [the languages] to my kids. It’s [not being proficient in my native languages] one of my biggest regrets, not really learning the language the way I should have. … It started off embarrassing for me personally because [when] I’m around my dad’s side of the family and there’s talks going on, they’re actually speaking my mother tongue, and I’m lost. …
It was embarrassing to sit among families and not really understand what was going on. I think it’s just because I wasn’t always around them [Eddie, 38-year-old male, Solomon/Tuvaluan]

Eddie, who is part of minoritized groups in Fiji as a Tuvaluan and Solomon man, described the regret and embarrassment he has felt because he did not learn his native language because he did not pay attention when he was younger. As a young boy, Eddie did not see the value of learning his native language, and he now is insecure about his ability to maintain vā through the use of his native languages. This only increased his embarrassment when he found himself amongst family members, not knowing what was being discussed. Now as an adult he sees the value of the native language and it disappoints him that he can’t speak in his native languages. His lack in native language proficiency is also impacting his children, because he is in a position where he is not able to pass on his native languages to his children, limiting them from participating in family conversations which threatens how they maintain a harmonious position in the vā.

Interestingly, while Eddie expresses being unable to speak proficiently in his native language, he describes other ways that he has remained connected to his family. He talked about how he maintained vā by exercising his agency to pursue traditional knowledge of fishing. He reported:

I needed to learn more. … My dad comes from a long line of fishermen. So I was able to learn a bit of trade before I [left home for 2 years] and when I came back I saw the need to continue do[ing] that. And that was gold when I used to go out fishing with my dad and his brother. His brother took the reins of being a full-time fisherman. They used to go out and they used to teach me the trick of the trade. And these were the things that no one else could teach. Inherited from their dad
and learned as they were younger so, I was so happy and blessed to learn a few things from them. I may not be strong language wise, but I make up for it by trying to be a part of who I was supposed to be. It kind of covers for the embarrassment of not really knowing the language.

Eddie recognizes that while lacking native language proficiency can negatively impact a person’s sense of belonging to their ethnic communities, he is also able to still maintain those important relationships by tapping into other aspects of identity. In his case he uses his agency to maintain his position in vā by learning to fish and to excel in it—a traditional trade or role that has been in his family for generations. He comes from a line of fishermen and by learning to fish and loving to fish, he reinforces this kinship notion to do something other than being proficient in his native languages because maintaining vā and familial relationships are sacred and of utmost importance to him.

Another group of students who have felt isolated because of their lack of native language proficiency were the Indo-Fijian participants. These students are descendants of Indian indentured laborers who were brought to Fiji to work in sugarcane fields while Fiji was a colony of Great Britain. Their feelings of being left out stems from not having a place within Fiji because of Fijian racial history—when surrounded by iTaukei Fijians—as well as feeling like an outsider when they are around students from India that attend the university. One student stated:

The Indians from India don’t necessarily accept us [be]cause we don’t speak their language and then the Fijians [iTaukei] don’t accept us just because we don’t speak the language, we don’t know Fijian. We don’t have a place. … Like the Indians [from India] they call us plastic Indians because we’re not from India, we’re from Fiji. [Priya, 25-year-old female, Indo-Fijian]
Priya clearly describes her struggle of navigating between her Fijian and Indian peers because of their perceptions of who she is in terms of her ethnicity. She is not considered part of the Indian ethnic group because she was born and raised in Fiji, and she does not feel accepted by iTaukei Fijian students because she does not speak their native language. Her experiences have influenced her feelings of not belonging to both the Indian community as well as the Fijian communities, forcing her to look for a place to belong with other Indo-Fijians or with communities outside the Indian or Fijian ethnic groups.

Another student shares a similar experience with not feeling accepted within the Indian community because they were born and raised in Fiji, as well as the Fijian community because they are not proficient in the Fijian language. She added:

I have a unit mate who is from India, whatever she says to me in Hindi, which is like pure Hindi, I understand everything. I am very confident when I have to reply to her in the Hindi that she knows, [but] I just can’t do it. I just start speaking in English and it’s so bad. I feel bad cause I can understand what she’s saying, but I just can’t speak it. On campus as well, like the Indians, they directly [say], “oh you’re not an Indian from India,” “the way you look, the way you speak, your accent sound[s] the same.” They’re saying that I am not from India, they don’t [specifically say] it but they push you to the side [be]cause you’re not from India. It’s the same with Fijians just [be]cause we don’t speak full Fijian. We understand [the Fijian language] because we grew up around Fijians. They say they’re accepting, but there are times when [I] feel they are not [accepting]. Like me and her [Priya] we understand Fijian, [but] we do not speak Fijian and we learned when we grew up at home [Fiji] and so we are included but we don’t feel like we
belong. Just because we speak a different [version of the] language, we cannot be part of that conversation. ... as much as people say it is language is nothing, it is something. [Nikita, 24-year-old female, Indo-Fijian]

Nikita reiterated what Priya points out, that despite their Indian heritage and being born and raised in Fiji, they do not feel like they belong in either of the ethnic communities, particularly ethnic groups that are at the university. While her peers do not openly segregate them, Nikita has felt it through conversations with her unit mate and through interactions with iTaukei Fijians on campus. She speaks and understands Hindi, but still, they did not consider her a member of the Indian community. Although she does not speak Fijian, she understands the native language because she was raised in Fiji, and yet she still felt like she cannot be part of the Fijian community. These Indo-Fijian participants felt a lack of acceptance from both groups—the people of India and the iTaukei community—prevented them from belonging to either the Indian or Fijian community.

