

**ADDRESSING CULTURAL DIVERSITY
IN A CREOLE SPACE
The SEMP Language Arts Curriculum¹**

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Proposals for curriculum reform under the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP) call for a curriculum that respects the diverse cultural experiences of students in Trinidad and Tobago, and that gives all students the opportunity to develop to their full potential, regardless of culture. This paper reports on an analysis of the curriculum proposed for a core subject in the proposed curriculum, Language Arts. The curriculum document was analyzed, using qualitative content analysis techniques, to determine its orientation, as reflected in its approach to dealing with issues of cultural diversity. It was found that while the curriculum reflected an orientation to social relevance in dealing with other aspects of students' cultural experience, in addressing students' language experience, it remained largely traditional in its orientation. The paper discusses implications for teaching and learning Language Arts at the secondary level.

Introduction

In 2002, the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Education issued drafts of curriculum documents for eight subjects that formed the proposed core for a new curriculum for Forms 1 and 2 in the country's secondary schools. The new curriculum represents part of a project for education reform called the Secondary Education Modernisation Programme (SEMP). The curriculum reforms proposed for the SEMP programme reflect the state's attempt to democratize the education process in Trinidad and Tobago—a movement that is evident throughout the Caribbean and, indeed, throughout the world (Papadopoulos, 1998).

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One of the identified challenges to promoting democracy and achieving equity in education in the Caribbean, and internationally, is to provide an educational experience that reflects the many different cultural experiences which constitute students' field of experience, and provides part of the context of their learning (Trinidad and Tobago [T&T]. National Task Force on Education, 1994). In addition, students must be prepared to negotiate the cultural practices that characterize communication in different disciplinary communities (Kalantzis & Cope, 1993). Still another challenge is to determine what relationship must be established, in the curriculum, between the canonical knowledge of Europe and North America, which has traditionally constituted mainstream academic knowledge in once-colonized Caribbean countries (London, 2003), and other forms of knowledge that may be of equal importance to students, and to the society. Such forms of knowledge may serve either to promote dimensions of students' development other than the purely academic, or to make bridges between the knowledge they already possess and the mainstream academic knowledge that they must develop. Kilgour Dowdy (2002), Banks (1993), and other writers have discussed the tensions that are often set up in the curriculum between these two types of knowledge, which may be regarded by many persons in the society as being in opposition, rather than as being necessary parts of the whole universe of knowledge to be included in the curriculum.

However, since a national curriculum is also a formal statement of what the society in general considers important for its young people to know, a curriculum may also be seen as a form of political discourse (Slattery, 1995). Curriculum content, in this paper identified as including proposed subject matter and learning experiences (Schubert, 1986), is a hotly contested issue, as different groups in the society fight for the power to prioritize areas of knowledge they consider important to the fulfilment of their agendas.

In establishing such priorities, one consideration is the preservation of what different groups consider important components of their cultural heritage. The *National Education Policy Paper* (T&T. National Task Force on Education, 1994) affirms a commitment to multicultural education that will engender respect for the cultural experiences of students (p. 40, par. 3.5), and that will ensure that each child has equal opportunity to learn, no matter what that child's culture may be. Policy guidelines have

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proposed values education and comparative religion as areas of the curriculum appropriate for fulfilling those commitments (p. 39, par. 3.3.3; p. 40, par. 3.3.5). However, no proposals or guidelines for infusing necessary content into other parts of the curriculum have been put forward.

Yet, there are other places in the curriculum where such commitments can be fulfilled. As Crawford and McLaren (2003) note, for instance, the teaching of language and culture are essentially inseparable. According to Brody (2003, p. 40), “Culture is negotiated through language ... and language codifies many cultural assumptions and values.”

However, many people in Trinidad society still see no need for a specific approach to ensuring that students have a multicultural education. Some subscribe to one of the prevailing myths of the society—that it has realized the melting pot ideal, favoured by early colonial administrators to modify the plural society (Campbell, 1997) and later articulated by its first Prime Minister, Eric Williams, in the context of his ideal of a West Indianized curriculum (cited in Campbell, 1997). Others feel that the only adequate approach to preparing students to live in the global society is an education experience that focuses almost entirely on knowledge from the academic mainstream that is prized in the developed world.

