



## Research Proposal

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# Bridging the Divide: In Pursuit of Access to Language Friendly Education in Trinidad and Tobago

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**ABSTRACT.** In the Caribbean islands of Trinidad and Tobago, many local children are first exposed to English when they begin school. Prior to this, their familiarity with language is based on the Trinidadian English Creole or the Tobagonian English Creole that they have known from birth. These children are often expected to use the lexifying English as the language of communication in school. Although Trinidad and Tobago and Venezuela have had a reciprocal flow of persons across imagined borders for many years, the recent mass migration and settlement of Spanish-speaking Venezuelan migrants has added another layer of complexity to the linguistic identity of the twin-island republic. As of 2023, migrant children continue to be denied access to public education in Trinidad and Tobago. Although temporary interventions have been put in place by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ("UNHCR"), as well as several national grassroots organizations (i.e. The Equal Place Programme/Espacio de Equidad), access to education for migrant children has remained inadequate, and was even more challenging at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Caarls et al., 2021). In this proposal, following Cummins (2007, 2009), Benson (2004, 2010), Siegel (2005, 2006), Migge, Léglise and Bartens (2010), Mufwene (2010), and Le Pichon-Vorstman (2020), I outline my research goal of examining the current linguistic landscape of Trinidad and Tobago, as well as the opportunities for language inclusion based on the outcomes in two early years classrooms in Trinidad.

**RÉSUMÉ.** Dans les îles caribéennes de Trinité-et-Tobago, la première exposition de nombreux enfants locaux à un Anglais non créole a lieu lorsqu'ils commencent l'école. Avant cela, leur familiarité avec la langue est basée sur l'anglais créole qu'ils connaissent depuis leur naissance. On s'attend souvent à ce que ces enfants utilisent l'anglais lexifiant comme langue de communication à l'école. Bien que Trinité-et-Tobago et Venezuela avaient eu un flux réciproque de personnes à travers des frontières imaginaires pendant plusieurs années, la récente migration et l'installation de migrants vénézuéliens qui parlent l'espagnol ont ajouté une autre couche de complexité à l'identité linguistique de la république des îles jumelles. Depuis 2023, ces enfants se voient toujours refuser l'accès à l'enseignement public à Trinité-et-Tobago. Bien que des interventions temporaires aient été mises en place par le HCR et d'autres organisations nationales de base (par exemple, le programme Equal Place/Espacio de Equidad), l'accès à l'éducation pour cette population a été inadéquat, et rendu encore plus difficile au plus fort de la pandémie de COVID-19 (Caarls et al., 2021). Dans cette proposition, à la suite de Cummins (2007, 2009), Benson (2004, 2010),



2013), Siegel (2005, 2006), Migge, Léglise et Bartens (2010), Mufwene (2010), et Le Pichon-Vorstman (2020), je décrirai l'objectif de recherche prévu, qui est d'examiner le paysage linguistique de Trinité-et-Tobago, ainsi que les possibilités d'inclusion linguistique sur la base des résultats obtenus dans deux classes de la petite enfance à Trinidad.

**Keywords:** *Creole languages, mother tongue, plurilingualism, Venezuelan migrants, Trinidad and Tobago, language policy, bilingualism, language attitudes.*

## INTRODUCTION

Amidst political, social, and economic turmoil in neighboring Venezuela, the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago has witnessed the arrival of an estimated 34,100 Venezuelan migrants since 2015 (R4V, 2022). The presence of this displaced population has added to the linguistic and cultural landscape of an already diverse population and has served as an impetus, prompting a reconsideration of the existing language of schooling across the islands. However, the need for a shift in policy existed in Trinidad and Tobago long before the recent arrival of Venezuelan migrants. The language of schooling has never matched the home language of the children. This research proposal considers the challenges posed by the monolingual education system of Trinidad and Tobago, and to what extent that system excludes both local and migrant children and their families.

As a former student of the education system in Trinidad, I acknowledge that I am approaching the research space as an “indigenous-outsider” who has now spent many years living elsewhere (Merriam et al., 2001). As a foreign language teacher myself, and a research assistant with the Language Friendly School, I have witnessed first-hand the benefits of welcoming students’ mother tongues into the classroom. In this study, I will work as a researcher alongside classroom practitioners, including teachers, administrators, families, and community partners, to assess the patterns of language use and attitudes in two early years classrooms in Trinidad and Tobago.

This proposal presents a synthesis of the literature pertaining to mother tongue education (Benson, 2010), migrant languages and intercultural communication in education (Le Pichon-Vorstman & Beerkens, 2020), Creole languages in situations of diglossia (Ferguson, 1959; Fishman, 1967), and the education of migrant and refugee children in the Caribbean (UNHCR, 2017, 2018, 2021). I present the interrelationship of these recurring concepts in order to assess whether monolingualism in this context performs a gatekeeping function, withholding information from minoritized groups. I maintain that a monolingual education system poses challenges to children’s universal right to education, as guaranteed by article 28 of the UN Convention on the rights of the Child (1989). The research considers the reality of Trinidad’s position as both a host country and a country of passage, and its responsibility to provide access to culturally and linguistically diverse education for all children. This includes children who plan to stay on the islands, as well as those who will migrate further.



