Challenges of Language Education in Post-Colonial Contexts

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Abstract
Many post-colonial contexts are dealing with dated infrastructures inherited from their colonial past. The education system is one of them, and while reforms seem necessary, many key players remain opposed. A major flaw in the education system is its curriculum, entirely offered in a standard language (English, Spanish, French) while students often speak a different language (notably Creole) at home. Students who cannot speak the standard language are at a disadvantage in an ill-adapted school system and face social and linguistic challenges that impede them from being successful first in their studies, and later on the job market. Teachers hold prejudice against Creole and are poorly equipped to support their students. For these reasons, there is an urgent need to legitimise Creole and minority languages in the classroom and to transmit the message to parents and educators about the possible benefits, such as providing a framework for students on which they can build their second language. Moreover, resources must be built to support teachers throughout the implementation of such major reform. This paper will attempt to make recommendations to change the current situation that puts entire populations at a disadvantage through a maladapted education system.

Keywords: language education, second language education, post-colonial, Creole, education reform

Introduction – Context

In this paper, the term "standard language" will refer to dominant varieties of languages, such as British and American Englishes. The term "standard" is used for lack of a better word, and by no means implies superiority over any dialect or Creole.

Colonialism might seem a thing of the past for populations who were not involved or who benefitted from it. However, many former colonies are still trying to make do with the aftermath, hesitant between reforms and stability. While some colonisers might have built durable infrastructures in their colonies, the goal of these investments was most likely mercantilism, with little to no respect for the local inhabitants and their culture. Many of these infrastructures are now outdated, and some were never adjusted to the local context, to start with. For these reasons, even today populations of former colonies are understandably reluctant to major changes brought from abroad or initiated by their own government, which often collaborated with (or was controlled by) the colonisers. It would be a mistake to think of all former colonies as identical; however, if similarities can be deduced from current situations, then perhaps some solutions could be applied to more than one context.

Currently, many former colonies face a similar challenge in their development; there is a desire for a strong, independent identity, while at the same time they benefit from (or rely on) the former mother country for support and economic opportunities. Since there are important differences between the local context and the ideal of standardisation symbolised by the former Metropolitan state, the infrastructures in place contain several inadequacies. An important manifestation of this situation is the education system, and language education in particular. The system needs to undergo major changes; however, several obstacles must be overcome in order to make it possible to amend the system already in place.

Education and Democracy

The infrastructure that seems to be at the origin of several issues in former colonies is the education system. Often a legacy of the colonial era, perhaps implemented without much consideration for the local educational needs and objectives, it often is a close copy of the system of the former Mother country, and continues today to keep its students at a disadvantage. Education is usually given in the standard variety of a language (i.e. British or American English), while the local population might speak a Creole or another language at home (Siegel, 2007). Students therefore need to learn the standard variety of a language in order to be successful in their studies (and later, in the job market). This has catastrophic consequences for children who cannot learn this second language adequately since all the subjects are taught in it. Koskinen (2010) goes as far as calling French-only policies in Haiti "linguistic apartheid", as the system "successfully" keeps lower social groups from accessing higher education or any position of power. Since Creole has no legal value (p.389), all official documents must be written in French (or English, Spanish, etc., depending on the country). This means that Creole monolingual speakers encounter great difficulties to access the judiciary system (laws, individual rights, etc.), cannot communicate with or easily understand any levels of government (election campaigns, town meetings, etc.), and might not fully understand important documents such as lease agreements, bank loans, employment contracts, etc. Language education is therefore directly linked to

power and social status. Being part of the main cultural group in a former colony does not grant access to power or opportunities; it is about being fluent in a standard language brought by the former coloniser. A country might have gained its independence and become democratic, but the power is still hold by a minority that does not represent the population, linguistically and culturally.

Teachers Attitudes

Since Creole does not have its place in the curriculum, Creole speakers are not always welcome to use it in class, especially when addressing a teacher. Students who speak Creole at school face negative attitudes and ignorance of teachers who perceive Creole as inferior or as an imperfect version of the standard language (Wigglesworth & Billington 2013; Siegel, 2007, 1999; Farr & Song, 2011). As teachers are former students who were successful in the actual education system, it can be assumed that they are fluent speakers of a standard variety of a language. Therefore, students and teachers come from different social groups, which does not help to suppress prejudice. Wigglesworth & Billington have observed that some teachers go as far as interpreting Creole grammar and pronunciation as errors in the standard language, and constantly interrupt students with corrections (2013), as if the students where unsuccessfully trying to speak the standard language. As a result, children's identity and sense of belonging suffer from low self-esteem because of the denigration of their language and culture (Wigglesworth, Billington & Loakes, 2013; Farr & Song, 2011; Migge, Léglise & Bartens, 2010; Koskinen, 2010). In the end, students might rebel against the cultural group that speaks the standard language, and refuse to learn it (Delpit, 2006; Green, 2002). Failure to identify with the target culture and experiencing negative emotions during class could have harmful consequences, as it will impede their second language acquisition, as per Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (1982).