Native Language Should Not be the Only Identifier of Ethnic Identity

The fourth theme that emerged was that “native language should not only be the identifier of ethnic identity”. There were five instances where students noted the importance of language in one’s ethnic identity but also commented that they felt that it should not be the only legitimate marker of one’s ethnic identity. Students emphasized how harmful restrictive language ideologies can be, especially for Fijians that may not have control or the agency on their subjectivity of the native languages, particularly on whether they were raised speaking their native languages or not. One student stated that “language is just similar to how you behave. It is equally important, but it [knowing the language or not] doesn’t have to define whether you’re from there [ethnic/cultural group].” [Semi, 25-year-old male, iTaukei]. Semi acknowledges that
while language is important, he feels it should not solely determine one’s legitimacy as part of the ethnic group.

Students also talked about how restrictive language ideologies about speaking (or not) Fijian, as mentioned above, can be harmful and dehumanizing, creating feelings of estrangement and loss. One student stated:

I just want to say that language play[s] a big role in our ethnic identity but when we start looking at it [in] a negative way like if you don’t know the language then you’re not part of us. I think that’s toxic, like what you are saying [is] if you don’t speak it then you are trying to be somebody else. My dialect is different from [theirs]. I don’t need to know their dialect to converse with them. I should know Fijian [the most common dialect], yes, but once you put knowing the language as the perfect example to explain that if you don’t know [the language] you’re not Fijian, I feel like that’s where I feel like it becomes something negative. [Marica, 24-year-old female, Indo-Fijian]

Marica clearly describes the negative impacts she feels when language proficiency is used as the only determiner to legitimizing a person’s ethnic group membership and identity. She notes that using proficiency in the native language as a gatekeeper to the positioning of group membership becomes ‘toxic’ as Fijians who are not fluent in their native language are in danger of being rejected or judged as not truly Fijian by members of their ethnic groups. Being rejected and judged because of their inadequate participation in cultural traditions and protocol, especially when the Fijian culture is one passed down orally through generations, can push Fijian students away from feeling part of the Fijian community. This form of gatekeeping dangerously positions people as outsiders. She points out the destructive and damaging impact for ethnic identity,
impacting feelings of belonging to Fijian ethnic communities. She also points out that there are other ways to maintain positions in the vā, and people must use their agency to actively engage in conversations and dialogue with members of their communities.

**Hegemony of English**

The theme “hegemony of English” included instances when students talked about the prevalence and power of the English language in their lives, both in Fiji and at the university. One Fijian student described English as the language of power—“the official language of Fiji and yet not the primary language” [Pita, 28-year-old male, iTaukei]. Students clearly articulated the role of the English language in replacing other languages in their lives, especially when the English-only policy was enforced in Fijian schooling. For example, one student noted:

> In Fiji[’s] education system, it’s mandatory for us to take English classes, whereas the Fijian classes aren’t mandatory. So, it’s up to the student and the parent, whether they would like to practice [the native language] or not in class. [Timoci, 25-year-old male, iTaukei]

Timoci continued to point out that the English language was forced upon them as a “mandatory rather than the indigenous language.” This mandatory policy restricts students’ agency to choose what language to use as they learn content in schools, and that by putting the English language precedent over the native languages, it positions their native languages as inferior to the English language.

Students also described how the hegemony of English was not only prevalent in their schools, but that it also seeped into their homes, influencing the language they spoke with their parents. One student describes how the English-only policy at school impacted the use of language in their homes, stating:
My parents know Fijian, but when we come home, we just reply in English, and it just becomes a cycle because from school we weren’t allowed to speak our mother tongue. We were only told to speak English from when we were young. And it was like that [till] we reached high school, and it’s even in universities today. [Semi, 25-year-old male, iTaukei]

Semi clearly describes a cycle of how prioritizing the use of English over the use of the native languages at school had major implications for language use in family settings as English became normalized as the de facto language of communication. The English language is positioned as the language of power, not only in the schools but in students’ homes. Emphasizing the English language as the de facto language of the home strengthens Semi’s position in academic spaces because speaking English at home increases his proficiency in English. However, this erodes his proficiency in the native language, negatively decreasing his native language proficiency and impacting his connection to the vā.

Jone [32-year-old male, iTaukei] further pointed out how religious institutions influenced schooling spaces to promote these hegemonic ideologies—something he only realized when he left home. He stated:

It wasn’t as bad as the Maori, or the Kanakamaoli, even in Fiji we were told not to speak Fijian. Now I realize that even in a church public school, you’re only supposed to speak English. I was told by my teachers that it is because the gospel is in English, which is true but there are functioning countries out there like Japan that speak Japanese and they don’t speak English. They were allowed to speak their language in their schools, so why not us in Fiji? Why was I not allowed to speak my language in my school? And if you did speak your language, you would...
get into trouble. Being here, now I think about it, that’s messed up. … And we were told that if you don’t speak English, you are uneducated. [Jone, 32-year-old male, iTaukei]

Now, as a student at university, Jone can more clearly appreciate the hegemony of English as an embedded part of his life in Fiji, where, across institutions (church, school, home), English functions as the language of communication even in spaces where there are a majority of Fijian speakers. Jone points out how the English language was positioned in Fiji, that he is challenging this ideology that English is a superior language to their native vernaculars, saying he now understands this to be “messed up.” Being told that his proficiency in English decides whether he is educated or not restricts his agency and positions him as inferior if he does not speak English.