## Sociohistorical Context

The twin-island Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is the most southern island in the string of islands that comprises the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean Sea. Trinidad lies just 11 kilometers off the coast from mainland Venezuela, making Venezuela even closer in proximity than Trinidad's twin-island of Tobago, which is located 83 kilometers from Trinidad's northeastern peninsula. Trinidad and Tobago's geographic position in the Caribbean has afforded the islands a unique status both linguistically and culturally.

In the case of Trinidad, the strong influences of the Spanish language and the Venezuelan culture, as well as the languages and cultures of the French Creole plantation workers and other Creole-speaking migrants from neighboring French colonies, have manifested themselves in different aspects of Trinidadian and Tobagonian society (Winer, 1989). Following the seizure of Trinidad and Tobago in 1498, Spain assumed control of the islands, beginning a period of just over three centuries of Spanish colonial rule (Ferreira, 2015). In the late 1700s, the Spanish colonists sought to increase settlement of the sugar plantations, attracting Frenchmen and enslaving African populations from neighbouring French colonies. The arrival of these French Creole-speaking populations surpassed the number of Spaniards living in the country at the time (Bryan, 1974). Eventually, French Creole languages and cultures came to figure prominently in the linguistic and cultural landscape of Trinidad, contributing to some of the most discernible aspects of Trinidad's identity today. This includes the language of Trinidadian Patois, now a heritage language, the Trinidad and Tobago Carnival, and the national Calypso music, which was first sung by the enslaved in mimicry of the plantation owners (Bryan, 1974).

In 1797, when Trinidad was captured by the British, the country's linguistic and cultural reality underwent a significant shift. There was a decline in speakers of Patois during the British government's implementation of the anglicisation policy after Spain had formally ceded Trinidad to the British in 1802. This policy sought to reinforce British rule by ensuring that British English became the sole language of instruction in schools (Trotman, 2012). The language landscape changed drastically during this time, with English Creole emerging and eventually replacing French Creole as the popular language. English became the language of instruction in education as well as the language of the judiciary system across the country. Even amidst this forced anglicisation of the islands, the Patois language and French Creole culture still managed to shape much of the sustaining English Creole language and cultural practices that exist in Trinidad today. While the English Creoles of Trinidad and Tobago are now the most widely spoken languages across both islands, there are several communities in the north of Trinidad where Patois is still spoken. Some other languages existing to various extents in Trinidad and Tobago today are Trinidad Bhojpuri, Trinbago Sign Language, Syrian and Lebanese Arabic, Cantonese, Portuguese, and the languages of the Indigenous populations, including the Kari'ña of the Carib, the Lokono and Taino of the Arawak, and Warao spoken by the Warao peoples of the Orinoco-Delta.

## Shifting Linguistic Landscape

As a result of forced migration, in the past decade alone the language landscape of Trinidad and Tobago has become more diverse. As Venezuelans have continued to grapple with the repercussions of a crippling economy and one of



the highest levels of violent crime in the world, they have also been victims of government repression, which has contributed to the mass exodus of asylum seekers from the country over the past decade (see Gedan, 2017). The flow of Venezuelan migrants to neighboring South American countries like Guyana, Brazil and Colombia, as well as to nearby Caribbean islands like Aruba, Curaçao, and Trinidad, is only expected to increase in the foreseeable future.

Trinidad and Tobago is now a country of both immigration and emigration, a factor that has contributed to the ever-growing complexity of the country's dynamic linguistic and cultural identity. The arrival of Venezuelan migrants has brought with it the resurgence of the Spanish language and culture (Ferreira, 2015). This linguistic and cultural diversity exists in two relatively small islands, with a combined area of 5,131 square kilometers and a growing population of 1.4 million persons across both islands, as of 2021.

## RESEARCH CONTEXT

### Migrant Population

Despite this growing migrant population, the government of Trinidad and Tobago has yet to support the inclusion of migrant children in the islands' public schools. As of January 2023, following advocacy efforts from the Response for Venezuelans (R4V) network of partners, among the 477 public and government-assisted denominational elementary schools in Trinidad and Tobago, the Catholic school board is the only board that has publicly announced that they would welcome migrant children in their classrooms if they were to receive approval from the Ministry of Education (Williams, 2019). As of January 2023, no official mandate has been made by the government regarding access to education for the migrant population for the 2022/2023 academic year.

The only accredited educational opportunity that currently exists for children of migrants is through the Equal Place Programme, a joint initiative by the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, the United Nations Children's Fund ("UNICEF"), Living Water Community, and the Trinidad and Tobago Venezuelan Solidarity Network (UNHCR, 2019). The Equal Place Programme provides access to school-aged children, free of charge, to an online self-paced platform. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 global pandemic in March of 2020, the programme offered limited access to trained facilitators at designated on-site learning centres. Today, the programme continues to be accessible virtually on one of two globally recognized platforms: NotesMaster, which is offered in English, and Dawere, offered in Spanish. Notes Master offers certification through the Caribbean Examinations Council and Dawere offers certification through Bachillerato, which is recognised by both the Venezuelan Ministry of Education and the Education Secretary in Bogotá, Colombia (R4V, October – December 2019).