These factors are particularly important to the teaching of secondary-level Language Arts—previously called “English”—in Trinidad and Tobago. As the name implies, the English curriculum has traditionally emphasized the teaching of the English Language, the development of literacy applied to texts written or spoken in Standard English, and analytical and aesthetic responses to examples of the English literary canon. London (2003) has described how the aim of the English curriculum in colonial times was to prepare students to function as good colonials. London recounts the primacy given to English as a subject within the colonial curriculum, as a major tool for maintaining British hegemony over the minds of its colonized people. A strong commitment to the principles that shaped the English curriculum in those days has been maintained in post-colonial Trinidad and Tobago.

As Carrington (1993), Robertson (1996), and others have noted, the curriculum has also been influenced by prevailing misunderstandings

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about Caribbean people as being speakers of English as a first language. Carrington (2001) has argued that even when the differences between the Creole and the Standard languages are understood, and educators accept the need to use the Creole as a bridge to increased mastery of the Standard, policy makers rarely make formal provision for the Creole to find a place in the curriculum. He points out that Haiti and Aruba are the only Caribbean countries where a formal commitment to use the Creole in the curriculum has been made, as evidenced by the production of written materials to support the delivery of such a curriculum.

It is likely, therefore, that in spite of the commitment expressed in the policy paper to a reformed curriculum that acknowledges and respects our multicultural experience, strong pressures may be exerted on the curriculum to maintain it as it has always been – a reflection of the world from the perspective of persons outside the Caribbean, serving the agendas of persons other than ourselves.

Moreover, it must be recognized that it is necessary for curriculum developers in the Caribbean to establish their own conceptualization of multiculturalism, which may be very different, given the region's history and cultural experience, from that used in countries of Europe or North America, where multiculturalism in education is conceptualized from the perspective of a dominant culture dealing with the influx of migrants from what may be considered minority cultures.

It is necessary, therefore, that proposals for reform of the curriculum be analyzed from the outset to see whether, and how, the ideal of a multicultural curriculum is being realized. These considerations informed the research questions that drove the study.

Research Questions

The study sought to understand how the SEMP curriculum addresses the issue of cultural diversity in its proposals for teaching and learning Language Arts. It focused on the Form 1 curriculum, which represents students' introduction to Language Arts at the secondary level, and sets the stage for their construction of understandings about the field. Specifically, the study asked the following questions:

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1. What choices are made in the curriculum, in representing the cultures of the different racial and ethnic groups that contribute to the Trinidad and Tobago multicultural experience?
2. What approach does the curriculum take to integrating multicultural perspectives into the teaching of Language Arts?
3. What orientation to curriculum is reflected in its treatment of the cultural context, the proposed subject matter, and the learning experiences of the curriculum?

Limitations of the Study

- The study defined “culture” in this case to include primarily dimensions of race, ethnicity, and language. It is recognized, however, that other possible dimensions of cultural experience may have been considered, including gender.
- This stage of the study has been focused on the curriculum document for Form 1. However, the curriculum is being developed for all levels of the secondary school. At the time of writing, the development of the curriculum for Forms 4 and 5 is about to begin, and it is recognized that students’ overall curriculum experience in Language Arts may be somewhat different, once the whole scope and sequence of the curriculum are realized.

The Literature

Cultural dimensions of the Creole space

Many attempts have been made in the literature to come to terms with the concept of the “Creole space.” Allen (2002) has acknowledged the problem of arriving at definitions of the concepts “Creole” and “creolisation.” Allen refers to Kamau Brathwaite’s articulation of the cultural dimensions of the process of creolisation, “in which the arrivants and their progenitors forge a complex dynamic of group identity and interrelations” (p. 47). She notes that creolisation is being increasingly recognized as having worldwide importance, as scholars turn to the Caribbean region for tools with which to understand global culture/s. Warner-Lewis (2002) describes how dynamic and often paradoxical manifestations of the creolisation process can be identified in linguistic, artistic, and material cultures of the Caribbean. She explains that cultural

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artifacts and behaviours (including language) that are shaped by the process “exhibit syncretism, fragmentation, but also admit innovation” (p. 248). It is clear that one major force shaping that process is the formal education to which all young persons in the society are exposed.