Another aspect of the hegemony of English emerged as students spoke about the negative consequences, they experienced for speaking the wrong kind of English. Not only was English presented as superior to Fijian languages, but participants in the study spoke about how their vernacular English was treated as inferior to other versions of English spoken at the university. One student described how he, and other Oceania students, were judged and then sorted by a system at the university that used specific versions of English as a tool to track them into and away from certain classes. He stated:

I feel like the classes that some of my friends are taking now at EIL [English as an International Language], I feel like there’s double standards to it. I know some of these students, they’re very bright and they’re very capable of doing [well] in the English language. But the system that was enforced indicates that they start with these English classes [are] very double standard. … I feel like before they hand out this criteria in order to separate students from continuing with their
regular classes to take EIL classes, [that] there be more Pacific Islanders in the system to actually identify if the students deserve to move forward with major classes [or not]. [Pita, 28-year-old male, iTaukei]

Pita clearly describes how he and others are forced to take English language courses, prior to being allowed to enroll in major courses, merely because they come from Oceania—not because they failed in any way. This restricts Pita’s agency to take classes he might need because class placements were based on evaluations that do not correctly assess their English proficiency. It also places Pita in a position of inferiority as he notes this double standard and how it’s used to separate and discriminate against students based on assumptions about the variation of English that they speak.

**English Proficiency as Gatekeeper**

Another related but distinct theme that emerged from the role of English is “English proficiency as gatekeeper.” This theme included experiences where students talked about the opportunities and privileges afforded to them because of their proficiency in speaking English, as well as when English acted as a barrier to school success. One student explicitly highlights this power of English as a gatekeeper when he states, “I think that’s why most families are leaning towards speaking in English. When you are good in English, it will take you places” [Tomasi, 35-year-old male, iTaukei]. Speaking English is clearly recognized as a vital avenue to success in various ways for the Fijian students in this study, positioning students to participate more fully in academic settings. Parents use their agency to influence their children’s learning, choosing proficiency in English over their native languages because of the positioning, status, and access to power that comes with the English language.
One way that students talked about English as an important gatekeeper was by providing them with confidence to navigate their academic lives at the university. For example, one student talked about how proficiency in English provided him with the confidence to share his thoughts in university classes, as well as to communicate with peers from other countries. He said:

It’s an oral fluency [EIL] class and we do a lot of speaking. I was very shy to share my opinions and stuff. Then the professors taught us a bit of strategies to be able to share your opinions. Now that we are approaching the end of the semester, I’ve seen a lot of growth, just how I was able to build that confidence to speak. Not only to be confident around my Fijian brothers, but also confident around native English speakers and people from other countries. [Kini, 25-year-old male, iTaukei]

Kini used his agency to learn the strategies his professors taught in class. He states how appreciative he is of the skills learned in his English as an International Language [EIL] course, a course designed to provide non-English speakers with English proficiencies, to be able to succeed at the university. Kini further noted how being proficient in English positioned him in ways that provided him access to an expanded social circle that included native English speakers. To Kini, becoming proficient in academic English that was taught in his EIL classes functioned as a way to increase participation in both academic and social spaces at the university. Similarly, another student shared how her proficiency in English in high school provided her with the access to friends and social groups. She said:

I think it helped me gain a sense of belonging. Cause in school there are always cliques. I was with those who knew [the Fijian language] and [those who] didn’t know [Fijian]. I think the role language played for me was that it helped me
determine my friend circle. Now that I am here at university, I wouldn’t really flock to all the Fijians. I’d get to know everyone else. … English is a universal language. [Mere, 23-year-old female, iTaukei] Mere recognized that being proficient in the English language increased her desire to and options for creating a social circle that would have otherwise been denied. Her English proficiency placed her in a position of privilege, where she is able to exercise her agency to choose who she could connect with and join groups she could belong to.

While students spoke about why being proficient in English is important, they also spoke about how a lack of proficiency in English acted as a gatekeeper to keep them fully participating in academic spaces. This was especially relevant for students as they were transitioning from their island in Oceania to the university. One student expressed the struggle when he said, “It was quite a difficult experience. It was new for us to try and transition to speaking English all the time” [Luke, 24-year-old male, iTaukei]. This struggle was evident in how another student talked about how his version of spoken English held them back from fully participating in the class. He said,

When we speak to other people from other countries we worry about our English, how good it’s gonna be. That is one of the things that stops us from sharing our opinions, because of our language and grammatical mistakes that might come up. [Josua, 24-year-old male, iTaukei].

Josua seemed to be expressing a fear based on the hegemonic ideologies that surround English. He worries that the type of English he speaks won’t be acceptable or good enough, and this fear excludes him from participating in the classroom completely, deeply impacting his experiences of belonging as a student at the university.
Summary of Findings: Language, Identity, and Vā in Fiji

Of the six themes in the findings, the first three themes (“native language proficiency reinforces kinship groups,” “native language facilitates participation in cultural traditions and protocols,” and “lack of native language proficiency”) co-occur throughout the student interviews. When asked about the role of native language in their lives, they always talked about why it was important, how it was used, and what would happen when they lacked native language proficiency. Each of these three themes highlight ways students express a need for proficiency in their native languages because it allows these Fijian students access to positions within the Fijian community. Students shared that a proficiency in the native language is necessary to maintain and strengthen existing relationships with immediate family members, as well as with kinship members in their tokatoka, mataqali, yavusa, and vanua. These three themes highlighted the importance of the native language in supporting these Fijian students’ identity and belonging, particularly in the vā.

