

## Spanish in the Primary School

Jennifer Yamin-Ali

The recent announcement by the Ministry of Education that Spanish is to be taught in primary schools in Trinidad and Tobago has generated a great deal of discussion. No doubt, this thrust has come from the widely held view in the language research arena that early language learning provides for the development of many of the broader and holistic goals of any education system. Such goals include the ability to communicate effectively with peoples of other cultures and backgrounds, enhanced problem-solving skills, the opportunity to gain a competitive advantage in the job market, and increasing the nation's potential to access a larger chunk of the global economy.

There are, however, some issues to be considered in this business of Spanish in the primary school. In the first instance, the reality is that in Trinidad and Tobago, Spanish cannot in the widest sense, be treated as a Second language, but as a Foreign language. Studies and discussion on the linguistic peculiarities of the Caribbean region, and of Trinidad and Tobago in particular, have demonstrated convincingly that the majority of the population speaks some form of Creole as their primary or first language, with Standard English being their second language. A large section of the population has the ability to move back and forth on the language continuum as their social needs require. We are already a bilingual if not trilingual community. Creole is a part of our reality, which will not disappear with wishful thinking or by ignoring it. Our approach to the teaching of Spanish should therefore be as that of a Foreign language.

It is interesting to listen to the views of the average citizen on the street, and the "informed," that "dey cyah even talk English an' dey want to teach dem Spanish!" One really has nothing to do with the other in a truly academic sense. The inability, or refusal, of the average Trinidadian or Tobagonian child to use Standard English as a norm, or when required, is embedded in a sociocultural legacy of definitions of power, powerlessness, acceptance, and rejection, all undergirded by economics. Their use of their preferred dialect is based, not on ability or intelligence, but on social comfort, which translates into a sense of belonging and identity. Space does not permit a prolonged discussion of this issue, which has been the scholarly focus of Prof. Dennis Craig and Prof. Lawrence Carrington, among others.

The positive outcomes of early language instruction *may* include improved overall school performance and enhanced creativity. Research in the field indicates that there is some measure of controversy over the optimal age for learning what is referred to as a Second language, but what I will refer to as a Foreign language. Whereas Piagetian theory argues that the best age for language development is at the typical primary school age, other research indicates that there may be factors other than age that account for language learning success in children. What curriculum specialists need to bear in mind is that there is no conclusive finding on the relationship between age and Foreign language learning. What this points to is that planners, advisors, and trainers have to be constantly open to new and innovative ideas to realize their goals. There is no blueprint. But there are, indeed, some areas for careful thought and wise decision making.

There are two major challenges for those involved in the “Spanish in primary schools” initiative. One is the very curriculum, and the other is its implementation. The current curriculum is a work in progress, I am told. My advice would be to ensure that the programme’s objectives are aligned to its goals. One area to which close attention should be paid, according to what is stated in the document I have seen, is the intention to “reinforce and increase knowledge of other subject areas through content-based Spanish language instruction.” One must be careful that this is not merely a perfunctory statement and that there is sufficient evidence of it in the objectives and in the specific “functional objectives” stated in the curriculum. One should also ensure that there has been consultation with the general curriculum in order to realize this goal.

While implementation may be a daunting challenge, it would be beneficial to learn from the experience of others in the field such as The Centre for Language Learning at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine, which has been engaged in a Spanish in the primary school project for some time now.

One of the major pitfalls of such programmes instituted elsewhere is the scheduling of classes that are either too infrequent or too short. The adage that a little is better than none is a common misconception that would only lead to the frustration of both teachers and students. There is also the issue of the status of the subject. Will principals, other class teachers, and parents buy into the validity of the programme’s claims?

Whereas one cannot assume that native speakers will not be an asset to any foreign language programme, a quick-fix approach to pedagogical training is certainly not the answer. It may be that the steering committee intends to use a team approach, combining the skills of trained teachers with untrained native speakers. While there is much value in “input” in the foreign language classroom, native speakers may also face the challenge of breaking down the socio-linguistic barriers facing them in the average classroom. Let us also note that a quick-fix approach to curriculum planning and teacher supervision is a dangerous path.

To a great degree, the success of this programme also lies its ability to motivate the learner. The content, including practice activities, must have meaning and relevance for them. The activities themselves must be structured to facilitate the natural inclinations of a primary school child—including movement, sound, and imagination. The learner’s perception of the language must be such that he/she wants to be associated with it. Positive attitudinal influences from significant persons in their environment should increase students’ learning in this context.