

*The L1 in L2 Learning: Mauritian Teachers' Beliefs and Attitudes*

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Abstract

This study examines English language teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the pedagogic use of Creole in English language classes in Mauritian State Secondary Schools. It also explores their reasons for doing or not doing so and their perceived effects of the use of Creole in the students' English language learning. The data comprise English language teachers' responses to (i) questionnaires gathering their views regarding the use of Creole in English lessons, (ii) interviews concerning their general opinion about employing Creole in English classrooms, and (iii) classroom observations about what happens in their actual teaching. The findings and data analysis indicate that (i) there are three distinct types of English language teachers in Mauritius as far as the beliefs and attitudes towards Creole use in English classes are concerned; (ii) whereas using English solely in English classes can provide students with maximal exposure for language enhancement, Creole has a pedagogic role to play in such aspects as building rapport, catering for learners' diversity and facilitating students' understanding of grammar and abstract concepts; and (iii) although using Creole may reduce students' exposure to English, it can create an affective learning environment and encourage greater participation. It is therefore recommended that medium of instruction policy makers in Mauritius formulate helpful guidelines concerned with the systematic and purposeful use of L1 to promote language proficiency for all students.

**Keywords:** Language education, medium of instruction policy, role of L1 in L2 learning

## **1.0 Introduction**

Issues related to language instruction have stirred much controversy in the education field. Within the many widely discussed topics, the role of the first language (L1) in second language (L2) learning and teaching has gained much attention (e.g. Eldridge 1996; Song & Andrews 2009). Given that teachers are the key personnel who implement and reflect continuously on the improvement of language teaching approaches in the classrooms (e.g. Stern 1983), it is useful to gather data regarding their views on the controversial issue of the use of L1 in L2 classes.

### **1.1 Sociolinguistic background of Mauritius**

A brief sociolinguistic background of Mauritius will put this research in its proper perspective. Mauritius is a small island in the Indian Ocean, which boasts a remarkable ethnic and linguistic diversity. It is a Creole-speaking island – a Creole both acquired and used in daily life. It is French-based, but the island has English as the official language and official medium of instruction in the education system. Like many Creole-speaking communities, Mauritian Creole, the language of the overwhelming majority of the population, has traditionally had little status, no acceptability in official and formal contexts. Since January 2012, however, under the influence of local language activists, Creole has been officially introduced as an optional subject in Primary Schools on an equal footing with other optional Oriental or Asiatic languages – also known as ‘ancestral’ languages.

### **1.2 Language in education policy in Mauritius**

Language education in Mauritius is interwoven with the issue of the medium of instruction (MOI). Language education is seen as vital to people in Mauritius as proficiency in English (and French, for that matter) gives access to socioeconomic benefits. 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 the most suitable for the public.

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 the instruction.”

For the first three years of primary education, then, there is no clear mandate concerning the language to be used in the classroom. From the first year onwards, schoolbooks are all in English, but the main spoken languages are Creole and French. 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 mobility (Sonck 2005; Rajah-Carrim 2007). 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. One thing is certain; the use of English in schools is much more restricted than what might be expected when reading the Education Ordinance.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

Teachers’ instructional practices in schools in Mauritius show that mixed code teaching is widespread. As Mauritius is a predominantly Creole-speaking society, it is natural that students use Creole for daily communication both inside and outside classroom contexts. They do not have a need to resort to English outside school and English still remains a ‘foreign’ language which students do not have a good mastery of. Any casual classroom observation in many schools will reveal that English tends to be the formal medium for presentation of lesson content while Creole tends to be used for the discussion and explanation of ideas and information initially presented in English.

