

A CALL TO ACTION Will French Survive this Time in the School Curriculum in Trinidad and Tobago?¹

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This paper examines the interface between language planning and French language teaching/learning in Trinidad and Tobago. It does not revisit the larger policy issues on the role and status of French (see, for example, Carter, 2000 and Carter, 2001 for such discussions), but focuses instead on how a bottom-up approach to language planning is critical to ensuring the viability of French in the school curriculum. Mindful of Stern's (1983) contention that, "the planning process ... includes constant renewal and revision" (p. 431), this paper argues that a bottom-up approach to language planning is more likely to contribute to a focus on renewal and revision, than has been possible to date with a top-down approach. In this regard, the paper offers some suggestions to French language teachers—an important group of stakeholders—since they can play a significant role in fighting attrition in French language learning. In conclusion, this paper suggests that while subject specialists must act as catalysts for renewal and revision, language policy and planning would be better served by a more comprehensive approach, including all teachers of language. Such a holistic approach would see educators recognizing the interconnectedness of their task, and ensuring that language planning is geared to nurturing the multilingual communicator of the future in today's classrooms.

Language Policy and Planning

Language policy making and planning is described as an "official, government-level activity" (Robinson, 1988, cited in Ingram, 1989) concerned with formulating a country's official position on a wide range of language-related phenomena. According to this view,

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at "New Perspectives in Francophone and Hispanic Studies," The University of the West Indies (UWI), Cave Hill, Barbados, 5-7 June, 2002.

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language planning and policy is a macro-activity, comparable to social and economic planning and thus properly the purview of what Wright (1995) labels “government-authorised” agencies. Weinstein (1989, cited in Weinstein, 1990), for example, suggests that the role of contemporary language policy and planning in France is to preserve the identity of the French society and the power of the French state in world affairs.

Kaplan (1993/1994) concurs that language planning should not be restricted to linguistic phenomena, for example, grammatical, lexical, or phonological change, but that issues such as attitudinal change, values change, and economic and political changes are all within the remit of language policy and planning. Taken collectively, these positions on the role of language policy and planning seem to imply that the state is the driving force in determining language policy and engineering language planning, although intellectual and power elites may have a non-negligible effect (see, for example, Cooper, 1989, cited in Wright, 1995). To sum up, the prevailing view in the literature is that language policy and planning is a top-down activity, emanating from the state.

This paper argues that the top-down model of planning, the preferred model of language policy and planning to date, has not sufficiently engaged the other stakeholders in the system—teachers, parents, the business sector, and so on. In the Trinidad and Tobago context, or even the wider Caribbean context, there is little evidence to suggest that the model of the state as language planner has been a very successful one. It is true that a number of policy documents show that the state is not unaware of the role played by foreign languages in the curriculum. In the draft *Education Plan 1985-1990* (Trinidad and Tobago [T&T], 1985, pp. 14-15), the place of foreign language learning as an essential component of modern education is clearly spelt out. Education must serve to:

- (g) develop an appreciation of the interdependency of the peoples and nations of the world, the need to work to foster a greater spirit of mutual understanding among nations and the ways in which Trinidad and Tobago can participate in this process;
- (h) equip citizens to participate with profit and to contribute significantly at the international level;
- (i) enable its citizens, through its foreign language teaching programmes, to be able to communicate with a reasonable degree of facility in at least one foreign language.

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This was as a follow-up of an earlier statement contained in the draft *Plan for Educational Development in Trinidad and Tobago, 1968-1983* (cited in Morris, 1985, p. 47), which advocated the inclusion of a modern language in the junior secondary curriculum:

to develop an awareness of the structure and sound of either French or Spanish and of the culture of Spanish or French-speaking peoples of the world especially in the Caribbean area; to promote facility in elementary conversation in these languages and to provide an adequate grammatical foundation for the further study.