Carrington (1988) has discussed some implications of this creolisation process for language users, teachers, and learners in the Caribbean. He describes features of Caribbean Creoles that reflect the qualities described by Warner-Lewis, and the asymmetrical relationships that often still exist between the official languages and the Creole vernaculars. Carrington notes that this leads to the deprecation of the Creole and Creole speakers in their own countries, since the Creole is still often associated with “lack of education ... lack of social grace” (p. 11). Craig (1999) notes that yet another challenge presented to Creole speakers required to learn Standard English is the fact that because the vernacular and the standard language share a lexicon, Creole speakers may not even recognize that they are not speaking English, and so may not be motivated to learn it.

Learning language for literacy in programmes of formal schooling also makes special demands on learners. As Baynham (1995) points out, students must make transitions between spoken and written languages, and between spontaneous and planned, casual and non-casual, and standard and non-standard uses of language. Kalantzis and Cope (1993) point out that students must also be able to make language transitions to meet the demands of different cultures of schooling and the different cultures of disciplines.

Language education in Caribbean contexts

Robertson (1996) argues that in the Caribbean, language education must be conceptualized to include tasks related to language learning and to language for literacy, and also to include a broader conception of the education process that reflects the unique experiences of Caribbean language learners. He identifies certain broader issues that must be addressed by language education within the Creole space, including: 1) the damage done by traditional understandings of the relationships between English and Creole to the psyche of Caribbean students, 2) the social disharmony that may be caused by “uninformed positions” in developing language policy for the Caribbean, and 3) the role of

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language competence in meeting the developmental needs of the countries of the region. These are all questions that a reformed Language Arts curriculum may be expected to address.

“Language awareness” may be considered a fundamental component of education in the Language Arts in Trinidad and Tobago. The importance of language awareness development for speakers of Caribbean Creoles who are being taught Standard English has been advocated by Craig (1999), and Simmons-McDonald (2001), among others. These writers argue that language awareness is a necessary dimension of the content of any curriculum that has, as a primary aim, learning Standard English. This is because a language awareness component can provide opportunities for Creole speakers to confront the differences and relationships between Creole languages and cultures and the dominant European languages and cultures that are the sources of the lexicons of the various Creoles. This focus on uses of language in society, and on language as cultural practice, implies that language awareness may be interpreted as being one dimension of “cultural awareness,” which, according to Hymes (1972, as cited in Byram, 1997) and van Ek (1986), is, in turn, one dimension of communicative competence. Gee (1996) also argues that every language is situated in a sociocultural context, and that appropriate use of language can only be achieved by cultivating an acceptable level of familiarity with that context.

Teaching and learning about culture

It may be argued that in the Caribbean, where cultures are in constant contact with one another, there is no need to teach language learners about the various cultures of the Caribbean. Yet Reddock (2002) has identified situations, in Trinidad and Tobago, where certain sub-groups within the society may choose to live apart from others, out of feelings of ambivalence and rejection of other cultures, or out of the fear of cultural domination. Situations also exist where some groups have been marginalized or stereotyped to the point where they are almost invisible to other groups. Mutual contact and extensive knowledge cannot, therefore, be taken for granted.