The fourth theme, “native language should not be the only identifier of ethnic identity,” did not co-occur with the first three despite it being related to native language proficiency. This theme highlighted the complex relationship that exists between participants’ native language to their identity and feelings of belonging. Students articulated clearly that while the native language facilitates the strengthening of familial ties and participation in cultural traditions and protocols, proficiency in the Fijian language should not be the only way to be legitimized as a Fijian. This also included the Indo-Fijian participants who expressed concern about not being included and accepted in both the iTaukei and Indian communities. Their lack of Fijian proficiency prevented them from being accepted by people in their Fijian communities and not speaking the version of Hindi that is spoken in India prevented them from being accepted by
other Indian students in college. They referenced themselves as “in-betweeners” and “plastic Indians.” Participants noted other ways to negotiate their position in the vā, including using their agency to do other things to maintain their relationships and positionalities. For example, Eddie negotiates his identity and belonging by using his agency to learn to fish, which is a skill that is taught and passed down through the men in his family. While he understands the importance of being proficient in his native language, being a skilled fisherman was his way of maintaining his position in the vā.

The remaining two themes (“hegemony of English” and “English proficiency as gatekeeper”) also co-occurred with each other, but they did not co-occur with any of the native language themes. When students referenced the English language, they talked about the positionalities the language afforded them—like access to academic and professional spaces. They also highlighted the power that the English language holds in those spaces, especially at the university they attend. A lack of English proficiency prevents them from participating in class and this impacts their learning and sense of belonging in school. Some of them mention their parents’ choice to speak English in the homes because it is believed to be the language of success. These Fijian students describe the struggle of needing to be proficient in English for academic success but recognize that it often comes with a cost. They gave voice to the difficult double bind they find themselves in, having to learn English, but at the loss of their native languages.

These students clearly point out that there is a need for both their native language and English in their lives. However, each language has a different relationship with identity and belonging for these students. Native languages are linked to vā, belonging to one’s people and way of life. English is not used in the same way—it is a tool that connects these Fijian students
to public and academic discourses and professional settings and vā is not indicated. Students highlight a need for both languages to belong in different ways—the English language is needed to access the world and the native language is needed to connect to oneself in relational ways.
CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis was to learn more about how Fijian college students expressed their language—their native languages and English—constructs identity and mediates connection. This study focused on 17 Fijian international university students from the majority iTaukei group, Indo-Fijian students, as well as students who described themselves as mixed race.

A major contribution of this study is how these students clearly described the different ways that English and their native language constructed identity and connected them to their various communities. Findings from this study are generally in line with work by Heller (1987) and Norton (2013) who identify language as the site for negotiating identity across time and space. The native language was crucial for constructing identity and maintaining connections for these international university students. Students emphasized the need to maintain and even increase their connection to their families and to their culture—maintaining their position in vā—especially when attending a university in a different country. iTaukei students and students of mixed race expressed similar understandings of the role of their native languages, while Indo-Fijian students articulated slightly different positionalities as members of a minority group within Fiji. All students talked about English as an important language for providing access to educational and professional opportunities. However, students also recognized the hegemony of English and the power structures that, at times, pitted learning English against maintaining their native languages.

Findings from this study point to the importance of attending to vā, which is the Oceanic notion of belonging, as the organizing framework for both identity and belonging for these students. Participants described how the native language reinforced existing kinship relationships
built and maintained throughout generations and how these relationships also shaped one’s cultural identity. For these iTaukei and mixed Fijian students, vā entails belonging to various complex groups that encompasses these students tokatoka (family units), mataqali (a clan that is made up of several close family units), yavusa (several clans who trace their lineage to a common ancestor or ancestor gods), vanua (a confederation of clans that reside on land to which they support and defend), and matanitu (alliances across vanua), as well as the responsibilities that are tied to being part of those complex groups.

Fijian students in this study talked about how the native language facilitated the construction of their cultural identities and the relational positions available to them. These findings relate to Schieffelin and Ochs’ (1986) work in language socialization, as they point out how language is both a communicative tool, as well as a marker for belonging to a specific group. Using the native language positions and reinforces existing kinship relationships that were built and maintained throughout generations. Students highlighted how speaking in their native languages and dialects also signaled to other Fijians and other Pacific Islanders where they were from and where their families lived, as well as the positioning of their friends. Students described knowing who their friends were and where they were from based on the native languages they spoke. This knowledge also strengthened their positions in the vā, knowing who they were in relation to their Oceania brothers and sisters.

Students expressed the need to maintain such connections because of their commitment to maintaining their positions in the vā, which strengthens their relationships to their family, to extended kin, and to various communities in Fiji to which they belong. These multiethnic and multilingual Fijian students articulated ways that using the native language positioned them in their various communities. For example, using specific forms and vocabularies of the native
language affords a position of legitimacy for these Fijian students as they lead and participate in cultural traditions and protocols. Findings from this study are aligned with Davies and Harré (1990) who point out that identity also influences the positions people take up and it depends on what positions are made available to them.

