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**Attitudes towards Learning English as a Second Language in
Primary Schools in Mauritius.**

Research among teachers, parents and children

Master's Thesis: Youth, Education & Society

Utrecht University

Utrecht, The Netherlands

Student: Maud van Steen

Student number: 6545637

Supervisor: Dr. R. van 't Rood

Second assessor: Dr. S. van Schaik

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ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Abstract

Mauritius is a multilingual island in the Indian Ocean with English as the official state language and language of instruction at schools. However, the common languages on the island are French and Creole, so most children have to acquire English as their second language in primary school. To successfully finish primary school and become eligible for enrolment into secondary school, children have to pass school exams. This poses problems for many children who fail the exam because of their deficit in English. This study analyses the attitudes of children, parents and teachers towards learning English as a second language and as an instruction language. Mixed-methods were used; Questionnaires were filled out by children ($n = 286$), parents ($n = 17$) and teachers ($n = 23$) and interviews were held with children ($n = 9$), parents ($n = 4$), teachers ($n = 11$) and MIE students ($n = 4$). Children, parents and teachers had a positive attitude towards English because they feel it is very important for children's career perspectives. However, children and teachers experienced pressure from the current curriculum with a demanding syllabus and important exams. Teachers experienced the current system as too difficult for children, especially considering the limited parental support. There is no time for context-embedded instructions to contribute to acquisition of English as a second language. Therefore, revision of the current curriculum and parental support are required to improve children's second language acquisition.

Keywords: second language acquisition, language attitudes, language of instruction, Mauritian primary schools, language policy.

Samenvatting

Mauritius is een meertalig eiland in de Indische oceaan met Engels als de officieel gesproken taal en de instructietaal op school. Echter, de meest voorkomende talen op het eiland zijn Frans en

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Creools, waardoor de meeste kinderen Engels als tweede taal op school moeten leren. Om met succes de lagere school af te maken en in aanmerking te komen voor inschrijving voor het voortgezet onderwijs, moeten kinderen slagen voor schoolexamens. Dit vormt een probleem voor veel kinderen die het examen niet halen vanwege hun tekortkoming in het Engels. Dit onderzoek analyseert de houdingen van kinderen, ouders en leraren tegenover het leren van Engels als een tweede taal en als instructietaal. Een mixed-methods design is hiervoor gebruikt; Vragenlijsten zijn ingevuld door kinderen ($n = 286$), ouders ($n = 17$) en leraren ($n = 23$). Interviews zijn afgenomen onder kinderen ($n = 9$), ouders ($n = 4$), leraren ($n = 11$) en studenten van MIE ($n = 4$). Kinderen, ouders en leerkrachten hadden een positieve houding ten opzichte van het Engels, omdat ze het belangrijk vinden voor de carrièreperspectieven van kinderen. Echter, kinderen en leraren ervaren druk vanuit het huidige lesaanbod met veeleisende syllabussen en belangrijke examens. Leraren ervaren het huidige systeem als te moeilijk voor kinderen, voornamelijk gezien de beperkte ouderlijke ondersteuning. Er is geen tijd voor context-ingebedde instructies om bij te dragen aan het verkrijgen van Engels als tweede taal, waardoor het nodig is het huidige curriculum en ouderlijke ondersteuning in de tweede taalverwerving te herzien.

Sleutelwoorden: tweede taal verwerving, houdingen tegenover taal, instructietaal,

Mauritiaanse basisscholen, taalbeleid

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Introduction

Mauritius is an island state located in the Indian Ocean, 850 kilometres East of Madagascar (Rajah-Carrim, 2007). The history of Mauritius is characterized by European colonialism, which started with the Dutch settling down on the island in 1598. Mauritius was under French colonial rule from 1720 until finally the English took over in 1810. The English continued slavery and brought in additional people from India to work in Mauritius (Baker, 1972). This led to a wide variety of backgrounds of the Mauritian inhabitants, resulting in a multi-ethnic and multilingual population in which twelve different languages exist (Bissoonauth, 2011; Rajah-Carrim, 2005; Rajah-Carrim, 2007).

Since 1810 English has been the official language of Mauritius, even though only 0.3% of the inhabitants claims to speak English at home, while 80% of the inhabitants of Mauritius claims to speak Creole at home, according to the Population Census in 2011 (Consensus 2011; Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2012; Rajah-Carrim 2005). Most of the languages spoken in Mauritius have a cultural or political meaning (Miles, 2000). For instance, in Mauritius the English language is mainly used by the government and for legal purposes (Ball, 2010). Therefore, the use of English indicates a high level of education and is associated with a middle- or upper-class status (Rajah-Carrim, 2005). Nevertheless, English is the only language on the island not associated with a particular ethnic or religious group. However, the use of Creole is associated with an economically and socially subordinate ethnic group in Mauritius, namely the descendants of African slaves. Besides this, in everyday interaction French is used by all ethnic groups, even though only 1.85% of the inhabitants claim that French is the language of their forefathers (Rajah-Carrim, 2005; Rajah-Carrim, 2007). Thus, the main spoken languages in Mauritius appear to be Creole and French (Sonck, 2005; Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2012). This is interesting, because even though retaining the former colonial language as the official language is common in countries that have lived under colonial regimes, the majority of the Mauritian population only speaks English to a limited degree and has limited knowledge of the English language (King, 2003; Stein, 1997).

Because it is the official state language, English is also the language of instruction at school from the fourth year of primary education onwards (Rajah-Carrim, 2005; Rajah-Carrim, 2007). However, there seems to be a large variation in the way this has been implemented in the

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

different schools in Mauritius (Sonck, 2005). All schools in Mauritius follow a curriculum that is provided by the government and supported by English materials that are also supplied by the government. Because most people in Mauritius speak French or Creole at home, this means that most children have to acquire English as a second or third language in order to join in with the school system (Rajah-Carrim, 2007). For the first three years of primary school there is no strict language policy; the only guideline that exists comes from the Minister of Education, who stated in 1998 that young children should be educated in their mother tongue (Sonck, 2005). Inhabitants who are in favour of admitting Creole to the school system indicate that it will provide opportunities to children from various upbringings, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Rajah-Carrim, 2007). This is in line with what UNESCO (2003) states, namely that children who have a different mother tongue than the national or instruction language at school are often at a considerable disadvantage in the educational system. However, the use of Creole in the classroom is not desired by many parents, because of its association with lower socio-economic groups (Rajah-Carrim, 2007; Sonck, 2005). Nevertheless, the minister declared in 2004 that from 2005 onwards Creole would be introduced in the school system (Rajah-Carrim, 2005). However, there is no clear information available about how this policy has been enforced and what impact these measures have had.

