

English Language Teaching in Mauritius: A Need for clarity of vision regarding English Language Policy

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Abstract

English plays a key role in the Mauritian educational system, not only as an important subject but especially as the medium of instruction. Any curricular reforms must incorporate a proper discourse around educational language provisions for the student population, and propose a curricular reform that would make the teaching of English in Mauritius effective. There is a growing public concern that poor standards of English, among teachers and pupils, are leading to an unsatisfactory quality of educational performance. This raises questions about the nature of our teaching practices and provokes interest in the use of English as a vehicle of classroom communication. This paper reflects on some fundamental questions: What awareness do teachers carry into the classroom regarding the implementation of English-as-medium policy? How does the use of English in the classroom affect the outcomes of teaching-learning activities? What course is open for ensuring effective practice and consequently desirable standards of using English as a means of transmitting knowledge, skills, attitudes and values?

Introduction

Schools and the people who work in education in these changing times are facing considerable challenges. Curriculum research and discussion in this context needs to be complex and multifaceted. How well is schooling today dealing with the type of people young people are today? How well is it preparing students for the more global world and changing forms of work that are the world of the future? How to develop key competences for personal, social and economic well-being in the 21st century? All these are crucial curriculum issues.

English plays a key role in our educational system, not only as an important subject but especially as the medium of instruction. Any curricular reforms must incorporate a proper discourse around educational language provisions for our student population, and propose a curricular reform that would make the teaching of English in Mauritius effective and profitable.

There is a growing public concern that poor standards of English among teachers and pupils, are leading to an unsatisfactory quality of educational performance. This is felt not only in Mauritius but is probably shared in other ESL situations in the African continent where English is not only the official language but also the medium of instruction for the greater part of school life.

This raises questions about the nature of our teaching practices and provokes interest in the use of English as a vehicle of classroom communication. We are made to reflect on some fundamental questions: what awareness do we, as teachers, carry into the classroom regarding the implementation of English-as-medium policy? How does our use of English in the classroom affect the outcomes of teaching-learning activities? What course is open to us for ensuring effective practice and consequently desirable standards of using English as a means of transmitting knowledge, skills, attitudes and values?

Languages in Mauritius

In this paper, I will describe the overall linguistic situation in Mauritius, especially the role of English language instruction in the educational system. The mother tongue of the majority of the islanders is Creole, the former vernacular of the African slaves who came to Mauritius as early as the 17th century. Bhojpuri is also a spoken language in Mauritius. It is the home language of 12% of the people (Population Census of Mauritius, 2000). This language came to Mauritius with migrant workers from India. French is the mother tongue of about 3% of the Mauritians. Many of these 'Franco- Mauritians' are the descendants of French settlers who came to Mauritius after 1721 and of the former sugarcane owners. They still have economic power and they now also have investments in other economic sectors such as tourism. English is the language of government, the civil service, education, and of all formal and official transactions. The language was brought to the island in 1814 when the British took over the administration although there were hardly any English settlers. Next to these four languages, there are about 10 eastern or 'ancestral' languages which nowadays have mainly religious and cultural importance.

English as the language of instruction

Today the following directive from the education Ordinance of 1957 still holds true:

In the lower classes of Government and aided primary schools up to and including Standard III, any one language may be employed as the language of instruction,

being a language which in the opinion of the Minister is the most suitable for the public.

In standards IV, V and VI of the Government and aided primary schools the medium of instruction shall be English and conversation between teacher and pupils shall be carried on in English; provided that lessons in any other language taught in the school shall be carried on through the medium of the instruction.

For the first three years of primary education, there is no clear mandate concerning the language to be used in the classroom. From the first year onwards, school books are all in English, but the main spoken languages are Creole and French. Mauritians generally do not consider Creole to be a 'proper' language. The Mauritians are very well aware of the international importance of English and French, and are also conscious of the fact that knowledge of these languages leads to social promotion. Many parents are therefore not in favour of the use of Creole at school.

Although from the fourth year onwards, English is the official medium of instruction, what actually happens in the classroom, varies widely from school to school. One thing is certain; the use of English in schools is much more restricted than what might be expected when reading the Education Ordinance. There is a consensus that English is internationally very important, so it is essential that the children learn English in view of Mauritius' modernization and economic development. The role of English as the official language of the country and language of education has grown historically and politically (Stein, 1997). The largest group of Mauritians is of Indian descent (about 70% of the population) and they are in favour of English as the official language and opposed to French. Unlike French, English is considered a 'neutral' language because it is not associated with a particular ethnic group. English is also the language of international trade, technology, commerce in the Indian Ocean; and essential for tourism (Crystal, 1997). Apart from these obvious reasons, acknowledged by Mauritians people, there are also technical reasons. Changing the official language would imply quite a financial investment.