While Trinidad currently serves as a host country, the government continues to position itself as a country of passage for Venezuelan migrants. This position is particularly relevant to understanding the government's refusal to ensure access to education for migrant children. While Venezuelan migrants may view Trinidad as a destination country, the government of Trinidad and Tobago prefers the nomenclature a "country of passage," which may



explain its slow development of solutions for these vulnerable populations (Rodríguez & Collins, 2021). The Trinidadian government has in fact taken steps toward solidifying its position as a country of passage. For example, the government signed the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees in 2014 but has since refused to validate its commitment to migrant rights (Rodríguez & Collins, 2021). The government of Trinidad and Tobago's lack of immigration legislation may be indicative of its refusal to accept its position in the region as a host country for Venezuelan migrants, choosing instead to view their presence as temporary and inconsequential.

During this prolonged period of uncertainty, while Venezuelan migrant families are being told that their children may be granted limited access to a select few government-funded denominational schools, most of these school-aged children remain underserved. Access to public education will require student permits, which are not provided to unregistered children of asylum seekers (R4V, June 2021). The linguistic situation of the islands was already complex before the arrival of the Venezuelan refugees, but their arrival accentuates the urgency of reconsidering educational policies that are particularly exclusive, especially regarding languages in education.

### English Creoles in Education

While it is crucial to address the accessibility of learning for migrant children, it is equally pressing to consider how local languages, and by extension local children, are being denied full access to an education that accepts their diversity. Societal attitudes toward the Creole languages in Trinidad and Tobago have contributed to the exclusion of these languages from the classroom. As noted by Craig (1976), in Trinidad and Tobago, societal attitudes toward Creoles have traditionally upheld the belief that acquisition of the English lexifier would enable social mobility, whereas the use of the Creole languages would yield the opposite effect.

The following myths about the Creole languages remain:

1. One needs to be able to code-switch between the Creole and the English lexifier in order to be successful (Youssef, 2004).
2. Only the English lexifier allows for social mobility (Siegel, 2005).
3. Creoles are not real languages, but broken versions of the real languages (Stewart, 1964).
4. Creole languages lack academic vocabulary (Siegel, 2006).
5. Creole languages are not suitable for education (Craig, 1976; Migge, Léglise & Bartens, 2010).

These beliefs have contributed to the devaluation of the Creoles, while British English has remained the measure of social success. Despite these attitudes toward the Creoles, the speakers themselves continue to use the languages in their everyday lives, with varying levels of linguistic proximity to the lexifier. Craig (1976) explains this disconnect, noting that it is the understanding of Creole language speakers that "...the high-status language could never be completely replaced, and that even if it is, its status in the wider world would still make it a very desirable



acquisition” (p. 101). As a result, the English Creoles still exist as the popular languages in Trinidad and Tobago but continue to be neglected in formal domains like education.

Presently, there is no census that demonstrates the reality of language use in learning spaces and communities of Trinidad and Tobago. Carrington’s (1976) landscaping and surveying of the language attitudes and patterns of use among children and their families was the last endeavor of this kind. As a result, in this study I use linguistic landscaping and soundscaping as instruments to determine whether there are differences between actual language use and perceived language use in communities surrounding participating schools, as well as in the classrooms themselves. Linguistic landscaping, according to Cenoz and Gorter (2006) is particularly relevant in plurilingual settings, where it provides “...information on the differences between the official language policy that can be reflected in top-down signs such as street names or names of official buildings and the impact of that policy on individuals as reflected in bottom-up signs such as shop names or street posters” (p. 68). Linguistic soundscaping will complement linguistic landscaping by affording insight into linguistic diversity in oral language use, a medium that figures prominently in the language communities of practice in Trinidad and Tobago. The goal is to show that, in light of the research carried out for more than 40 years in this field, an inclusive educational policy that acknowledges the importance of the country’s diverse population and its growing plurilingual and multicultural reality, is possible. To this end, the proposed research will examine the following:

1. languages that are most frequently used in different spaces surrounding the research communities, both orally and in writing;
2. discrepancies that might exist in the language attitudes and perceived and actual use of language in the school and surrounding communities;
3. opportunities for including languages other than English in the classroom; and
4. any changes that might occur in children’s willingness to participate in learning tasks within a Language Friendly framework.

## KEY TERMS

**Access to education:** the availability of education that aligns with articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which calls for education that “...respects the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language, and values.”

**Migrant:** refers to those individuals residing in Trinidad and Tobago for whom this is not their country of origin. Migrants may be residing in this country as their host country or as a country of passage. Migrants may be children at their destination, children who stay behind, or children currently on the move (Caarls, et al., 2021). For the purposes of this research, the term “migrant children” is used to refer to children at their destination in Trinidad and Tobago.



**Refugee:** a person living outside the country of nationality and is unable to return because of persecution or fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion (UNICEF, 2017).

**Asylum seeker:** a person seeking safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than their country of origin, and who awaits a decision on their application for refugee status under national legislation (Caarls et al., 2021).