Students also reported ways that language proficiencies include and exclude them from places to belong, supporting Haque’s (2012) work which states that language is a powerful tool that determines one’s inclusion and exclusion. The co-occurrence of themes related to the importance of speaking the native language to construct identity and maintain connection in the vā occurred for participants who are iTaukei or of mixed ethnic heritage. This was not observed for Indo-Fijian participants in this study. Like in other nations, the minoritized speakers of Fiji, the Indo-Fijians, had a slightly different relationship to their native language as they felt doubly marginalized. The Indo-Fijian participants felt displaced because even though they considered themselves nationals of Fiji, they did not feel connected to the Fijian people and their culture. While they understood the Fijian language, they were not proficient in the Fijian language, and it prevented them from being accepted fully by the iTaukei communities in Fiji. Participants shared how their inability to speak the Fijian (iTaukei) language, despite understanding the language and having been born and raised in Fiji, led them to feel like they were not accepted as legitimate members of the Fijian community. These Indo-Fijian students also voiced how despite their proficiency in the Hindi language, this proficiency was not legitimized by peers from India because they were only of Indian descent and not direct citizens of India. They voiced experiencing further displacement at the university, including not being accepted by peers from India although they spoke the native languages of India (Hindi and Tamil). Part of this friction is related to the cultural differences between the Indo-Fijian students from Fiji, who are considered
a minority group in Fiji, and the Indian students from India, whose cultural system is still caste-based. These Indo-Fijian students feel that they have no position and no legitimacy in either group (both the iTaukei and Indian communities). Much more research is needed to understand how language plays into Indo-Fijian national students’ sense of belonging to communities in Fiji.

iTaukei and mixed Fijians also noted when they felt excluded or legitimized because they lacked proficiency in their native languages. When students shared about how they use language in their homes, families, their schools, and communities, as well as in their professional environments, they spoke about how language plays a critical role in including and excluding them from participating in these spaces. While students talked about language being an important part of ethnic identity and status, they also talked about how language should not be the only identifier as a Fijian. These Fijian students expressed concern about using language as the only determiner that legitimizes being part of their ethnic community and that this way of thinking is quite damaging. They reported other ways of belonging to their cultural communities and maintaining their positions in the vā. These ways include the use of their agency to engage in conversations and dialogue with members of their ethnic groups and to learn skills and trades that have been in their families for generations.

Findings from this study also highlighted access to the English language as being a necessity to be able to belong to academic and professional discourses. Students saw the value and merit in being proficient in the English language, positioning them in spaces and discourses that require a proficiency in reading, writing, listening, and speaking in English. Students also recognized the hegemony of the English language and how focusing on only increasing proficiency in the English language threatens their ethnic identities and positions in the vā, especially if it means losing their native languages. Part of this recognition stems from the
participants’ positionalities, having left Fiji to further their education in a different country. A majority of these iTaukei students talked about not recognizing the importance of their native languages or actively participating in cultural traditions and protocols until they had left home—Fiji. They spoke about how, even when at home in Fiji, they did not actively maintain a proficiency in their native languages or participate regularly in cultural traditions and protocols because they had elders and other family members who fulfilled those obligations. When these students found themselves at university, away from family and friends at home, they reported using their agency to deliberately create communities with other Fijian students. They reported participating in this community in order to maintain their proficiency in their native languages, as well as to practice specific verbiage used in traditional protocols. This Fijian community at the university helped strengthen their relationships to Fijian students, and it solidified and legitimized their identities as Fijians when they were away from home.

There are several implications from this study, each pointing to the significant role language plays in solidifying ethnic identity as well as maintaining their positions in the vā, for all ethnic groups in Fiji. Language proficiency really matters for these students—whether it be the native languages or the English language. For these Fijian students, a proficiency in their native languages positions them as an integral and legitimized member of their communities. There is a huge emphasis on these students doing all they can to maintain their positions in the vā, through the proficiency in their native languages as well as through other cultural acts. Fiji is a nation whose culture is passed on orally and without a proficiency in the native languages, the culture will not pass on to the next generation—an extinction of the native language is an extinction of our culture.
This study sheds light on the significant role of language in identity formation and belonging, with implications for language education policy specific to Fijian context. Participant voices reflected what Ratu Sukuna, considered the Father of Fiji, stated when he said, “Ena sega ni mate na iTaukei ke sega na kena kei na mena. E na mate ga ke sega na wekana.” [A Fijian will not die without food. He will die without his family/people] (Bula FM Fiji, 2021). Wekana is a Fijian word that references family, relatives, colleagues, or any important affiliation or association within an extensive social network—a vastly wider network than that is recognized by Europeans (Gatty, 2009). It is imperative to clearly listen to and understand the relationship between access to and participation in native language and Fijian notions of identity and belonging. Research in Fiji highlights the need for instruction in both English and in the native languages of Fiji in order to promote belonging to ethnic groups as well as promote school belonging. This is especially important given the diverse and multilingual communities that reside in Fiji.

Voices of these 17 Fijian students in this study underscore the importance of equitable language policies in schools that serve Fijian students and that can help them navigate their multilingual spaces—including their native communities as well as in schools. Findings have implications for educational policies, practices, and pedagogies that empower Fijian students to operate in public spaces, while helping them maintain connection to their ethnic communities and identities. A policy that emphasizes the use of native languages as the medium of instruction for students’ education is a way to approach equity education for all these students—iTaukei, Indo-Fijian, and those of mixed ethnic backgrounds—because it provides students with access to multiple platforms. Not only that but incorporating a language immersion program in Fiji allows Fijian students to excel academically and culturally. Fijian students who are proficient in their
native languages and in English will be able to participate in academic and professional spaces, without worrying about losing their native languages or worrying that success in an academic setting comes at the cost of their positions in the vā.

The end goal is to create schooling experiences that enhance the learning of all relevant languages, including English, without sacrificing the proficiency and use of the native languages. Because of the cultural and linguistic diversity in Fiji, there is no one-size-fits-all language policy or program that will accomplish this goal. More research and more conversations, or talanoa (the Oceanic word for conversation) must be held with various stakeholders in Fiji to see how to best serve the multilingual communities of Fiji. Talanoa (Vaioleti, 2006) must include members of the Fiji Ministry of Education, and teachers, school administrators, parents, and students from different parts of Fiji.