As a consequence of the current issues with the use of English in school, only two-thirds of the children pass the national exams, according to the last assessment from an analysis of education statistics (Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2012). Children are supposed to pass this national exam in order to finish primary school and become eligible for secondary school (Griffiths, 2000). If they do so, they obtain the Certificate Primary Education (CPE), which is conducted in English (Bunwaree, 2001; Griffiths, 2000). Therefore, these CPE examinations could lead to a form of exclusion in the educative system, affecting a rather large part of the school going children (Bunwaree, 2001). Children are unjustly labelled as unintelligent when they fail due to their deficit in English (Brock-Utne, 2005). Moreover, children whose parents can afford private tutoring to prepare them for the CPE have a much better chance at passing the examination, compared to children whose parents cannot afford this. Therefore, it is important to see what can contribute to the acquisition of a second language outside of private tutoring.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

To understand the educative system in Mauritius, it is important to mention that learning in the Mauritian educative system can be described by the so-called three “R’s”, Recipient, Repetition and Recall (Griffiths, 2000). These “R’s” embody the mechanism to memorise the knowledge at school that is necessary to pass the CPE. The children receive the knowledge without questioning the veracity and relevance of it (Griffiths, 1998). However, it has been shown that more time investment in teaching a new language leads to a more successful acquisition of this language (Dixon et al., 2012).

Interestingly, there are more countries, like Tanzania and South-Africa, that are struggling with language policy in a similar fashion as Mauritius, in which globalisation plays a major role (Brock-Utne, 2005; Watson, 2007). In these countries, it has been shown that it is important for the government to develop a clear language policy that takes the different mother tongues into account. According to UNESCO (2003, 2007), teaching children in the language they understand best results in good practice. So, since the government is usually responsible for the provision of materials, qualified teachers and education laws, they can support the second language acquisition (SLA) not just through policy, but also financially by providing the right support where needed.

According to Shameem (2004), the way children use a language can be influenced by peers, teachers, headmasters and parents. By providing children with the suitable ecological conditions like motivation, long-term educational support and context, children can become bilingual (Ball, 2010). To fully understand the implications of SLA for children, it is important to look at language acquisition in general, because many different contextual influences can contribute to the success of a language proficiency (Hoff, 2006). Thomas and Collier (2002) stated that the level of cognitive and school development of children in the first language predicts SLA (Cummins, 2001). This means that it is more difficult for a child to become proficient in a second language when the development of the first language is at a lower stage (Khatib, & Taie, 2016). In line with these findings, Cummins (2008) makes a distinction between basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) to provide insight in the difficulties and timeline that second language learners have to face. BICS refers to the conversational fluency while CALP is about expressing and comprehension of written and oral ideas and concepts. Therefore, CALP is strongly related to success in school

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

performance. According to Cummins' (2005) theories, an underlying overlap between the first and second language makes it possible to transfer knowledge from the first language to the second language.

This language transfer can be supported or induced by the educative system (Cummins, 2005). According to the separate underlying proficiency (SUP) model from Cummins (2005), language representations will be stored separately in the brain if there is no underlying proficiency between the two different languages. The SUP model suggests a connection between the place where the language is learned, such as home or school, and the performance in that language. The proficiencies and knowledge in the first and second language will develop separately and cannot be transferred. Contrary to the SUP model, the common underlying proficiency (CUP) model refers to the proficiency in both languages. This suggests that when there is academic knowledge and ambitions in both languages, the first language will have a beneficial effect on the second language. However, CUP will only occur when there is sufficient exposure and motivation (Khatib, & Taie, 2016). The motivation of children towards learning a new language can therefore make a significant difference in the level of proficiency that is eventually achieved (Gardner, 2001). There is a strong correlation between children's motivation to learn a second language and how much effort they will put into learning the second language (Dixon et al., 2012). Repeated and clear contextualised instructions can contribute to SLA, which suggests that instruction should primarily focus on context-embedded tasks for children who learn in a second language (Cummins, 2008; Dixon et al., 2012). For teachers, in a multilingual setting like Mauritius, it is important to have knowledge of SLA, the different functions of language, BICS and CALP, in order to efficiently teach and make the second language context embedded to these children (Shameem, 2004). So, if there is sufficient exposure to the new language and motivation to learn this language, the transfer of knowledge and skills between first and second language will be far better.

The motivation to learn a second language is shaped by attitudes and integrativeness of individuals or a group towards the second language (Gardner, 2001; Shameem, 2004). Motivation is the will of the child to learn the target language (Dörnyei, & Skehan, 2003). Integrativeness refers to the genuine interest of children to learn the second language (Gardner, 2001). Attitudes can be described as the underlying psychological aptitude to impact or evaluate behaviour in a

certain way. Because student attitudes are strongly influenced by peers, teachers and parents, it is important to move their attitudes and behaviour towards learning the second language (Shameem, 2004).

Peers play an important role in the language proficiency of children, through peer pressure or by being a role model (Hoff, 2006; Walqui, 2000). Furthermore, more interaction with peers speaking the target language can contribute to SLA as well. Literary practise in the first or second language at home forms an excellent contribution to proficiency of a second language, for example by frequent book reading (Paradis, 2007). Moreover, parental attitudes towards the second language can contribute to the quality and speed of SLA by children, and strong parental support towards learning a second language can contribute to better and faster SLA by children (Li, 1999). However, language acquisition is also strongly related to the socio-economic status (SES) that children grow up in (Hoff, 2006). Parents with a lower SES encourage their children less in SLA, for instance because they are not able to help children with their homework due to insecurity about their own second language proficiency (Jones, 2009). Furthermore, teachers' educational attitudes and theories have an effect on their own classroom behaviour, which in turn influences what students actually learn (Karavas-Doukas, 1996). If a teacher has a positive attitude towards the second language, he or she will invest more time in explaining and teaching the language (Hoff, 2006). The instruction skills and language ability of the teacher are also a predictor for the children's SLA; if a teacher is ineffective or the lessons are dull and confusing, then this will negatively influence students' attitudes towards a SLA (Dixon et al., 2012; Gardner, 2001).

