# Language of Instruction and Instructed Languages in Mauritius

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**Mauritius is a multilingual country with English, French and Creole as the main languages, and several ancestral languages which are mainly used for religious ceremonies. Most children speak Creole at home and learn English, French and one ancestral language in the first year of primary school. The educational dropout rate is 40–50% after primary school. It is argued that the use of three languages in primary schooling places too great a cognitive burden on children. Language policy in education needs to be revised on pedagogical and scientific rather than political grounds. It is recommended that language be introduced into the curriculum at different points in time.**

**Keywords:** multilingual education, educational policy and planning, education in developing countries, Creole

## Introduction

Mauritius is commonly better known for its beaches and its luxurious hotels than for its exceptional variety of races, religions, cultures and languages. Although this article deals with the linguistic situation in Mauritius in general, and more specifically with the importance of languages in the educational system, it should be stressed that, particularly in Mauritius, such an analysis is inevitably linked with socioeconomic, political, cultural, psychological and religious factors. Different cultures are present all over the island, in different social layers of the population, and are partly maintained by means of the languages that are inherently linked with them. Indian languages such as Hindi, Telegu, Marathi, Tamil, Urdu, Gujrati and Chinese languages such as Mandarin, Hakka and Cantonese are part of the ancient cultures which were introduced in Mauritius by immigrant workers who started arriving in 1835 when slaves were freed, while the importance of French and English is a result of the colonial history of Mauritius (in the 18th century and 19th–20th century, respectively). Even economically speaking, Mauritius could be called complex because it finds itself at a cross-roads: although it is in many ways still a developing country, it is also developing fast towards modernisation and becoming part of the western world, which adds to the importance of European languages.

Mauritius is often cited as an example of a society in which many different groups live together in harmony. The island is, however, not exempt from ethnic conflict and even violence (Carroll & Carroll, 2000). Friction between ethnic groups is particularly evident in language politics, especially in the educational sector. In this paper, I will describe the overall linguistic situation in Mauritius and then examine the role of language instruction in the

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educational system. Based on my experiences living in Mauritius from 1996 to 2000, on informal observations in preprimary and primary schools and recordings of classroom instruction and of individual interviews with students, I argue that in Mauritius the five-year-old child is confronted with too many learning tasks at the same time, but that the political situation in Mauritius keeps the government from changing the system. Yet to achieve their potential in the world economy, significant changes to the role of languages in the educational system need to be made.

## Languages in Mauritius

The mother tongue of the majority of the islanders is *Creole*, the former vernacular of the African slaves who came to Mauritius as early as the 17th century (for more specific details about the origin of Mauritian Creole, see Seuren, 1995). Creole languages are languages which have originated from a European parent language in a colonial situation out of the need that people having a different L1 have had to 'create' a common language to communicate amongst each other. The parent language of Mauritian Creole is French. However, from a morphological and syntactic perspective there are very few similarities between the two languages. For example, whereas French has a large number of flexions to indicate *tense*, *aspect* and *mood*, Mauritian Creole has recourse to preverbal markers to express these. The situation is different from the point of view of vocabulary, as Mauritian Creole tends to borrow a lot from French. It is the language currently spoken at home by 70% of the people (Population Census, 2000), but in reality the figure is probably higher as many do not like to admit that Creole is their home language. Nowadays, Mauritians from all layers of society speak Creole, but it is mainly used in informal situations and for interethnic communication. Although in newspaper articles and in some books, there is an attempt to reflect the spoken language on paper, the Creole in Mauritius is not a written language. There is no standard form of the language, which is probably a reason why the status of this language is still very low.

*Bhojpuri* is also a spoken language in Mauritius. It is the home language of 12% of the people (Population Census of Mauritius, 2000). This language came to Mauritius with migrant workers from India. Its roots lie in the Bhojpuri spoken in Bihar in India, but it is now quite different from the original language. Bhojpuri used to be the main vernacular of the Indian population, but it is slowly being replaced by Creole (still 20% Bhojpuri in the Population Census of 1990 whereas only 12% in 2000). The mother tongue of most of the older Indian people in rural areas is Bhojpuri. Their children are often bilingual Creole–Bhojpuri (about 50% of the population) while their grandchildren in most cases have no more than a passive knowledge of the ancestral language. Like Creole, Bhojpuri is not an official language.