## CURRENT APPROACHES

### Monoglossic Ideology

The existing language-in-education policies in Trinidad and Tobago support a *monolingual habitus* (see Gogolin, 1997) that “frames only one given language as legitimate and tends to blind people to multilingual, multicultural life” (Kiramba, 2018, p. 7). Bourdieu (1977) defines *habitus* as “a way of being, a habitual state...a predisposition, tendency, propensity or inclination...” (p. 214). This predisposition to monolingualism signifies a hierarchy within what Bakhtin (1981) would refer to as *monoglossia*, where the dominance of one language labels the home languages of students as socially disadvantageous and a hindrance to their success. Monoglossic ideologies perpetuate the idea that not all languages are valuable resources in the formal learning context (McKinney et al., 2015). Many scholars have proposed that when monoglossic ideologies are imposed on a linguistically and culturally heterogeneous population, students are disempowered and denied equal access to education (see for instance, Cummins, 2000, 2001; Kiramba, 2018; Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2020). Amidst growing linguistic diversity in the region, the current education system of Trinidad and Tobago is not currently designed to accept migrants.

The National Primary English Language Arts curriculum of Trinidad and Tobago (2013) acknowledges that “the co-existence of two major linguistic systems, English Creole and Standard English, poses major linguistic problems for some learners” (p. 8). While Creole is acknowledged as a “...tool for building their awareness of the target language,” it is viewed only as “a natural support if communication breaks down when teaching Standard English” (p. 8). In supporting monoglossic norms, key stakeholders of the education system of Trinidad and Tobago perpetuate the notion that there is no room for linguistic and cultural diversity in the country’s classrooms. Instead, they uphold the English lexifier as the most socially advantageous language, and minimise the significance of all other popular, heritage, and migrant languages. Stigmatization of Creole and migrant languages is not unique to the country, but persists in many Creole-speaking former colonies, where the languages are viewed as socioeconomically disadvantageous, and a hindrance to learning (Siegel, 1997). In the following sections, I explain why there is a strong need to address the myth of “bad languages” in education in Trinidad and Tobago. For example, Trinidadian society’s perception of Spanish has changed. The language was traditionally afforded great prestige prior to the arrival of migrants, offered only at a select few secondary schools as a second language. Society’s perception and patterns of language attitudes have continued to shift over the past five years, with Spanish now largely being



viewed as the language of the migrant population. Similarly, French continues to hold a degree of prestige, being taught at even fewer secondary schools. The Patois, despite its being foundational to the country's national identity, is not offered in schools.

### Inadequacy of the Existing Migrant Education Programme

While the Equal Place programme is meeting a need that the government continues to disregard, it remains ill-equipped to accommodate all children of migrants. UNHCR qualifies the Equal Place Programme as a “temporary intervention” (UNHCR, 2019), acknowledging that it is not meant to replace in-class learning. In June of 2020, despite working with the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as infrastructural challenges like a lack of reliable internet connections, the Equal Place Programme managed to reach a total of 806 children of Venezuelan migrants (UNHCR, 2020). The Equal Place Programme certainly met an important need, providing a growing number of children with access to their universal right to education. However, one might also consider whether the very existence of the programme has allowed the national government to continue to neglect its responsibility to these children. Further, despite its efforts, underfunding of the programme has meant that 1,500, or 60 percent, of all school-aged migrant children remain without access to education in Trinidad (R4V, June 2021).

### Regional Comparison

While Trinidad and Tobago serves as one of the primary destinations for migrants and asylum seekers, it is not the only country in the region that has received large numbers of Venezuelans. In May of 2020, the Regional Office for Education in Latin America and the Caribbean (“OREAL/UNESCO Santiago”) released a report dedicated to addressing Colombia’s response to roughly 1,400,000 Venezuelans who had migrated since 2015. This report identified declining literacy rates among Venezuelan migrants in Colombia as a key concern among regional members of OREAL/UNESCO (UNESCO, 2020). The literacy rate of the Colombian population, including the migrant population, had dropped from 91.4 percent between 2012 and 2015 to 86 percent between 2016 and 2017 (Renna, 2020). About 79 percent of the 460,000 Venezuelan children under the age of 18 had access to the regular school system in Colombia, leaving about 260,000 out of school. Even so, access to education for children of refugees and asylum seekers in Colombia far surpasses the accessibility in Trinidad and Tobago. Further, unlike Colombia, where the language of instruction is Spanish, the language of instruction in Trinidad and Tobago’s schools is English, posing even more challenges to these children. In neighbouring Guyana, where Venezuelan migration began in 2018, English as Second Language classes were offered after school in five communities. Education partners sought to reach both migrant and local children as well as Indigenous Guyanese Warao children through this initiative, in the hope of promoting social cohesion (R4V, August-September, 2019). As of January 2023, no similar initiatives have been undertaken at the national level in Trinidad and Tobago.

