Education in Mauritius : A Multicultural and Multilingual African Country

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A brief history of Mauritius and the present sociolinguistic situation.

Mauritius, a small island in the Indian Ocean, lies 700 km east of Madagascar and has a surface area of about 1800 square km. It has often been called a 'racial melting pot' because, over the past 400 years, there has been an influx of various peoples, with various origins and religions and having different traditions and languages, into Mauritius.

Probably discovered in the 7th century by Arab traders, Mauritius was not occupied until 1598 by the Dutch who named it 'Mauritius'. They settled down in the island, introduced sugar and exterminated the dodo. When the Dutch left Mauritius in 1710, they do not seem to have left any of their people or any of their culture in the island. The only traces of the Dutch occupation reside in the survival of certain place names that are of Dutch origin. Five years after the Dutch left, the French took possession of the island. They lived there for about a century, contributing to the development of the island by importing slaves from Madagsacar and Africa to cultivate the land. With the master-slave situation, a pidgin developed and soon after was born a French-based Creole - Kreol - which is still widely used in the island to this day. The island was conquered by the British in 1810 primarily as it was a strategic naval base and they wanted to protect the seas from French pirates. Because of this, British never quite settled down in the island. Moreover, since the Treaty of Capitulation stipulated that the inhabitants could keep their religion, laws and culture, Mauritians continued to use French and Kreol, although English became the language of administration. When slavery was abolished in 1835, Mauritius saw an influx of Indian labourers who came from different parts of India and who brought along with them their

religion, culture and languages. Then again, because there was the need for the Indian labourers to communicate among themselves as well as with the people on the island, a Hindi-based Creole - Bhojpuri - emerged and developed. With time, Chinese traders came to Mauritius as well as merchants from northern India. By the time Mauritius became independent in 1968 and a parliamentary republic in 1992, it had a motley population. Today, Mauritius can be seen as a fairly new independent and developing country that is rich both culturally and linguistically. In 1995, the population was estimated to be of 1 129 429 people, of which:

- 66% Indo-Mauritians - 52% Hindus, 14% Muslims
- 31% General population - consisting of a minority of whites, a minority of people of African descent and a majority of 'gens de couleur' or 'mulâtres', those of mixed blood
- 3% Sino-Mauritians

The major faiths present on the island are Christianity, Hinduism and Islam.

Given that Mauritius is a multi-ethnic and a multi-religious country, the inhabitants seem to have felt the need (conscious at times, unconscious at others) to keep their identity as members of certain groups that have religion and cultural background as common denominator - language has been used as one of the means of doing so. One constantly finds within the Mauritian the paradox between being Mauritian and yet being a member of religion X, or community Y. This dichotomy has manifested itself at a linguistic level, at a level of language choice. Therefore language issues in Mauritius have been and still are a sensitive issue.

If we go back 36 years in time (1962) and look at the language census, we find that many of the inhabitants, when asked to fill in the section of the census form dealing with their mother tongue, tended to put in the ancestral language they identified with. They were strongly encouraged to do so by the various religious groups and the press even printed communiqués telling people of different religious groups what to fill in for 'Mother Tongue'.

TABLE 1: Language Census – 1962

LANGUAGE	MOTHER TONGUE %	CURRENTLY SPOKEN
English	0.2	0.3
French	6.8	7.6
Kreol	29.2	42.5
Hindi	36.3	30.4
Marathi	1.6	1.1
Tamil	6.4	2.7
Telegu	2.3	0.9
Gujerati	0.1	0.1
Urdu	13.5	6.0
Chinese	2.8	1.9
Other	0.8	0.05

(*after Benedict, 1965*)

The correlation between the number of inhabitants of a certain faith and a certain mother tongue is interesting to note; for example, in 1962, there were about 14% Muslims in Mauritius and 13.5% of the population claimed to have Urdu as their mother tongue. If therefore the census does not appear terribly accurate in terms of the language situation at the time, it does say a lot about the attitudes of the people of the time towards the language they used or claimed to use.

In 1977, after a movement to have Kreol as a pan-Mauritian language, a public opinion poll was carried out by a private French firm (SOFRES) and it was found out that 66% of the people interviewed wanted Kreol as an official language, 80% wanted Kreol to be used on television and on the radio, and 60% wanted Kreol to be used at school. When Kreol was introduced as the main language for television and radio programmes, the population voiced its dissatisfaction and the government had to go back on its decision. Such events indicate the attitudes of the Mauritian population towards such languages as Kreol, the oriental languages and the European languages.