*French* is the mother tongue of about 3% of the Mauritians. Many of these 'Franco-Mauritians' are the descendants of French settlers who came to Mauritius after 1721 and of the former sugarcane plantation owners. They still have economic power and they now also have investments in other

economic sectors such as tourism. A large part of the population has some knowledge of French, the degree of knowledge varying widely from individual to individual. French is also the main language of the media (see Miles, 1998a, about language mixing in the media).

*English* is the language of government, the civil service, education, and of all formal and official transactions. The language was brought to the island in 1814 when the British took over the administration although there were hardly any English settlers. Many islanders have a very limited knowledge of English, restricted to basic vocabulary and formulaic expressions (e.g. parents telling their child 'allez, shake hands' when meeting a foreigner). On the other hand, educated people are often able to write better in English than in French. Generally, the higher the level of education an individual has, the higher the level of proficiency in both English and French. At the university level, for example, most students have a very good knowledge of English.

English is sometimes spoken at home by some well-to-do Indian families as well as by expatriates. There were some settlers of British origin in the 19th century but they have long ago been 'swallowed up' by the French speakers' community. Their origin might still be recognised in names such as 'Tenant', 'Lloyd' or 'Lincoln', names all pronounced in the French way. Whereas English is seen as the language of knowledge, French is associated with cultural activities such as the theatre, movies and the media.

Next to these four languages, there are about 10 eastern or 'ancestral' languages which nowadays have mainly a religious and cultural importance. In this paper, the general term 'ancestral languages' will be used for all these languages (for a finer distinction, see Tirvassen, 2002: 130–131).

None of the above-mentioned languages fulfils all functions in Mauritian society (i.e. written and spoken, formal and informal, technical and cultural), which may be a reason why they have successfully coexisted for so long.

## Education and Languages: Historical Overview

During the French colonisation period, only a privileged group of people had access to education. The language of education was the language of the rulers, French, and those who could afford to do so, sent their children to be educated in France. The slaves who served the French colonists spoke Creole[1] and their children did not go to school as primary education was neither compulsory nor free (May & Woolard, 1997: 141). After the arrival of the British in 1810 and the Treaty of Paris in 1814, Mauritius became a British colony with English as the official language of the island. However, as far as education was concerned, hardly anything changed. It was agreed that the population would keep their languages, habits and traditions (article VII of the Treaty). This caused no practical inconveniences as there were not that many British settlers. The British administration took pains not to provoke the French ruling class. Nonetheless, over the course of a century, English came to be the language of education (see Stein, 1997, for an in depth discussion of British colonisation in Mauritius).

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

> In the lower classes of Government and aided primary schools up to and including Standard III, any one language may be employed as the language of instruction, being a language which in the opinion of the Minister is most suitable for the pupils.
>
> In Standards IV, V and VI of the Government and aided primary schools the medium of instruction shall be English, and conversation between teacher and pupils shall be carried on in English; provided that lessons in any other language taught in the school shall be carried on through the medium of that instruction.

This paragraph written in 1957 was borrowed directly from the Education Ordinance of 1944, and that in turn was a repetition of what had been proposed at the beginning of the century. In the 1950s, however, the situation began to change dramatically: the former Indian immigrants (who had begun arriving after the abolition of slavery in 1830) started to play an increasingly important political role. A result of this change in the political climate was the 1955 introduction of ancestral languages into the educational system. State schools now offered each child the possibility of studying the language of his/her ancestors: Urdu, Hindi, Telegu, Marathi, Gujrati, Tamil, Chinese, Arabic. These languages are symbolical and their use is restricted to religious purposes. The government's stated aim was to prevent the loss of a rich cultural heritage (as had partly been the case with the Creole people) and to strengthen ethnic identity, but the promotion of the ancestral languages cannot be dissociated from political motives.

Next to the function of English and French at school, there has always been the question of the role of the mother tongue.[2] During the first years after independence in 1968, the role of Creole in education became a major issue.[3] It is indeed the mother tongue of many children and a symbol for national unity, but it is on the other hand not backed up by a written environmental support (literature, press); it does not even have a standardised orthography and has a very low status. In Bissoonauth and Offord (2001: 395), examples are given of people's attitudes towards Creole: English has the highest status; using French also gives a good impression; when one speaks Creole in a formal context, one is looked down upon and ignored. However, one should take into account that these interviews were carried out with educated people (secondary school students and teachers), i.e. only a specific sample of the population. Debates about this subject became so emotional that the question has now been put aside. The point is far too sensitive and political parties prefer not to get involved. Creole is now spoken in all layers of society and by all ethnic groups, but it has not gained any economic or educational importance (for a detailed description of the role of Creole up until the beginning of the 1990s, see Foley, 1992). Of course, the controversy has not come to an end and although it is not within the scope of this article to discuss in detail the pros and cons of the use of Creole in general, more will be said about the role of Creole in education below.