The literature notes various approaches to teaching and learning about different cultures. Fantini (1997), for example, proposes curriculum content that focuses on artifacts of the culture – the things people make;

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sociofacts – the ways in which people come together for different purposes; and mentifacts – people’s perspectives on reality. Banks (1993) notes that content for a multicultural curriculum can be selected from a range of areas of knowledge. These include mainstream academic knowledge, knowledge from popular culture, transformative academic knowledge, concepts and theories derived from personal experience, and schooled knowledge. Christensen (1994, as cited in Byram, 1997) argues that students should not be required to learn any particular combinations of beliefs, behaviour, and meanings dominant in a specific society, because since they are dominant, they represent primarily the interests of a powerful minority. Instead, Christensen proposes that learners should be taught methods of analyzing any cultural practices and meanings they encounter, whatever their status in the society. Byram (1997) suggests that Christensen’s approach can be used to promote critical analysis of the ways in which particular cultural practices and beliefs maintain the social position and power of particular groups.

Banks and Banks (1993) propose that the various approaches to integration of multicultural content in the curriculum be conceptualized along a continuum:

- *The contributions approach.* Mention of discrete elements, ethnic heroes, and events is added to the curriculum, selecting them by criteria taken from mainstream perspectives. No attempt is made to explore their significance or change the curriculum’s structure or dominant perspective in any way.
- *The additive approach.* Significant cultural content is integrated into the curriculum, and material may be studied from alternative perspectives. The structure is not basically changed.
- *The transformative approach.* This enables students to explore curriculum content from different cultural and ethnic perspectives, and changes the curriculum structure to facilitate the process. The focus of the curriculum is to understand the common culture as a synthesis of the diverse cultural elements.

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- *The social action approach.* This curriculum maintains the transformative approach, but also requires students to make decisions and take actions on cultural diversity issues.

These possible approaches to developing students' understanding about dimensions of the cultural contexts of language use may help language students in different ways, and to different extents, as they make decisions about the appropriate use of language in different contexts.

Teaching language in Caribbean multicultural contexts

An assimilationist approach, which excludes language awareness, dominated Caribbean education throughout the region's colonial past, and is still apparent in some curricula developed in Caribbean countries today. As Robertson (1996) describes it, in this approach English is taught on the assumption that its status as official standard language means that it is also Caribbean students' first language. The Creole that is students' true first language, and an important marker of Caribbean ethnicity, may therefore be entirely excluded from such a curriculum, the aim of which is to ensure that students attain an acceptable level of proficiency in the standard. In fact, in an assimilationist approach, even languages that are accepted as legitimate curriculum content may be taught in isolation. The cultures in which they originated are often not analyzed for their impact on language learners at all. In addition, it often happens that only cultural content from the dominant culture is included.

However, as Evans (2001) and Simmons-McDonald (2001) point out, approaches have been proposed to incorporate elements of the Creole within curricula in Caribbean countries, and some of these approaches have already been implemented in schools. These approaches may be described as either additive or transformative approaches, using the typology proposed by Banks and Banks (1993).

Curriculum orientations

Approaches to selecting and organizing content and learning experiences for any curriculum usually reflect a specific orientation, or specific orientations, to curriculum and curriculum inquiry. An

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orientation to curriculum is shaped by a certain curriculum philosophy and an understanding of the way learning takes place, which influences the choices of persons making curriculum decisions (Eisner, 1985). Thus, the Language Arts curriculum can be analyzed from the perspective of the orientation/s it may reveal.

Schubert (1986) suggests three orientations to curriculum: critical, or emancipatory; hermeneutic, or interpretive; and, finally, reflective of the dominant paradigm. Eisner (1985) himself describes five possible orientations to curriculum—curriculum for academic relevance; for development of cognitive processes; for self-actualization; for social relevance and reconstruction; and curriculum as technology, which purports to be value free and to be focused purely on the effective delivery of instruction.

More recent post-colonialist perspectives on curriculum propose that all aspects of culture (including language) and identity featured in the curriculum must be treated as the products of human encounters, arising from experiences of cross-culturalism and hybridity. From this perspective, the shaping of cultures is an ongoing process, for Hall (1990) maintains that within any community, several alternative communities are always struggling to surface.