The current situation in Mauritius as far as languages go is that English is the official language used in parliament, for traffic regulations, for administrative purposes in schools, and it is also the official medium of instruction. To have and to keep English as the official language in Mauritius is a wise compromise given the attitude of different communities towards the various languages (European and ancestral). English is also seen as the language of knowledge as most of the teaching done on the island is done in English and the most important examinations of the secondary cycle are done through Cambridge, UK. French has the status of a semi-official language and it is the most widespread European language used on the island. It is the main language of the media. However, as it is associated with the whites in Mauritius, it has not been given the status of official language. Kreol is the language of general use, the language of equality. The 1990 population and language census showed that 71% of the population had Kreol as their mother tongue. However, as it is associated with the Creoles, or the 'gens de couleur', it has been seen as an ethnic language and as such rejected as a pan-Mauritian language. Moreover, Mauritians perceive Kreol as a debased language and it thus has very low status. Such attitudes inhibit its development towards becoming the official language despite the fact that 90% of the population can speak Kreol. Kreol could be defined as the low status lingua franca of Mauritius. The Hindi-based Creole is spoken by a part of the population and it too enjoys low status, lower than that of Kreol. Although the ancestral languages are little used on the island except for religious purposes, they are terribly symbolical. Any attempt to discard

any of the ancestral languages has always resulted in social chaos. Mauritius thus finds itself in a situation where the population has a language that links the inhabitants as a nation, that is Mauritian Creole (Kreol). However, this language is not given a place in Mauritian society for social, ethnic, religious and political reasons.

Any linguistic planning in Mauritius is a hard task, not so much because it is a linguistic problem as it is a socio-political problem. Now, taking linguistic decisions in education becomes an even greater problem as education is a crucial sector in any country. It is even more revered in a developing country where parents do not want to see their children work the land, but rather want them to have white collar jobs. We will now move to the problem of medium of instruction in Mauritius, which is an interesting issue in view of what the 1953 UNESCO report said and in view of the complex situation of Mauritius.

1953 UNESCO Report and the failure to provide mother tongue education to Mauritians.

In 1953, the UNESCO Report said:

> It is axiomatic that the best medium for teaching a child is his mother tongue. Psychologically, it is the system of meaningful signs that in his mind works automatically for expression and understanding. Sociologically, it is a means of identification among members of the community to which he belongs. Educationally, he learns more quickly through it than through an unfamiliar linguistic medium.

The report came out in an era of decolonisation, when different countries were becoming independent and thus needed to assert their identity as independent peoples. In an attempt to do so, certain countries turned to using the vernacular as a medium of instruction (many countries turned to using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction in the first few years of primary education). It was not always an easy decision to take and an easy thing to do as many of those countries had speakers of many languages, dialects, tribal languages. There was the need for a lot of language planning in order to have education in the L1. Still, some succeeded. India, which is a multilingual country has implemented a three

language policy. This shows the admirable efforts made by different nations when it came to offering mother tongue education to their inhabitants.

Indeed, it seems most logical that a child should be taught in a language that is familiar to him. If a child is taught basic concepts in a language other than his/her L1, he/she will most probably not understand them as fully as if they were taught to him in his/her mother tongue. By the time, he/she will have learnt enough of the L2, the teacher would have gone so far in the syllabus that he/she will not be able to understand the subject matter taught in that L2. Thus, he/she will always lag behind. It has been noticed that the children of West Indian immigrants in England are the ones who do worst at school (Romaine, 1993). The explanation for this has been that it is because they are taught in a language that is not their L1, a language that is foreign to them. Consequently, the rates of unemployment, alcoholism, drug addiction and crime are relatively high while the standard of living is low. The level of education among indigenous people in many countries at the time when they were colonies was low because the indigenous children were taught in a foreign language if and when education was offered to them. It seems that the main aim of the UNESCO was to make education available to all children of newly-independent countries to ensure the development of those countries.

The benefits of having the mother tongue as a medium of instruction are many. First, it offers equal opportunity to all members of a country to have access to education and therefore jobs, a higher standard of living and better measures of hygiene. As such, the creation of a discriminatory society is discouraged. Secondly, it enhances personal development, ensures free as opposed to controlled access to media and thus ensures democracy and liberty. Finally, it encourages the population to be involved in the development of technology for the progress of their country. However, there are countries where using the mother tongue as a medium of instruction appears to be almost impossible. This is the case in certain African countries where there are a variety of languages that have ethnic or tribal associations. Mauritius is not an exception.

