Abstract
In Samoan classrooms, student silence or lē-tautala is a cultural communication practice, as it is in the community. The most significant meaning promoted in the home context is that of respect for elders or visitors, but as this paper explains, lē-tautala has multiple meanings. This paper reports on the findings of a doctoral study that unpacked lē-tautala. It looks at the multiple meanings communicated via the practice of lē-tautala and the consequences of requiring students to speak when their cultural inclination tells them not to. This paper also highlights some implications of the cultural practice of lē-tautala for teachers of Samoan students both in Samoa and elsewhere.

Key words: student silence, formative assessment, science lesson, cultural practice, Samoan teachers, culturally responsive teaching

Introduction
This paper reports on some of the findings of a doctoral study on the cultural appropriateness of written formative assessment in science lessons in Samoa (Lee-Hang, 2011). In Samoan culture, children and young adults are expected to remain silent (lē-tautala) at home in the presence of elders and visitors or when the extended family meets, as a mark of respect. This expectation to practice lē-tautala poses problems in the classroom context, however, particularly with regard to formative assessment in the classroom and especially when teachers want to elicit verbal feedback from students to assess their learning.
While lē-tautala is a sign of respect, the silence of children and young adults in classrooms is also a result of other factors. This paper discusses the cultural practice of silence and its multiple meanings in the classroom in Samoa, and examines the implications for teachers of Samoan (as well as Pasifika) students in Samoa and overseas.

What is lē-tautala?

Lē-tautala in this study refers to student silence. It is a practice that communicates specific cultural messages and meanings. The term literally translates as “no talking” or “don’t speak”. In the classroom environment, it can be defined as the time when a student exhibits no verbal responses, and this occurs throughout a lesson and even after a teacher’s question. Lē-tautala is a cultural communication practice because the sender is conveying a culturally-inspired message to the receiver. Unfortunately, in many cases, receivers do not get the message or misinterpret the message, to the detriment of the sender.

What is the cultural cause of lē-tautala?

Lē-tautala is culturally significant in Samoa because it is a tangible sign of conveying, for example, one’s respect for elders, visitors and those in authority, and is a sign of obedience. When Samoans have guests at home, children are discouraged from speaking in their presence unless they are spoken to. It is a cultural expectation for children to be quiet or to go outside (during the day time), to another room or to another family fale (house) nearby (at night) when guests or elders are conversing at home. As this paper explains, however, in the classroom context lē-tautala (silence) is not simply a mark of respect for the teacher, but is practiced by students for several reasons.
How is lē-tautala perceived by teachers?

*Lē-tautala* can be mistakenly construed as reticence, shyness or lack of understanding of the lesson by teachers who are not aware of the significance of this cultural communication practice within *fa’aSamoan* (the Samoan way of life). *Lē-tautala* is significant because it affects the interactive nature of formative assessment; that is, it prevents the teacher from eliciting crucial information about what a student is learning. Research on formative assessment, which relies on feedback from students, indicates that it is a powerful way to improve learning (Black and William, 1998). Student disclosure is important in formative assessment because it informs the teacher whether the learning objectives have been met, and if not, prompts the teacher to do additional teaching (Cowie, 2000). When a student is practicing *lē-tautala* she or he is unlikely to disclose information that will enable formative assessment to take place. The teacher cannot read the student’s mind, hence cannot make a judgement about the student’s learning.

Teachers need to understand the cultural meanings of *lē-tautala* and the consequences of requiring students to speak when they are observing this practice. Awareness and understanding of *lē-tautala* will enable teachers to devise culturally-appropriate ways to elicit information about a student’s learning, for example in a non-verbal (and culturally-sensitive) manner.

**Unpacking lē-tautala**

In order to understand *lē-tautala*, we need to unpack it and uncover the multiple meanings embedded in the practice. In doing so, we can interpret the cultural messages that are conveyed by students who practice *lē-tautala* in our classrooms.
Samoan teachers’ views about the causes, meanings and consequences of *lē-tautala* were mapped out on a flow diagram (see Figure 1). This diagram is helpful when formulating strategies to assist pupils with their learning as it enables teachers, to see how this cultural practice can affect Samoan pupils’ learning and identify areas where non-oral formative assessment could assist the learning of those pupils who practice *lē-tautala* in the classroom (Lee-Hang, 2011, p. 320).

**Figure 1. Diagram mapping various classroom meanings and causes of Lē-tautala in a Samoan classroom**
Talanoa (discussions) that the author had with Samoan elders and educational leaders for confirmation purposes were helpful in authenticating the various meanings of lē-tautala and other study findings. This is similar to the Kaupapa Maori Research approach where the kaumatua (elders) input makes the research findings and methods more robust and authentically indigenous (Berryman, 2008).

The multiple meanings of lē-tautala

As shown in Figure 1, lē-tautala has several meanings, which include: mā-gofie (easily-embarrassed), leiloa le tali (lack of knowledge), fa’amanapia (shyness), matamuli (shame-faced1) and fa’aaloalo (respect). The following discussion is an attempt to further clarify these nuanced meanings of lē-tautala and the effects it has on pupil learning.

Some pupils practice lē-tautala because they are mā-gofie. This occurs when a pupil is so overwhelmed with the prospect of being embarrassed that he or she becomes embarrassed and silent merely by being asked or directed a question in class.

