This paper examines the gap between myth and reality in foreign language planning in the state of Trinidad and Tobago. It argues that in the absence of a coherent, well-articulated foreign language planning policy, the popular misconception that language learning is a marginal activity continues to hold sway. In support of this contention, it draws on a recent study conducted among first-year language undergraduates (Carter, 1998), where only 8.57% of the population surveyed expressed agreement with the statement that people in their country place a lot of importance on learning foreign languages. This paper suggests that the role of the Caribbean linguist and foreign language educator must be to separate myth from reality, and raise public awareness about the critical need for foreign language competence in the Caribbean citizen of the 21st century.

Introduction

The Dutch linguist van Els (1992, cited in Tucker, 1997) contends that the trump card of competence in a variety of foreign languages is increasing in value. Tucker (1997), for his part, sees the foreign language proficiency of American citizens as a natural and national resource, something to be preserved and promoted. Caribbean linguists (see, for example, Morris, 1985 and Solomon, 1987) are equally convinced that foreign language competence must be developed among citizens of the region. Yet, while the Netherlands has a national language policy and Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century (1999) articulates the US perspective, Caribbean states are still grappling with the issues involved in formulating national language policies. Linguists in the English-speaking Caribbean find that very little has been implemented at the level of public policy to make foreign language proficiency a reality for the Caribbean person. Whyte (1995) argues that neglect, inaction, and indecision at the state level have far too often characterized language planning policy in the Anglophone Caribbean.
In their introduction to *Language Myths*, Bauer and Trudgill (1998) make the point that linguists need to be more proactive in informing the general public about language. They argue that in the face of linguists' failure to do this, other people in the society—editors, journalists, and so on—become purveyors of information about linguistics, without the benefit of knowledge that only specialists can provide. Bauer and Trudgill argue that linguists must assume responsibility for making linguistics more accessible to the public and, in so doing, dispel some of the myths; some of the "well-established ideas about language...that ordinary people have" (p. xvi).

The author of this paper concurs that linguists must play an important role in dispelling some of the myths, and bringing clarification to the sub-field of language that relates to language planning. However, there is much evidence to suggest that for almost half a century, Caribbean linguists have been trying to raise awareness about linguistic issues by seeking to inform policy making in the region. It has now become necessary for linguists to employ an additional strategy, and to focus on raising public awareness about linguistic issues by interfacing directly with the public. Yet, a public awareness approach is still likely to be unsuccessful, unless the planners, that is, Caribbean decision-makers, become more proactive than they have been traditionally. This paper contends that in attributing blame for the persistence of certain myths about language and language planning, Caribbean politicians must bear their fair share. It is the failure of the region's politicians to implement the many plans and projects proposed by the region's language specialists that has helped to foster public indifference to language issues.

In the area between the definition of the goals of language planning and the implementation of these goals, the ground is littered with false starts and stillborn projects. In the absence of a coherent and well-articulated national language policy, goals may be defined and projects implemented in a piecemeal fashion, but the fragmented nature of such an approach contributes little to the advancement of the field. Fortunately, or unfortunately, this is not a uniquely Caribbean phenomenon. Ingram (1989) contends that an apparent lack of planning and seemingly ad hoc policy implementation is not unusual in the field of foreign language planning in education. He posits that "language-in-education planning is more often unsystematic, incidental to other policy-making, and piecemeal than it is rational, systematic,
integrated, or comprehensive" (p. 54). Many policy documents (Caribbean Community Secretariat, 1993; Caribbean Examinations Council, 1996) and regional spokespersons (Bourne, 1993; McIntyre, 1995; Thomas, 1997) underline the need for language proficiency to be a core competency of the Caribbean citizen. But given the failure of the present approach to language planning to translate into the kind of vibrant language awareness that the region desires, it is perhaps time to adopt an approach that can be characterized as rational, systematic, integrated, and comprehensive.

A National Language Policy

Medley (1995) points to the merit of having a national language policy as the broad framework to support language learning/teaching goals. He argues that "the establishment of a national language policy. . . lends credibility to the discipline itself by acknowledging a need at the highest levels of government for the benefits to be derived from the study of foreign languages" (p. 154). He issues a word of caution, however, insisting that measures must be put in place to ensure the success of public policy. Medley stresses that (a) public policy must be goal-oriented action, rather than random measures; (b) public policies must consist of courses or patterns of action by governmental officials rather than their separate, discrete decisions; and (c) policies should reflect actual steps taken and not simply planned actions or statements of intent. The last point is especially relevant to the issues being examined in this paper for, as Medley states, "the fact that a government endorses something does not mean that it will materialise" (p. 154). Morris (1989), among others, expresses a similar view, noting that "it is clear that the desired goals for foreign language teaching in the Caribbean will remain at the level of ideals unless certain steps are taken" (p. 51). A brief overview of the "Removal of Language Barriers Project" (see Solomon, 1978 and 1987 for reports on this project) illustrates how well-founded the arguments of Medley and Morris are, in relation to the gap between official endorsement of policies and the implementation of such policies.