Linguistic Challenges

In addition to these negative perceptions of Creole, many problems remain because educators fail to see the need for bilingual or second language education. Classes are taught in standard forms of languages, without any support for Creole speakers. If the teachers do not have linguistic knowledge of the local dialect or Creole, then they are not equipped to support their students. Moreover, if students do not receive formal education in their mother language, they will lack basic literacy skills and language awareness. Without any knowledge of grammar, sentence structure, etc. in their first language, the second language does not have any solid framework to be built on (Malcolm, 2011, p.270) and students will keep permanent gaps in both languages (Polinsky & Kagan, 2007). Creole speakers start at a disadvantage since Creoles typically do not have a standard orthography, as the word itself can be written Creole, Kréol, Kreyol, Kreyòl, Kweyol, Kriol, Krio, etc. (Siegel, 2007, 1999). Many students are not even aware if they speak English, Creole, Spanish, etc., or if they are mixing them (Devonish & Carpenter, 2007, p.290), which can result not only in high degrees of interference between similar varieties (Ellis, 1994, p.102), but also costly errors during high stakes tests such as standardised exams prepared by the Ministry of Education, or entrance exams to high schools, universities, and pre-employment screening tests (Wigglesworth & Billington, 2013).

In contexts where all first grade elementary school students are monolingual Creole speakers, teaching non-language classes such as math, geography, etc. strictly in the standard language without scaffolding cannot possibly be beneficial for the learners. In an effort to support Creole speakers, a few countries have tried to integrate bilingual programs into their curriculum. The results have been positive (Farr & Song, 2011), although empirical studies warn us that programs such as linguistic immersions are difficult to assess quickly because children need to be in such environment for at least five to seven years before it becomes realistically possible to measure their benefits (Cummins & Hornberger, 2010). The current situation in Creole contexts is not a formal, controlled linguistic immersion; rather, it is more of a linguistic *submersion*, where students must "sink or swim". If they cannot learn the second language on their own, they will fall behind and will never catch up with the curriculum. In the United States, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of Chinese American students in *Lau v. Nichols* (1974) that the submersion approach violated the Civil Rights Act as it discriminated them based on their national origin and inabilities to speak English[1]. Unfortunately, there is little chance for this to happen in countries with a majority of Creole speakers because the argument of "national origin" could not be used for people who were born in the same country, and monolingual Creole speakers do not have access to the judiciary system easily, as previously stated.

Reforms vs. Public Opinion

If legitimising Creole as a way of communicating in the classroom and teaching basic similarities and differences with the standard variety could be solutions to provide support for Creole-speaking children, attempts to reform the education system have met their fair share of resistance. Surprisingly, Creole speakers themselves are opposed to a reform of the curriculum to include Creole. In fact, this negative attitude of Creole speakers toward Creole language is shared among many post-colonial contexts (Wigglesworth, Billington & Loakes, 2013; Koskinen, 2010; Devonish & Carpenter, 2007; Simmons-McDonald, 2004). Parents and grandparents, who remember being discriminated against during the colonial era, perhaps perceive the reform to include Creole as an attempt from the government to control them and compromise their future chances of success by keeping them from accessing higher echelons of power in the society. Combined with the preconceived negative opinions that some teachers hold against Creole, even if reforms are decided at the governmental level (Ministry of Education), sometimes with the help of renowned international educators, there is no guarantee that those changes will actually be welcomed and successfully implemented in all schools of a country.

What Can Be Done

If both teachers and parents are opposed to change, the situation might seem desperate. Admittedly, they are the ones interacting with children daily, while researchers or bureaucrats from the Ministry of Education might not frequently visit schools to see what the situation in the classrooms actually is. If reforms decided by the government do not become reality, it is partly because a population that has been abused by years of colonialism cannot trust its government or any high (or foreign) authority easily. There is a need to connect with the population to re-establish trust.

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[1] *Lau v. Nichols, 414 US 563 - Supreme Court 1974.*

According to Professor Jeff Siegel of the University of New England, Australia, running public awareness campaigns must be a top priority for the future (1999). Connecting with parents and the general population to explain how changes can benefit them directly is a first step towards acceptance. Again, Siegel (2007) recommends that the public be informed of the findings of sociolinguistics "since awareness of such research over the past 40 year has not trickled down to the general public" (p.80). Publishing studies in academic journals that are read by experts in the field has no chance to reach the general population. Additionally, the information needs to be explained in terms that everybody can understand, and in a language that can be understood by the majority, meaning Creole, in some countries. Publishing information in a language that only the elite minority of a population can fully understand would bring us back to the purpose of this article. If new school programs are implemented without a proper public explanation of the benefits, public antipathy is more likely to remain (Wigglesworth, Billington & Loakes, 2013; Koskinen, 2010; Rickford, 2006), and the lack of success of said program will only confirm and reinforce the prejudice that the objectors were holding in the first place.