## Education and Languages: The Present Situation

### Language of instruction

For the first three years of primary education, there is no clear mandate concerning the language to be used in the classroom. From the first year onwards, school books are all in English, but the main *spoken* languages are Creole and French. Mauritians generally do not consider Creole to be a 'proper' language, but officially this attitude has changed: in February 1998, the Minister of Education declared that young school children should be taught in their mother tongue. However, this was not necessarily a popular move. The Mauritians are very well aware of the international importance of English and French, and are also conscious of the fact that knowledge of these languages leads to social promotion. Many parents are therefore not in favour of the use of Creole at school. Some parents even start speaking French at home, once their children begin attending school (Tirvassen, 1993). Parents can exert a considerable amount of pressure on the school especially when they are well off or highly educated. I have observed in the preprimary section of an English-speaking private school (4–5-year-old children) that the parents insisted on the importance of learning French, while the children were still having serious difficulty with English.

Although, from the fourth year onwards, English is the official medium of instruction, what actually happens in the classroom varies widely from school to school. Asking students and teachers and observing classes does not necessarily give a clear picture of the situation because teachers are reluctant to admit that they use Creole, and they avoid using it in the presence of 'official' outsiders.[4]

In some schools, Creole is not used at all. These are the few private schools to which expatriates send their children (English system or French system) and fees are high. No ancestral languages are taught either. Many private schools are confessional schools. In 2001, secondary private schools were still in the majority (3240 seats in state schools, 4200 seats in private schools for lower VI), but this will change as by 2006, 49 new secondary state schools will have been built (with a new total of 6220 seats for state schools). For more information about the reforms in secondary schools, see the report edited by the Ministry of Education and Scientific Research (*Ending the Rat Race in Primary Education and Breaking the Admission Bottleneck at Secondary Level*, 2001).

Whatever will be officially decided or recommended with regard to the use of Creole at school, it does not look very likely that much will change in the near future. Some teachers (and parents) try to avoid Creole; others will use it extensively to facilitate communication and teaching. For these reasons, French is also widely used in schools: it is a prestige language and communication in it is easier than in English. One thing is certain, the use of English in schools is much more restricted than what might be expected when reading the Education Ordinance. This is not surprising as the children have no previous knowledge of English before entering school and very often the teachers' knowledge of English is not very extensive. Furthermore, English is not widely used in the child's environment. Before independence in 1968,

there were some English-speaking teachers (e.g. Irish nuns) in the schools but these have all gone. The poor level of proficiency in English is now a vicious circle (insufficient exposure and poor instruction leading to insufficient knowledge overall) that cannot be remedied by some governmental directive.

## Teaching of languages

From Year 1, English is used as the language of instruction, and is also taught as a subject. The distinction between the two in the classroom is, however, far from clear. In the private school where I carried out some of my research and where English is used as a medium of instruction, children do receive explicit second language teaching. I observed lessons where the children were made familiar with thematic vocabulary (e.g. names of animals, how to express emotions, etc.). On the other hand, the teaching of the English language in most Mauritian schools is often restricted to teaching isolated and fixed expressions ('Where do you live?') and is structure based rather than oriented towards communication. During the lessons I observed in another school the teacher pointed at a picture board and the children had to say the word aloud. Or the teacher asked 'Montrez-moi où est le "ceiling"'. The English words were put in a Creole or French linguistic context such as in 'Allez, shake hands maintenant'. It is doubtful whether the children understand even these simple expressions because I often got wrong answers such as 'Curepipe' (a town in Mauritius) to the question 'What's your name?' or 'Sangita' (name) to the question 'Where do you live?' (for information about the content of the English textbooks used, see Foley, 1995).

French as a subject is also introduced from Year 1 (five sessions a week). In some preschools, it is often used as a means of communication. In secondary school, French as a subject becomes an option.

Eastern or ancestral languages are an option from the first year of primary school (five sessions a week). About 70% of the children learn an ancestral language; it is mainly Creole children who do not choose this option. For the Creole speakers, the connection with their own cultural past is not so prominent, although it can certainly be found in traditional sega-songs and sega-dancing.