Using Kreol — the mother tongue of a majority of Mauritians — as a medium of instruction in Mauritius is an issue that was raised in the late 1960's, just before the country became independent. Until that date, it had been an uncontroversial issue that education should be carried out in English, the official language, and therefore all the education documents said that English should be the medium of instruction at all levels of education. But given that most Mauritian children had Kreol as mother tongue, those documents made allowances for the use of Kreol as a *support language* in the first few years of primary education. It was stated that as soon as the children could understand one of the standard European languages (English, French) the teacher should shift to that language. In 1967, a linguist who had just graduated with an MA in Applied Linguistics from the University of Edinburgh, UK, came forward and said that the high percentage of illiteracy and the great number of failures at the end of the primary cycle could simply be explained by the fact that Mauritian children were taught literacy and numeracy in languages that were not their L1. He admitted that to change the language policies in the education sector would be a hard task: it would take time and money to standardise Kreol and to produce reading materials in the vernacular, it would take time to convince the nation that Kreol was a full fledged language that had a syntax like any other language and that it would be just as good a language to teach as are the other languages of the world. But he was convinced that such a venture was worth the efforts as the results would be rewarding for the individual and for the country itself. After 30 years, the situation in Mauritius is just the same as it was in the 1960's. English is still the official medium of instruction and Kreol is still being used as a support language, it has not been standardised, there are relatively few reading materials available in that language although it is spoken and used by the great majority of the population. The percentage pass is still fairly low at the end of the Primary School level examination and thus, only a certain part of the population has access to secondary and tertiary education.

If we take the batch of children who started primary education in 1984 and followed them throughout their 13 years of schooling, we would be able to have an idea of their development and performance over time:

TABLE 2

	Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) - 1989	Cambridge School Certificate (SC) - 1994	Cambridge Higher School Certificate (HSC) - 1996
No. of pupils	29 297	11 480	5 257
% Pass	57.13	65.9	68.8

We notice that of the 30 000 children who start primary school, some 43% fail the CPE examination which is alarming and which seems to indicate that there is a problem at the primary level. Furthermore, only 12% of the initial number leave secondary school with a HSC. A survey carried out in 1988 by the Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE) found that 62.1% of the children in Standards 5 and 6 could not read their English text books. Thus, although the 1990 census indicates that the rate of illiteracy among school leavers (aged between 12 and 14) is 8.4%, these statistics have to be taken with a pinch of salt.

This linguist maintains that the main problem in the country is that we do not have mother tongue education and he is supported by many other linguists who have written papers on the need to use the mother tongue as the medium of instruction, at least in the first few years of primary education. One might find this situation, where there is still no mother tongue education in the first few years of schooling, very strange in a relatively small country where 71% of the population claim to have Kreol as their mother tongue and 90% admit that they currently use it. One can be even more surprised when one knows that in the Seychelles, the medium of instruction at the primary level over the past 17 years has been Seselwa, the Seychelles Creole, which has its origins in Mauritian Creole.

Having English as the medium of instruction at the upper primary, secondary and tertiary levels is undisputed by most linguists. What has been disputed is the use of English, a foreign language, as the official

medium of instruction in the first three years of primary education. What was therefore suggested in the late 1960's was the introduction of Kreol, the mother tongue of most Mauritians, as the medium of instruction in those first three years of education. It has been said that Kreol should be used to teach the basic concepts to Mauritian children and that it should be used to teach literacy. Then, that there should be a period of transition where literacy skills should be transferred from Kreol, the L1, onto French, the L2/ English, the official language and a foreign language. This is the case in many countries which require knowledge of another language in order to pursue further education because of the lack of materials in the mother tongue; Seychelles is an example where there is a transition to using English as a medium of instruction in the later years of primary education. These suggestions have remained suggestions and have never been put into practice in Mauritius. The reasons for this failure of implementing Kreol as the medium of instruction at the primary level are various.