The decision to work toward the removal of language barriers in the region was made at the inaugural meeting of the Caribbean Development and Co-operation Committee (CDCC) in Havana, Cuba, in 1975. At the second session of the CDCC, the signatory governments reiterated their desire to remove language barriers, and agreed that a staff of translators and interpreters should be trained to cater for the
projected increase in regional collaboration. They further agreed that measures should be taken in order to (a) increase the number of people speaking the official languages of the region, and (b) stimulate the need for speaking the region's official languages. The holding of a "Regional Workshop on the Removal of Language Barriers in the Caribbean" was meant to be a landmark stage in the implementation of this project. The Workshop would be the concretization of what had hitherto been discussed as public policy, and then conceptualized by the linguist retained as consultant to the project. Yet, despite the commitment of the region's governments to the programme, and despite the fact that the workshop would involve "the widest possible participation of relevant policy-makers, language teachers, especially teachers holding pivotal positions in universities, teacher-training institutions and perhaps senior secondary schools" (Solomon, 1987), the planned workshop took four years to materialize. Martinus (1995) states that financial constraints were responsible for this delay. It is likely, though, that while financial constraints could have been the ostensible reason, other reasons may have contributed to the delay. It is not inconceivable that although regional governments may have shown enthusiasm for the project when meeting in inter-governmental fora, in private they were less eager to commit their country's money and resources to a project in a low-priority sector such as language education, unless they could be assured of strong public support for the idea.

At the level of the nation state, a similar gap between goals and their implementation can be seen. Thus, even though attempts have been made at language planning, usually at the instigation of linguists and other academics, the translation of these goals into concrete actions is often undermined by the lack of political will and or financial resources. It seems that decade after decade, in spite of good intentions and impassioned calls for more dynamic ways to promote language learning, language planning is characterized by the ad hoc and the ephemeral--a phenomenon which seems to be generalized throughout the Anglophone Caribbean. However, since it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an analysis of the region as a whole, this paper will look specifically at the context of Trinidad and Tobago, the context with which this writer is most familiar.
The "Removal of Language Barriers Project" was conceived as a two-pronged approach to promoting multilingualism in the region. Thus, while certain interventions would occur at the regional level, others would be focused at the level of the state. Consequently, two instruments were to be established to achieve the objectives identified at the inception of the project. At the regional level, a Caribbean Language Institute (CLI) was proposed, while the National Chapters/Committees of the CLI (NCCLI) were designated to conduct the work of the CLI in each territory. In Trinidad and Tobago, the decision was made in 1988 to establish a National Chapter/Committee, a move that was fully endorsed by the Education Minister of the day, according to whom:

The first task of the NCCLI's would be to formulate National Language Plans as a basis for national and regional language planning and policy. Other NCCLI activities [would] include:

(i) the conducting of relevant research in the field of language teaching/learning, as well as their own countries' language needs;
(ii) the organisation of workshops, seminars, conferences and other activities to meet national training needs;
(iii) the creation of a data bank on language teaching and learning, language teaching personnel and language resource materials. The data bank will be linked to the Regional Data Bank of CLI;
(iv) the encouragement of the use of appropriate modern technology.
(Pantin, 1988, p. 172)

While there have been individual attempts to promote the activities identified in (i), (ii), and (iv) above, to the best of this writer's knowledge, a collaborative approach to language planning under the auspices of a National Chapter has never been institutionalized. A decade and several Ministers of Education later, the data bank still does not exist, and the National Language Plan is something advocated by linguists (see Solomon, 1987), but nothing more than a "foreign" concept to the majority of the population.
Results of Survey on Language Learning

A population that is largely unaware of the need for foreign language proficiency is, by extension, one that places little value on foreign language learning, as a recent survey conducted by this writer revealed. This survey (Carter, 1998) was conducted among first-year undergraduates (N=35) at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. The respondents, who were language majors and minors, were asked to give their opinions about a number of issues relating to language teaching/learning in their society. The instrument used in this study was the "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)," a research instrument developed by Horwitz (1988) to investigate the beliefs of second/foreign language learners. Four beliefs (see Appendix) expressed by the students are significant to the discussion in this paper.