The research suggests that monoglossic ideologies pose numerous obstacles for students in a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous population (Kiramba, 2018). It is also evident that access to plurilingual education as a means of enhancing students’ levels of engagement and academic performance (see for instance, Benson, 2010; Cummins, 2000, 2001; Le Pichon-Vorstman et al., 2009; Migge, Léglise & Bartens, 2010). Therefore, one can accept



that Trinidad and Tobago may be a candidate for the integration of a Language Friendly approach as a means of supporting a more equitable language and literacy development across the country.

## PROPOSED INTERVENTION

### The Language Friendly School

There is no system currently offered by the government of Trinidad and Tobago that considers the intercultural competence and language repertoires with which migrant children are equipped. The recent mass arrival of the Venezuelan migrants has certainly added a layer of complexity to the language landscape of Trinidad and Tobago, but there are opportunities to confront this challenge.

In response to the plurilingual reality of Trinidad and Tobago, a Language Friendly approach would allow for an education system that prioritises pluralism in a way that would achieve the necessary social cohesion and support for intercultural understanding. The Language Friendly approach is based on the premise that linguistic and cultural diversity are strengths, not barriers, to success. Ferguson (1959) co-opted the term “diglossia” to refer to speech communities in which two languages, belonging to the same lexifier, co-exist. The term has since been used to refer to Creole-speaking Caribbean nations like Trinidad and Tobago (Winford, 1985, 1988). Implementation of the Language Friendly approach would treat the language situation in Trinidad and Tobago not as a diglossic, but rather, as a plurilingual society. The absence of a language-in-education policy that addresses the language needs of the local Creole-speaking population, as well as those of the Spanish-speaking migrant population, exacerbates the challenges that the most underserved children will encounter in their education.

The Language Friendly approach is based on the Language Friendly School, which is a program of the Ruti Foundation. The Language Friendly School is co-founded by Dr. Ellen Rose Kambel and Dr. Emmanuelle le Pichon-Vorstman. It supports a model of language-in-education pedagogy that encourages a whole-school approach to ensuring that children’s whole identities are welcomed and valued in the school and classrooms. Language Friendly Schools acknowledge the school as a shared space that should embody the languages, cultures, values, and opinions of its staff, its student populations, their families, and community partners. Following the Language Friendly approach, children’s languages are not only accepted or tolerated, but also celebrated. Linguistic and cultural diversity are recognized as the shared goal of all stakeholders, including educators, administrators, parents, children, and members of the community. Following the research of Cummins (2000, 2001), Benson (2004), and Auger (2014), among others, the Language Friendly School promotes language-in-education policies that ensure that students do not lose languages during their school tenure. In pursuit of this linguistic and cultural diversity, the hope is that plurilingual children can see themselves represented in the classroom and understand that their language diversity is a strength that adds value to the school community (Le Pichon-Vorstman & Kambel, 2021).



## GUIDING LANGUAGE-IN-EDUCATION POLICIES

### The Importance of Mother Tongue Education

Affirmation of learner identity in plurilingual contexts requires the integration of the home languages into the classroom. Benson (2010) explores several opportunities for plurilingual pedagogical policies in the contexts of Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique, and Ethiopia. Her research assesses language and literacy where multiple languages are used, as well as the educational strategies that allow for a transfer of skills across children's languages. Benson (2010) builds upon Thomas and Collier (1997) and Cummins' (2009) research, which contends that the mother tongue should be supported to encourage the development of common underlying proficiency as children add languages to their linguistic repertoires.

In her consideration of Guinea-Bissau as a triglossic society, Benson (2010) draws upon Ferguson's (1959) model of high and low prestige languages to explain the position and power of the official language, Portuguese, in comparison to the lingua franca, Kiriol, and the indigenous languages, including Balanta, Fula, and Mandinka. Like English in Trinidad and Tobago, the language-in-education policy in Guinea-Bissau requires the use of the official language, with native-like proficiency of Portuguese as the goal. Benson (2010) argued that this language requirement is largely responsible for low school enrolment and high attrition rates (p. 325). In Guinea-Bissau, the lingua franca and indigenous or migrant languages are "relatively ignored by the national system, except for their unsystematic oral use when teachers can find no other way to communicate with their students" (Benson, 2010, p. 326). This exclusionary practice, Benson (2010) explained, does not allow for activation of prior knowledge, and fails to affirm learner identity, thereby restricting children's ability to demonstrate knowledge using their own language. Trinidad and Tobago's mention of English Creole is evident in its national language arts curricula, but there is little available evidence of inclusion of languages other than the lexifying English. This research seeks to understand if and how teachers interpret and embed language awareness in their instructional practice.

### Affirmation of Learner Identity

Affirmation of learner identity through the intentional inclusion of refugee children should be the goal of all schools. As noted by Le Pichon-Vorstman (2020), when children are encouraged to use their languages and to share their cultural practices in schools, their whole identities are recognised and valued. They may then begin to see themselves as equal members of the classroom and of the school community, and be motivated to engage in learning (p. 373).