The first reason could be summed up in the term "linguistic burden". The languages currently studied at the primary level are English, the official language, which is also officially the medium of instruction; French, the semi-official language; and an oriental language for those who want to study it (most of the population, being of Asian origin, insist that their children have the right to learn the ancestral language with which they identify. Although the use of ancestral languages is very restricted in the country and although the marks for Oriental languages are not computed for the examination at the end of the primary level — the Certificate of Primary Education examination —, their presence in the syllabus is crucial. All attempts made so far to change the status or the importance of Oriental languages has led to social unrest. Only last month, new bank notes came into circulation. The former bank notes had had an inscription in Tamil, followed by one in Hindi. On the new bank notes the order was reversed, with Hindi first and then Tamil. That caused so much tension in the country that the bank notes are being withdrawn from circulation and the original order of the inscriptions will be kept on the next set of notes which should be out in July 1999. This indicates how far language issues are sensitive in Mauritius). It has been felt by the population that to have one more language in the syllabus — Kreol — on top of English, French

and an Oriental language, would be a linguistic burden on the children. One possible solution, were Kreol to be introduced as a medium of instruction, might be to eliminate one of the other languages in the primary school syllabus. But the question is: which one of the other languages should then be introduced later in the primary cycle, or even in the secondary cycle? There is no question of touching the Oriental languages as they have ethnic associations and the population has seen it and will see it as an attempt to stifle their ancestral culture. And there is no question of touching either one of the European languages: English would have to be introduced early as it is the medium of instruction and French is already widely used in the country — both have high prestige. They are perceived as the languages that will give them good jobs and status in the society, so they could not be introduced later in the school syllabus. So, in the case where Kreol would be introduced as a medium of instruction, the children might find themselves with four languages in the first years of primary education.

Presently, French and English are used as media of instruction from the first year of primary education. If Kreol were to be introduced at the primary level, one of the possible solutions would be to introduce different languages at different points in the school syllabus. The question that then arises is: what is the second language that should be taught to the children? In the Seychelles, they have introduced English in Year 2 and then French in Year 4. (Since they do not have any oriental languages to include in the syllabus — the population being fairly homogenous — this has worked well for them.) But what to do in Mauritius? Even linguists disagree. Some say that English should be the second language to be introduced as it is the official language of the country. Others say that it should be French as French is supported by the environment - it is used extensively on the island. Others are concerned about the place to be given to Oriental languages once English and French have been taught. We find that the situation is very thorny.

The third reason for which Kreol is not made the official medium of instruction is because of the status of this Creole vis-à-vis the other languages. Indeed, European languages have a very high status in Mauritius. English is perceived as the language of knowledge and French

as the language of culture. In comparison, Kreol has very low status. It is seen as the language to be used by everyone for social interactions but it does not enjoy enough prestige to be used for something as serious and important as education. This attitude is enhanced by the growing use of French in Mauritius - we could say that Kreol is in a diglossic situation with French, with the former as the low variety and the latter as the high variety. Mauritians feel that Kreol is only bastard French because it borrows heavily from French lexicon. They do not see it as a full fledged language and therefore are extremely reluctant to give it a place, however small, in the school curriculum

The fourth reason for not having Kreol as a medium of instruction seems to be the inherent fear that there will be the creation of an élite were Kreol to be used in education. That is, if Kreol were to become the medium of instruction, then those people who were educated enough or rich enough, would send their children to private schools where French/English would be the medium of instruction. There would then be an elite who would have better command of the prestige languages and therefore would have easier access to good jobs. There is the fear that such a plan will result in segregation.

As a last point to be mentioned here, introducing Kreol as the medium of instruction would require the standardisation of the language. Up to now, there have been a few individuals who have worked on a Kreol dictionary, some have worked on a phonetic dictionary and others have done it differently. But, to this day there has not been a group of linguists who have sat down as a corps to standardise the language. So, we do not find a Mauritian Creole dictionary like we find an English English Dictionary or an American English dictionary. Partisans of Kreol are now writing as much in Kreol as possible with the hope that this will help standardise the language naturally, rather than forcibly and artificially by having a group of people working on the project. Furthermore, if Kreol were to be introduced as a medium of instruction, there would be the need for the creation of school materials and reading materials in Kreol. Again, to this day, only about 60 works have been written in Kreol. Finally, teachers have been trained to teach primary school children in French/English. They would have to be themselves taught literacy in the mother tongue

and then be re-trained to teach in the mother tongue. They will also have to be trained to make the transition from using Kreol as a medium to using one of the European languages as a medium. This will cost the state a lot of money and it has been believed that a developing country has other more pressing priorities than dealing with language issues. Yet, this is far from an impossible task. Let us take the example of the Seychelles, archipelago which became independent in 1976, that is 8 years after Mauritius became independent. The Seychelles have had Seselwa — the local Creole — as a medium of instruction since 1981. It has been said that at the beginning, there were a few problems in the Seychelles as Seselwa had not been properly standardised, as the teachers had not been properly trained when Seselwa was introduced as the medium of instruction and that there were not enough reading materials in the Creole. But, despite all this, Seselwa has been the medium of instruction in the past 17 years and the Seychellois claim that it is working fairly well. The country has developed and the currency value indicates that the country is on the right track. Therefore, the 'high cost' argument seems to be a less important issue than the other issues discussed earlier.