This research

So, language attitudes shape motivation to learn a second language, which inevitably affects language proficiency, particularly when attitudes towards language are shaped by political and social events, and driven by economic need, as is the case in Mauritius. However, not much is known about the perspectives and attitudes of Mauritian children, parents and teachers towards English as the instruction language in school and the way this might influence children's SLA. Therefore, in this research language attitudes of children, parents and teachers towards SLA are viewed by using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model focuses on the context and quality of the environment of a child and on how the development of a child can be influenced by its environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner distinguishes four different systems: the first system is the microsystem, which includes all direct influences towards the child like peers, family and school. The second layer, the mesosystem, refers to the interrelations between two or more settings, for example the interaction between school and family. The third system, the exosystem, is about factors that indirectly influence the child, for instance the school policy or the curriculum. The last system, the macrosystem, includes the community, government and organisation of school systems.

For the current research, the main research question is: *“What are the attitudes of children, parents and teachers towards learning the English language as a second language in Mauritian primary schools?”* In order to answer this question, three sub-questions have been formulated: Firstly, *“What is the attitude of non-native English-speaking children towards learning the English language?”* Secondly, *“What is the attitude of parents towards English as a language of instruction and how is the acquisition of English as a second language supported by the parents?”* And finally, *“What is the attitude of teachers towards English as a language of instruction and how is the acquisition of English as a second language supported by the teachers?”* Based on the literature, it is hypothesized that children, parents and teachers view English as the language that is needed to pass the exams and that they associate it with higher education (Rajah-Carrim, 2005). Therefore, it is most likely that teachers and parents support the acquisition of the English language. However, it is expected that the socio-economic status of the parents will be decisive on parental support towards acquiring the English language. It is predictable that parents with a lower socio-economic states are less able to help, because of their own insecurities (Jones, 2009)

Schools system Mauritius

The school system in Mauritius is comparable to the British school system and is free for all children (Bunwaree, 2001). Children enter primary school at the age of five and the primary school takes around six years to complete. Most of the primary schools in Mauritius are state schools, also called governmental schools. It is worth noticing that besides the governmental schools in Mauritius there are two different types of private schools (Bunwaree, 2001): “privately

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

funded” and “state funded privately” aided schools. However, there are only two private schools of the first category. The state funded private schools are sometimes run by religious organisations. These privately aided schools are freely accessible for all children but are known for enrolling many children from a Creole background. In addition, there are the so called “Zones d’Éducation Prioritaire (ZEP)” schools in Mauritius. ZEP schools are governmental schools that have to deal with learning difficulties and therefore receive additional support from the government (Kumar, & Gurrib, 2008).

Method

Research and procedure

To carry out the research, mixed-methods have been used. Both semi-structured interviews were held and questionnaires were filled out by teachers, schoolchildren and parents of schoolchildren. Permission for this study was granted by the Ministry of Education and *Le Service Diocésain de l’Éducation Catholique* (SeDEC). Seven primary schools were selected for participation, evenly divided over four different zones as they are distinguished by the Ministry of Education. At least one school has been selected in each zone. Teachers, parents and children who participated in this research were approached through these selected schools. Since the students from the Mauritian Institute of Education (MIE) are the future teachers and have to face the difficulties of teaching a second language, they were approached to participate to provide an additional perspective.

Participants. For privacy reasons, the seven schools are anonymised for this research. The school zone and school type for each participating school as well as the anonymised label are described in Table 1.

The questionnaires were filled out by children ($n = 286$), parents ($n = 17$) and teachers ($n = 23$). Interviews were held with children ($n = 9$), parents ($n = 4$), teachers ($n = 11$) and students of the MIE ($n = 4$). From adult participants consent was obtained verbally, for the children informed consent written in French was obtained from the parents (see Appendix D; English version). It is worth mentioning that there was some overlap between participants who filled out the questionnaire and participants who were interviewed.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Table 1

School labels

School	Zone	Type
A	3	Private aided
B	2	Private aided
C	1	Private aided
D	4	Governmental
E	3	Private aided
F	4	Private aided
G	3	ZEP

The questionnaires were filled out by pupils from grade V ($n = 143$) and grade VI ($n = 143$). The gender division of the participants can be found in Table 2.

Table 2

Gender participants.

	Frequency male	Percentage male	Frequency female	Percentage female
Children	139	48,6%	147	51,4%
Parents	4	23,5%	13	76,5%
Teachers	5	21,7%	18	78,3%

Table 3

Participant distribution per Zone.

	Freq. Zone 1.	Perc. Zone 1.	Freq. Zone 2.	Perc. Zone 2.	Freq. Zone 3.	Perc. Zone 3.	Freq. Zone 4	Perc. Zone 4
Children	49	17,1%	37	12,9%	94	32,9%	106	37,1%
Parents	8	47,1%	1	5,9%	5	29,4%	3	17,6%
Teachers	3	13,0%	3	13,0%	11	47,8%	6	26,1%

Note. Freq.=Frequency; Perc.= Percentage

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The division of participant per zone is shown in Table 3. The ZEP school was located in Zone 3 and the Governmental school in Zone 4. The children were aged between 9 and 11 ($M = 9.9$, $SD = 0.68$). The children that were interviewed were all in grade VI of school A and school F, aged between 9 and 11.

The parents who participated were aged between 26 and 51 ($M = 35.88$, $SD = 6.35$). The four parents who were interviewed were approached in school A and school E.

The teachers who filled out the questionnaires ranged from 20 to 48 years old ($M = 38.13$, $SD = 7.52$). Two of them were teaching grade IV, eight of them were teaching grade V, ten of them were teaching grade VI and three questionnaires were filled out by, a so called, “holistic teacher”. Holistic teachers teach all non-academic subjects for example handcrafts and sports (Ministry of Education, 2005). These teachers have a less defined role, and see the children in a variety of classes and settings which gives them a wider experience with the students. Since they teach in all grades, their opinion is valued in this study. The interviews with teachers were held with grade IV, grade V and grade VI teachers and one interview with a grade II teacher. Additionally, four students from the MIE were interviewed; one male and three female, aged between 24 and 31. Three of them were in their second year and one was in his first year.