## 2.1 Code-Switching in Language Classroom

A number of scholars (e.g. Chambers 1991, Duff & Polio 1990; Ellis 1994; Franklin 1990; Krashen 1982; Turnbull 2001) maintain the commonly-held belief that teachers should avoid using students' L1 in L2 classrooms mainly for two reasons; first, code-switching denies learners valuable L2 input, thereby subverting L2 acquisition; and second, exposure to as much comprehensible L2 input as possible is conducive to meaningful language learning and crucial for successful L2 acquisition. Nevertheless, others (e.g. Atkinson 1987, 1993; Cook 2001, 2008; Lin 1988, 1991; Luke 1991; Macaro 2001) suggest that appropriate teachers' use of students' L1 can play a supportive role in L2 learning and teaching; for instance, L1 can be used to check comprehension, give instructions, organize tasks, maintain discipline, build rapport and explain lexical items and grammatical concepts.

## 2.2 Research Questions

The following research questions have been formulated to guide my inquiry:

- (a) What are the English language teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards the use of L1 in L2 classes in Mauritian secondary schools?
- (b) Why do they use Creole, if any?
- (c) How may they think the use of L1 would facilitate and/or hinder students' L2 learning?

## 3.0 Methodology

This study was conducted in two secondary schools in Mauritius where all students speak Creole as their L1. The first school, school A, is situated in an urban area and is a high-proficiency school while the second school, School B, is situated in a rural area and is a low-proficiency school. There were 20 participants in the study, 10 from each school, all English language teachers whose L1 was Creole.

The research adopted a mixed methodology – combining both qualitative and quantitative approaches in data collection and data analysis (Patton 2002). Data were collected from questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

## 4.0 Results and Analysis

The results obtained showed that there is a rather marked difference between how English teachers in School A and School B view the issue of the pedagogic use of L1 in L2 classes.

The first research question aimed to gain an understanding of the English teachers' beliefs and attitudes concerning the use of L1 and L2 in their classes. The beliefs and attitudes expressed by the participants can be broadly categorised into three types:

- |        |   |  |
|--------|---|--|
| Type 1 | - | Maximal advocates: teachers who advocate exclusive use of L2 and endeavour to find alternative ways to avoid using L1 during teaching;   |
| Type 2 | - | Pedagogic L1 advocates: teachers who are sympathetic towards the pedagogic use of L1 in L2 classes and are highly likely to supplement their L2 teaching with L1 as a last resort, based on their unique teaching context; and |
| Type 3 | - | Optimal L1/L2 advocates: teachers are in-between the two.  |

The following will provide a more detailed account of each type of teachers.

### Type 1 – Maximal L2 advocates

**Table 1**

Selected teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards L1 and L2 use in L2 classes

		<b>T1</b>	<b>T2</b>	<b>T3</b>	<b>T4</b>
1.	To me it is best to only use English in English classes.	6	6	6	6
2.	I use some Creole and some English in my English classes.	1	1	1	1
5.	My students should be exposed to as much English as possible in English classes.	6	5	6	6
7.	It is more effective to use Creole to raise my students' awareness of the similarities and differences between Creole and English.	1	2	1	1
8.	I use Creole to explain a language point when all the other teaching strategies in English fail to work for my students.	1	1	1	1
16.	Using Creole saves my time in explaining an abstract concept.	1	2	1	1
17.	My use of Creole reduces my students' exposure to English.	6	1	6	6
23.	Supplementing a little bit of Creole when teaching vocabulary and grammar can facilitate my students' English learning.	1	1	1	1

The participants had to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree with the above statements. They had to circle only ONE response to each statement to indicate their opinion:

*1 = strongly disagree and 6 = strongly agree*

In general, this group of teachers (T1 to T4) are, ardent advocates of the exclusive use of L2 and believe that learners should be exposed to as much as L2 as possible. They do not quite value the potential benefits brought about by using L1. For example, although all the teaching strategies in L2 fail to work, they tend not to resort to the use of L1. According to one teacher (T4) in the interview, there can be two reasons. Firstly, he can foresee that if he starts to use L1, his students will become dependent on it (see Wong-Fillmore 1985). And secondly, he strongly believes that the use of L1 will reduce students' exposure to L2.