However, according to Le Pichon-Vorstman (2020), there are challenges to achieving this goal. These challenges include but are not limited to: (1) the language(s) of instruction and the language(s) that are welcomed in the school; (2) acknowledgment of and appreciation for the experiences of these children prior to their arrival at the school; and (3) acknowledgment and understanding of potential academic interruptions prior to their arrival at the school (p. 368). Le Pichon-Vorstman (2020) noted that unless the school is willing and able to acknowledge and accept the work associated with surmounting these challenges, refugee children are likely to struggle with



integrating and feeling accepted. Assimilatory practices that aim to integrate the student quickly into the monocultural and monolingualistic culture of a school are likely to have more of a negative impact on the children's academic trajectory, often resulting in teachers assuming a deficit approach to education for these children, where their diversity of language is viewed as a hindrance to their learning (Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2020). In coming years, one can hope that Venezuelan migrant children will be welcomed into the public school system of Trinidad and Tobago. When that time comes, challenges may arise in classrooms where their languages and identities are not included.

The particularity of the islands of Trinidad and Tobago is that local children encounter a similar challenge. They enter school speaking Creole, but rather than being able to use their literacy in this language to support acquisition of English, they may be made to feel inadequate because of their inability to communicate in the language of instruction.

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

### Critical Language Awareness

Adopting a critical language awareness framework, the proposed research considers the propensity for implementing a Language Friendly approach to instruction at the elementary level, which would encourage reconsideration of identity, positionality, and power within the educational system (Le Pichon-Vorstman, 2020; Prevoo et al., 2016). To this end, this research considers how valuing language and culture can influence academic success. Following the work of Fairclough (1992) and Janks (1997), this research seeks to understand the language attitudes and discourses that exist both in the school and the surrounding community. I ground this research in critical language awareness, in hopes that findings may promote knowledge about non-standardized and migrant languages, equipping speakers of these languages with the ability to challenge language hierarchies that are imposed upon them.

### Plurilingualism

The Language Friendly approach operates within a plurilingual framework, which is intended to support the linguistic and cultural diversity that already exists across the country. Plurilingualism is a framework that acknowledges the interrelationship of languages within a society (Piccardo, 2016). Under a plurilingual framework, one acknowledges the interchangeability of languages (Galante, 2018). The term differs from "multilingualism" in that there is an emphasis on individuals' simultaneous use of all languages within their repertoires (Piccardo, 2016). Plurilingualism aptly captures the linguistic diversity that exists in Trinidad and Tobago.

Further, a plurilingual lens allows for the reimagining of the hierarchical relationship between the Creole languages and the English lexifier. Coste, Moore, and Zarate (2009) noted that the concept of plurilingual competence represents a shift away from linguistic perfection as the goal of language use and language learning. Instead, it focuses on how individuals use their multiple languages to communicate with other speakers across different



spaces (pp. 16-17). Heugh (2018) explains that these functional multilingual practices are innate every-day practices that multilingual individuals have always used to communicate in diverse settings (p. 343). Heugh's (2018) research expressed the need for language-in-education policies that are student-centered. Heugh's (2018) work aligns with Cummins' (2007) research, which advocates a reimagining of monolingual pedagogical practices that fail to engage prior understandings, do not acknowledge interdependence across languages, and do not allow for translation across languages. Both Heugh (2018) and Cummins (2007) called for a shift in perspective and practice away from traditional top-down approaches to responding to diversity in education, and toward those that validate the knowledge, experiences, and intercultural repertoires of children from diverse backgrounds. For example, children with diverse linguistic repertoires use translanguaging and code-mixing on an everyday basis in order to achieve different purposes in the classroom and in their communities. Heugh (2018) explains that functional multilingual practices like translanguaging and code-mixing are innate every-day practices which multilingual individuals have always used to communicate in diverse settings (p. 343).

In Trinidad, such a shift in perspective could reorient the linguistic landscape toward one that is more accepting of the linguistic and cultural diversity that already exists both within and beyond the classroom, thereby benefiting children who speak languages other than the language of schooling. In the case of Trinidad and Tobago, a reorientation toward Language Friendly practices would allow for:

1. reconsideration of persistent attitudes and beliefs toward the English Creoles and other languages in society;
2. redefining of language proficiency, where currently, "proficiency" is limited to assessment and evaluation based on the acquisition of the English lexifier;
3. space for migrant languages to exist and thrive in the educational system; and
4. the re-emergence of the Patois language, Trinidad Bhojpuri, Indigenous languages, and other heritage languages among the younger generations.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

### Educational Design Research

This research will take the form of an educational design research study. The Language Friendly approach will be implemented as an intervention in collaboration with classroom teachers, school administrators, students, family, and community partners. McKenney and Reeves (2012) explain that the relevance of educational design research has to do with its connection to practical applications (p. 12). Throughout this study, it is crucial that Language Friendly practices are developed *with* educators to ensure continuity and authenticity at the whole-school level, with the goal of ensuring that the schools and practitioners become agents of their own change. To that end, a co-



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learning agreement between myself and practitioners will allow for shared action and reflection, before, during, and after the implementation of the intervention. McKenney and Reeves (2012) describe the co-learning agreement as one that embodies systematic inquiry, involving both the researcher and practitioner.