One could also say that the rationale for foreign language learning contained in the Caribbean Examination Council's (CXC) most recent foreign language syllabus, that is, the *Modern Languages Syllabus* (1996), is a fair indication of the foreign language education policy of Trinidad and Tobago, and the other member countries of the CXC. The rationale states in part:

The Caribbean is a unique meeting place of different races, cultures, languages, social structures and political systems. Four official languages are spoken in countries which are now beginning to appreciate that strength lies in unity. Our task is to contribute pro-actively to this process by encouraging students to develop a positive orientation to the country, or countries, of the target language(s) and thereby contribute to development at the personal, as well as the international level. (1996, p. 1)

Yet, despite the noble ideals contained in these documents, few would suggest that in Trinidad and Tobago, the state has aggressively pursued a language policy with the same vigour that it has managed fiscal or trade policies, for example. In the absence of proactive state planning, language planning seems subject to prevailing winds and currents. It is left to the other stakeholders in the education system to step in and fill the breach. More often than not, stakeholder intervention is in an ad hoc manner, in response to some particular problem.

A recent example of such intervention arose in response to the CXC's decision to discontinue the January sitting of Caribbean Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC) French from 2003. This decision was made on pragmatic grounds. It had proven to be far from cost effective to

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conduct an examination for a population of fewer than 100 candidates in the January sitting, compared to the 3,000 plus candidates who sit the June examinations. Yet, in the absence of a clear policy statement from either the Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Information, clarifying the reason for the discontinuation of the January examinations, the move was interpreted as further evidence of the attrition of French in the school curriculum.

On a positive note, the suggestion that French would be removed from the school curriculum was not greeted with public approval, as might have been expected, given the perceived attrition in French language learning. The public's dismay in reaction to the rumoured removal suggested that any attempt to remove French from the syllabus would be an unpopular decision. The controversy that was sparked by this incident put paid to the assumption of French being of minimal importance in the Spanish-dominated Americas. Instead, it forced stakeholders to reiterate the historical, political, and cultural role of French in Trinidad and Tobago (see, for example, Carrington, Borely, & Knight, 1974; Carter, 2000; Robertson, 1993). The public outcry suggested that many see the economic and cultural merit of having at least two of the region's languages taught in the nation's schools. Temporarily, at least, French has earned a reprieve. Though it may be premature to speak of language revival and language expansion, the often-mooted death of French is unlikely to occur in the immediate future. Nonetheless, those who see the continuing need for French in the curriculum should look upon what happened as a wake-up call and think of what action is needed to keep French language learning energized.

As comforting as the public support for French was on this occasion, one cannot help but wonder what would have happened if the public had adopted another stance. What would have been the official response if the public had supported the removal of French from the curriculum? Would the primary constituents of French language learning—the teachers and students of French—been able to do anything to stem the tide of public opinion? It is perhaps out of concern for this kind of eventuality, and also in keeping with the contemporary focus on bottom-up models of development, that some have been calling on teachers to see a role for themselves in language policy and planning.

Teachers as Language Planners

Díaz-Rico (1995) believes that one way to forestall a scenario in which some of the other stakeholders—the business community, lobbies, sectarian interests—determine the direction of language policy and planning is by stressing teacher agency in the planning and policy process. She argues that, “if teachers do not influence planning and policy, decisions will be made by others: by the force of popular opinion, by politicians, by bureaucrats, by demagogues” (p. 11). Whyte (1995) also advocates a role for teachers in defining and determining language policy and planning. But Whyte assigns teachers to a less central role in the planning process. He sees teachers playing a supportive role and challenges states to assume their responsibility in language policy and planning. This paper is nearer to Díaz-Rico’s view in arguing that classroom teachers must be catalysts in language planning and policy. If teachers were to endorse this role, by making a concerted effort to influence language planning and policy, they could develop a greater voice in matters relating to foreign language education. In the rest of the paper, I shall explore some of the ways in which teachers could influence the process from the bottom-up.

Teachers as Curriculum Planners

The primary and enduring role of teachers must be as curriculum planners. Stern (1983) supports the ideal of a distribution of responsibility in planning. He argues that planning should involve all the stakeholders who assume responsibility for different aspects of the system. Teachers are thus charged with the responsibility of being expert curriculum planners and facilitators of learning.

