Reading practices in a Kreol speaking environment: Reflecting on the experience of preschool children in Mauritius

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The issue

The large majority of children in Mauritius are Kreol-speaking and they live in a Kreol-speaking environment.

Paradoxically, it is English which is the dominant school language: most textbooks (other than French and the Oriental Languages) are in English; assignments and exams are in English and any official correspondence around the school is expected to be in English.

Other than the school context, Mauritian learners are in a print environment that is dominated by French and English. While most of what is in the newspapers is in French and a lot of the linguistic landscape is in French and English, the official government documents and the official documents are in English. The print environment thus requires the child to be a proficient reader of English and French in order to function effectively in an increasingly print mediated environment.

The demand to be literate in the European languages, to read and write in these languages, is thus enormous. This demand is an educational, social and professional one. With the development of the internet, with a flow of information in written and other multimodal forms,
this demand for literacy skills is only going to increase in the years to come. We note that young children use internet facilities, do research work on the net and form part of complex social networks on the net, all of which require sophisticated reading and writing skills.

The academic and scholarly literature has highlighted the importance of reading in the development of children. The rich literature on emergent literacy has pointed out the many psycholinguistic benefits of immersing children in a print-environment where reading books, reading fiction, and reading for pleasure are emphasised. This literature has highlighted that children who are read to from a young age develop early awareness of print and the awareness that print carries meaning, they develop decoding and vocabulary skills, they also nurture an interest in and a motivation for reading. This literature thus foregrounds the fact that reading brings about linguistic and socio-emotive-affective changes in children. This literature, however, is a Western literature which often takes reading for granted – taking pleasurable reading for pleasure practices for granted among parents and children in Mauritius would be a faux pas.

In such a local context where reading and writing are essential social practices, and in view of the importance allocated to reading practices in the literature, I have been very interested with Mauritian children’s exposure to reading and their socialisation into reading at the point when they enter the education system – point at which the school is responsible for initiating them to a reading culture. This interest that I have had has also been fuelled by a dose of concern since I have become increasingly aware and sensitive to the fact that while most of the children are from Kreol-speaking backgrounds, the large majority of the reading materials that are available are in French and English. This has encouraged me to investigate the reading practices of a group of preschool teachers and leaners. The aim was to describe and analyse their reading practices in the complex sociolinguistic situation.

Observations

The observations that I make here draw heavily from the data collected for doctoral research in 2004 and 2005. While quantitative cross sectional data were collected from 7 Government primary schools in Zone 4 in 2004, qualitative data were collected, using a longitudinal case-study of one preschool in an urban area in 2005. The observations I make are thus general, but not generalizable.

1. In line with the preschool curriculum guidelines, all the preschools I visited had a class library, nicely laid out and visually appealing, with a very satisfactory number of books. For instance, the preschools I visited had between 100 and 150 books, most of which in English and French.
2. Again, in line with the preschool guidelines, the teachers organise and plan storybook reading sessions on a fairly regular basis – once a week or once a fortnight. This revealed that they were aware of the importance of reading to the children.

3. However, it was rarer to see a teacher read a book in class. It sometimes happened that the Friday afternoon planned storybook reading session was cancelled or used for another lighter activity. Similarly, it was rare to see a teacher using a book in class. One time it happened during a lesson on the theme of animals. The teacher brought a colourful book of an encyclopaedic nature. She showed the pictures to the children, and she read the text. Given that the text was in French, the teacher read the linguistically complex text *verbatim* and then simplified the language and interpreted in Kreol for the children. Similarly, the observed storybook session indicated similar reading-translating strategies. This made the storybook reading process long and tedious for the teacher and the learners.

4. It thus appeared that the reading practices at the preschools observed were quite limited in nature and that could be, in many ways, seen as problematic. How can we expect children to develop a ‘reading for pleasure’ culture if they are not exposed to it and socialised into it at school? Is it fair to expect children to read for enjoyment when the reading they were exposed to at school was mostly of a tedious nature?

What do these preliminary observations indicate or suggest? Why are these reading practices rare and scarce?

1. Although one could argue that it is a lack of books that leads to storybook reading being relatively rare, it was obvious that there were many books available in the school libraries. The quantity of books was thus not an issue.

2. It appeared to me that the issue was more related to the appropriateness of the books:

   a. First, it seemed that the books in the preschool library might have been linguistically inappropriate. Since all the children are Kreol speaking, when they were read to in French or English, the storybook reading sessions lost much of the entertaining and fun aspect that is associated with reading. Conversely, teachers could have read Kreol books for the children to socialise them into a reading culture. However, the teachers said that there were not many books in Kreol in their library, that they were not trained to read Kreol books – revealing their negative attitudes towards storybook reading in Kreol.
One incident occurred when the teachers received a Kreol storybook and they showed much resistance to that book, eventually shelving it in a discreet place.

b. Second, one could argue that some of the books were inappropriate for the children’s age and their language proficiency. Since most pre-schoolers are 4 and 5 year olds and since English and French are foreign languages for them, maybe some of the books could be those written for foreign language learners with a lot of images and repetition.

c. Third, it seemed that the teachers themselves did not have a reading culture. Since they had been brought up in the 1970s and 1980s, time at which education had just become free and accessible, they had quite a formal bookish and exams-oriented kind of education experience. They themselves not having a rich reading culture was probably an additional factor in enhancing the lack of reading in schools.

Conclusion

The importance of reading in our education system and the lives of the children on Mauritius cannot be underestimated. We are aware that children need to develop diverse reading and writing practices to embrace the challenges of a print-mediated world. The gap between the language that the children speak and the literate languages that they have access to is a challenge that the education system and the teacher training corps should consider, should they wish to enhance the reading culture of the children and by extension, the youth.