We thus find ourselves in a situation whereby the L1 of most Mauritians is Kreol; it is very much the language of the environment, it is the language used for most informal conversations, it is the language that brings, to a certain extent, the population together as a nation before the nation compartmentalises itself as members of different ethnic groups. We also find that because of the complex socio-political situation of Mauritius, introducing Kreol as a medium of instruction would create problems of different sorts: financial, organisational, but especially attitudinal. So what do we do?

Since the question of introducing Kreol as a medium of instruction in primary schools has been brought forward, the proposal has been dealt with very evasively. The people concerned for taking the decisions have kept postponing the issue. In 1978, the Commission of Enquiry on Education said that some type of research had to be done in order to find out whether language policies had to be amended in the Mauritian system of education. By the time there was the next Commission in 1982, the research had still not been conducted and things continued as they had

always been. The 1990 Commission explicitly said that because language issues were too sensitive in Mauritius, it would be best to leave things as they were. So, we find that the situation in Mauritius is such that most children have Kreol as L1, but they are taught English and French at school as if those languages were their L1. The percentage pass has increased slightly over the years but it could still be improved and many linguists think that it will not improve drastically because the children are not being given basic education in their L1.

An alternative programme of education.

The question now is: do we leave things as they are or do we try to find an alternative that will take into consideration linguistic research as well as the socio-political situation of Mauritius? One of the suggestions of the first linguist who dealt with the introduction of mother tongue education in Mauritius was that if Kreol were introduced as a medium in the first few years of primary education, then English should be introduced orally, with songs, games and stories in English, to make the children familiar with the language before teaching it as a language and then introducing it as a medium of instruction. In the framework of 'Generative Grammar' and of what Chomsky (1957) and Krashen (1981) have said in relation to language acquisition and the role of direct input for the acquisition of another language, the linguist's idea is a very interesting one. Indeed, if the children were given enough input in their first year at primary school to acquire English/French, it would then be easier for them to be taught via English/French media as from their second year. They would then transfer their literacy skills from Kreol to English/French and continue the school syllabus in one or both of the European, high prestige languages. But as this has not proved to be a workable idea over the past thirty years, maybe it would be better for our children if we were to work the other way round.

Instead of fighting the losing battle of providing Mauritian children with mother tongue education at primary education level, maybe we should make them familiar enough with English/French before they go to primary school so that when they get to Standard 1, they have enough

passive knowledge of English/French to be taught via those languages. Before looking further into that possibility, we might want to consider the Canadian experience.

If we have a look at the immersion programmes in Canada, we see that immersing children in a language other than their L1 can be beneficial to them. The 1965 St. Lambert Experiment in Canada set out to assess and evaluate the impact of elementary schooling conducted primarily in the L2 on the linguistic, intellectual and attitudinal development of children. The idea of immersing children in an L2 comes in a situation where there is a widespread desire or need for a bilingual or multilingual citizenry. It is believed that in such cases, priority for early schooling should be given to the language or languages least likely to be developed otherwise. For example, if we were to introduce immersion programmes in Mauritius and if we were to follow the logic just mentioned, children would be immersed in English rather than French because, while the latter is used in the environment, the former is very little supported be the environment. Lambert and Tucker (1972) carried out an experiment where they had an experimental group of native English speakers whom they immersed in French since their first day at kindergarten (two hours daily, for a year). The children had a native French speaker as a teacher. They learnt songs in French, played games in French and were addressed in French. However, once outside the classroom, the children were again in an English-speaking environment. From Year 1 at primary school, the children followed the same syllabus as the native French speakers of Montreal. French was the medium of instruction. English was introduced to them only in Year 2. After 5 years, Lambert and Tucker (1972) found that the children in the experimental group did not lag behind in their native language - English - or any subject. They had a high level of proficiency in French and English. They developed a degree of competence in reading, writing, speaking and understanding French, their L2, that English pupils following the 'French as a Second Language' class for the same number of years could never match. Lambert and Tucker suggested that the experimental group had transferred their literacy skills from their L2 to their L1. The same kind of immersion experiment was carried out by a different group of researchers (Bruck *et al*, 1971) among working class children and the results were similar. The experiment was

also carried out among pupils with low academic ability and the results did not show that below average students were handicapped by the immersion experience. From the experiments conducted, it seems that if such immersion programmes are conducted properly, they may bring about fairly good results.

