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ABSTRACT

Language and Competitiveness is a multilingual, multidisciplinary and multi-component research project that looks at the nexus between language and competitiveness in contemporary Trinidad and Tobago. The project which is funded by the GORTT Research and Development Impact (RDI) FUND has promised to deliver a number of outputs, outcomes and benefits, i.e. research impact, to different stakeholders beyond the academic community.

In the short paper presented here, the focus is on two of the project's sub-projects: one which explores the linguistic, cultural and sociological factors supporting or hindering trade with China and the second a language audit documenting foreign language capacity and supply in the country. The paper shows how the project has been able to address certain national developmental issues in the area of linguistic and intercultural competence as they pertain to trading with China and documenting language capacity. A discussion of the outputs, outcomes and benefits shows that the project is clearly fulfilling its mandate for research impact. Clear elements of best practice relevant to conducting research with impact also emerge from the discussion.

Key words: Language, competitiveness, research impact

Introduction

Research with impact

This paper discusses a research project entitled “Language and Competitiveness: Positioning Trinidad and Tobago for Sustainable Development”. The project is a multilingual, multidisciplinary project funded by the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago Research and Development Impact (RDI) Fund. Projects that have received grant funding from the RDIFUND must demonstrate impact. In order to assess the success of the project, i.e. the impact made, the paper will begin by discussing the implication of research impact. Through the discussion of some outputs, outcomes and benefits of the project, we hope to provide enough evidence to support our case that the research represents an example of best practice in research impact.

The Australian Research Council (2015) defines research impact as “the demonstrable contribution that research makes to the economy, society, culture, national security, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond contributions to academia.” The Economic and Social Research Council of the UK (2015) offers a similar definition stating that, “**Economic and societal impact** is the demonstrable contribution that excellent social and economic research makes to society and the economy, of benefit to individuals, organisations and nations.” For the linguists at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus, conducting research with impact represents a radical departure from the traditional focus of our linguistic and cultural research. Much of the foreign language research conducted at the St. Augustine Campus (Carter, 2006; Ibrahim-Ali, 2014; Mideros & Carter, 2014) has been pedagogical research in the form of action research, or applied research seeking to explore particular classroom phenomena such as individual differences and skills development. The aim of that research is to improve instructional practice and student learning. In contrast to such research, the Language and Competitiveness Project moves beyond the classroom context to address the broader issue of individual and societal linguistic and cultural competence and how this competence could be deployed to boost sector and country competitiveness. Because of the lack of research in this area, our research aims to create impact both along conceptual lines—(re)-framing the debates and contributing to the understanding of policy issues and along instrumental lines—influencing the development of policy, practice and perhaps ultimately legislation.

International and national perspectives on language and competitiveness

Although competitiveness has attained buzzword status in national and regional economic discourse, prior to this research project there had been little discussion and no empirical research on the intersection between languages/cultures and competitiveness. “Competitiveness is defined as *the set of institutions, policies and factors that determine the level of productivity of a country*. The level of productivity, in turn, sets the level of prosperity that can be earned by an economy” (World

Economic Forum, 2015). Caribbean economists have alluded to the importance of languages for the economy (e.g. Bourne, 2003; Downes, 2003). But there is no existing research that makes this the primary focus or even more specifically investigates foreign languages vis-à-vis competitiveness. Education documents by the Caribbean Examinations Council (<http://exc-store.com/syllabuses-subject-reports/cape/languages/french>) inspired by CARICOM have also stressed the importance of linguistic and intercultural skills for 21st century Caribbean citizenship and employability in a globalised workplace. But general statements on the importance of languages stand in stark contrast to the policy approach in a country like Singapore, a country which is a perennial high performer in the Global Competitiveness Report, and one where the notion of competitiveness is embedded in general education and language policy and policy documents (<http://www.moe.gov.sg/media/speeches/2012/02/08/speech-by-mr-heng-swee-keat-at-the-singapore-conference-washington-dc-usa.php>). Similarly, Switzerland, the traditional leader in global competitiveness, with its three official languages (French, German and Italian) and almost universal fluency in English is perhaps the clearest example of a country synonymous both for its competitiveness profile and its widespread multilingualism.