Effective language policy in Fiji must take into consideration different contexts, regional geographies, and diverse demographics of Fiji. For example, a focus on English language education might be more relevant in the more urban parts of Fiji where English is the de facto language of communication in post-high school institutions, as well as in professional and career spaces. However, many of the students in this study from urban areas also expressed sadness at the loss of their native language. Similarly, an instructional focus on the native languages might be more emphasized in the more rural areas where there are pockets of communities that are majority iTaukei, majority Indo-Fijian, majority Chinese, or majority Rotuman communities. In these rural communities, native languages are the medium of communication and how relationships and vā are maintained. These native languages must be the method of teaching and learning in the schools. However, English is sought after by these communities as well, given the power and prestige that comes with speaking English. Effective language policy will provide
equitable access to learning English without requiring the loss of these important native languages.

Dual Language Bilingual Education (DLBE; Howard et al., 2018; Lindholm-Leary, 2001) has proven to be an effective and equitable educational approach for multilingual learners in other contexts, such as the United States. DLBE programs may hold promise for meeting the diverse needs of multilingual learners in Fiji. Further research should explore this possibility as well as investigate how these programs might be implemented across the varied and diverse contexts in Fiji. Finally, future research must also include the voices from minoritized groups in Fiji, in order to ensure effective language policies that will serve all Fijians.
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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Flyer

BYUH Pacific Islander
Focus Group Participants Invited

“Ethnic Identity and School Belongingness”

You are invited to join a research focus group discussing ethnic identity and school belongingness among male Pacific Islander BYUH students. This focus group will be an hour long with a break in the middle. A meal will be provided to all participants.

To participate in this focus group, you must:

- Be a Pacific Islander BYUH student
- Sign a consent form
- Choose one of the times that best fits your schedule

Sign up at:
shorturl.at/gwCDY
or
follow the QR code

For more information about the focus group contact
Melia Fonoimoana Garrett melia.fonoimoana@gmail.com
Drs. Spencer Scanlan and Erika Feinauer erika_feinauer@byu.edu
(Principal Investigators)
APPENDIX B

Demographic Questionnaire

Ethnic Identity and School Belonging

Thank you for joining our focus group. Our goal is to better understand ethnic identity and school belongingness among Pacific Islander BYUH students. Please fill out the questions below to help us have a greater understanding of this topic.

Name _________________________________

Are you a BYUH student? (Mark yes even if you are taking off the summer)
  • Yes
  • No

Age ____________ Phone number ________________________________________________

Email _______________________________________________________________________

I identify my ethnicity as (check all that apply)
  • Fijian
  • Maori
  • Marshallese
  • Micronesian
  • Native Hawaiian
  • Niuean
  • Samoan
  • Tahitian
  • Tongan
  • Asian
  • Black/African
  • Caucasian
  • Hispanic/Latinx
  • Middle Eastern/North African
  • Native American or Alaskan Native
  • Other ____________________

Where were you born?
  • Hawaii
  • Continental United States
  • Other _________________

Where were your parents born?
  • Hawaii
  • Continental United States
  • Other _________________
Where did you graduate high school?
- Hawaii
- Continental United States
- Other _______________

What do you identify as your religion? _________________________________
APPENDIX C

Focus Group Interview Protocol

We are so appreciative that you are here with us to discuss your experiences as a Pacific Islander. We value your insights and perspectives. We are going to ask you about ethnic identity and school belonging, and about some measures (see attached) that people have used to measure these. We would love to hear any and all thoughts on these topics and tools. We appreciate anything that you have to say to help us understand how they matter in your school.

Ethnic Identity
1. When you think about your ethnic identity, what does that mean to you?
2. What does it look like to you, when you explore / have explored your own ethnic identity? Can you give examples of times when you have explored your ethnic identity as a Pacific Islander?
3. What does it look like to you, when you show commitment to your own ethnic identity? Can you give examples of times when you have displayed a commitment to your ethnic identity as a Pacific Islander?
4. What role does language play in your ethnic identity?
5. What role does religion and/or spirituality play in your life? How is it related to your sense of ethnic identity?
6. Look at this measure (MEIM-R). What do you think? Is there anything missing here from these questions that would better help us understand your ethnic identity, or the ethnic identity of other Pacific Islander students you know?
7. What else would you want us to know about your ethnic identity that we could ask you?

School Belonging
1. What does it mean to you to feel like you belong at your school? How do you know when you feel a sense of school belonging?
2. When do you feel most connected to what is happening at school? (in classrooms, with teachers, at lunchtime, with other students, after school, etc…)
3. Can you describe the times you have been able to share your perspectives and feel a part of the school? If so, in what ways have you done so?
4. What role does language play in your sense of belonging at school? (does/did your home language match the language of your schooling? What was that experience like?)
5. Look at the measure (SSBS). What do you think about how it might measure school belonging? Is there anything missing here from these questions that would better help us understand the ways that you feel like you belong at school as a Pacific Islander? (Do you think that this vary by the ethnic group of the students?)
6. What else would you want us to know about how Pacific Islander students belong at school?