The success of such programmes in Canada makes us realise that if mother tongue education is impossible in certain countries because of socio-political reasons, then the country has to find other ways of bettering the system of education within the existing framework. If we take the case of Mauritius, it seems that it is very difficult to change language policies in the primary school syllabus as the system has been here for such a long time that any attempt at changing the existing system usually results in the dissatisfaction of the population. So maybe Mauritius should attack the problem at a pre-primary school level. As pre-primary schools are fairly new in Mauritius, it might be a more practical solution of setting up a pre-primary school syllabus than trying to change the primary school syllabus. A few decades ago, when there were mainly extended families in Mauritius, most children stayed at home with their mothers or grandparents until they were of age to go to primary schools. With the emancipation of women and their growing numbers in the work place, with the increase in the number of nuclear families, more and more people are sending their children to nurseries and then to pre-primary schools. The 1990 Housing and Population Census of Mauritius contained a section on pre-primary education.

It was estimated that there were 900-1000 pre-primary schools in operation, 848 of which were owned and run by non-governmental bodies and 735 of which had applied for registration with the then Ministry of Education, Science and Technology. The figures showed that two thirds of the children aged between 3 and 5 were attending pre-primary schools before going to primary schools. Pre-primary schools are therefore a relatively new venture in the Mauritian society, it is not as fully developed as the primary schools are. There is not yet a definite national pre-primary school syllabus as there is a set primary school syllabus. So, that might be the place where toddlers could be introduced to English/French so that by the time they get to primary school, they would have enough (passive)

knowledge of English/French to be taught in those two languages. What is being suggested is that toddlers be given enough input at the pre-primary level to acquire one or two of the European languages. Since, French is the main language of the media and very much supported by the environment, maybe more importance should be given to English as it is a foreign language in Mauritius, very little supported by the environment despite the fact that it is the official language. What could be done is to have songs, cartoons, films, stories in English/French to familiarise the children with those languages so that when they go to primary school they are not completely lost when the European languages are used. These one or two years of pre-primary schooling will give the children more time to adapt to the foreign languages and to acquire them without having the stress of the syllabus on top of the acquisition of these languages.

Such a new plan will arouse the patriotic feelings of many who will say that having such a system will lead to the death of Kreol, the symbol of Mauritian culture. This seems unlikely as Kreol is currently spoken by 90% of the population and it has survived in the past 250 years. Linguists have talked of decreolisation as they have seen the influence of French on Kreol, but such processes are inevitable. Languages, by nature, are mutable. Living languages do not remain static. Even though French/English have been used as media of instruction in the past five decades, there does not seem to have been a decline in the popularity of Kreol as a lingua franca in Mauritius. On the contrary, the census in 1990 shows that there has been an increase in the number of Kreol speakers, or maybe more precisely, an increase in the number of inhabitants who admit that they have Kreol as a mother tongue and that they use it currently. In any case, should such a project be implemented, syllabus designers for pre-primary schools should have well defined objectives; the aim of having activities in English/French should be to introduce the toddlers to English/French so that they acquire a degree of competence that will facilitate their contact with those languages as media of instruction in primary schools. The aim of the project should not be to diminish the importance of their mother tongue by, for example, forbidding the children from using Kreol at school. Some will say that toddlers will have an attitude of superiority towards their relatives who use Kreol as they have been immersed in English/French, and that they will have a

divided attitude towards their own mother tongue as it will not be used at pre-primary level. Such problems could be partly dealt with if the teacher allows the toddlers to use their mother tongue and maybe even use it themselves. If the aims of the project are clearly defined, one can fight the attitudinal problems. Finally, such a project could also be criticised because the use of English/French in the school will have as implicit message that Kreol is not a good enough language to perform such tasks as educating — but this is already the case as Kreol has never been seriously considered as a medium of instruction. To sum up, the aim of having such a programme must be made very clear. It is not to make the children produce English/French to near-native like competence, but rather to make them familiar with the language(s). Then, they will be able to understand more easily what the teacher is explaining to them when they are in their first year at primary school, consequently, they will become *more easily literate* in those languages — it is already the case that they become literate in English (a foreign language) and French (an L2).