Instruments. Attitude questionnaires were used as a measuring instrument for this study. Different questionnaires were used for children, parents and teachers. The questionnaire for teachers and parents also focused on the support towards learning this second language. The first part of the questionnaire was designed to acquire more background information of the participant, such as gender, age, religion and the zone they lived in. The questionnaire contained one multiple choice question. The other questions were closed 5-point Likert scale questions, with answer options ranging from 1= strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. For children the numbers 1 to 5 were framed as smileys from sad smiley to a happy smiley (see Appendix E). The questionnaires for children and parents were translated to French to prevent misunderstanding about the questions, because of a possible deficit in English. The questionnaire for the teachers was written in English. The questions for the questionnaire were partly adapted from the Attitude and Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) (Gardner, 2001). Other items were taken from similar attitude studies, like the research of Abidin, Pour-Mohammadi and Alzwari (2012) and Karahan (2007).

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

The questions for the semi-structured interviews with children, parents, teachers and student from the MIE were also based on questions from these measuring instruments.

Data analysis

Questionnaires. Data obtained from the questionnaires was analysed by using IBM SPSS Statistics Data Editor 25. Descriptive statistics were conducted to determine the frequencies, the means, the variances and the standard deviations of the gathered data. The frequency of the responses to a question were used to obtain an indication of the attitude towards an attitudinal statement (see Appendix A, B and C).

Interviews. The transcriptions of the interviews were analysed with the NVivo 12 software. With NVivo the transcriptions can be coded and clustered. Different topics were used to cluster the coded transcriptions from children, parents and teachers. The four topics for children were: motivation/attitude, importance of English, English at home and English at school. For the analysis of the parental interviews, the codes were clustered in four categories, namely: motivation to learn English, learning English, parental support and English at school. The themes for the analysis of interviews with teachers were: Attitude and motivation of children, importance of English, parental support, teacher support, exams, curriculum and attitudes of teachers and teaching English.

Results

The results of the questionnaires are described in Appendices A, B and C. The mean and Standard deviation are given for each Likert scale question from the questionnaires.

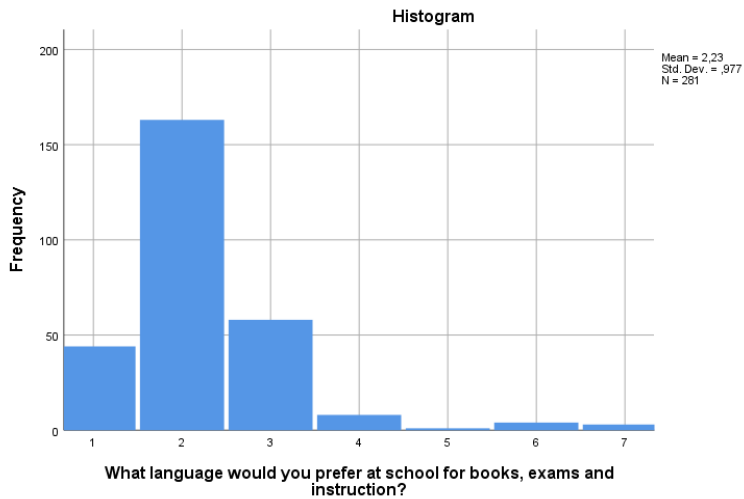
Language of instruction

In the questionnaire, children, parents and teachers were asked what they would prefer as language of instruction in primary school education. The results are shown in Figure 1 till Figure 3 below.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Figure 1

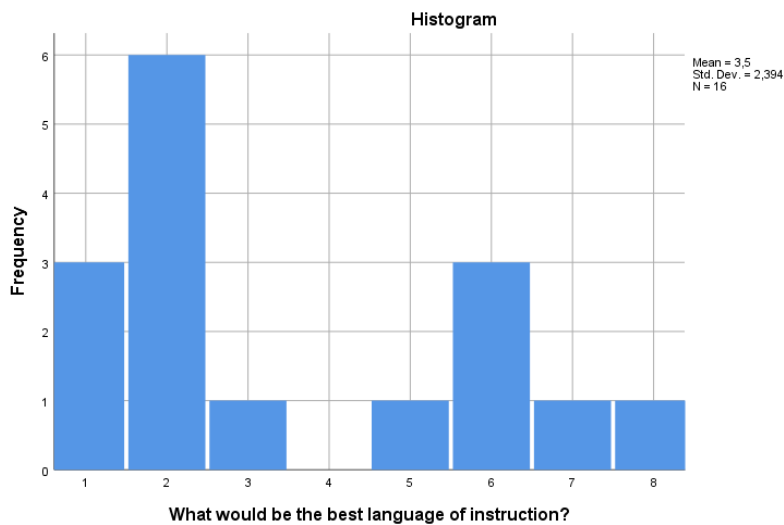
Children’s attitude about best language of instruction.



Note. 1= English; 2=French; 3=Creole; 4= other; 5= French and Tamil; 6= French and Creole; 7= English and French.

Figure 2

Parents’ attitude about best language of instruction.

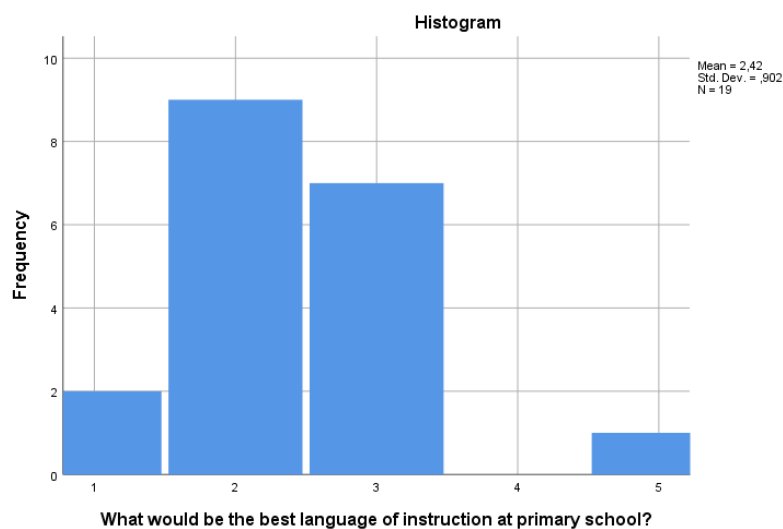


Note. 1= English; 2=French; 3=Creole; 4= other; 5=English, French, Creole and Hindi; 6= English and French; 7= English, French and Creole; 8= English, French, Creole and Mandarin.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Figure 3

Teacher's attitude about best language of instruction.