In Item 24 of the BALLI, respondents were asked to indicate whether "people in Trinidad and Tobago place a lot of importance on learning foreign languages." The students' answers to this question revealed very clearly that, in their opinion, there is little societal support for foreign language learning. A total of 68.57% of the students disagreed/strongly disagreed that language learning was important in their country. Of these, a larger percentage, 40%, strongly disagreed, while the remainder disagreed. Small percentages of students, however, expressed an opposing view--2.86% strongly agreed and 5.71% agreed that their fellow citizens value foreign language learning.

In another item, Item 26, respondents were asked to given an opinion on whether people in their country were good at learning foreign languages. The majority of those surveyed opted to take a neutral position on the issue. In response to the statement, "People in Trinidad and Tobago are good at learning foreign languages," 68.57% of the students neither agreed nor disagreed, while 22.86% of the students agreed and 8.57% of them disagreed. No student strongly disagreed. It is possible that the expression of neutrality may simply be a case of prudence on the part of the students, who were hesitant to admit that their fellow citizens were "good at learning foreign languages." However, it is interesting to analyze the students' responses in terms of what Horwitz (1988) calls the group language learning self-image. Horwitz posits that the answer given by respondents to Item 26 (People in my country are good at learning foreign languages) reveals what they think of the language learning potential of their fellow citizens.
According to this hypothesis, these students are ambivalent about the language learning potential of their fellow citizens. It is unlikely, in that case, that the group language learning self-image will be very high.

The two other items that are most significant to this paper refer to the respondents' beliefs about motivation. Items 19 and 28 sought to investigate the students' motivation in terms of the traditional instrumental/integrative dichotomy (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Item 19 investigated whether the students' French language learning was governed by instrumental needs, while Item 28 sought to determine whether these students were chiefly motivated by integrative needs.

When students were asked whether speaking the target language well would help them gain employment, just one student (statistically 2.86% of the respondents) strongly agreed that French language learning could serve an instrumental purpose in the society, while 22.86% agreed that by speaking French well they might obtain employment. The largest percentage of students, 45.71%, neither agreed nor disagreed that French language learning served an instrumental purpose. Approximately one quarter of the students felt there was only a tenuous link between French language learning and job opportunities—14.29% strongly disagreed and 8.57% disagreed (see Appendix). On the other hand, when learners were asked whether "it is necessary to speak their language in order to communicate successfully with native speakers," the majority of students agreed that one needed to speak the second/foreign language (L2) to communicate successfully with L2 speakers—22 students expressed this view; 7 students (20%) strongly agreed and 15 students (42.86%) agreed. While no student strongly disagreed with this view, there were some dissenting voices—17.14% of the respondents disagreed and a slightly larger percentage, 20%, was neutral on the issue. Horwitz (1988) suggests that learners who agree that they need to speak the L2 well to communicate with L2 speakers are demonstrating the primacy of an integrative motivation.

What the data from this study reveal is that in spite of arguments advanced by a number of prominent spokespersons, from linguists and other academics (Bourne, 1993; Craig, 1992; McIntyre, 1995; Morris, 1989; Ramchand, 1994 as cited in Morris, 1997; Pantin, 1989; Robertson, 1993; Thomas, 1997) to business executives (Yetming, 1995), that fluency in the languages of the region is imperative for functioning in the Caribbean context in the 21st century, the students are aware of the
dissonance between, on the one hand, official statements and, on the other, (the lack of) official and popular support for this ideal. This is perhaps why they do not consider the society very supportive of foreign language learning; are doubtful about the aptitude for foreign language learning of their compatriots; and do not think that their fluency in French will be an asset in gaining employment. One positive belief, though, is that they consider foreign language proficiency essential for interaction with L2 speakers. This is significant because it underscores the need for language planning in the Caribbean region to integrate instrumental and integrative goals.

It may be argued by some that the size of the population surveyed precludes the writer from making any emphatic statements about the perceptions about language education/language planning in the country. However, there are several reasons why the opinions of these students, future foreign language professionals, need to be considered:

- Their status as advanced learners of French and Spanish, who have been exposed to 7+ years, or approximately 500 hours, of foreign language instruction, means that they have a greater sensitivity to language issues than does the average citizen.
- By opting for tertiary level language study, these students have indicated an interest in functioning as foreign language professionals or, at least, using languages as an ancillary skill in their professional lives.
- While, in absolute terms, the population surveyed was a small one, there was a 92% rate of response to the survey; in other words, almost all the students in the course completed the survey.