In summary, *from the start of the first year of primary school*, all children learn English and French at school and the majority learn an eastern language as well. The teaching of languages occupies an exceptional place in primary education in Mauritius. To illustrate this further, the number of teachers appointed for the different subjects are as follows:

- general purpose (GP) (English, French, mathematics, environmental studies (EVS)): 3539 teachers;
- eastern languages (EL): 1488 teachers.

A GP teacher teaches all of the four subjects while a teacher of EL only teaches the particular language he has been appointed to teach (data from *Commentaires sur le livre blanc du Ministère de l'Education*, 1997: 12). The discrepancy between GP (including English and French) on the one hand and EL on the other hand, is obvious. About 30% of the teachers are appointed for

the latter. This can be explained by the fact that GP lessons are administered to *all* children while EL are taught to ethnic groups. As a result, GP classes are too full, while ancestral language classes often have a small group of children, depending on the area and the ethnicity.

## Controversies Concerning Languages and Education

### In the classroom

As mentioned above, the languages currently used in the classroom are a serious matter of controversy. Indeed, opinions about the role of languages in education are such a sensitive issue that politicians try to avoid taking a firm position. In September 1997, the Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development published a White Paper about the reform in Education. Only one paragraph was dedicated to languages and the content is illustrative of the evasive and obscure way the subject of languages is frequently dealt with:

> Language Policy is a very sensitive and very controversial issue; it arouses considerable passion and emotion. This is unfortunate – Language must always foster Unity, not the contrary. We will not do justice to our endeavour if we do not address the issue of a language policy as a matter of urgency in an honest and sincere way. There is need for a national consensus. It is proposed to update existing studies to establish whether we need some flexibility in our medium of instruction at classroom level; and to what extent our present approach to languages needs to be revised to live up to our national aspirations. (Ministry of Education and Human Resource Development, 1997: 29)

The main point of this controversy is the role of the children's mother tongue, Creole (and to a lesser extent Bhojpuri, the latter hardly ever being mentioned), in the curriculum. Mother tongue education has undeniable social, linguistic, psychological and educational advantages, particularly when teaching literacy and numeracy. This is why advocates like Skutnabb-Kangas (2000) proclaim that it is everyone's human right to be taught in the L1. There are, however, multiple drawbacks to the teaching of Creole such as the lack of a standardised form of the language, inadequate support for the written language in the environment, and the attitude of the population towards the use of Creole as a language of education (see Sonck, 2000).

There is, on the other hand, a consensus about two major issues:

- English and French are internationally very important. It is essential that the children learn these languages in view of Mauritius' modernisation and economic development.
- Mauritius is proud of its cultural diversity. The different ethnic groups have somehow managed to preserve their cultural and religious identity. The ancestral languages play an important role. In order to prevent identity loss, it should be possible for each child to study and learn the language that is linked to his/her ancestral origin.[5]

## Languages and the National Exam at the End of Primary School

### The role of the national exam

The national exam which leads to the Certificate of Primary Education (CPE) is administered at the end of primary school education, i.e. after six years. Until recently, pupils' CPE rankings determined which school he/she will be sent to. There are large disparities between different schools in terms of quality, education, teacher training and infrastructural abilities, and the best candidates are sent to the schools with the best reputations. Some children are selected for schools that are practically at the other end of the island, which can also lead to the termination of their education as their parents may not be able to pay for transport. It must be noted that as of 2004, the ranking system has been replaced by a grading system which should enable more students to be enrolled in State Secondary Schools (Ministry of Education and Scientific Research, 2001). Whether these changes will lead to improvements in the inequities in the educational system remains to be seen.

The children who do not pass the CPE exam have no other choice but to put an end to their school career. There is hardly any vocational or technical training, with the exception of the Hotel School in Réduit and the Industrial and Vocational Training Board in Phoenix. Again, changes have been proposed for the future, but the main scope of this paper is the role of languages in the education system, primarily in primary school. No changes are foreseen in that area. Approximately 30–40% of 11-year-old children fail CPE each year (Ministry of Women, Family Welfare and Child Development, 1999, *National Programme of Action Phase (Phase II) for the Development and Protection of Children*: 28). In some areas, the failure rate can be as high as 90% (Roche Bois: Nicolay Government School and Emmanuel Anquetil Govt School, see Research Project carried out by the European Commission, 2000).