Note. 1= English; 2=French; 3=Creole; 4= other; 5= English and French

The results show that children, parents and teachers preferred French as the language of instruction. 16.01% of the children who filled out this question stated that they would prefer English as language of instruction. For the parents this was 18.75%, and only 10.52% of the teachers stated that English would be the best language of instruction in primary school. Interestingly, English as an instruction language was not preferred by any of the groups. Another interesting observation is that, after French, only parents preferred English as an instruction language over Creole as opposed to children and teachers. Six out of the 16 parents preferred a combination of languages as language of instruction. This is in line with what was said during the interviews with parents. All four parents that were interviewed preferred a mixture of English and French as language of instruction. As one parent said: “I prefer mixture, both English and French”. However, based on the questionnaires parents seemed to find it more important that their child learns English than French ($M = 2.12$, $SD = 1.05$).

Most of the children felt forced to learn English in school ($M = 4.30$, $SD = 1.38$). Teachers had a more neutral attitude about this ($M = 3.41$, $SD = 0.91$). However, some of the teachers declared that children were forced to learn the English language at school. A teacher said: “We can help them, we can support them. But we can’t force them.”

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

From the interviews with the teachers, multiple attitudes towards the best language of instruction were visible. Some declared that the language of instruction should be English and that it should be spoken more in schools and at home. Another stance given by teachers was that English should be taught as a secondary language instead of as a language of instruction, which should be the mother tongue.

Importance of learning the English language

Children, parents and teachers found it important to learn English. This was stressed in both the questionnaires and the interviews. Children indicated that studying English made them more educated ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 0.840$). During the interviews, several reasons were given for the importance of English. It was cited that English is important because it is the national language of Mauritius and many things such as official forms are written in English and have to be filled out in English. According to the participants, English was also needed to travel to other countries or to be able to live abroad. A child said: "... and if I grow up and go to other countries I will maybe speak English there." Moreover, "In Mauritius we have foreign tourist coming and mostly they speak English." a parent said. Therefore, it is also important to speak English. This point was also supported by children; "Talking and foreign person" and "because tourist" was given as answers to the question: "Why it is important to learn English?".

Both parents ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.03$) and teachers ($M = 4.27$, $SD = 0.883$) stated that English is important for the career of children. Children indicated that parents stress the importance of learning English to them ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 0.69$). Children felt that it was important to learn English to get a decent job in the future ($M = 4.7$, $SD = 0.79$). "I do speak English when I grow I have a good job" a child said. It was also cited that English was important, because it is the language of instruction at school. English is found important by children, teachers and parents for future job and school perspectives, but also for success at primary school level.

Teachers view on learning English

Learning English was found to be important by the teachers. However, all interviewed teachers agreed that it was very difficult for the children to learn English in the current system. According to the teachers, children are not used to and insufficiently exposed to the English language. A grade V teacher mentioned: "It is quite difficult for them ok, but we should. Unfortunately it is compulsory for me I need to teach them and I have to make sure." According

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

to the teachers, they are forced to teach in English by the school curriculum that was set up by the government. Teachers have to follow the syllabus and the exams are compulsory as well. A grade V teacher said: “It is an exam-oriented programme. The only problem is they have to finish the syllabus. So we have a tendency to go quickly, so I need to do this chapter, I need to finish that in two weeks. Because the exams are near, so we have to prepare the child for the exam.” Teachers pointed out that, according to them the syllabus is too bulky and complex. One of the teachers mentioned: “Perhaps it is difficult. Sometimes the syllabus is a bit complex, perhaps we must start with very simple words, sentences.” According to the teachers, they had to translate instructions into French or even Creole, because children would otherwise not understand the lessons. This was in line with the answer to the question from the teacher’s questionnaires if teachers translated all their instructions to Creole or French ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.007$). Several teachers declared to focus on the keywords, to ensure children recognise these whenever they have to answer questions when there is no translation to French or Creole. In line with this a teacher invoked that she did not have time to give children extra support in English, because she cannot afford to lose time in order to keep up with the syllabus. During the interviews with teachers, several suggestions about teaching strategies were given. “We are thinking about just more and more ways how we get to have the children love English. I think we should work again on the books that are provided. Ok this, and then would have more time to do more oral classes.”

Nevertheless, it was mentioned by three out of the eleven teachers that not only children have difficulties with the English language, but teachers as well. “We teachers do have difficulties sometimes to teach English.” a teacher said. One teacher declared that those who have difficulties speaking and teaching in English will switch to French more often, because that is easier for them.

Exams

Besides the pressure of the syllabus the exams were discussed several times during the interviews. Neither parents ($M = 2.24$, $SD = 1.09$) nor teachers ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 0.84$) wanted children to learn English just for the exams. However, this strong opinion was not reflected in the attitude of the children on this topic ($M = 3.38$, $SD = 1.62$). One teacher said: “Because for the exams if they are not able to read the story they will never be able to answer the questions. So they will have zero. So they must learn English to be able to answer the question and pass the

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

exams.” Other teachers agreed upon this: “Yes, that is a big problem. When I teach for example maths ok? I have to use my mother tongue to explain to them. Either Creole or French. As I told you the questions are set in English. The pupils can understand the techniques, the problems, how to solve the problems. But the main problem comes when they read, they cannot understand.”

According to the teachers, children have to be able to read in English otherwise they will automatically fail the exams since the children will not be able to understand the exam questions. A couple of teachers indicate that they put more emphasis on reading, because of the exams.

Moreover, according to some teachers, the numbers on the percentage of students with a passing mark are not the real numbers, but have been redacted by the government. The real number of passing students would in reality be even lower than the statistics released by the government. This was done so the government would not be held accountable for the failure of its educational system. A teacher said: “So you know education here is not based specifically on theoretical things. It is politically also. Unfortunately it is like that.” One of the teachers pointed out that the government reached out for suggestions from the teachers to increase the pass marks. However, the teachers failed to see any follow-up since then.