Academic Achievement / Attainment
1. What are your educational plans or future aspirations? (Grad school? Work? Career? Financial?)
2. What barriers, if any, have you had to overcome to get to BYUH. How did you overcome these barriers? (Resources? Family? Friends? Other?)
3. What barriers or resources do you anticipate overcoming/drawing on in your future as you pursue your schooling and career goals?
APPENDIX D

Institutional Review Board Letter

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY- HAWAII
Institutional Review Board

MEMORANDUM
Application Approval Notification

TO: Spencer Scanlan

FROM: Boyd Timothy, IRB Chair
Brigham Young University – Hawaii
808-675-3931
boyd.timothy@byuh.edu

SUBJECT: IRB Application Number: # (21-61)
Project Title: Ethnic Identity, Religiosity and School Belonging among Pacific Islanders students in Hawaii

Approval Date: October 12th, 2021
Expiration Date: October 12th, 2022
Application Type: New
Research Type: Non-Exempt
Application Review Type: Expedited

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Brigham Young University – Hawaii approved your application. The research was approved in accordance with 45 CFR 46 of Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, and the University’s IRB policies and procedures. The IRB approves waiver of signed informed consent as per criteria in 45 CFR 46.116(d). Please reference the IRB application number (above) in any future communication regarding this research.

Recruitment/Consent: For research requiring written informed consent, the IRB-approved and stamped informed consent document is enclosed. The IRB approval expiration date has been stamped on the informed consent document. Please keep copies of the consent forms used for this research for three years after the completion of the research.
Continuing Review: If you intend to continue to collect data from human subjects or to analyze private, identifiable data collected from human subjects after the expiration date for this approval (indicated above), you must submit a renewal application to the IRB Manager at least 30-days prior to the expiration date.

Modification: Any changes to the approved protocol must be approved by the IRB before the change is implemented, except when a change is necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. If you would like to modify the approved protocol, please submit an addendum (Protocol Modification) request to the IRB Manager. Requests to modify an active protocol may be submitted at any time by the Principal Investigator (PI) sending a signed letter or email to the IRB Manager. The letter should state the specifics of the changes and should include: the rationale for the changes, a detailed description of the procedures, an explanation for how the changes will affect the risk to the subjects, and any appropriate supporting documents -- such as new versions of consent forms, data collection instruments, and recruitment materials. Be sure to include the project title, IRB application number, and the name and email address of the person to whom the approval letter should be sent. Finally, if any additional researchers are to be added to the project (including students), please supply their investigating role and email address. If revised versions of documents previously approved by the IRB are being submitted, they should be labeled as such (for example, revised on March 20, 2008). If the original application was reviewed by an IRB committee member (in an expedited review), please send a copy of the addendum request to the IRB member. Please do not submit modification requests on IRB application forms. Also please note that any addenda do not change the duration of IRB approval. The expiration of IRB approval is based on the date when the most recently submitted application was approved, not when the addendum was approved.

Unanticipated Problems Involving Risks: You must promptly report to the IRB Manager any unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

Student Researchers: Unless otherwise requested, this IRB approval document was sent to the PI. The PI should share a copy of the approval document with student researchers or others as necessary. This IRB approval document may be a requirement for student researchers applying for graduation. The IRB may not be able to provide copies of approval documents if several years have passed since the date of the original approval.

Additional Information: If you need additional information or have any questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Manager.

[Signature]
IRB Chair’s signature

10/12/21
Date
Protocol Modification
Brigham Young University–Hawaii
(Updated April 2014)

Please submit this form and any attachments as a single Word file to boyd.timothy@byuh.edu for pre-review by the IRB staff.

Protocol No. 22-23

Project Title: Ethnic Identity, Religiosity and School Belonging among Pacific Islanders students in Hawaii

Name(s) of Investigator(s): Spencer Scanlan (PI); Erika Feinauer (Co-PI)
E-mail Address: sscanlan@byuh.edu; erikafeinauer@byu.edu Phone: 808 371 4150; 801.422.4543

Additional Contact(s)

If additional contact information has changed since last IRB review, list all current contact(s) below. If no new information, go to Proposed Change(s).

Name: Catalina Hernandez Andrade  Affiliation: BYUH Research Assistant
Email: catalinah12@go.byuh.edu

Name: Kehau Malzl  Affiliation: BYU Research Assistant
Email: kehua.malzl@nebo.edu

Name: Grace Tora  Affiliation: BYU Research Assistant
Email: grace.tora17@gmail.com

Proposed Change(s)

Indicate each change for which you are seeking IRB review and approval (check all that apply):
☑ Change in study personnel (including change in PI)
☐ Change in the number of participants
☐ All other research changes

Revised protocol descriptions should state the specifics of the changes and should include: the rationale for the changes, a detailed description of the revised procedures, and an explanation for how the changes will affect the risk to the subjects.

Description of changes:
Revised Document(s)

This request requires the revision(s), addition(s), and/or deletion(s) to the following (check all that apply):

☐ Research Protocol
☐ Consent Form(s), Assent Form(s), Permission Form(s), and Verbal Script(s) including translated documents
☐ HIPAA Research Authorization Form(s)
☐ Recruitment Materials (e.g. ads, flyers, telephone or other oral script, radio/TV scripts, internet solicitations)
☐ Script(s) or Information Sheet(s), including debriefing materials
☐ Instruments (e.g., questionnaires or surveys completed by participants)
☐ Other, Specify:

Attach all revised documents. Revised versions of documents previously approved by the IRB should be labeled as such (for example, revised on March 20, 2014).

Principal Investigator’s (or Advisor’s) Assurance

I agree to follow all applicable federal regulations, guidance, state and local laws, and university policies related to the protection of human subjects in research, as well as professional practice standards and generally accepted good research practices for investigators.

I verify that the information provided in this Protocol Modification form is accurate and complete. I will initiate change(s) to this research only after having received notification of final IRB approval (unless necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants).