Classroom practitioners would no doubt be happy to receive such encouragement in carrying out one of their core functions. This, moreover, as the present generation of foreign language teachers is in some ways freer than past generations of colleagues to exercise their professional responsibilities fully. Where, before, teachers might have felt disempowered because they were presumed to be consumers and not producers of foreign language methodology, the passage to what Kumaravadivelu (1994) calls the “postmethod condition” has changed this. In the post-method condition, teachers’ classroom practice is no longer circumscribed by the reigning orthodoxy. Instead, teachers are

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now challenged to assert themselves and embrace their autonomy as classroom practitioners. This paper argues, as a consequence that, it is initially via the curriculum that teachers can bring their weight to bear on the planning process.

One area that immediately reveals something of the vibrancy of the French language course is the textbook. Dörnyei (2001) points to Chambers's (1999) empirical findings that the textbook is second in importance after the teacher in determining students' attitudes towards the language course. The question that we then need to ask is whether the French textbooks in circulation convey the sense of renewal and revision previously identified by Stern (1983) as essential elements of the planning process. Is the textbook in use in the first decade of the 21st century one written two or three decades ago? This question is an important one on several counts, the first relating to the kind of language reproduced in the textbook.

A study by Kinginger (1998) underscores the empirical evidence that shows that there is a gap between classroom talk and native speaker talk and, additionally, points to a gap between the language reproduced in textbooks and authentic spoken French. When we consider Glisan and Drescher's (1993) contention that textbook descriptions of language reflect "classical grammatical rules based on formal written language" (p. 25), it becomes evident that models of French conveyed by very dated textbooks will be several generations removed from the language found in the speech community. In an era of language learning for communicative competence, this could prove to be a serious handicap for learners whose primary linguistic models are those found in anachronistic texts.

Similarly, textbooks that were published several decades ago are unlikely to convey accurate images of contemporary France in its sociocultural evolution. Do the textbooks in use reflect metropolitan France as a country coming to grips with its multicultural identity, or are they textbooks where all the protagonists are the Marie-Frances and Jean-Pierres of an earlier time? Are croissants still the main fare at the breakfast table of the average French family or does textbook reality reflect current economic and gastronomic reality?

What of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Cayenne? Are these places presented as exotic tourist destinations, or are they presented as real

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places, with real people, dealing with real issues – cultures to which the students can relate? Is francophonie given adequate representation in light of the present geopolitical reality where more speakers of French are found outside the hexagone than within its frontiers? (See Ager, 1996, for a good discussion of the problems and opportunities of francophonie.) In other words, have the textbooks kept pace with the reality of modern France and the French-speaking world, or do students come away from our classes convinced that most adult men wear berets and drive around in 2CVs? If the textbooks available come up lacking, then teachers who are concerned about presenting a picture of a vibrant, dynamic language and culture must turn to other media, for example, cable television and the Internet, and to realia to fill the gaps in their students' worldview of speakers of French in the 21st century.

A second way in which teachers must leave their mark as curriculum planners is in the types of learning activities in which they engage their students. Is their pedagogical practice premised on an up-to-date understanding of how proficiency can be improved in the various skills? Teachers can be more effective facilitators of learning if they are aware of the stages in listening, or writing; if they bear in mind the importance of background knowledge in reading; or if they balance the role of accuracy **and** fluency in speaking. Do they in fact aim in their teaching to develop all four skills? Or is language learning synonymous with learning vocabulary and grammar by rote?

When one observes the foreign language lesson in a classroom in Trinidad and Tobago what seems to be driving force? The textbook? The CSEC or General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level exam, or the students' own centres of interest? Kohonen (2001, p. 33) raises a concern shared by many others with an interest in appropriate methodology, when he notes that the "*quality of the learning tasks*" is a fundamental issue in modern pedagogy. He contrasts "learning that has little or no personal meaning and does not involve the learner's feelings" with learning that is "characterised by personal involvement, use of different sensory channels, a sense of self-initiation and discovery, and a tendency towards self-assessment by learning". He concludes that, "the essence of such learning is personal meaning."

Curriculum practice that is grounded in renewal and revision cannot ignore, for example, that the present generation, fed on television, cable

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television, the Internet, and so on, are a generation of visual learners who, moreover, thrive on interactivity. Le Loup and Ponterio (1996) underscore this, making the point that the interactive nature of modern technology makes it far more attractive to students who have become used to interacting with information in these modes than a textbook, no matter how colourful. Students who access more and more of their information through interactive media are more likely to chafe at the disjunction between the world at large, that supports these media, and the classroom that still sees the textbook as the primary resource for **all** learners, whatever their "intelligence," as described in Gardner (1993), whatever their preferred sensory mode (see, for example, the discussion in Harmer, 2001).