Language as the medium of instruction

The issue of English as a medium of instruction is inevitably linked with the debate surrounding the promotion of Creole in the field of education. I am aware of the passionate arguments 'for' and 'against' that stakeholders raise with regard to this issue. Some of these are popularly summarized in broad statements about English being a foreign language and having been the instrument of colonial administration.

They spark off considerations for using mother tongue as the child's natural medium of thought and expression, and therefore the right of a child to be taught through it. But let me quickly state my position over mother-tongue literacy.

Nationalist vs. Functionalist response

The linguistic question of language as the medium of instruction not only in Mauritius but in the African educational system has prompted two kinds of responses. At one extreme is the nationalist response which advocates the centring of African languages in African educational instruction. This school of thought has been influenced principally by the views of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) about the use of vernacular languages in education. Since the 1950s, it has been UNESCO's position that (1) the 'vernaculars' are superior to Euro-languages from the point of view of the development of cognitive skills in a child's early education and (2) 'vernaculars' can promote linguistic skills that facilitate, rather than inhibit, the acquisition of English and French at a later stage of the educational process (UNESCO 1953: 47-49).

At the other extreme is the functionalist response which stresses the inevitability and usefulness of English, suggesting that because of its global status, because of its wealth of publications, because of its 'affinity' with the inherited school system, English is the natural choice as the medium of education. Kenya, like Singapore, is a prime example of a government that has continued to be influenced by a functionalist response concerning the place of English in African education.

This controversy about which linguistic medium of instruction provides the child the best learning facility has led to several experimental projects, both in Africa and elsewhere. These experimental projects have not vindicated the nationalist response, and if some of these experiments have produced any results, they are a reflection of the ideological biases of the experimenters themselves.

A politics of language aimed at mother-tongue literacy has an uncertain future in Africa. As language, education and economic development are interrelated factors, whatever research has been carried out in Sub-Saharan Africa shows that there is no link between mother-tongue literacy and economic development. On the contrary, Singapore's success in educating students through English challenges the assumption of the supremacy of instruction through the home language. English was the native language of virtually none of the Singapore population in 1965 (Aramainathan 1970). However, although English had little basis in a specific Singaporean Community, its

high status and international economic value allowed it to be accepted as the main medium of education in Singapore (Lee 2000), and it is not far-fetched to link Singapore's language education policy to its high level of economic prosperity in the South East Asian context. Singapore's excellent educational outcomes through L2 – medium instruction from the beginning of schooling challenges the assertion of the supremacy of L1 schooling. Lee Kwan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore from independence in 1965 until 1990, cited economic reasons as the impetus behind the nation's retention of English as an official language. He determined that only mastery of the English language would bring Singapore the International trade, investment and access to Western Science and technology it needed.

In my view, the empowerment of individuals should have primacy over the development of an individual's mother tongue, and even over the preservation of a language. If language maintenance gets in the way of empowerment, then the individual's language rights may be being maintained but the educational and social rights are not. Phillipson (1992: 120) pointed out that " An apparently sound focus on the mother tongue as medium of education does not in itself provide a guarantee of enlightened education". Because provision of mother-tongue education has been linked (especially in Africa) with denial of access to the privileged English, "Africans in the periphery-English nations seem, with few exceptions, to feel that support for African languages is intended to confine them to an inferior position" (p. 127). Although the imposition of an ex-colonial language, which is now the language of an elite, can be seen as a continuation of colonial dominance, the formerly colonized people should not be construed as victims.

" It is important to resist images of those who have been colonized, or subjugated in other ways, as passive recipients of the dictates of their masters. Surely that is the colonial fantasy." (Crowley 1996: 52)

We cannot deny that in the last 25 years or so, the English language has been gaining importance at an accelerated rate all over the world because the language is regarded as a valuable resource for modernization and economic development which entails an escalation of commercial, technological and cultural exchanges with English-speaking parts of the world. English has contributed to these changes and developments by serving as a vital link with the outside world. In view of the importance for us to integrate into the global economy, there is a need to expand and improve English language proficiency. This implies that as a nation, tremendous efforts and resources need to be expended on revamping curriculums, updating English syllabuses

producing new English textbooks, developing skills-oriented examinations, and upgrading teachers' professional competence.