Each of these orientations has implications for how issues of cultural difference and identity may be addressed in a Language Arts curriculum. Therefore, from an emancipatory or post-colonialist perspective, for instance, the curriculum will allow students the opportunity to critique the language and the literary canon, and to construct understandings of language as being continuously socially constructed in an interdependent world. On the other hand, an orientation to academic relevance would focus primarily on students' mastery of the Western canon in literature, and their mastery of the dominant language or languages of the society, as the benchmark of cultural literacy (Hirsch 1988). Where an academic relevance orientation would also perceive a divide between the traditions of the literary canon and the cultural forms of the developing world, or of minority groups, a critical approach would allow students to question the canon from the perspective of how language and the canon maintain certain groups in positions of social power. It would attempt to empower learners to re-create themselves as subjects having agency in their societies.

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Methodology

The data source for this paper was Sections 2-4 of the SEMP curriculum document issued for Form 1 Language Arts for secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Qualitative content analysis of the document, as described by Mayring (2000), focused on the statement of philosophy and goals, the proposed learning outcomes, and the techniques suggested for delivery of the curriculum and assessment of students. The analysis employed inductive category development, with open coding of the material informing step-by-step formulation of inductive categories. The initial categories were informed, but not dictated, by the researcher's familiarity with theoretical frameworks proposed in the literature, and by her professional familiarity with English curricula, as a teacher educator for English teachers. These areas of experience helped to develop "theoretical sensitivity" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As the analysis proceeded, original categories were subsumed into broader categories, or new categories were formed, as careful analysis of the data suggested was appropriate. Periodic checks on the reliability of the researcher's interpretations were conducted through consultation with other Language Arts specialists.

Findings

Curriculum representation of experiences from diverse cultures

The curriculum document does indeed make an attempt to identify cultural elements, including events, icons, tools, and technologies of different cultures, so as to illustrate and exemplify concepts related to language learning and literacy development. It also directs teachers and students to texts that can increase students' knowledge of such elements.

Input into the curriculum from the diverse cultures that contribute to the creolisation process is selected primarily from the dominant European and North American cultures, and from cultural practices of the numerically dominant Afro-Trinidadian and Indo-Trinidadian sectors of the population. Indo-Trinidadian cultural practices are selected primarily from the Hindu sector of the population, although there are occasional references to the Muslim religious festival of Eid, and to

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Hosay. Some cultural practices of minority groups such as African-Americans in North America are also included.

When, for instance, students are required to learn certain concepts related to the use of style in language, the genres used to provide examples of the concepts often reflect literacy practices situated in familiar sociocultural contexts. Thus, for example, teachers are advised to use festivals that are widely celebrated across groups within the culture, like the Hindu festival of Divali and the Christian festival of Christmas, as occasions for having students write informal letters to friends (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-46). It is also suggested that to enable students to differentiate between formal and informal occasions, they role-play conversations taken from familiar contexts. To teach the appropriate use of figurative language (p. 2-46) teachers are asked to ensure that students create “similes and metaphors that are Caribbean.”

Attempts in the curriculum to develop students’ affective responses to texts usually propose the use of genres from the popular culture, both indigenous and international, as most likely to evoke such affective responses. Content labelled “Emotional response to literature” is to be taught using, as resource material, traditional poems, rap from the African-American culture, or calypso, an indigenous art form (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-44). Poetry appreciation, it is recommended, will be taught by using resource materials such as chutney songs, also indigenous to the Caribbean and, again, the calypso (p. 2-78). The oral tradition, therefore, has a strong presence in the curriculum.

However, to help students construct understandings about generic structure, the curriculum proposes that they should be exposed primarily to examples of dominant genres from the literate cultures of the Western world – short stories, newspaper stories, and formal letters, for example.

The examples of such genres suggested, on the other hand, often make reference to icons, incidents, and themes from the local or wider Caribbean cultural context. For instance, in learning “Reading Skills,” students are expected to be familiar with sub-genres within books, such as the title page. Examples proposed for study are local texts like

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Caribbean Poetry Now. Proposed for assessment are such questions as, “On what pages will you find poems by Louise Bennett?” [the Jamaican poet] (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-38). When students are to be taught to use the encyclopedia, they are to be encouraged to search for information about iconic local figures like Dr. Eric Williams, Trinidad’s first Prime Minister; the Trinidadian Nobel Prize winner, Sir Vidia Naipaul; and the dancer, Beryl McBurnie, as well as international figures like Dr. Martin Luther King (pp. 2-39, 2-42).