It is not surprising that overall teaching is organised according to what is required to succeed for this high stakes exam.[6] Almost all students rely on private tutoring to raise their chances for success; this also serves to supplement the inadequate salary of teachers. Very poor students are at a distinct disadvantage.

### The role of languages in CPE

The questions of the CPE examinations are in English and the test materials are printed in England. It is therefore indispensable that the participants should understand English, even for a mathematics exam. The role of English as a key to success is therefore undeniable, but knowledge of English is yet again taken into account when marks are awarded for the different subjects. The importance of languages is striking:

English: 3 points;
French: 2 points;

(Asian languages/Arabic as an option: 3 points);
Mathematics: 3 points;
EVS: 3 points.

For decades, one of the main issues of the CPE (next to the ranking/grading system mentioned above) has been the weighting of the ancestral languages. If these languages are included in the grading system, then, once again, Creole children are at a disadvantage. Since January 2004, Oriental/Arabic languages have been conferred the same status as all other examinable subjects for the CPE examination. Pupils who have not previously studied these languages have been offered the possibility of free tuition outside normal school hours as of 2001.

## Evaluating the Role of Languages in Mauritian Schools

The discussion about languages in education in Mauritius can be elaborated at length. There are cultural, social, economic, linguistic, psychological, political and other aspects to be considered. Here I will focus on the most salient points: English as the medium of instruction, French and ancestral languages as a subject.

### English as the language of instruction

The role of English as the official language of the country and language of education has grown historically and politically (Stein, 1997). The largest group of Mauritians is of Indian descent (about 70% of the population) and they are in favour of English as the official language and opposed to French. Unlike French, English is considered a 'neutral' language because it is not associated with a particular ethnic group. English is also the language of international trade, technology, commerce in the Indian Ocean; and essential for tourism (Crystal, 1997). Apart from these obvious reasons, acknowledged by the Mauritian people, there are also technical reasons. Changing the official language would imply quite a financial investment. This would be the case for French, but even more so for the adoption of Creole as it is not a written language and there is as yet no standard orthography.

That being said, it is a fact that overall knowledge of English is relatively poor. The low success rate at school (about 20% of the population is completely illiterate (Education Card: Statistics: 2); 30–40% failure for the CPE) is also partly the result of nonlinguistic factors such as low income.

### The role of French

Although French is only taught as a subject in secondary school, the general level of proficiency in French is higher than is the case for English. Often mentioned as the most obvious reason for this discrepancy between English and French is the fact that French is much closer to Creole and therefore easier to acquire.[7] French is the language of the media and it is substantially used (spoken and written) by a large number of people. French could be called a 'second language' in Mauritius but I am reluctant to use this term for English.

One illustrative example from everyday life could be given: the film 'Titanic' was shown in many cinemas in Mauritius in 1997, but it was dubbed into French, even in the capital. It should also be mentioned that the French government puts much more effort into promoting the French language in Mauritius (e.g. Alliance française) than the British government does for English. For example, the headmaster of an important English-speaking private school expressed his disbelief to me when the British High Commission did not respond to his request for assistance in getting British books destined for education imported tax free. Promotion of the English language, it appears, is not one of their main missions. The French, on the other hand, offer French language courses at the Alliance française, even in Rodrigues, a small island which belongs to Mauritius. The British Council does not organise language courses but does offer a library, organises presentations by British speakers, and arranges for some Mauritian students to study abroad.

The special situation in Mauritius is not the fact that the language of instruction is not the same as most children's mother tongue, but that there is a competing 'foreign' language that is more integrated into Mauritian daily life.

### Ancestral languages

As noted above, instruction in nine ancestral languages is offered to students from the earliest grades. One may wonder whether the government of Mauritius can afford the teaching of all these languages at primary school. Moreover, it is far from certain that it is really the population's wish that these ancestral languages are taught at school. The parents who can afford it (including those who decide that EL should be part of the language teaching package offered at school) send their children to private schools or colleges where these 'ancestral' languages are not taught. They may familiarise their children with these languages at a later age.