A further contrast can be drawn between the proliferation of research on the economic value of languages in multilingual Europe (e.g. Grin, 1994; 2002) and the discourse in the English-dominant UK about its dwindling supply of linguists and the “vicious circle of monolingualism” (British Academy, 2013; British Council, 2013; CILT, 2009; Levitt et al, 2009). Lately, however, this has been changing. Abandoning an earlier complacency about the linguistic deficiencies of the UK education system, the business community is now actively engaging with academics to research language and competitiveness and is sounding the alarm that low individual and societal foreign language competence is a barrier to trade and export and thus negatively associated with competitiveness (see, CBI, 2010; CfBT, 2011). There is growing understanding that the “trade tax” of £7.3 billion, or a 0.5% of the GDP loss as a result of poor foreign language skills, is proof that English is not enough and that foreign languages are still necessary despite the dominance of English as the global business and scientific *lingua franca*.

Given the well-established correlation between linguistic and intercultural competence and competitiveness in the literature, the Language and Competitiveness project sought to investigate Trinidad and Tobago through the lens of language and competitiveness.

Interdisciplinary scholarship and research

The approach adopted in the project reflected the multidisciplinary composition of the research team and the pre-eminence of the role played by linguists; although the research team also includes a social scientist, highly qualified in applied statistical analysis and experienced in conducting research on issues of population and development. Whereas the largest body of research on this topic in the UK has been conducted by economists (e.g. Foreman-Peck, 2007; Hagen et al, 2006) our project focused on the language and culture side of the equation. The project aim was to find ways to explore the nexus between language and competitiveness and at the same time enable team members to conduct research that was in consonance with their own

research or academic interests. Instead of one project exploring the links between language and cultural awareness and economic competitiveness, the project is composed of five sub-projects designed so that each sub-project contributed to the overarching project. Each would investigate a contemporary linguistic issue with direct relevance to competitiveness. Approaching the investigation in this way, we were drawing on one of the strengths of our work and research context. Ruane (2003) contends that the “historically high disciplinary barriers, for example between different philologies or linguistic fields” has often militated against multilingual research projects. She sees language centres as providing a necessary corrective to this tendency. She suggests that language centres because of their unique composition offer fertile ground for research collaboration, “(thanks to) their multidisciplinary nature involving several languages and fields, today’s language centres foster and promote interdisciplinary scholarship and research.”

Drilling down: the five sub-projects and their impacts

In order to be as inclusive as possible of those who expressed an interest in the project, French, Portuguese and Spanish were to be the featured languages. However our Brazilian colleague had certain work commitments, which in the end made her participation impossible. A Chinese colleague joined the project team in her stead. This turned out to be serendipitous, because when the project finally began, the Brazilian colleague had returned home in response to a family emergency, while the Chinese colleague had received permission to prolong her stay (the reason why she had originally been excluded). The research project enjoyed the advantage of an international, multilingual staff, but the mobility of these international workers sometimes meant that their long-term presence could not be guaranteed. The personal issues aside, the main criteria for joining the research team were experience/interest in conducting research and commitment to the project. The project was also to be supported by a fulltime Graduate Research Assistant. When the project finally started all those who were on board met the main criteria.

Of the five sub-projects, three related to specific languages, while two were not language specific as follows:

- 1) Trading with China: Linguistic, Cultural and Sociological Factors in Doing Business with China (Carter, He Min et al)
- 2) French language and cultural competence in the workplace (Bukari and Daly)
- 3) Spanish-English bilingual children: proficiency and language attitudes (Landa-Buil)
- 4) A language audit: documenting capacity and supply in foreign languages in Trinidad and Tobago (project team)
- 5) Developing a Language Management Strategy in selected SMEs (Carter et al)

Trading with China

As the Language and Competitiveness project nears completion, some of the impacts of the sub-projects are already apparent and these will be discussed next. The major outputs of the Chinese sub-project have been two workshops, a series of podcasts, a database of firms engaged in trading with China and a set of FAQs on some of the linguistic, cultural and sociological factors pertinent to doing business with China.

Apart from the database, all the other activities have sought to address the linguistic and cultural issues that the business sector highlighted in their responses to a survey administered at the beginning of the project.

The focal point of our engagement has been making stakeholders sensitive to the characteristics of a “high-context” culture, since an understanding of how the culture interprets association and interaction, for example, is key to conducting business successfully. A description of the variance between high- and low-context cultures is attributed to the anthropologist Hall (1976). In a high-context culture like China, one distinguishes between those inside one’s circle and outside one’s circle. A high-context culture therefore values interpersonal relationships and building trust is a slow and stable process to ensure that relationships are carefully nurtured. Behavioural norms that might be valued in many Western business contexts, such as the importance of getting down to business and seeking to conclude business transactions quickly run afoul of Chinese socio-cultural and business norms; whilst nonverbal behaviour and implicit messages, which take their meaning from the context, the situation, and people are preferred. The importance of these contextual cues explains why Chinese culture is described as a “high-context” culture. Another framework put forward by Livermore (2010) describes China as a “clock-time” culture, one that emphasizes punctuality, (which he contrasts with “event time” orientation or culture). He offers the following advice, “for those coming from clock time cultures, be willing to spend time building long-lasting relationships. Create margin and flexibility in your schedule for this pursuit” (Livermore, 2010, p.94)