Through this inquiry, the research aims to understand the current language-in-education policies and practices of Trinidad and Tobago. The intended intervention of Language Friendly practices could highlight which aspects of the existing language approach work, and which need to be redressed in order to better meet the diverse needs of the school. The research is also intended to consider language-in-education practices that could afford a retention of national cultural identity, while simultaneously supporting the cultural identity of the migrant children. Implementation of Language Friendly practices is premised on the individuality of each school, and is contingent upon the community demographics, the needs of the children, and the willingness of educators to engage. This intervention would not entail the implementation of a standardised model, but rather the development of a plan that would consider all factors and circumstances of the participating school.

While this study will implement the intervention in two experimental primary classrooms, the hope is that the emerging theoretical and practical findings will guide and influence practice in similar diverse learning spaces across Trinidad and Tobago and in the Caribbean region. In the first phase of this research, through a review of literature and existing policy reports, the overarching problem has been identified as inaccessibility to learning due in large part to the exclusion of languages and cultures from the classroom and the school. The review of literature has provided a diagnosis to support the problem identification. Linguistic landscaping and soundscaping of the schoolyard, classrooms, and the surrounding community will be used as an instrument to provide a more holistic and up-to-date perspective of the language landscape.

Through linguistic landscaping (Landry and Bourhis, 1997) and linguistic soundscaping (Scarvaglieri et al., 2013), this proposed research first seeks to describe the linguistic diversity of the islands' schools. In line with functional multilingualism, the objective is to determine whether and how different languages are used in various settings. Further, it will provide insight into how interlocutors use this linguistic diversity, and accompanying intercultural competence, in their everyday language practices. Linguistic landscaping and linguistic soundscaping will help to better define the existing linguistic profiles of the participating research site, prior to implementing the proposed pedagogical intervention. Data from linguistic landscaping and soundscaping will be analyzed to determine the number of languages used in signage and in captured conversations, coding each data set as either monolingual, bilingual, or plurilingual. These findings will be compared with the data of reported language use in the surveys. Methods of linguistic soundscaping will involve "soundwalks" (Semidor, 2006) and recordings of individuals in language groups around the school and the community (Scarvaglieri et al., 2013). This research will contextualise findings from linguistic landscaping and soundscaping through a plurilingual lens that values learners' linguistic repertoires in these social spaces, as well as their linguistic trajectories through metalinguistic awareness. Analysis of the data gathered through linguistic landscaping and soundscaping will aim to determine to what extent linguistic



diversity exists or does not exist in the micro-interactions of the school and the community. These findings will be shared with research participants during the period of problem diagnosis.

The Language Friendly approach considers the involvement of children, their families, and community partners as invaluable to the effective inclusion of home languages in the school. Following “funds of knowledge” theory (Velez-Ibanez & Moll, 1989; González et al., 2005), this proposed research will also consider the propensity for building stronger and more fluid relationships between the home, school, and community. This work will build on the premise that language inclusivity in schools facilitates opportunities for the children’s families and the community to contribute more freely and more meaningfully to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the school. To that end, this phase of the study will involve a workshop with interested families, where the research will be explained in greater detail and families will have an opportunity to share their thoughts, attitudes, and concerns regarding language use and literacy development within the existing diverse linguistic landscape. Participating families will complete a survey aimed at determining language awareness, attitudes, and use.

Following this phase of diagnosis, the planning phase will be conducted in collaboration with the participating educators and administrators, as we work together to design a Language Friendly plan that will serve as the guiding pedagogical practices that lead the intervention. This Language Friendly plan will aim to best meet the needs of the specific school population. After having developed the Language Friendly plan with the educators, and ascertained preliminary findings among children and their families, the intervention will be implemented. Educators will incorporate the predetermined classroom and whole-school activities designed to create linguistically and culturally inclusive spaces for all learners. This intervention will unfold over the course of one term from September to December. The goal of educators during this time is largely dependent upon the school-wide goals explained during the workshop and planning stage. During this period of implementation, teacher observation, teacher reflective journals, and student work samples will provide qualitative data for evaluative purposes. Teachers will record their observations using voice memos, photographs of student work, voice recordings of classroom discussions, and anecdotal jot notes.

Following the implementation, I will conduct interviews with the educators and administrators in order to discuss any changes to their pedagogical approach and whether they found that the intervention supported or deterred levels of motivation and/or literacy development in their learning spaces. Educators will reflect on notes in their reflective journals or voice memos, recorded during or following the period of implementation.

## Characteristics of Participants

This study will include teachers from two early years classrooms. The call for participants has been made available digitally to educational stakeholders in Trinidad, and shared with those involved in the linguistic and cultural reclamation of Creole languages across the country.



## Data Collection

Following McKenney and Reeves' (2012) explanation of abductive reasoning, I aim to observe relationships in the data, including the relationship between attitudes toward language in the school and the overall support afforded to linguistically diverse children. In the first phase of this research, data will be collected during site visits, through interviews with educators, in-class observations, and field notes. During this time practitioners will engage in narrative inquiry, recording observations using a collaborative web platform such as Microsoft Whiteboard. Using this tool, they will collect pedagogical documentation from the classroom. On this platform, teachers will also be encouraged to share their attitudes toward language use in the classroom. An understanding of the attitudes of participating educators is key in determining which Language Friendly practices might be implemented, and in what way, in the participating classrooms.