Whereas Creole is the language that unites the nation, the role of the ancestral languages in the educational system serves to divide the population. Mauritians always finds themselves being torn by the desire on the one hand to be Mauritian and on the other hand to be a member of their ethnic community or a religion. Emphasising the ancestral languages at school and on the CPE exam adds another disadvantage towards Creole speakers who already suffer from low social and economic status. Another point that should be taken into account is the lack of interest in EL at secondary school. In *Commentaires sur le Livre blanc du Ministère de l'Education* (Rivet Raymond, 1997: 13), it is stated that these classes are as good as empty. The teaching of ancestral languages (and its role in the CPE exam) distinguishes Mauritius from other countries in a very similar multilingual situation.

## Comparisons with Other Multilingual Countries

Mauritius is a multilingual country with a multilingual education system. Other countries such as Fiji (Mangubhai, 2003), Vanuatu (Miles, 1998b) and Singapore (Wee, 2002) have faced similar educational challenges. Mauritians themselves often look to Singapore as a model for success, both linguistically

and economically. Singapore has four official languages: Malay, Mandarin, Tamil and English. English is the language of instruction, but students have to take their 'mother tongue' as a second language (in this specific context, 'mother tongue' means the ethnic language of the identity group one's father belongs to, i.e. it is not necessarily spoken at home). The mother tongues are important because they are supposed to act as 'cultural anchors' that prevent Singaporeans from losing their Asian identities (Wee, 2002: 291).

Several countries in the Indian Ocean also have multilingual educational systems. The Seychelles is a trilingual country. The Creole in Seychelles is similar to Mauritian Creole and also has its roots in French. It is the mother tongue of more than 90% of the population. Prior to 1981, teaching was in English and French, but since then, Creole has become the only language of instruction for the first three years of primary school. In the fourth year English becomes the language of instruction. French is introduced as a foreign language in the fourth year. The situation in the Seychelles is still being assessed: there are clear advantages to having children learn to read and to write in the mother tongue, but there are also disadvantages with respect to parents' attitudes and difficulties when transferring to English as the medium of instruction (Salabert, 2002).

Madagascar is a bilingual country (Creole and French) and in contrast to Mauritian Creole, there is an extensive literature in Malgache. The language of education was changed from French to Malgache for a period of about 15 years (1976–1990), then back to French (Babault, 2002).

A few generalisations can be drawn from the situation in other countries:

- Acquiring literacy in one's mother tongue facilitates learning. However, the necessary transfer to another medium of instruction in subsequent years may create problems.
- Upgrading Creole is a political statement and is meant to offer more equal chances to all but introducing it as the medium of teaching is not always supported by the majority of the population.
- It is not sufficient that the orthography of Creole is standardised. Creole as the medium of instruction should be accompanied by an environmental support, in the media and elsewhere.

## Directions for Language Planning in Education

In this section, I propose language planning measures that would alleviate some of the problems that I argue arise from the language learning demands placed on children from the earliest years of primary education.

When analysing the linguistic situation in Mauritius, one can see that having English as the medium of instruction does have its advantages. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the majority of children do not sufficiently master English, and that the school results at the end of primary school are unsatisfactory for nearly half of the children. The level of knowledge of English is far from satisfactory. It can of course be argued that it is not easy to teach children in a language other than their mother tongue, particularly if the children share a common language (Creole) which they use

to converse with each other. Yet, immersion programmes in Canada have proved that teaching children in a language other than their L1 can be successful (Genesee, 1987). This argument alone cannot therefore explain the failure of success in Mauritius. It is maybe not so much the question of 'which' language is attributed which function (English the language of instruction; Creole the support language for the first three years; French the second western language; teaching of ancestral languages to preserve the cultural identities), but rather the questions 'when', 'where' and 'how' that have to be discussed.

The child has no prior knowledge of English when he/she starts primary school. It would be recommendable to start earlier with the learning of English, i.e. in preprimary, in a playful way by means of nursery rhymes, songs and games. This is already done in some schools. One good example is a preprimary school in Goodlands, where, as opposed to some private schools, the children do not come from a privileged background. This was a private initiative from the Minister of Education (1997), in cooperation with an idealistic teacher. Unfortunately, there is no scientific follow-up as to how these children perform later at primary school. French as a subject could be introduced later in the curriculum, not in the first year of primary school.

The expensive teaching of the ancestral languages at primary school should also be reassessed, with regard to 'when' to start with ancestral languages, but maybe also as to 'where' to offer this possibility of learning an ancestral language. Muslims can learn Arabic although their ancestors in India have never spoken that language. What if the Creole population demand that their 'ancestral' languages, of African origin, should be taught as well?[8] The programme (nine languages) is already very large and one should be realistic.