[Signature]
Signature of Principal Investigator
Date: ____________

[Signature]
Signature of Faculty Advisor (if applicable)
Date: ____________

FOR IRB USE ONLY:

Approved __________________________________________ Date: ____________

IRB Member or Human Subjects Program Director
Subject: FW: Request for IRB Protocol Modification - Application Number #22-23
Date: Monday, May 15, 2023 at 1:50:23 PM Mountain Daylight Time
From: Spencer Scanlan
To: Erika Felnauer

From: Boyd Timothy <boyd.timothy@byuh.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, September 14, 2022 2:47 PM
To: Spencer Scanlan <Spencer.Scanlan@byuh.edu>
Subject: Re: Request for IRB Protocol Modification - Application Number #22-23

Thanks, Spencer.

Your amendment has been reviewed and processed following the procedures of current university policy. The proposed changes were judged to have no influence on the risk assessment of the study, and so accordingly the form has been signed and filed along with your original proposal. There is no need to wait for any further action or communication from any member of the IRB. But if you have any questions or concerns, feel free to contact me at any time.

Boyd H. Timothy, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
55-220 Kulanui Street #1896
Laie, HI 96762
Phone: (808) 675-3931
Fax: (808) 675-3754

From: Spencer Scanlan <Spencer.Scanlan@byuh.edu>
Sent: Wednesday, September 14, 2022 8:24 AM
To: Boyd Timothy <boyd.timothy@byuh.edu>
Subject: Request for IRB Protocol Modification - Application Number #22-23

Aloha Boyd,

I am submitting an addendum requesting approval for a protocol modification to add three student research assistants for a current research project. Adding three research assistants will address the current need to transcribe focus group interviews from 97 research participants. Additionally, the research assistants will support research tasks, including data coding and analysis, literature scan, and reviewing and revising research manuscripts. All research participants have completed their CITI Program Certifications and will comply with data security procedures outlined in Part B of the IRB document to protect and safeguard data confidentiality. The PI and Co-PI will provide additional training to the Research Assistants on the proper safeguarding measures during the data coding and analysis process to help maintain confidentiality.

Mahalo,
Spencer Scanlan, PhD
Assistant Professor
Brigham Young University-Hawaii
Office: Edward D. Smith Center for Learning and Teaching 100A
Phone: 808-675-3831
APPENDIX E

Consent to be a Research Subject

Please sign below that you consent to participate after reading through this consent form.

Introduction
This research study is being conducted by Dr. Spencer Scanlan at Brigham Young University – Hawaii, and Dr. Erika Feinauer at Brigham Young University to examine BYUH Pacific Islander perceptions of the constructs of and connections between ethnic identity, and school belonging for Pacific Islander students at BYUH. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a BYUH Pacific Islander student.

Procedures
You will be asked to participate in one Focus Group Interview that will be conducted in the Center for Learning and Teaching Conference room and scheduled during the months of June and July in 2022. Multiple times will be offered and you may sign up for just one that is most convenient for you. Focus Group Interviews will consist of 5-7 members and be no longer than 90 minutes. Focus groups interviews will be video and audio recorded, then transcribed.

We will use the Focus Group Interview Protocol that you have been given with this consent form to talk about how you perceive and understand issues related to ethnic identity, religious commitment, and school belonging for students at BYUH.

We will provide a meal to those who participate.

Risks/ Discomforts
There are minimal risks for participation in this study. However, you may feel emotional discomfort when answering questions about ethnic identity, religiosity, or school belonging. When participating in the focus group, it is possible that you may feel embarrassed when talking in front of others. Please look over the Focus Group Interview Protocol so you can be sure you will be comfortable discussing any of the topics. You may leave the Focus Group at any time, with no repercussions. The moderator will be sensitive to those who may become uncomfortable.

Participating in this study also presents risks to confidentiality, as these conversations are being recorded. We will mitigate this risk by transcribing the recording and de-identifying the transcripts. We also remind you, as a participant, not to disclose the contents of this conversation or discuss who participated in this conversation with anyone outside of this Focus Group. That will help to ensure confidentiality to all who participate in this study.

Data Sharing
We will keep the information we collect about you during this research study for analysis and for potential use in future research projects. If the study data contain information that directly identifies you: Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be stored securely and separately from the rest of the research information we collect from them. De-identified data from this study may be shared with the research community, with journals in
which study results are published, and with databases and data repositories used for research. We will remove or code any personal information that could directly identify you before the study data are shared. Despite these measures, we cannot guarantee anonymity of your personal data. The results of this study could be shared in articles and presentations, but will not include any information that identifies you unless you give permission for use of information that identifies you in articles and presentations. After the research is completed, the questionnaires and tapes will be destroyed.

Benefits
There are no direct benefits to subjects. However, it is hoped that through your participation researchers will learn more about how Pacific Islander students experience school belonging at BYUH.

Compensation
There will be no monetary compensation. However, you will receive a meal during the Focus Group Interview.

Participation
Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your class status, grade or standing with the university.

Questions about the Research
If you have questions regarding this study, you may contact Melia Fonoimoana Garrett at melia.fonoimoana@gmail.com, Dr. Spencer Scanlan at spencer.scanlan@byuh.edu, or Dr. Erika Feinauer at erika_feinauer@byu.edu

Question about your Rights as Research Participants
If you have questions you do not feel comfortable asking the researcher, you may contact Dr. Boyd Timothy, IRB Chair, (808) 675-3931, boyd.timothy@byuh.edu

I have read and understood the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study. If you sign on the survey, this will be your consent to participate in this study.

_____________________________  ________________________
Signature                                      Date