It must be noted that the majority of the examples proposed are persons who would be considered in the society as being of primarily Afro-Trinidadian or Indo-Trinidadian origin—the numerically dominant racial groups in the society. The festivals cited are generally either Christian or mainstream Hindu, with limited references to Muslim festivals. Other cultural practices and significant persons in the society, reflecting the beliefs of, for example, the Baha’i or the Orisha, are not evoked in this curriculum. Iconic figures named do not include persons from, for example, the Syrian-Lebanese community, although this community now exercises significant economic power. Hence the curriculum, in attempting to acknowledge the contributions of different groups, excludes many. It also simplifies the way in which different permutations of race and ethnicity characterize the society.

Nevertheless, there are explicit attempts to engender a value for persons and practices of all cultures in the country. When, for example, the curriculum introduces the concept of “descriptive vocabulary,” it suggests that students be asked to use such vocabulary to describe persons whom they know. The “connected activity” proposed in this case is described as “seeing beauty in self and other people” (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-32). Also, a proposed discussion of family structures includes not only the dominant nuclear family, but also the extended family, which is a much more familiar concept for many Trinidadians.

Students’ experience of popular culture, and especially of the mass media and popular music, is acknowledged throughout. In fact, a component of the curriculum deals with media literacy, and students are introduced to texts produced by the popular media, including films and television shows like soap operas and cartoons, and advertisements from the print media. For the most part, however, while students are

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encouraged to analyze the technologies the mass media use to compose their messages, they are not required to critique the messages themselves, which, consequently, are invested with significant power. In fact, teachers are most often encouraged to ask students to identify the benefits of the mass media. When, on occasion, students are to be encouraged to critically analyze mass media (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-127) the critique is focused on individual programmes they may have heard or seen, rather than on mass media as a social institution, with powers of representing reality from certain perspectives.

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Language as dominant cultural practice

It is noteworthy that, in spite of its attempts to ensure that a range of cultural experience is presented, and valued, the most significant feature of the Language Arts curriculum is that it communicates an expectation that students' own communications with others should be conducted primarily in Standard English. This is to happen, apparently, even when the context of language use is not formal, and does not relate to the production of academic or other formal, written texts. For example, students are to be taught the concept "idiomatic expressions" (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-111), but the examples of idiomatic expressions proposed do not seem to acknowledge that there is a place among the Language Arts they are learning for even those Trinidadian Creole idiomatic expressions, like "going on a lime," that are used in a range of social contexts.

Each term's work includes a section dedicated solely to the mechanics of language, but this section never refers to the mechanics of the Trinidad or Tobago English Creole, even for the purpose of differentiating between English and Creole structures. The curriculum does not articulate a need for students to develop language awareness related to the specific differences between the grammatical features of the English and the English Creole, and to how they are used in different contexts. Even when the resource materials for teachers, which form part of the document, describe the language experience approach as a strategy for teaching reading (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 4-8), no adaptation of the approach is proposed to meet the specific needs of Creole-speaking secondary school students when such a strategy is employed, in spite of the fact that the philosophy behind the strategy is that the student's own language experience is to be respected.

The document does signal that students are permitted to use the Creole under carefully defined situations, related to learning how it can be incorporated into English language narratives they produce, and signalled as being the speech of fictional persona by quotation marks. When they are to be assessed for their ability to produce narrative writing, the sample instrument provided notes, as one criterion for assessment, "Use of dialogue (vernacular structures acceptable)" (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 3-24).