The positive feedback received from the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Foreign Affairs who congratulated the project team on the initiative and lent their support by releasing some of their staff to attend one of the workshops; the engagement with the Trinidad and Tobago Manufacturers’ Association who sponsored one of the workshops at their Head Office and are eager to have similar workshops for other linguistic/cultural business contexts are some of the early benefits of the project. Some may argue that these activities are no different from standard outreach activities. But we feel that the outreach was strategic, there was a clear focus and the outputs and outcomes can be readily identified and measured—the Chinese sub-project therefore had *impact*. The impact is instrumental since outputs like the podcasts and FAQs will lead to outcomes in the implementation of programmes and policies to promote trade with China. Currently, trade with China is largely unidirectional. But if we could raise awareness and provide the business and manufacturing sector with linguistic and cultural knowledge, we would help those who are seeking to buy goods from China, and we might even help those who want to be vendors and export products *to* China. The anticipated economic benefits of the sub-project would be realised even more in the latter scenario and we would have contributed to enhancing our country competitiveness. A quotation by former German Chancellor Willy Brandt that is often cited in the competitiveness literature underscores the importance of linguistic and cultural competence when one is seeking to tap into export markets “If I am selling to you, I speak your language. If I am buying, dann müssen Sie Deutsch sprechen!” (you need to speak my language).

The sub-project on designing a Language Management Strategy (LMS) (Hagen, 2011) is the way we shall take the outputs from the Chinese sub-project one step further *and* extrapolate to other languages. A language management strategy usually

comprises a package of pre-emptive measures, which facilitate a company's entry or expansion in a new cross-border market where there are linguistic and /or cultural barriers.

The language audit

The language audit is the most ambitious of the five sub-projects. It is one that also has the potential to create substantial instrumental impact at the policy level. That sub-project was conceptualised to respond to a lacuna we noted in Trinidad and Tobago's census data collection: no language data are collected. This contrasts sharply with policy in both the developed and developing world and with United Nations recommendations. The United Nations Statistics Division (<http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/popchar/popcharmehods.htm>) supports the collection of language data during national censuses, offering very clear guidelines in this matter:

There are three types of language data that can be collected in censuses, namely:

- (a) Mother tongue, defined as the language usually spoken in the individual's home in his or her early childhood;
- (b) Usual language, defined as the language currently spoken, or most often spoken, by the individual in his or her present home;
- (c) Ability to speak one or more designated languages.

In their pioneering study, "Linguistic exposure of Trinidadian children", Carrington et al. (1974) noted that while Trinidad of that time was considerably less diverse than 19th century Trinidad, it was still more complex than many imagined. Anecdotal evidence about the number of recent migrants to Trinidad from the People's Republic of China, from the Middle East, and from South America suggests that Trinidad is even more linguistically complex now, than it was four decades ago. Yet, the national census is silent on the question of languages spoken. The assumption is that Trinidad and Tobago is a monolingual English state, with a variety of English-based creoles. The lack of data on any minority languages that may be spoken in the home or other private contexts means that policy-making may be insufficiently informed by our current demographic reality.

In the absence of official primary data on linguistic backgrounds, the language audit has had to rely on a snowballing technique by which speakers of other languages known to us have been asked to distribute the survey in their family or social networks to persons who share their mother tongue. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was again helpful to the project by providing us with a diplomatic note that we could disseminate to the diplomatic missions based in Trinidad as we sought the support of their nationals. But that approach produced a poor return. Since Trinidad and Tobago has no history of collecting linguistic data, even with the encouragement of their embassies, individuals were slow to respond to our survey and self-identify as non-English-speaking residents or visitors. This is why the snowballing technique employing personal connections was the more productive route. Even so, the sub-project has met with mixed success so far. After an initial slow start in Trinidad, the project team has had greater success in Tobago. We have hypothesized that tighter social networks among those who share a mother tongue and culture are more

prominent in smaller Tobago, mirroring Tobago's strong kinship ties among native-born islanders. It is likely that there is also less reluctance to declare one's foreignness in an island where tourism is the mainstay and visitors are part of the island's economic and social fabric.