The factors that may influence the beliefs and attitudes of this group of teachers have to do with their teaching context and their previous L2 learning experience. In the questionnaires, this group of teachers rated their students' L2 proficiency as "fair" to "excellent". This may explain why they can maintain the use of L2 throughout the lessons, and have developed such a belief that L2 teaching is best conducted in L2. In his interview, one teacher (T4) cited his learning experience of French as being crucial in the formation of his belief (Macaro 2001). He said:

“When I studied French in Alliance Française, the teachers used complete French to conduct the lessons.... So I would say, when learning an additional language, it is more effective for teachers to treat students as learning another mother tongue and force them to think in that target language, without undergoing a translation process”

### Type II – Pedagogic L1 advocates

**Table 2****Selected teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards L1 and L2 use in L2 Classes**

		<b>T10</b>	<b>T17</b>	<b>T18</b>	<b>T19</b>	<b>T20</b>
1	To me, it is best to only use English in English classes	4	4	1	1	2
2	I use some Creole and some English in my English classes	2	4	4	1	6
5	My students should be exposed to as much English as possible in English classes	6	6	5	6	6
7	It is more effective to use Creole to raise my students' awareness of the similarities and differences between Creole and English	5	5	4	4	6
8	I use Creole to explain a language point when all the other teaching strategies in English fail to work for my students	5	5	5	6	6
16	Using Creole saves my time in explaining an abstract concept	5	4	5	6	6
17	My use of Creole reduces my students' exposure to English	3	4	3	5	5
18	My students become more dependent on Creole when I use it to explain difficult concepts	3	4	5	6	5
23	Supplementing a little bit of Creole when teaching vocabulary and grammar can facilitate my students' English learning	5	5	4	6	6

This group of teachers (T10, T17 to T20), possess different beliefs and attitudes towards L1 use in L2 classes. In general, the sole use of L2 is not valued as highly as the maximal L2 advocates. Nevertheless, they believe that learners should have as much exposure to L2 as possible. They show a more appreciative attitude towards the potential benefits of using L1 in L2 teaching; however, they too are sensitive to the potential drawbacks of using L1 (e.g. reducing students' exposure to L2). This awareness shows that they do not support the use of L1 blindly; rather, there could be other factors shaping their beliefs and attitudes such as teaching context and previous L2 learning experience.

As reported in the questionnaires, the L2 proficiency of students that T17 to T20 teach is either "bad" or "very poor". According to T18 and T20 in the interviews, this was one of the reasons why they needed to use L1 in their L2 lessons. These two teachers recalled, in their interviews, that their previous L2 learning experience was critical in shaping their beliefs.

**Table 3****Selected teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards L1 and L2 use in L2 classes.**

		T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T11 1	T11 2	T11 3	T11 4	T11 5	T11 6
1	To me, it is best to only use English in English Classes	6	5	5	5	5	6	6	4	4	5	3
2	I use some Creole and some English in my English Classes	2	1	2	2	3	2	6	6	6	5	5
5	My students should be exposed to as much English as possible in English Classes.	6	6	5	5	6	6	6	5	6	6	5
7	It is more effective to use Creole to raise my students' awareness of the similarities and differences between Creole and English.	1	4	2	3	2	3	4	5	5	6	5
8	I use Creole to explain a language point when all the other teaching strategies in English fail to work for my students.	3	1	4	5	1	6	5	5	6	5	5
16	Using Creole saves my time in explaining an abstract concept.	3	4	4	5	3	4	4	6	6	5	5
17	My use of Creole reduces my students' exposure to English.	5	4	4	5	2	6	5	5	6	5	4
18	My students become more dependent on Creole when I use it to explain difficult concepts.	5	4	4	5	1	6	4	5	5	4	4
23	Supplementing a little bit of Creole when teaching vocabulary and grammar can facilitate my students' English learning.	3	4	3	5	5	5	5	4	5	6	4

Table 3 shows that this group of teachers (T5 to T9 and T11 to T16), are neither very positive nor negative about using L1 in L2 classes. In other words, the beliefs they hold and attitudes they exhibit are in-between the maximal L2 advocates (Type I) and pedagogic L1 advocates (Type II). Generally speaking, teachers in the high-proficiency school (School A) tend to be supporters of exclusive use of L2 while those in the low-proficiency school (School B) are likely to be the opposite.