The teaching of ancestral languages at all primary state schools has two major drawbacks: the intellectual burden on the young children is very heavy, and a large part of the already too narrow education budget is spent on this language programme. Politicians should question whether this is justified and whether there are alternatives, for example the teaching of the ancestral languages outside the school, by communal organisations. Everything has a price, even development, and priorities should be set. This does not imply that the importance of culture and identity is denied here, but solutions may be offered outside school or at a later stage in the education.

The different languages could be introduced at different levels within the education system, starting as early as in preprimary, or even taught outside school.

Answering the question as to 'how' to teach and how to implement changes would take more than a brief summary and does not fall within the scope of this article. A few points, however, can be mentioned. As was already pointed out, teaching in Mauritius is authoritarian and teacher-centred, which hardly leaves any room for creativity for the part of the learner (Griffiths, 2000). This general attitude in the classroom also applies to the teaching of languages. English is not functional and is restricted to the use of certain phrases which are often drilled. This provides little practice for learners to develop English skills for communicating and learning through English. It is inevitable that

considerable amounts of codeswitching and codemixing with French and Creole take place at school.

The teaching and knowledge of English could be improved by providing more input (environment, media, material) and by providing teachers with the opportunity of improving their pedagogical knowledge and their English proficiency. At present, there are no specialised courses in second language teaching for student teachers at the Mauritian Institute of Education.

Last but not least, any changes in the educational system should be preceded by careful linguistic planning and preparation of teachers and materials. Preferably, experimental scientific studies should be carried out on which the decisions can be partly based. The setting up of pilot schools would help to evaluate certain innovations.

Miles (2000) states that 'true language planning is neither social engineering nor political gamesmanship. Rather it is a sober stock taking of the global direction of linguistic evolution followed by a realistic allocation of educational resources.'

## Conclusion

Mauritius is a developing country with a 40–50% educational dropout rate after primary school. The unsatisfactory results are partly due to the fact that Mauritius is still developing economically (hence insufficient financial means and infrastructure; low qualified and badly paid staff; very poor students). It is a fact that education is the key to further development. Moreover, Mauritius is in full economic expansion and the demand for skilled labour is high. Improving educational policy should therefore be one of the priorities of the government. In Mauritius, this also involves rethinking the language policy, as school education evolves around languages and it is known that the language results, both for the language of instruction and the languages to be taught, are far from satisfactory and could, in one way or another, even be partly responsible for general failure at school.

Education and languages are sensitive points of issue in this multiethnic, multicultural and multireligious country, but the unsatisfactory education results cannot be ignored. A clear and objective language policy is needed whereby not only the sociopolitical situation is taken into consideration. Decisions should also be based on pedagogical and scientific grounds. Careful linguistic planning is needed, as other experiences have shown that one cannot proceed too fast. And yet, no serious steps have been undertaken to investigate the linguistic deficiencies and possibilities at school. The education system is therefore an obstacle to the fulfilment of the economic aspirations of the island.

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## Notes

1. Before Creole, other languages were spoken such as Wolof (Senegal), dialects from Mozambique and Malgache (from Madagascar) (Express, 18th April 1998, p. 7).
2. In the first half of the century, a proposal was made by the English administration to teach the rural Indian children in their mother tongue (Indian language of origin). This has never been carried out.
3. This is only the case for Creole. Bhojpuri has never been vehemently defended because it could not be brought forward as a symbol for the national unity of Mauritius, being linked to a specific ethnic group.
4. In general, teachers were extremely cooperative in allowing me to audio-tape their lessons and to interview their pupils.
5. Ironically, this is not the case for the Mauritians of African origin.
6. In January 1999, radio broadcasts announced that it seemed likely that the CPE would be phased out, but that it had not yet been confirmed in writing. At the same time, the role of ancestral languages was being examined. This contradiction illustrates that the controversial nature of the exam itself and its content are a matter of continuous discussion.
7. As a counterexample of this argument, see the case of Seychelles, mentioned further, which is very similar to Mauritius (English, French and a French-based Creole) and where the knowledge of English is better than that of French (Salabert, 2002).
8. It is not possible to study Malgache in Mauritius although it is spoken by 13 million people in Madagascar; nor is it possible for the Mauritians of African descent to study a Bantu language, which is currently spoken by 350 million people. These languages are not spoken in Mauritius but that is also the case for some Indian ancestral languages which are included in the language programme.

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