Parental support

According to teachers it is important that parents help their children with homework ($M = 4.32$, $SD = 0.78$). According to parents they help their children to learn English at home ($M = 4.29$, $SD = 0.99$) and most of the children experienced that their parents help them learn English at home ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.25$). From the nine children that were interviewed, one child only spoke English at home as her native language. Almost all the interviewed children indicated that at least one of their parents helped them with homework in English. All of the parents that were interviewed stated that they were helping their children with learning English at home.

One teacher said “It is like a triangle. Parents, teacher and the pupil. We should cooperate.” However, most of the teachers agree that for most students this was currently not the case. Many parents seemed to be unable to help their children with homework or practicing English. It was mentioned that: “They do not have a follow up at home. And the parents, their level of education is quite low, so they would not be able. Sometimes the parents come to see me and tell me I cannot help my child because I do not understand what is written in the books. So just see we are in 2019 and we still have people who are uneducated. So what will happen to

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

them if they also follow that step.” Parents acknowledged these problems as well: “Yes it is very hard. Because the parents do not understand English. I am sad for those children. Because my son also tell me when their friends have problem in class he is sad. But for me also. Some parent does not understand their homework. But if you do not speak English, that will be a problem to, to help them.” However, several other teachers mentioned that the problem partly lies with parental motivation. Parents would not make the effort to help their child with learning the English language. According to one grade V teacher, parents would be motivated to pay for private tutoring instead of tutoring their children themselves. Several teachers experienced that a lot of parents are not motivated because they ignore advice or fail to show up on parent meetings. When asked if they feel that parents are motivated for their children to learn English, one of the teachers answered: “I cannot see that here. Unfortunately not. They are just giving some advice: you should learn at school, you should pass your exam that all. They do not really emphasise on English. I do not see that by parents no.”

MIE students

Students from the MIE experienced that students in the higher grades of primary school had difficulties with the English language, especially with speaking the language. During the interviews, it became clear that the students had very divergent opinions about learning English at primary schools. To the question if it is a good thing that English is the language of instruction, one of the MIE students answered: “Previously I would have said no to that. Because I was against it. Then they incorporated the mother tongue, even in the curriculum. [...] The attention that student had those classroom, I was shocked..” This shows that he saw that Creole as a language of instruction was more effective than English. However, other students supported English as an instruction language at primary schools. “I think at the beginning, at a very low, at grade one itself, we should try speaking English and whenever we are connecting an English class, we should try make them speak more English rather than Creole.” a MIE student said. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the students mentioned limited attention was being directed towards second language acquisition at the teacher training. It was only said that: “Actually we have a lecturer, from America, who has come. He said a variety of activities that we can do to make English fun and also teach in like I say, play base, game base strategies. Role-plays, so that

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

really helping us.” All students appointed that it is important to make the learning process more fun, so the children will be interested.

Discussion

In this study we have taken an in-depth look at the attitudes of Mauritian children, parents and teachers towards learning English in primary schools. English is the official language in Mauritius, as well as the language of instruction in primary schools. However, French and Creole are the languages spoken as a mother tongue by most people on the island. Therefore a vast majority of the children have to acquire English as a second language, which leads to an extra challenge for them. The children have to pass an exam, conducted in English, to promote from primary school to secondary school. Many children fail these exams due to their inadequate level of English and are subsequently excluded from the regular educational system (Brock-Utne, 2005).

In line with our hypothesis, the data gathered in this study demonstrates that children, parents, and teachers have a positive attitude towards learning English, because they feel that it is an important language to learn. The English language is seen as an important requirement for a successful career and good perspectives for success in life. However, the children and teachers preferred French or Creole above English as the language of instruction. The negative attitude of the parents towards Creole as language of instruction can be explained by the negative association that exists between the Creole language and a lower socio-economical status (Rajah-Carrim, 2005).

Children indicated that they feel forced to learn English in school, and this attitude was recognised by most of the teachers. This indicates a lack of intrinsic motivation to learn English, which would not meet the requirements of learning English according to the CUP model (Cummins, 2005). Teachers stated that the current difficulty of the English education supersedes the learning capabilities of the children. Teachers experienced the current way of teaching to be forced because of the pressure induced by the syllabus and exams. According to Karavas-Doukas, (1996) the behaviour of a teacher in class is shaped by their attitude, so this pressure would reduce the ability of a teacher to take extra time to improve knowledge transfer. This results in less exposure to English during the lessons, which negatively contributes to the SLA (Hoff, 2006; Khatib, & Taie, 2016). To ensure children pass the exams, teachers mainly focus on reading,

therefore English is not embedded in a context. The current system strongly promotes a focus on cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) which undermines the transfer of knowledge and common underlying proficiency (CUP) (Cummins, 2005). On top of this, teachers themselves have difficulties with the English language, causing them to invest less time in teaching in the target language. This can negatively affect the children's attitude towards English (Dixon et al.,; Gardner, 2001).

Teachers state that many children have very limited follow-up and support in English at home. Most parents are not able, or not motivated, to support their child at home, despite efforts from teachers to encourage this behaviour. This lack of support can hinder the SLA of English (Li, 1999). This might seem contradictory to the observation that the importance of learning English is pushed onto the children by their parents. A possible explanation for this contradictory behaviour can be found in the insecurities by parents because of their own deficits in English (Jones, 2009). This problem may arise from the fact that only 0.3% of the people speak English at home (Consesus, 2011; Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2012; Rajah-Carrim, 2005).

It can be concluded that children, parents and teachers have a positive attitude towards learning the English language in primary school, because of the importance of the language. However, due to the exam-driven school curriculum and limited support received by children at home, it is likely that the attitudes of children and teachers are negatively influenced. This negatively affects the motivation of children, parents and teachers. At this moment, there is a strong focus on the CALP aspect of the English language. This stagnates the second language acquisition (SLA) process of English and CUP will not occur for most of the children. The difficulties surrounding English education contribute to the exclusion of children from the school system when they fail to pass the exam required to promote to secondary school. Therefore, it can be stated that there are some challenges to overcome with regards to English that would greatly improve the Mauritian educational system.

Limitations

As with any study there are limitations to this study that have to be acknowledged. In this section, the two most prominent limitations will be discussed. Despite the questionnaire being translated into French, children had difficulties reading, understanding and answering the

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

questions independently. This problem was overcome by having the teachers read the questionnaire aloud and occasionally clarifying questions to students. Moreover, the students sat close together during a few of the questionnaire sessions, allowing for students to glance at each other's answers. These two factors might have contributed to social desirability; children might have adapted their answers to reflect what they felt the teachers wanted them to answer or because of perceived pressure from fellow students. In an attempt to avoid this pitfall, the children were instructed about the purpose of the study, and the importance of giving their own opinion was stressed. However, it is not possible to exclude the possibility that social desirability has influenced the data collection.