Next, teacher training needs to be reformed in order to change the old mentality of negative attitudes toward Creole languages. Educators need to be taught about the history of the Creole or dialect that their students speak, along with some basic sociolinguistics to understand not only the similarities and differences between the Creole and the standard language, but also the origin of this Creole and the culture that is attached to it (Farr & Song, 2011; Koskinen, 2010; Devonish & Carpenter, 2007). No educators can reasonably ask their students to part with their cultural identity. An obvious way to embrace Creole and its culture is by legitimising it in the classroom through story-telling, music, literature, students experience, guest speakers, history classes, etc. (Siegel, 1999; Roberts, 1994). Including rather than discarding the students' background will give them a sense of belonging and provide a framework to build upon rather than starting from zero. Additionally, student's motivation will most likely increase if they receive any support from their teachers instead of the usual denigration.

Subsequently, the next step is to develop teacher resources to support educators in this reform to legitimise Creole. Many successful stories around the globe can become source of inspiration for countries that want to initiate those changes. Notably, Jamaica and Australia have integrated minority languages into their curriculum, as reported by Prof Siegel in his hopeful update of the situation on Creoles and minority dialects in education (2007, p.69):

> The CAPE syllabus 'Communication Studies' in Jamaican high schools includes a 'Language and Society' module that focuses on the linguistic situations in Caribbean countries and their historical background, as well as on aspects of the grammar of Creole vernaculars as compared to English (Kouwenberg, 2002).

> In Western Australia, the 'Two-way English' programme for students who speak Aboriginal English has been further developed (Malcolm *et al.*, 1999). This programme recognises and explores cultural and linguistic differences as a rich educational opportunity for both teachers and students (Cahill, 2000; Western Australia Department of Education, 2002).

However, no matter how successful the program in Jamaican high schools is, it might come too late in the curriculum to make effective changes in its population's perception of Creole language, or to support Creole speakers who attend school in their second language. Denigration of Creole speakers starts from day one, at the elementary school level, at the same time that students have to keep up with the new language and the content in different subjects. Integrating Creole languages from the beginning of the school system would be a better solution. Admittedly, the article does not mention if children are welcome to use Creole to communicate in class since the elementary level. As for the program in Australia, the situation might differ a little from other former colonies, since speakers of Aboriginal English are not the majority in their country, as opposed to Haiti or the Seychelles, for example, where speakers of the "standard" variety are a minority.

Recommendations

Reforming the education system and informing the public about the benefits of such reform are necessary to give every student a fair chance at accessing quality education. However, these changes will not be possible if they are done through a strictly top-down approach. It is necessary that as many people as possible get informed and involved, including principals, teachers, parents, etc. Teachers of course play a key role, but reaching a majority of teachers is not a simple task, especially in contexts where a university degree is not required to teach at the elementary or secondary levels. This means that publishing articles in academic journals would not reach them, for example. Reforming formal teacher training at the university level, also, would not reach every educator, and therefore would not make any major difference on the ground for years. There is a need to use non-technical terms and to provide workshops adapted to local situations to in-service teachers, and to visit schools frequently. Teachers need continuous support, especially for issues that will emerge after the first steps of the reform. If support is not provided beyond the initial phase, they are more likely to give up after a few unfruitful attempts.

As change should come both from the top and the bottom to involve all the different layers of a society, there is a need to empower the local people through their culture and languages. Countries with a colonial past have been in situations when decisions affecting the life of their populations were taken by the coloniser without consulting locally beforehand. Therefore, repeating this mistake would not help to reduce public antipathy towards change. Parents need to be consulted as well, not only informed of the decision taken by the Ministry of Education, or foreign experts, or after it has already been implemented. The more the local people will be involved, the more they will understand that those changes will benefit them; if they own the changes, they will support them.

Finally, many former colonies should work on strengthening ties with bordering countries. Former Metropolitan states such as France or the United Kingdom are still too often the major provider of economic opportunities. Diversifying their economy and developing alliances can only be beneficial for neighbouring countries in long terms, and would avoid a brain drain that would have a disastrous impact on the local economy. Local economical opportunities would also give the population a legitimate reason to welcome a focus on local languages in their education system.

Conclusion

Legitimising Creole in class and giving value to the students' culture are basic ways of overcoming the disadvantages faced by students who do not speak the standard variety of a language used in the school system. Awareness programmes for teachers, administrators, and the general population (especially parents) are necessary to change persistent negative beliefs, but even those programmes are not yet accepted as valid by everyone. A proactive approach to contact the population directly to inform them not only of the results of research but also of the positive consequences of such programs can make a difference. Any awareness program will have a better impact if the information is shared among local people rather than from the government, or even worst, from foreign experts. A team of foreigners telling the local population what is better for them without much consultation or local expertise would be repeating the mistakes of the colonial past, and this is what former colonies must be careful to avoid. They must see their own potential not through the eyes of a coloniser, but in a way to turn it to their advantage and give their population a better chance of success.

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