Factors which impinge on ELT

My research indicates that there are three interrelated groups of factors which impinge on ELT. The first group of factors, collectively referred to as infrastructural resources, includes school facilities, instructional equipment, language learning materials, and professional competence of teachers and is influenced by government policies and economic development. Schools which produce high proficiency level in English are usually provided with a whole range of modern instructional technologies from basic equipment such as overhead projectors and tape-recorders to highly advanced facilities such as state-of-the-art multimedia language labs.

Some schools lack the 'hardware' to support educational reform and innovations whose success often depends on the availability of good teaching facilities and extensive use of instructional technologies.

Teaching in these schools usually takes the form of 'chalk and talk'. English textbooks must incorporate some of the latest developments in English language education. For example, more innovative series of English textbooks place a greater emphasis on the development of communicative competence. English materials which are not specially prepared for language teaching should also be readily available, for example, English newspapers and magazines, English TV programmes, English websites, videos of English movies. These materials cater for the different needs of English learners, and provide them with greater exposure to authentic use of English, and create a condition for them to learn the language experientially and communicatively. Students who live in acquisition – poor environments are exposed to English only in their English classes and mainly through a single set of textbooks. As a result, these students have little opportunity to experience English in authentic use and to learn it in context. This not only makes it difficult for them to develop their communicative competence in the language but can also affect their language learning strategies and incline them to take a largely analytical approach to English learning. This factor, together with other contextual constraints discussed above, contributes to a general tendency among students to treat English as an object of analytical study rather than a means of communication whose use can be effectively acquired experientially.

Another important resource factor to be considered under infrastructural resources is the professional training and competence of teachers working in different

regions. Around the world, ambitious privileged schools even recruit native speakers to teach their English classes and to upgrade the language proficiency and professional skills of their staff. For example, about 15% of the primary and secondary schools in Shanghai have at least one native English-speaking teacher on their staff. Many secondary schools abroad are affiliated to prestigious universities or have established connections with such universities and consequently, can enlist help from the universities with their in-service teacher training. Due to their connections with higher institutions of learning, their staff also tend to be better informed of new educational theories and methods. Some governments even sponsor an increasing number of teachers for in-service training in overseas universities. Shanghai, for instance, has been sending groups of secondary English teachers to Lancaster University in the UK for short-term training in the past few years. According to the Shanghai Curriculum and Teaching Materials Reform Commission (1999), by the end of 2003, about 11,000 teachers of English in Shanghai had participated in refresher courses, and between 1500 and 1800 core teachers have received ELT training in overseas institutions. Because of their good professional competence, these teachers are more capable of implementing pedagogies such as skills-oriented, task-based, communicative approaches (Ng & Tang 1997).

Sociocultural Factors

Besides resources, there are also a number of sociocultural factors that impinge on ELT. One of them is a substantive exposure to foreign influences via movies, music, literature, textbooks, Internet and contact with foreign tourists. Two other related sociocultural factors that impact on ELT are the perceived value and social uses that we make of English. When the uses of English are largely limited to the domain of education, as is the case for Mauritians, the motivation to learn English is low. Here there is little opportunity to use English for social and vocational purposes, and students have virtually no exposure to English out of class. Moreover, when ELT is very much examination-oriented, it encourages narrowness and dependency by testing mainly rigid textbook knowledge and largely ignoring abilities and creative use of knowledge. The traditional culture of learning that we have developed pushes ELT in many schools to take a highly analytical approach and focus on the transmission and learning of grammar and vocabulary knowledge out of communicative context.

Curricular and pedagogical practices

The third group of factors that impinge on ELT are related to curricular and pedagogical practices. Within the educational system, the curriculums that we have

adopted also contribute to differences in levels of proficiency in English. Research indicates that schools which achieve a high proficiency level are those which have implemented content-based English instruction (CBEI). CBEI integrates English teaching with the study of other school subjects. Such instruction has clear advantages over other forms of language instruction (Wesche & Skehan 2002). One advantage is the maximization of students' exposure to the target language. A related advantage is students' exposure to contextualised language use, that is, relevant, meaningful, and authentic language use. A third advantage is the repeated use of the target language for problem-solving and communicative purposes, which is necessary for developing a high level of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. Still another advantage is students' strong motivation to learn the target language well in order to succeed in subject learning. Because of these advantages, CBEI is an effective way to develop high proficiency in the language. This has been borne out by the results of experimental CBEI programmes in Shanghai (Hu 2002) for discourse functions. In classrooms directed at itemised knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, there is a predominant concern with formal accuracy of language production and constant correction of students' mistakes in order to develop good verbal habits. Formal practices such as pattern drilling and exercises involving repetition, imitation, and substitution tend to involve artificial or meaningless language use and students often fail to transfer skills trained via such formal practices to real communication.