The second limitation is grounded in the selection procedure for the participants of this study. The children and parents selected for the interviews were nominated by headmistresses and teachers. We noticed that the children participating in the interviews all possessed a better than average proficiency in English, an observation that was undescribed by the teachers. This was partly caused by the lack of interpreters. The answers given by these children could have been biased by the fact that this subset of the students did not sufficiently represent the whole student population. To overcome this limitation, questions about classmates of the interviewed children were asked during the interviews. This problem also recurred in the selection of the parents that participated in this study, since they were not randomly sampled, but nominated by the headmistresses of the schools. Moreover, only a limited number of parents participated in this research, including one married couple, which limits the generalizability of the findings based on the parents' questionnaires and interviews in this study. For further research, it is recommended to improve sample size and explore different methods of selecting parental participants. Despite these limitations, the applied mixed-methods approach, implication of various stakeholders, and thorough setup and analysis of the results, ensure the relevance and rigor of this study.

Implications and recommendations

The pressure from the current curriculum combined with little exposure to English and lack of support at home causes a negative attitude towards SLA of English in Mauritian primary schools. This results in hindered acquisition of the English language as a second language for most Mauritian primary school children, and leads to exclusion of children from the educative

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

system. In order to overcome this urgent problem, changes have to be made with a focus on the curriculum, parental support and teacher support.

A recurring theme is the curriculum for primary schools that limits the SLA of English. Therefore it is necessary for the Ministry of Education to re-evaluate the primary school curriculum and possibly revise it with the purpose of alleviating the burden of the curriculum for teachers. Many pitfalls of the current curriculum are founded in workload of the syllabus and the importance of the exams. This pressure prevents teachers from creating context embedded lessons that will contribute to SLA (Cummins, 2008; Dixon et al., 2012). The exams put a lot of stress on the current system, children and teachers. Therefore, it is recommend to revise the current curriculum in close collaboration with teachers. Furthermore, it is advised to further investigate the best approach to building a curriculum best suitable for all involved ethnical and linguistic groups. It is advisable to take a constructivist approach into account to improve the quality of education, by actively involving children in their own learning process (Fensham, Gunstone, White, & White, 1994). This can be done by group assignments and projects were children have to participate actively. A suggestion would be to take a closer look at countries that share similar language issues, who may have already formulated viable solutions (Watson, 2007).

According to UNESCO (2003, 2005), children are best taught in their mother tongue, which in the case of Mauritius is most likely Creole. Implementing this will contribute to a better level of cognitive and school development, which in turn will support better SLA (Thomas & Collier, 2002; Cummins, 2001). The complex language situation in Mauritius makes teaching in children's mother tongue a non-trivial solution for Mauritius, because there is no language that is spoken by all children. However, an improvement could be made by using French as the language of instruction in schools instead of English, since French is spoken and understood by a far larger part of the population than English (Sonck, 2005; Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, 2012). A high level of cognitive and school development will create a solid foundation to introduce English, as a language of instruction or subject (Cummins, 2005).

Teachers are also struggling with the English language and some teachers have insufficient proficiency in this language to create decent context embedded lessons that contribute to positive SLA. To overcome this, it is recommended that the English language in general and improvement of SLA of English become a spearhead during teacher education.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Should the decision be made to change the language of instruction to another language, then the instatement of a separate subject of English with a dedicated teacher is recommended.

The learning process of SLA can be further improved by increased involvement of parents. The goal of this approach should be to take away the inhibitions currently stopping parents from helping their children out with schoolwork. To achieve this, support meetings for parents could be organised aimed at handing them tools or encouraging community initiatives (e.g. reading aloud sessions in public libraries or community centres). This is necessary to show parents the importance of their support and to strengthen the English proficiency of the parents in order to reduce their insecurity (Jones, 2009). Therefore a suggestion would be to focus on parental education programmes targeting low-skilled parents to increase their involvement and strengthen their capabilities to assist their children (Hafford-Letchfield, & Thomas, 2018). However, teachers already organise parent meetings where they provide suggestions for parental support, but these are unsuccessful. To ensure this initiative will succeed, it is required to use a new approach. It would be wise to investigate how to best organise these gatherings and find the proper angle to involve parents, possibly with help of government initiatives or campaigns. A possible solution can be the use of parents acting as role models for other parents or parents leading these meetings.

In conclusion, we find that the best approach to deal with the problem of learning English as a second language in Mauritian primary school would entail a multi-faceted approach, in which teachers, parents and the government are participating.

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Appendices**Appendix A.**

Table A1.

Questionnaire children.

Questions	<i>n</i>	M	SD
I understand when my teacher speaks English in class.	282	3,73	1.296
I am forced to learn English.	281	4,30	1.135
I wish I could have many English speaking friends.	283	3,76	1.379
I prefer when my teacher talks in English in class.	284	3,59	1.288
I study English just to pass the exams.	285	3,38	1.615
My parents help me to learn English	285	4,06	1.249
Studying English is important because it will make me better educated.	282	4,59	0.840
I prefer it when my teacher translates all the instructions from English to French/Creole.	280	4,17	1.240
I feel embarrassed to speak English in front of other students.	282	3,19	1.571
I prefer when the teacher uses both English and French/Creole in class.	281	4,53	0.866
My parents say that it is very important for me to learn English.	281	4,70	0.690
I would like to learn as much English as possible.	277	4,52	0.935
I think that my teacher should speak in French/Creole during most of the lessons.	280	3,84	1.371
I really work hard to learn English.	281	4,23	1.174
Studying English is important because it will help me to get a good job.	280	4,70	0.786
I do not like it when my teacher talks English in class.	280	2,40	1.446

Note. *n*= number of participants; M=mean; SD= Standard deviation.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Appendix B.

Table B2.

Questionnaire parents.