Based on the foregoing reasons, it seems clear that the students’ beliefs should not be discounted, and that their scepticism about the degree of language awareness in Trinidad and Tobago should be cause for great concern.
An Awareness of Language Issues

Concern about the degree of language awareness in the Caribbean has been a frequent theme among researchers. Among those who have adopted a critical stance to language planning policy is Whyte (1995). In his paper, “Toward a policy on foreign language study for the Commonwealth Caribbean,” he makes an important point about public policy. He contends that public policy is as much the result of what governments fail to do as what they do. According to Whyte’s argument, in matters of public policy, a government’s inaction is no less eloquent than its action. It is not enough, therefore, to pay lip service to the ideal of foreign language proficiency when all other signals indicate that language issues are low on the list of the state’s priorities. The reality of the deficiencies in foreign language planning in Trinidad and Tobago cannot escape the scrutiny of those who have even a partial understanding of what is at stake.

In its overview of language policy planning, this paper has maintained that over the years many persons, both language specialists and non-specialists, have presented a rationale for the development of multilingual competence among the region’s citizens. The need to treat with the multilingual and multicultural nature of the Caribbean has been a recurring theme. As the Caribbean enters the 21st century, a number of factors in the political, economic, and social spheres underscore the urgency of adopting a rational, systematic, integrated, and comprehensive approach to language planning. The first of these relates to political issues, in particular, the status of Cuba and Haiti in the region. Some points to ponder include:

- The imminent normalization of Cuban-American relationships and the resulting power shift when the US lifts its embargo on Cuba.
- What role will an “unfettered” Cuba play in the Caribbean region?
- Does the Anglophone Caribbean possess a level of proficiency in Spanish to engage in reciprocal relationships with Cuba?
- The present marginalization of Haiti within the region because of its political instability.
Can the region continue to ignore the need for fluency in at least two foreign languages and continue to reject multilingualism (Haiti and the French-speaking islands notwithstanding) because of the accepted view that the thrust in language teaching/learning should be toward English-Spanish bilingualism.

Secondly, as technology makes e-commerce a reality, what are the implications for multilingual, intra-regional trade? Multilingual entrepreneurs need not confine themselves to regional markets, but by exploiting the multilingual Caribbean diaspora in Europe and North America, entrepreneurs can widen their Caribbean client base.

Thirdly, there are compelling social reasons to encourage the spread of multilingual competence. In the same way that a case can be made for the promotion of technological literacy among all sectors of the population, a case can be made for the promotion of multilingual competence. The widening gap between the haves and the have-nots in Caribbean societies impels us to be constantly vigilant; to safeguard equity in the allocation of resources. To date, foreign language proficiency has tended to be a badge of elitism, a skill possessed by secondary- and tertiary-level graduates. If fluency in the region’s official languages is to become a competency of Caribbean citizens in the 21st century, how might this be best accomplished for the population at large? Wright’s (1995) analysis of language education in the context of the European Union is instructive in this regard. She argues that the minority of citizens who master two foreign languages will constitute the political and administrative élites of the European community. She continues by discussing the implications of this, “The tendency of these classes to reproduce themselves would be encouraged, since those whose wealth makes them mobile and gives them international contacts are in a privileged position to acquire a second language” (p. 153). Caribbean countries will need to guard against a similar trend. Looked at from this perspective, promoting universal multilingual competence is one way of facilitating equity and social harmony in our small states.
Conclusion

The development of multilingual competence in the languages of the region can no longer be treated as a pleasant, but rather unrealistic, dream, shared by linguists and other foreign language specialists. The reality of the 21st century and the twin demons of globalization and balkanization challenge small societies, like those in the Caribbean, to preserve and promote their natural resources. Foreign language proficiency is such a resource for the Caribbean citizen. Planners and policy makers must understand this, and join with linguists in dispelling the myth that foreign language proficiency is of little importance to the average citizen.

Facing up to the reality of the need for the region’s citizens to interact beyond their primary language group must lead to an aggressive public awareness campaign to make language learning a regional and national priority. As the Caribbean enters the 21st century, the time is ripe to shed some of the old myths of the past age and embrace a new reality premised on self-awareness, and an understanding of the shared destiny of our people. Our goal must be for a “community of communication” (Wright, 1995, p. 157), with the region’s languages acting as bridges, rather than barriers, to greater communication and interaction. It is time, therefore, to employ rational, systematic, integrated, and comprehensive methods to translate the myth of a multicultural, multilingual Caribbean into a reality.

References