It should be clear from the discussion above that which language teaching approach is adopted is not an autonomous decision but is inextricably intertwined with a whole range of economic, social, and cultural factors. Given the interconnection and interaction among and between the macro and micro factors, efforts to improve the quality of teaching and learning by addressing one or two of these factors are at best of limited effectiveness and at worst counterproductive. There is a clear need for efforts aimed at improving the effectiveness of ELT to be informed by an ecological perspective on English teaching and learning, that is, an encompassing view of language teaching and learning within the totality of economic, political, social, cultural and curricular influences (Van Lier 1997).

Without adequate teaching conditions, pedagogical innovations introduced through centrally controlled curriculums and syllabuses are not likely to be implemented properly and may only enlist lip service. Where the social uses of English are largely absent, there will be little opportunity to learn the language experientially, and there will be no incentive for students to learn it for communicative purposes. When

examinations ignore communicative use of language knowledge, teachers and students will not be motivated to develop communicative competence. The connection and interaction between these and other factors suggest that it is not an easy task to improve the quality of ELT in acquisition poor environments. Much remains to be done both in and beyond the language classroom.

Rescue Operation for English

The English language seems to have redoubled its prominence and relevance to become the de facto world language since the advent of globalisation. This means that we need to intensify the search for effective strategies in the teaching and learning of English in Mauritius where the gap between demanded competence and actual competence in the use of English is growing wider.

A rescue operation to restore English to its legitimate status in our multilingual setting is an idea whose time has come. To give English such a status would require, among other things, a major shift in attitudes and values with respect to language. We seem here to cultivate a mindset which equates language with ethnicity, but the globalisation of our economy forces us to reframe languages as forms of economic capital rather than as identity markers.

Lack of proficiency in English can lead to a failure to gain access to the knowledge reproduced in that language. If large sections of learners fail to grasp the knowledge made available to them, what then is the purpose of their education?

Although the extent of the falling standards has yet to be empirically quantified and qualified, there is enough evidence to suggest that students' knowledge of English, the medium of instruction, is not satisfactory.

Clarity of vision on English language policy

I would therefore like to make a strong recommendation to the Ministry of Education & Human Resources, which is the largest provider of English language education, to define a clear English language policy. What exactly do we wish to achieve through the teaching and learning of English in this age of globalisation? The absence of clear guidelines from the government in a situation where the use of English is de-emphasised yet at the same time it remains the medium of instruction leads to ambivalence on the part of both teachers and students.

The teaching of English in Mauritius is grounded within a peculiar linguistic environment where there is an ambivalence towards English, since teachers of English are the primary instruments through which proficiency in English is effected, a myriad questions may arise pertaining to the preparation of teachers for this phenomenal task.

When there is a lack of clarity of vision regarding the objectives for teaching and learning English, when most English language teachers are themselves not very clear as to the status of the English language and its future position in the country, this has several implications:

(1) Firstly, it is very difficult to plan a viable and long-term language methodology without a clarity of vision.

(2) Secondly, it is difficult for a government to commit itself materially and in terms of manpower if it is not clear what importance or role English has in the country.

It is noted by Bull (1964) that 'while getting educated is a personal matter, in contrast, providing education is a social enterprise'. A medium of education, therefore, as an essential part of the larger process, must (a) enable learners to get educated and (b) enable society to educate. In the former capacity it should, ideally, adequately fulfill each of the four functions of language for the individual. These are

1. Communication, i.e. we need language to receive and impart information;
2. Conceptualization i.e. we need language to think and learn to think;
3. Expression, i.e. we need language to react demonstratively to experience, and
4. Communion, i.e. we need language to relate to teachers and fellow learners.

Conclusion

The point I am making is that the only way of restoring English to a level of teaching at which it could be properly used as a medium of instruction is for learners to receive a massive increase in their exposure to English and their use of English. Otherwise, the status of English in Mauritius will be relegated from a second language to a foreign language, and at worst it will become a 'library' language – a language for writing reports in government and parastatal organizations.

I wish to end with a quotation from Oscar Wilde which suggests that educators have the responsibility to refuse complicity in the punishments inflicted by society on children in the name of ideology:

"A child can understand a punishment inflicted by an individual, such as a parent or guardian, and bear it with a certain amount of acquiescence. What it cannot understand is a punishment inflicted by society".

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