Questions	<i>n</i>	M	SD
It is good that English is the language of instruction at school.	17	4,18	0.883
I like to speak English with my child.	17	3,76	1.091
I feel embarrassed to speak English in front of my child(ren).	16	2,31	1.448
Teachers should speak English during the entire class.	17	3,06	1.249
I want my child(ren) to study English just to pass the exams.	17	2,24	1.091
I let my children do their homework on their own.	17	3,18	1.286
Studying English is important because my child(ren) need it for their career.	17	4,24	1.033
I think that the teacher should speak in French during most of the lessons.	17	3,41	0.939
Studying English is important because it will make my child(ren) better educated.	17	3,47	1.179
I want my child(ren) to learn English as much as possible.	17	4,29	0.849
I never speak English with family and friends.	16	2,63	1.204
It is not useful to learn English.	17	1,71	0.772
Studying English is important because it will be useful in getting a good job.	17	4,47	0.624
I help my child(ren) to learn English at home.	17	4,29	0.985
It is better if children start learning English in secondary school.	17	1,82	1.131
It is more important for my child(ren) to learn French than English.	17	2,12	1.054
I assist my children when they do their homework.	17	4,24	0.752

Note. *n*= number of participants; M=mean; SD= Standard deviation.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Appendix C.

Table C3.

Questionnaire teachers.

Questions	<i>n</i>	M	SD
It is good that English is the language of instruction at school.	22	3,23	0.946
English must be taught as much as possible in primary schools.	22	4,09	0.610
Students need to have a teacher who have English as their mother tongue.	22	2,73	0.703
It is better to give instruction to children in French.	22	3,45	0.800
It is better to give instruction to children in Creole	22	3,32	0.839
I only teach English to let children pass the exams.	22	2,05	0.844
I prefer to teach in French/Creole.	22	3,32	0.894
Studying English is important because children need it for their career.	22	4,27	0.883
A good teacher gives children opportunities to speak English during the class.	22	4,36	0.848
Children are forced to learn English.	22	3,41	0.908
It is better to teach children in their mother tongue.	22	3,50	1.012
Studying English is important because it will make children more educated.	21	3,86	0.793
All children understand what I am saying when I speak English in class.	22	2,32	0.716
I always translate my instruction to French/Creole.	21	3,71	1.007
English should be introduced in secondary school.	20	2,55	1.317
English as a language of instruction excludes children from the educative system.	21	3,00	0.894
It is important that parents help their children to learn English at home.	22	4,32	0.780

Note. *n*= number of participants; M=mean; SD= Standard deviation.

Appendix D.

Informed consent student questionnaire

Authorization letter for questionnaires for primary school students

This letter of authorization informs parents of fourth- to sixth- grade students. This form will be used as permission for the participation of these children in research on attitudes towards the English language.

Attached, you will find the relevant information and the letter of authorization.

FOR INFORMATION

Introduction

My name is Maud van Steen I am a student of a Master's program (Youth, Education and Society) in the Netherlands. In order to be able to complete our studies, we are doing research in Mauritius. The purpose of this questionnaire is to investigate attitudes of Mauritian parents, teachers and children towards the use of English at school.

With this in mind, we would be very grateful if you would allow your child(ren) to complete the questionnaire in class. The questionnaire will consist of four parts. The first part will be about more general information, such as the child's age and grade. The second part will be about the child's attitude towards the use of English in school. These parts will consist of around 10 to 15 questions each. There will be a few open questions, but most questions will be answered by choosing a smiley (see Appendix E).

Importance

It is desirable for students to participate in this research by completing the questionnaire, in order to get an answer to our research questions.

The study focused on the attitudes towards learning the English language in primary school, Since English is the language of instruction. The attitude of children shapes their motivation to learn a language. If they have a positive attitude, there are willing to put more effort to learn this target language.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

Duration

Filling out the questionnaire will take around approximately 30 minutes. Since it will be done in class, we will not need additional time.

Confidentiality

The questionnaire will be entirely anonymous and we will have no way to identify the students. The only required information by this questionnaire will be the grade of the child. Any other information provided by your child will not be disclosed. Any information received will be analysed in general and will be interpreted as a percentage in the report.

Voluntary participation

It is you who will decide whether your child will participate in this research or not. If you give your child permission to participate, but during the questionnaire he/she feels uncomfortable with one or more questions, he/she will have the right to not finish the questionnaire.

If you have any questions or if you would like to have more information on this research, you can contact the school.

If you agree to your child's participation in this research, we would be grateful if you would sign the certificate below.

We thank you in advance for your cooperation.

LETTER OF AUTHORIZATION

I confirm that I have read the letter above. I have had the opportunity to ask questions, and these were answered. I therefore give my child permission to complete the related questionnaire in class.

Name of child: _____

Name of parent: _____

Signature of parent: _____

Date (day, month, year): _____

Appendix E.
Questionnaire for Children

Part A. General information

A1. What is your age? _____

A2. What is your gender?

Male

Female

A3. Where do you live (in what city/village)? _____

A4. What is your ethnicity?

Creole (Afro-Mauritian)

French (Franco-Mauritian)

Indian (Indo-Mauritian)

Chinese (Sino-Mauritian)

Other: _____

A5. In what grade are you now? _____

A6. What is the religion of your family?

Hinduistic

Muslim

Christian

None

Other: _____

Part B. Language attitudes.

B1. What language would you prefer at school for books, exams and instruction??

English

French

Creole

Other: _____

For the following statements, please select the smiley that best fits your opinion.



= I do not agree at all



= I agree



= I do not agree



= I agree completely



= I am neutral

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

B2. I understand when my teacher speaks English in class.



B3. I am forced to learn English.



B4. I wish I could have many English speaking friends.



B5. I prefer when my teacher talks in English in class.








B6. I study English just to pass the exams.



B7. My parents help me to learn English.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

				
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B8. Studying English is important because it will make me better educated.

				
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B9. I prefer it when my teachers translates all the instructions from English into French/Creole.

				
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B10. I feel embarrassed to speak English in front of other students.

				
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B11. I prefer when the teacher uses both English and French/Creole in class.

				
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B12. My parents say that it is very important for me to learn English.

				
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ATTITUDES TOWARDS LEARNING ENGLISH IN MAURITIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

B13. I would like to learn as much English as possible.



B14. I think that my teacher should speak in French/Creole during most of the lessons.



B15. I really work hard to learn English.



B16. Studying English is important because it will help me to get a good job.



B17. I do not like it when my teacher talks English in class.