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There is only one place in the entire curriculum document where a Creole structure is provided as an example of possible ways of using language in an identified sociocultural context. Even then, it is there to be stigmatized as being among “Impolite ways of speaking. (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-71). In the example, it is proposed that classes should discuss the language used by a young person, depicted as asking on the telephone, “Owicho going to the savannah later?” The curriculum directs that the student should compare this with the “acceptable” form: “Good day. I am Jackie. Can you tell me if Owicho will be going to the savannah later?” It may well be that the primary focus is the absence of the salutation, but the document does not make this clear. What is clear, however, is that the impolite speaker betrays his rudeness while using a Creole grammatical structure.

One attempt is made to explicitly put the Trinidad English Creole lexicon into its sociocultural context. When students are to be taught the meanings of unfamiliar words, teachers are advised to teach them the history of words and phrases like Hosay, Chutney, Dimanche Gras, and silly mid on (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-79). The words selected refer to a range of practices reflecting the meeting of European, African, and Indian cultures, in the common cultural space of Trinidadian Creole culture.

However, no opportunity is explicitly provided in the curriculum for students to distinguish between uses of the two language systems in different contexts, or to make choices as to when it might be appropriate to use each. It is left to teachers to decide when and how this is going to happen, or if it ever will.

Attempts at curriculum integration

As indicated above, the attempts at integration focus largely on integration of cultural content with knowledge of concepts from the dominant language. Thus, cultural content related to knowledge of practices, icons, tools, and texts is integrated with knowledge of language skills and concepts by using one area of knowledge as a context for understanding another. Information about the culture students have already been exposed to as members of the society, or of specific racial or ethnic groups, may be used to help them to develop certain language skills. It is assumed that they will know the culture’s values for a good

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calypso, for instance, and that they can use that knowledge to develop an effective argument about what constitutes a good calypso. They can also tap their knowledge of cultural contexts in which that skill will be relevant and necessary (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-92).

The curriculum also proposes occasional opportunities for students to integrate the knowledge of the classroom with their knowledge of the cultural life of the community, as when, for example, teachers are directed to have elders of the community come in to provide descriptions of community life, so that students can see how information can be made vivid through use of language (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-114).

There is, however, only a very limited attempt made to integrate their multiple experiences of different uses of language across contexts and cultures with the language rules and genres that they are now learning. No attempt is made to tap their experience of how choices between two language systems can be integrated into one stretch of discourse, or of the contexts in which these choices are made.

Curriculum orientations

The curriculum reflects multiple, and sometimes contradictory, orientations. The statement of the vision that informs it notes that Language Arts must portray a way of life that reflects “the ideal culture” (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-2). It asserts, in its rationale, that “great literature allows the writer to delineate and define reality. To be conscious of this it is necessary to be immersed in their works” (p. 2-3). At the same time, however, the document claims that this curriculum “moulds citizens who ... appreciate the diversity inherent in a multicultural society” (p. 2-3). There is no apparent recognition of possible tensions between the two perspectives.

Teaching and assessment of language in the curriculum are conducted from one dominant perspective—that of speakers of English as a First Language. Students are expected to learn the Standard English, but there is no acknowledgement of the Trinidad and Tobago Creoles that constitute a first language or dialect for many of them. In addition, no attempt is made to have students examine critically what the advantages and limitations are of having to either study a language that is not their

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own or be penalized for using their own first language or dialect. All the assessments for speaking and writing include a criterion "Use of Standard English" (e.g., T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, pp. 3-13, 3-14, 3-18).

Even when students are allowed to examine the use of Creole structures in social contexts, they are rarely to be encouraged to think of themselves as using the language themselves. Students are to be required, instead, to imagine the Creole as being used by market vendors or shopkeepers, not by educated people (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 2-128). Thus a dominant message is sent, which perpetuates the stigmatization of the Creole as unacceptable, uneducated, or impolite. The attitude to the Creole - Standard relationship therefore establishes a divide, which is constructed from an orientation to what Eisner (1985) has termed "academic relevance." Students are to develop cultural literacy, assessed by their control of cultural capital from a dominant Western culture of language use.