Others are silent (lē-tautala) because they leiloa le tali (don’t know the answer) and do not want their peers or the teacher to know that, because it diminishes their mana and family pride. This leads them to having feelings of musu (withdrawn) and they withdraw from engaging in class because of their fefe (fear) of sasi / measēsē (mistakes) and the inevitable ulagia / amusia (mockery) that accompanies any mistakes in Samoa.

1 This is the definition of matamuli, found in Pratt (1878, p. 151).
Le-tautala can also mean fa’amanaia. This often occurs when the pupils have no experience of the task that they have been asked to perform. They fear making a mistake and being mocked by their peers for mistakes. This leads to them being musu.

Le-tautala can also mean matamuli, based on pupils’ previous bad experience(s) in the classroom and this leads to feelings of musu and fefe because the pupils do not want a repeat of the same embarrassment they went through before.

Le-tautala can also mean fa’aaloalo, a fundamental cultural value that seems to permeate every facet of fa’aSamoa. This meaning of le-tautala is influenced by cultural practices at home. These cultural practices include: children not having a voice in family decisions, or being silenced by parents when visitors are at home, or getting a telling-off for talking too much or asking too many questions. Samoan children, according to Pereira (2005) “are seen but not heard” (p. 17). As a Samoan, I know that when children are sent to school, parents often say to their children “la e teine lelei (or tama lelei), usita’i ma fa’alogo i le faiaoga” (be a good girl [or good boy], obey and listen to the teacher). In fa’aSamoa, obedience is synonymous with respect and respect is exhibited as le-tautala through listening, obedience, deference (Schoeffel, et al., 1996), not “talking back” or not questioning anything (Moli, 1993).

Figure 1 provides an avenue for the views expressed by the participants in this study to be displayed in a clear manner, especially with regard to the inter-connectedness of each factor. The diagram illustrates the meanings and causes of le-tautala as well as its detrimental effects on learning. Some of the negative effects on pupils and their learning include:

- Musu (withdrawn)
- Fefe isēsē (fear of mistakes)
• Fefe i iloa lona vaivai (fear of people knowing his/her weakness/ stupidity)
• Fefe i pona po'o gao (fear of labels)
• Fefe i ulagia (fear of being ridiculed/mocked)
• Fefe ne'i te'i ua mā (fear of being embarrassed)

Another aspect that has been identified that has a negative effect on pupils' learning is the perception of pupils who ask questions in class. Pupils who tend to ask “too many” questions will be labelled as:

• Valea (stupid)
• Fiapoto (want to show off; conceited about their intelligence)
• Lē fa'aloalo (disrespectful)

This seems to perpetuate the existence of lē-tautala in a classroom.

Figure 1 also captures the almost sequential links (or interrelatedness) between the following:

• Sēsē (making a mistake)
• Ulagia (mockery)
• Mā (embarrassed)
• Lē fia-iai (wish not to participate)
• Tia'i aoga (absenteeism)

The last stage of this chain of events, tia'i aoga, is a very serious matter.

As teachers, we need to carefully consider the cultural perceptions of students and adopt practices that do not subject our students to social ridicule or to a state of being mā (embarrassed). Extreme cases of mā can have negative effects on a student’s motivation and learning. It can demoralize and de-motivate a student to the point that they lose interest in attending the class or school altogether.
Implications for teachers of Pasifika students

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Lē-tautala, as far as this study is concerned, is a culturally-inspired phenomenon in Samoa. However, it is not necessarily exclusive to Samoans because Pasifika cultures share many similarities (Taufe’ulungaki, 2003). Lē-tautala is a Samoan term, other Pasifika cultures may have their own terms for the same phenomenon. As a teacher of Pasifika students, one must be familiar with the cultural context or the nuanced multiple meanings of lē-tautala in order to fully understand their students. Using written formative assessments is considered culturally appropriate because it provides a possible solution to engage students who are otherwise lē-tautala (Lee Hang, 2011).

Using innovative teaching strategies that overcome lē-tautala will enable the student to feel “safe” to learn and will build trust which is pertinent for relationship building and student learning (Bishop, 2007). This is also important for student disclosure and, in particular, “trustworthiness of peers” (Bell and Cowie, 2001), which is crucial in a classroom context. Students would rather “seek help from trusted peers and teachers” (Bell and Cowie, 2001, p. 72). Many students believe that “You need to be able to trust others, to be sure their reactions won’t be to make fun, talk about or think I am stupid” (data reported in Bell and Cowie, 2001, p. 73). Further studies, focusing more on actual pupils in the classroom, are needed to reveal the extent of this cultural practice in Samoan classrooms.

The unpacking of lē-tautala for teachers in Samoa can raise awareness about the contradictions between the culture of the home and that of the school. It is a small step in the right direction towards rethinking Pasifika education (see Pene, Taufe’ulungaki and Benson, 2002) as well as promoting innovative and culturally-sensitive teaching strategies for Pasifika (including Samoan) students. The same goes for teachers of Pasifika and Samoan students overseas in predominantly palagi (non-Samoan)
mainstream schools. It is important to be culturally aware or culturally responsive, so that when a Pasifika student exhibits lē-tautala in the class, it is not construed as reticence or disobedience but rather that the student is actually practicing his or her culture.

References