A critical look at the curriculum should lead teachers to reappraise the role of culture in helping students make meaning of their learning. Do students gain in understanding of themselves as speakers of a mother tongue containing words like *pommecythere* and *chardon béni*? Are they moved along a path of intercultural communication that begins with themselves and then radiates outward to explore concepts such as diversity, otherness, foreignness (Kaikkonen, 2001)? Foreign language education is the ideal site to help students internalize one of the previously identified goals of education, namely, to "develop an appreciation of the interdependency of the peoples and nations of the world, the need to work to foster a greater spirit of mutual understanding among nations in ways in which Trinidad and Tobago can participate in this process" (T&T, 1985). Post- September 11, 2001, we should not need too much convincing of the urgency of promoting intercultural learning through foreign language education. Curriculum planning that strives to keep renewal and revision at the heart of the planning process must pay attention to all these concerns.

Yet, curriculum planning, however current and relevant it may be, is doomed to failure, if teachers are perceived simply as technicians charged with implementing curricula. Teachers understandably have a hard time maintaining "a sense of excitement and engagement with the business of teaching" (Harmer, 2001, p. 344) when they are expected to fulfil so many different roles on a daily basis. Language teachers must surely have been the inventors of terms such as multitasking and multiskilling, given that it is expected that they will function as "planners, assessors, disciplinarians, motivators, facilitators, target

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language users and modelers, and creators of positive learning environments" (Smith & Rawley, 1998, p. 15)! Unfortunately, the weight of their responsibility is such that many (language) teachers may find they have little energy left over to keep their practice creative, authentic, and relevant. However, without the time, space, and opportunity to develop their professional expertise, their professionalism could be seriously jeopardized. Kohonen (2001) poses the challenge differently when he says that, "They [teachers] are committed to foster human growth in themselves in order to be able to foster growth in their learners" (p. 20). If teaching is not to slide into being a routinized activity, the focus on renewal and revision must be applied equally to the teaching profession and professional development.

Promoting Reflective Practice

Wallace's (1991) model of the reflective practitioner, which integrates teacher knowledge, received knowledge, experiential knowledge, practice, and reflection, is perhaps a useful model for teachers to consider. The concept of the reflective practitioner values teachers as professionals, possessing specialized knowledge and capable of making competent choices. Yet, being a reflective practitioner is not a **product** approach to teaching professionalism; it is very much a **process** approach. Teachers who adopt the reflective model keep their teaching fresh, because they remain focused on their professional performance. By reflecting and exploring what worked or did not work in the classroom, these teachers develop insights into their day-to-day practice. Reflective practice is cyclical by nature. Teachers move from mapping (What do I do as a teacher?) to informing (What is the meaning of my teaching?) to contesting (How did I come to be this way?) to appraisal (How might I teach differently?) and finally to acting (What and how shall I now teach?) (Bartlett, 1990).

Bartlett, however, urges teachers to extend themselves even more, arguing that simple reflection should not be the final goal of the committed professional. He encourages teachers to move to a more critical reflective practice. Teachers have to "transcend the techniques of teaching and think beyond improving [their] instructional techniques" (Bartlett, 1990, p. 205). Teachers must move from "how to" questions to "what" and "why" questions. Bartlett contends that reflective teaching as a form of critical inquiry leads teachers to see their teaching not only

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in terms of instructional and managerial techniques, but also as part of broader educational purposes. He continues:

Becoming a critically reflective teacher is intended to allow us to develop ourselves individually and collectively; to deal with contemporary events and structures (for example, the attitudes of others or the bureaucratic thinking of administrators) and not take these structures for granted.