One output of the sub-project has been a short paper entitled "Documenting language capacity: the role of the National Census" which was presented at the 24th Meeting of the Regional Census Coordinating Committee in Guyana in October 2014. A copy of the paper was also sent to the Trinidad and Tobago Ministry of Planning and Development. The paper aims to raise awareness among technicians and policy makers in the Anglophone Caribbean that our demographic data are incomplete if we do not collect language data.

An example from the American context shows what could easily be accomplished if such data were available. The MLA (Modern Language Association) Language Map (n.d.) is described as follows:

The MLA Language Map is intended for use by students, teachers, and anyone interested in learning about the linguistic and cultural composition of the United States. The Language Map uses aggregated data from the 2006–10 American Community Survey (ACS) to display the locations and numbers of speakers of thirty languages commonly spoken in the United States. The Language Map Data Center provides data about over three hundred languages spoken in the United States, using data from the 2006–10 ACS, ACS 2005, and the 2000 US Census. Comparative tables and graphs provide a snapshot of changes between 2000 and 2010 in American language communities, showing speakers' ages and ability to speak English.

While American linguists can use primary census data to conduct research on the linguistic and cultural profile of their country, here in Trinidad and Tobago, we face a steep challenge. We must first seek to make an impact by raising awareness among policy makers about the importance of collecting linguistic data. Rigorous data collection through a national census can then be the starting point for linguistic research that examines how these persons might be changing the linguistic and cultural landscape of the country.

Knowing the linguistic and cultural capabilities of one's population is not an end in and of itself. It is a way to understand how that linguistic and cultural capital could be used for development. Yet another example from the American context shows how such data might be used from a competitiveness perspective. In a presentation entitled "How to reach beyond education with Chinese language" at the 2015 National Chinese Language Conference, speakers Ann Marie Gunter and Anna Lamm argued that in North Carolina changing demographics and economic opportunities showed that the state was more global than ever. They highlighted census data which showed that 11% of the state's population speak a language other than English at home and that the foreign-born population was 1.6 times larger than it was in 2000. Other data showed that North Carolina ranked 12th among US states in exports of services, with Canada, China and Mexico being their top export markets. Another interesting statistic was that between 1992 and 2011 the state had seen a 162% increase in jobs tied to international

trade, which meant that one out of every five jobs in the state is related to international trade. This level of rich detail relies on the collection of linguistic data which can then be combined with other economic data. Interestingly, Gunter and Lamm never mentioned competitiveness. Their focus was nonetheless firmly on language competence and employability. They were keen to share with their colleagues the importance of helping students see the big picture in language learning. All this information was provided in the context of a presentation where Gunter and Lamm sought to show how their language programmes “prepare students to use language skills in their careers... (how connecting to government organizations and business leaders) help students see the many opportunities available to employees who are bilingual, biliterate and bicultural.” As in the Singapore education system, the teachers are making clear to their students that there exists a strong link between language and intercultural competence and employability. And as the research has shown employability in a globalised, multilingual and multicultural world spurs on country competitiveness.

Conclusion

The discussion of these two sub-projects has served to illustrate the concept of research impact and specifically how outputs, outcomes and benefits together lead to research impact. As Ruane and others have pointed out research is a critical element of language education in higher education contexts. Teacher researchers in the applied linguistics field are very sceptical of those who see research as an either or phenomenon. Some of the field’s most prolific researchers are among its best teachers, as it is their quest to understand the many unknowns in second language acquisition in order to promote better learning which is at the root of their research endeavours. Other disciplines might not need to nourish the teaching stream via research, but foreign language teaching which does not explore the how and the why of linguistic and intercultural competence can quickly grow stale, relying on rejected myths and discounted theories. The paper has served as an extended definition of the kind of research that is innovative, challenging and can be invigorating in the higher education context.

Adopting the focus of research impact has encouraged the teacher/researchers in this project to continue our push beyond the boundaries of the classroom and make the focus of our investigation about language use in society. While the endpoint of our foreign language teaching has always been upskilling students to use languages in the real world, the framework provided by adopting a research impact perspective enlarges the pool of stakeholders in language study. Whether or not someone decides to pursue a language course (although we certainly hope they do), the podcasts on Chinese business etiquette can help them be better in their professional sphere. The importance of collecting linguistic data should resonate with those in the school system, the social services sector, our Ministry of Planning and Development etc. Research impact shifts the dynamic from what some might see as the cloistered world of academia to a wider group of stakeholders in business, in industry, in the government.

This paper, like the three other papers on the panel, gives some insight into new directions in foreign language research in Caribbean Higher Education. We feel that they provide examples of best practice in research in the field and help the academy

make the case for the continued funding of research to support national and regional development.

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