Before any decision is taken by educationalists, a study has to be carried out to test the viability of such a project at the pre-primary level. In theory, it would seem that such a scheme would work. We would then have to see whether it would work in practice. One way of doing it would be to have three groups of children of similar socio-economic background for the experiment:

Group A: a group of children who are not sent to pre-primary school, and who go directly into primary education, which is the case of many families in rural areas.

Group B: a group of children who are sent to an ordinary pre-primary school, where the teacher mainly uses Kreol and the child is not really exposed to English or French

Group C: a group of children who are sent to a pre-primary school where the teacher has a syllabus, whereby he/she sings songs, tells stories, plays games and videos in English/French. The syllabus will have to be well defined and the teachers who will take part in this experiment will have to be trained. For instance, one thing to consider would be to use the one person/one language policy, where one teacher

would take care of the English part of the syllabus and another one the French part of the syllabus. Kreol would be allowed in the school and the teachers could use Kreol when communicating with the children.

The children's progress should then be monitored over the first few years of primary education to see whether there are differences in the performance of the children in the development of their language skills and of their intellectual abilities. Such results might suggest whether a new plan should be attempted at the pre-primary level.

Should the results indicate that introducing English/French informally at the pre-primary level produces better results in English/French and the subjects taught via these media, measures will have to be taken to implement the project at the pre-primary level in Mauritius. Various steps will have to be taken for the project to work properly.

1. First of all, a national plan will have to be established. The lack of national planning for the development of the pre-primary school sector has recently been criticised in one of the national newspapers. 'Le Mauricien' writes that "ce secteur est fragilisé par l'absence d'une stratégie de développement national."[1] (17.11.98). The implementation of a national plan will be facilitated by the fact that in the recent budget, subsidies have been given to all registered pre-primary schools. Therefore, qualified bodies can be empowered to supervise the development of the plan.

2. Pre-primary school teachers will have to be given the necessary training to work in the pre-primary sector. Training for pre-primary school teachers is already available at the Mauritius Institute of Education and it was estimated, in 1990, that 75% of pre-primary school teachers had followed some training. Such training could be made compulsory (as training for primary school teachers is) and the candidates should be told the aims and the objectives of the national project, so that they understand why they are being asked to do certain things. Unless they are told

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[1] " This sector is rendered fragile by the absence of a national strategy for development."

the reasons for which the project is being set up, they will not be able to give the best of themselves in their work.

3. Pre-primary school teachers will have also to be trained so that they will be able to use certain very basic sentences in French/English. They will also need to be prepared so that they will be able to tell stories in English/French and play games in those languages. Materials will have to be made available to those pre-primary schools. For instance, books, tape recorders, a television, a video and video tapes will have to be provided to the schools. In the last few years, an increase in the number of children's programmes in English, like "Sesame Street," has been noticed. There are also a fair number of cartoons both in English and French on television. With the equipment at hand, teachers should be able to tape enough material to use during school hours so as to provide direct input to the children in English/French using visual aids.

Finally, there will be the need for a body of qualified people to verify whether the work is being done according to the norms set. This body will be responsible to see to it that the work is being done up to the standards required and that there is no abuse of the system.

This whole scheme will not take place overnight. It will demand the work of 3-4 years for the study. And then, if the study produces satisfactory results, there will be the need for a few more years' work to prepare a national syllabus, register pre-primary schools and train the staff. But it seems a more pragmatic idea to organise pre-primary education in a well-researched way (it not being properly organised yet) rather than going to change the primary school syllabus, with the introduction of Kreol as a medium of instruction, which would lead to a lot of dissatisfaction among the Mauritian people.

Conclusion

In the Mauritian context, we have seen how languages within the education sector present certain problems. We, as a nation, have to deal with these problems in such a way as not to put our children at a disadvantage as far as their education is concerned. Whether we want it

or not, this is a competitive world and our children will need the best education possible for their own progress and for that of the country. We, as a nation, will also have to be careful not to hurt the sensitivities of different ethnic groups as we go about language planning in the education sector. We have to find the *juste milieu* as the Frenchman would say.

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