Lehtovaara (2001) in "What is it - (FL) teaching?" makes an even stronger case for foreign language teachers to transcend linguistic concerns and assume their responsibility as educators. Herself a foreign language teacher and teacher educator, she alerts practising teachers to "the need and benefits of a contemplative reflection on the foundational principles of our practices" (p. 141). Lehtovaara argues that "the reflective professional" cannot shy away from fundamental considerations like the meaning of humanity. She contends that responsible educators must first be responsible human beings. They must begin by asking, "*What does it mean to me to be a human being who teaches something (e.g. a foreign language) to somebody? And What does it mean to be a human being whom I am teaching?*" (p. 148).

It is clear that both Bartlett and Lehtovaara advocate a more embracing role for the teaching professional than the technician's role that is usually assigned to teachers. Teachers are urged to view themselves and their profession more holistically. They are to try to situate the microcontext of the classroom squarely in the macrocontext of society. This kind of vision of teachers and teaching would certainly imply a stronger voice for teachers in all facets of education, including language policy and planning.

A natural corollary of foreign language teachers assuming their responsibility as educators would be the promotion of more collaborative relationships with other colleagues who are engaged in a similar enterprise, starting with those who teach English. All language teaching aims for the same objectives: helping learners to communicate in the four modalities—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The classroom objectives of the teacher of English are thus intrinsically the same as the objectives of the teacher of French or Spanish. While some may argue that the goals for the official standard and goals for foreign languages would lead to substantially different foci in practice, this

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paper suggests that there are sufficient areas of overlap for educators to find a mutuality of purpose in their professional approach.

This paper posits that language learning could be best served by rejecting the compartmentalized view of language learning that has prevailed thus far. Stressing language education in this way would foster a spirit of collegiality where teachers would work collaboratively, making curricular decisions that would benefit all languages. In such a movement, language teachers would affirm the importance of language for communication and promoting intercultural learning. Language teachers would promote a language policy inclusive of all the languages taught in our schools. Renewal and revision would be a goal shared by all language teachers who would drive language policy and planning from the bottom-up.

Will French survive this time? The survival of French in the school curriculum can best be assured if the atomistic view of subject area teaching that has driven the curriculum for so long is replaced by one that operates from a different paradigm and poses the problem differently. In the current view, French shares an uneasy relationship with Spanish, and support for Spanish sometimes implies the marginalization of French. In society and in the school, such attitudes are passé. Interconnectedness and interdependency are the order of the day, and these are the ideals that should inform our thinking. The vision is too narrow, utilitarian, and profoundly anachronistic when what prevails in the area of school-based language policy and planning is a content-area perspective.

Foreign language educators must approach their professional practice as one grounded in the education of the human being. And in the educating of human beings, the study of foreign languages is unparalleled in helping learners reach out and encounter other ways of being and thinking. If we are truly committed to the ideal of educating 21st century citizens, questions such as “will French survive this time?” are of nuisance value. French **has** to survive in a curriculum that promotes diversity and intercultural learning as critical 21st century skills. Starting from the bottom-up, we can move our society into understanding that foreign languages must form part of the education of the 21st century citizen. Starting from the bottom-up, we must inform our society that the trend worldwide is to more foreign languages, not

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less. Starting from the bottom-up, we must infuse the curriculum with renewal and revision and shake off the monoculture approach in the language classroom, as we seem at last set to do in agriculture. The case has been argued for Trinidad and Tobago, but the same holds for the wider Caribbean.

Conclusion

This paper challenged the notion that language planning and policy is primarily a top-down process. It suggested that the time has come to apply more current, bottom-up planning models to the education context. Consequently, the paper urged teachers to see themselves as agents for renewal and revision in the curriculum. It argued that teachers who allowed themselves to be typecast as disempowered, dependent technicians would find their professional status compromised. Teachers were therefore encouraged to become critical reflective practitioners.

Being a reflective professional assumes more contemplation, more collegial collaboration, and the assumption of greater responsibility as an aware educator. This kind of practitioner would be better able to respond in an informed manner about the goals of foreign language education and be able to drive language policy and planning from the bottom-up. In this more proactive view of language planning and policy, the business of preserving French in the curriculum would be posed differently. Stakeholders would grow into an awareness that the issue at stake is more crucial than the maintenance or loss of French, *per se*. What would be emphasized is that a curriculum that seeks to educate for peace, understanding, and solidarity among all peoples is better served by fostering more intercultural communication, notably through more exposure to foreign languages and cultures in the school-age population.

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