The inclusion of cultural practices is used partly as a stimulus for the development of concepts about language, by connecting new ideas with previous personal knowledge (T&T. Ministry of Education, 2002, pp. 2-79, 2-128). It also appears to be used as a means of making the curriculum relevant to students, and of making the language learning experience fulfilling to them. The curriculum also attempts to provide students with a stock of knowledge about the cultural icons and a more limited exposure to the significant literacy practices of their society, such as the practice of composing and performing texts from the oral tradition for commentary or description. The inclusion of cultural practice thus seems to reflect some orientations to self-actualization and social relevance. However, no attempt is made to introduce students to methods, or provide them with opportunities to question the dominant language agenda, or to see language use as entailing the possibility of informed choice. Therefore, it may be argued that the proposed orientation to teaching Language Arts is almost totally uncritical.

Discussion

As may have been expected, many of the contradictions and tensions within the society with regard to issues of language and culture are reflected within the SEMP Language Arts curriculum. It seems obvious

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that the curriculum developers have not arrived at a rational approach to dealing with these contradictions.

The first and most important of these has to do with the philosophy that informs the curriculum as it relates to what must be considered the ideal culture, as described in the curriculum vision statement. In a Creole society where so many cultures and combinations of cultures co-exist, what is to be considered the “ideal culture”? Is any one ideal possible? And what are the criteria to be used to select important features of the ideal for teaching the young of the Trinidad and Tobago society? Also, if another ideal towards which the curriculum is aimed is to reflect and respect all cultural experiences of young people, what are the grounds for inclusion of particular cultural practices in the curriculum, given that inclusion of any necessitates exclusion of others?

Another issue that must be clarified is the aim of the curriculum with regard to the language learning experience. The curriculum attempts to cultivate effective language-in-use, but has not yet arrived at a position with regard to important language and literacy practices when the English and the Creole language systems compete in providing effective ways to communicate in various contexts of use. It assumes a stance of respecting students’ personal knowledge and cultural experience, but does not signal the need to accommodate the wealth of knowledge and experience they already have, of using language in situations that may require them to shift codes continuously within a single stretch of discourse.

The curriculum document reflects a static view of language use in the society. The assumption is still that learners must simply be able to choose English over any English Creole, and to distinguish between “polite” forms of language and “impolite” forms. It must be questioned what tools it gives students to deal appropriately with situations where, for example, some students may at times have to move from speaking Trinidad English Creole with friends, interspersed with influences from the Jamaican English Creole and African-American English as they discuss popular music and films, to using the language appropriate to different disciplinary communities during the school day, and then to using Trinidad English Creole intermixed with Hindi and, possibly, Bhojpuri at a puja or Hindu prayer session at night. In each case, the

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cultural practices of different communities will establish different criteria for appropriate use of language.

Preparation for successful interaction on these occasions demands that students be given the opportunity to develop a more sophisticated and critical language awareness, so that they will know how best to choose. They should develop awareness not only of the differences between the vernacular they already command and the Standard they are expected to learn, but also of how each can be a language of power within identified contexts. They are exposed to a limited, but somewhat unrealistic, range of choices in the experiences of the SEMP curriculum, and little opportunity to develop principles for making those choices with confidence. There is no exposure, certainly, to the concept of more and less powerful discourses, and no opportunity to learn what factors must be considered in evaluating the power inherent in opting to use a certain type of discourse in a given context. Yet, these are factors that must be addressed urgently, if the curriculum is to be effective in helping students to develop true communicative competence.

Conclusion

It must be recognized, in evaluating the curriculum, that many of the issues that it fails to address are in fact potential sources of intense conflict in the society. It is therefore unlikely that the teachers and Curriculum Officers who developed the curriculum would have the power to make the necessary decisions about the role of language, and about ways of dealing with cultural issues, which might have addressed some of the challenges that have not been faced in this curriculum. The wish to reflect true respect for all the cultures that constitute the society can only be realized in the context of well-conceived language and culture policies at the national level. Without such policies, even the best-planned curriculum is likely to be ignored, or to be subject to vituperation in the ongoing struggle among languages and cultures for their place in the Trinidad and Tobago society.

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