#### **4.1 Pedagogic Reasons for Using or Not Using L1**

The second research question aimed to probe into the reasons why the participants use and/or do not use L1 in their L2 teaching. The findings are reported as follows.

The reasons for not using L1 includes (a) compliance with policies and parents' expectation, (b) provision of maximal L2 exposure for language enhancement, (c) existence of alternative teaching methods. One teacher suggested that when teaching vocabulary, for example, the teacher can use synonyms and /or antonyms (see McCarthy 1990; Thornbury 2002), or create a context for students to imagine the words involve some abstract concepts.

On the other hand, the reasons for using L1 include (a) facilitating understanding of grammar and abstract concepts, (b) managing misbehavior and engaging attention, (c) building rapport, (d) giving

feedback, (e) catering for learners' diversity, i.e. making adjustments in the teaching (in this case, supplementing the teaching with some L1) so that the less competent students can catch up, (f) saving time achieving learning objectives.

#### **4.2 Potential Effects of L1 Use**

After exploring the reasons why teachers choose to or not to use L1 in their L2 teaching, the final research question tries to understand their perceived potential benefits and drawbacks of pedagogically employing L1 on their students' L2 teaching. The results are reported as follows:

##### **L1 hinders L2 learning**

###### **Dependence on L1**

T4 said in the interview that, "I really hope that students do not look for excuses to use Creole. They should seize every opportunity to use English. This is the best way to improve". This teacher seems to agree with Edstrom (2004) who warns practitioners about the adverse consequences of over-reliance on L1 in L2 teaching; she suggests that using L1 might slow down or limit the development of students' understanding and interpretation of L2.

###### **Reduction of Exposure**

It is commonly believed that students can receive more input in L2 when L2 is used in class. With more input, they will get used to the target language more easily (e.g. Zacharias 2004). Thus, over 80% of the respondents indicated on the questionnaires that using L1 reduces students' exposure to L2 (e.g. see Tables 1 to 3). T3 wrote in her questionnaire that, "students and teachers should use English during the lessons and even outside classroom in order to provide an English-rich environment".

##### **L1 facilitates L2 learning**

###### **Creation of an affective learning environment**

In the questionnaires, some teachers in School B wrote that the students "simply turn off their learning 'engine' if the whole lesson is conducted in English". This may indicate that the anxiety level of those students is extremely high in L2 lessons. According to the affective filter hypothesis in Krashen's Monitor Model (1981, 1982), language anxiety has a powerful destructive effect on L2 acquisition. Thus, one way to create an affective learning atmosphere, according to some of the teachers surveyed, is to supplement L2 teaching with the use of L1.

###### **Encouragement of greater participation**

More than half the teachers surveyed reported in the questionnaires that their students were more willing to participate effectively and pay attention when L1 was used. When observing the lesson of T12, it was noted that when L2 was used, only few students volunteered to answer questions, but when L1 was used, they became energetic and constantly yelled out the answers. This shows that implementing the sole use of L2 in L2 classed may not be suitable and conducive to the learning of every student.

#### **5.0 Conclusion**

My conclusion is that a more helpful and effective medium of instruction policy, instead of being stipulated by a higher authority like the Ministry of Education, might be a school-based one, allowing the stakeholders of the schools to decide on the most suitable and effective course of action for the school. Hence, it would be wise to offer students the opportunities to express their opinions about whether or not L1 should be used in classrooms and, if so, how it should be employed strategically so

as to maximise and facilitate their learning, since this could be one of the prerequisites for successful L2 acquisition in the long run.

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