

Towards a Bilingual Society

Jeanette Morris

Only a small number of the thousands of students who leave our secondary schools each year are able to speak a foreign language with some degree of fluency. The vast majority leave without any ability to communicate in a foreign language at even the most basic level, despite our Spanish and French heritage. Traditionally, the study of a foreign language has been part of a liberal education and the goals of teaching a foreign language have been mainly intellectual and literary. Modern approaches focus on students' ability to speak the language, as well as on the benefits to be derived from regional integration, based on an understanding of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the Caribbean peoples. Successive governments and education plans have all paid lip service to the necessity of having citizens able to communicate in a foreign language, and have identified Spanish as the most appropriate given our proximity to Central and South America.

Recently, an even greater imperative to ensure a bilingual cadre of skilled personnel has surfaced. Globalisation has led to a greater emphasis on regional integration for our small economies to survive. The formation of the Association of Caribbean States (ACS) is an example of this. Increasingly, the English-speaking Caribbean must interact and negotiate with our Spanish- and French-speaking neighbours. With the coming on stream of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) in 2005, this imperative will be even greater as we will have to market our products to the population of over 850 million in the Americas, the majority of whom are Spanish speaking. Language training is therefore a vital aspect of preparing our country to compete in the new global environment.

This imperative was articulated by Ambassador Odeen Ishmael of Guyana at a forum in Washington DC as far back as June 14, 1996:

“...Today, we operate in a global economy, and so we must think globally. Guyana is located in a region where Spanish is a dominant language... we have developed close ties with the Spanish-speaking countries of the hemisphere, and we have signed horizontal cooperation agreements with a number of them. Some of these countries offer training courses... but on many occasions we cannot access these opportunities because our people have no proficiency in the Spanish language. Because of this, we lose out on many chances.... The time is ripe for us in Guyana to train our people to speak a second language.... My vision is that by the year 2010, all Guyanese children, by the time they are 16 years of age, must have a proficiency in the Spanish language.”

Why then do our students reject language study in droves when Spanish is part of the core curriculum and is taught in all our secondary schools? Why are we not producing bilingual students?

Firstly, to my mind, there has been a devaluation of the traditional humanities subjects with a concomitant swing towards subjects that are seen to be more utilitarian and relevant to employment, for example, business studies, science, and technology. The idea of education for its intrinsic value and for the development of the individual has given way to a desire for credentials leading to high-paying jobs.

Secondly, learning a language cannot be achieved in the short term. It requires practice and is the product of cumulative learning over time. Students today seem unable to defer gratification and are not inclined to work towards long-term objectives, preferring quick and easy rewards.

Thirdly, the nature of the language learner in our schools has changed. Before the large-scale expansion of secondary education, foreign languages were taught to a minority of students who represented a small elite destined for the professions. As the educational system developed and expanded, the profile of the language learner changed and now spans the entire range of abilities. In some schools, teaching methods have not adapted to suit the needs of the new learners, so that we have teachers still using outdated approaches such as the grammar translation method, with predictable results.

Fourthly, some teachers themselves lack fluency in the foreign language and are not confident enough to use it as the medium of instruction. The result is that for most students the classroom experience does not lead to their acquisition of the foreign language. Research has shown that in order to acquire a language one has to hear it constantly to improve comprehension, and use it as often as possible to improve oral proficiency. Unfortunately, in many of our classrooms, the foreign language is not a living spoken language but a content area where students learn about the mechanics of the language and do endless written grammatical exercises, but never get to use the language.

Given the economic imperative to reach out to Latin American markets, how can the education system ensure that the goal of enabling students to leave school after five years with competence in at least one foreign language is achieved?

I suggest that a multi-pronged approach is necessary. The first step should be a public education campaign to sensitise citizens to the idea that foreign language competence is no longer the province of a small elite but a necessity for all persons. Manufacturing and business enterprises need to ensure when hiring staff that fluency in a foreign language is one of the essential requirements that will determine whether or not an applicant gets the job. Companies need to ensure that staff already on the job receive language training in the workplace. This is already on stream in some progressive enterprises, as exemplified by the following item in the February 19th, 2003 edition of “Tradewatch”, a publication of the Caribbean Export Development Agency:

“The Inter-American Development Bank (Office in Barbados) is seeking quotations from institutions or individuals for the provision of Spanish Language instruction to its staff in Barbados during the period April – December 2003.”

Career guidance in schools should emphasise the advantages of science and engineering students maximising their marketability by the addition of a foreign language. Too many parents and even teachers of other subjects discourage students who want to continue their study of a foreign language beyond Form 3. To ensure that all foreign language teachers are fluent in the language they have to teach, there should be exchange programmes during the long vacation for teachers to spend time in a French- or Spanish-speaking country. Continuous professional development to upgrade teachers' pedagogical skills should be ongoing, with incentives to encourage teachers to participate in training. However, all this will be in vain if teachers are not given the necessary resources and facilities to enable them to do their job.

There are many good foreign language teachers in the system working in difficult conditions and managing to produce competent foreign language learners. They need support from the Ministry of Education, principals, other teachers, and parents so that their work can have a multiplier effect, and achieve the goal of having the majority of our students leaving school as bilingual students and citizens.

School of Education, UWI, St. Augustine