The Language Friendly approach also considers the involvement of children's families and community partners essential to the effective inclusion of children's home languages in the school. Following the funds of knowledge theory (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005), this proposed research also seeks to consider the propensity for building stronger and more fluid relationships between home, school, and community. This work will build upon an understanding that language inclusivity in the schools will facilitate opportunities for the children's families and the community to contribute more freely and more meaningfully to the linguistic and cultural diversity of the school.

## Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews with educators and families will be coded thematically across the initial and exit interviews, as well as from recordings of the workshop with families and community partners, field notes, and teacher reflective journals. The preliminary codes will be developed based on identifying characteristics of the educators (e.g., factors signifying identity and positionality). These codes will contribute to the emergent themes that will be used to classify quotes extracted from participants' reflective journals, voice memos, interviews, and dialogue recorded during the preliminary and closing meetings.

Quantitative data analysis from the initial family and educator surveys will be assessed to determine an index of language use and language attitudes in the participating school communities. This data will afford insight into the variation and similarities in language attitudes and use across different schools and community actors. I will undertake a statistical analysis of the completed surveys in order to compare attitudes toward the following:

1. Trinidadian English, Spanish, Patois, and any other language that will emerge from the soundscaping and their respective use in school and society;
2. plurilingualism;
3. goals for language use in school and society; and
4. variability of language use in different spaces.



## POSSIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

### Acknowledgment of Plurilingual Reality

A key recommendation for governments of host countries is to ensure that teachers and schools are well equipped to meet the needs of the incoming migrant population (Caarls et al., 2021). This would entail providing support for linguistic and cultural awareness programs that support children's diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires. When migrant children are eventually granted access to the public school system, challenges are bound to arise if language and cultural differences are not effectively accounted for. Trinidad and Tobago is in fact now a plurilingual society within which a monolingual education framework is failing to meet the needs of its linguistically and culturally diverse population. Its language-in-education policies that remain focused on mastery of the English lexifier do not serve to benefit the English Creole-speaking local children, nor do they create space for Spanish-speaking migrant children in the education domain. A shift toward a plurilingual framework that supports a Language Friendly approach would allow for a reconsideration of language competence and would support children in harnessing the potential within their diverse linguistic and cultural repertoires.

Acceptance of the plurilingual reality of the country reinforces the opportunity for diversity in education that would benefit not only migrant children, but also local Creole-speaking children who have always been marginalised by the monoglossic language-in-education policies. A Language Friendly approach would ensure that:

1. All languages are respected. It would differ greatly from a two-way bilingual or immersion program in that it would offer support for *all* languages and cultures, with the intention of eliminating the hierarchisation of languages (Le Pichon-Vorstman, Siarova & Szőnyi, 2020). Such an inclusive learning environment would also promote stronger relationships between the school and the home.
2. Languages are treated according to their interrelationship. It would also differ greatly from a program that provides merely supplementary support to language learners, in that it would promote the interrelationship among the languages, rather than promoting the separation of languages.
3. Interculturality is part of the teaching. In response to its growing migrant population, Mexico has adopted a program that aids teachers in creating intercultural learning environments (Caarls et al., 2021). In a similar fashion, Language Friendly pedagogy would support the development of intercultural competence among educators.

Through the celebration of all languages in education, the Language Friendly approach may reinforce the cultural significance of both English and French Creoles, while allowing space for Venezuelan Spanish and any other languages spoken in the community.



## CONCLUSION

UNHCR policy reports (2017, 2018) identify access to public services as the most critical among the issues facing migrant populations, with education sitting near the very top of the list. However, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has yet to acknowledge its responsibility to provide education to children of migrants and asylum-seekers. While policy reports reveal that access to education is the primary concern, it is important to ensure access to education that is linguistically and culturally responsive to the diversity of the population.

In summary, it is crucial to address the language attitudes of the existing population to determine the potential for linguistically inclusive approaches at this time. It is also important that key stakeholders in education acknowledge that the fundamental right to education mandates access to education that supports children's linguistic and cultural values (articles 28 and 29). Language-in-education policies should encourage a framework that celebrates the linguistic and cultural diversity of the children.

Trinidad and Tobago has an opportunity to welcome plurilingualism as a key tenet of its language-in-education policy. As demonstrated above, a Language Friendly approach to education may provide the chance to support both its migrant populations and its linguistically diverse local populations. If the Trinidadian and Tobagonian education system were to evolve to include the home languages of both Creole-speaking local children and Spanish-speaking Venezuelan migrant children in more meaningful ways, one might speculate that students could become more engaged in classroom activities. In this way, the goal of ensuring accessibility to education for all and improving the chances of academic success would be well underway.

Perhaps this is an opportunity for education stakeholders to reimagine the curriculum in a way that acknowledges the significant contributions that each of these languages, and people, make to the cultural and linguistic identity of Trinidad and Tobago. It is perhaps an opportunity for the inhabitants of the islands to make changes that guarantee a quality education for all, thus affirming the full identity of each of the islands' children and reimagining the full capacity of richness and diversity in the country's identity.

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