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# On “two-legged dictionaries” and other insights from the Language and Competitiveness Project



**LANGUAGE  
& COMPETITIVENESS**

Beverly-Anne Carter PhD  
Centre for Language Learning  
The University of the West Indies  
St. Augustine Campus  
Trinidad and Tobago

Insights from the Language and  
Competitiveness Project/B Carter  
COTE 2016, Oct 13-14

# Overview of the presentation

- ▶ Background to the Language and Competitiveness project
- ▶ Exploring uncharted territory
- ▶ Key insights
- ▶ Next steps

# Background to the Language and Competitiveness Project



# Research and Development Impact Fund

THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES  
OF ALL CARIBBEAN ISLANDS

**Knowledge Mobilisation  
in Service of Development -  
On the Path to Impact**

**Impact Highlights  
from Completed  
RDI Fund Projects**

**RDI FUND**   
THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IMPACT FUND

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# Language and Competitiveness: Key facts

- ▶ Name: Language and Competitiveness: Positioning T&T for Sustainable Development
- ▶ Funding: TT0.5 million from the GORTT-UWI Research and Development Impact (RDI) Fund
- ▶ Duration: 30 months
- ▶ Objective: Explore the links between linguistic and intercultural competence and competitiveness

# Language and Competitiveness: Distinguishing features

- ▶ Distinguishing features of the Language and Competitiveness Project:
  - Multilingualism and multiculturalism: Spanish, French, Mandarin, other languages
  - Multidisciplinarity: languages + economics, competitiveness, demographics, migration, trade and export, workplace competencies etc.
  - Academy-industry partnerships



# Executive Director, ExporTT

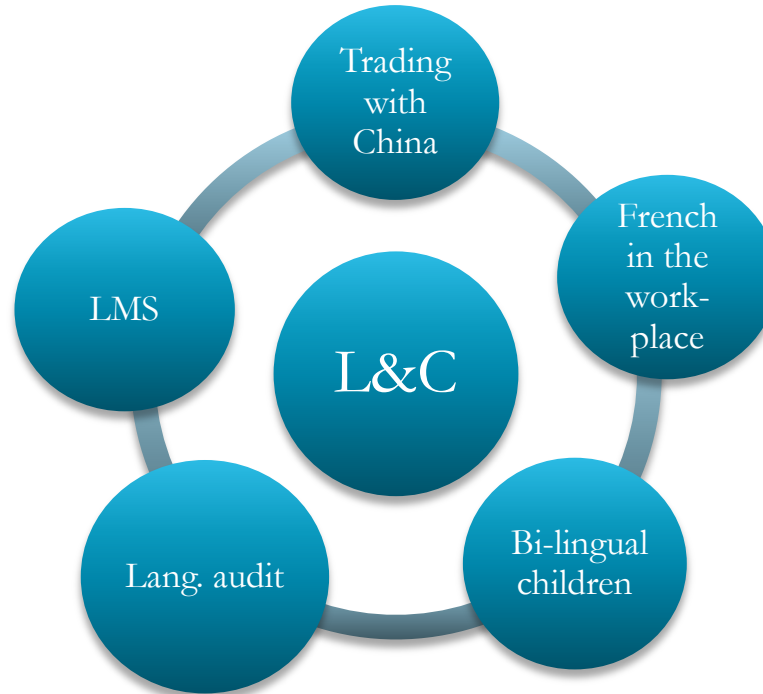


# Exploring uncharted territory





# Exploring uncharted territory



# Language and Competitiveness = Five studies

1. Trading with China: Linguistic, cultural and sociological factors in doing business with China
2. Spanish/English bilingual children: Acquisition and attitudes
3. French language and culture in the work place
4. A language audit of speakers of languages other than English
5. Boosting economic competitiveness through the adoption of a language management strategy (LMS)

# LMS Information sheet: Boosting economic competitiveness

- ▶ “In this study we are particularly focused on the language and cultural practices of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); whether these companies have a (formal) international communications strategy as part of their business strategy.”

# Boosting economic competitiveness

“Research in the EU and UK business sector (Hagen et al., 2006; Hagen, 2011; Hagen et al., 2012) has shown that the adoption of a language management strategy helps SMEs boost their economic competitiveness.”

# “A vicious circle of monolingualism” (BA 2013, p.5)

- ▶ “In contrast, it has been estimated that UK companies lose up to £21 billion annually as their lack of linguistic and cultural skills prevents them from engaging fully in foreign markets (Foreman-Peck, 2007).”



# Boosting local economic competitiveness

- ▶ “No similar research has been conducted in the English-speaking Caribbean. Our study will help Trinidad and Tobago companies to critically assess their current and future needs for language and intercultural skills.”

# Methodological approach

- ▶ Four interviews averaging 30 minutes each were conducted with senior managers in three enterprises in Trinidad and one phone interview was conducted with the owner-manager of a Tobago-based enterprise.
- ▶ The interviews were transcribed.
- ▶ This presentation draws on a preliminary analysis of the qualitative data.

# Key insights



# Company A: Trading with FL markets (DR)

- ▶ “What we have done is... companies in Trinidad, in order to access these places you kind of do a reverse strategy which is you find somebody over there who could talk English and you deal with them...Ms. X could understand anything, at any speed, she actually sounds Trinidadian sometimes, so she is definitely an asset.”

# Company B: Trading with FL markets (China)

“Their English is not 100% and we don’t expect that... so what I do is I talk simple English, you know, don’t use too many big...you know descriptive words, you just get to the point kind of thing, and they understand that and they appreciate that... and you don’t want to use a word they don’t even know and some of them using Translator or whatever, those things, so what we learnt, and what I have learnt, the simplest English form of writing is the best way to communicate with them.”



# Company A: Techniques for dealing with FLs

- ▶ **A:** It's nice if somebody could call this office from DR and the telephone operator could answer it in Spanish.
- ▶ **BC:** Is that possible now?
- ▶ **A:** No, it's not possible, actually just coming out of Inward Buyers TT Mission we had a guest from the DR. We had to hire an interpreter because although I can understand a lot of Spanish to throw it back at him would be challenging, so it's something that we actually need, something that we have to kind of re-orient ourselves...

# Company A: Techniques for dealing with FLs

- ▶ “We generally don’t get major calls like that and if we do we would take the information and have for example Ms. X contact them in Spanish, so sometimes we would probably get an e-mail and we’d send it to her and she would make the contact.”

# Company A: Techniques for dealing with FLs

- ▶ “Sometimes we call Ms. X on her cellphone and do 3-way call, so Ms. X is on the road in DR and she’ll have to pull aside for 15 minutes to translate (sic) for us.”

# Company A: Techniques for dealing with FLs

- ▶ **BC:** OK. So in-house in your business you really don't have any need for foreign language skills because you get people outside who interface in English?
- ▶ **A1:** Well, I wouldn't say so...
- ▶ **A2:** I think it's always a plus.

# Company B: Techniques for dealing with FLs

- ▶ “We have bilingual people here...It’s also a big asset if you have somebody who could speak Chinese or write Chinese because in the foreseeable future China is going to be where everybody is going to buy.”
- ▶ “We had a Chinese girl, and she was very helpful. You wouldn’t believe you get better prices as well.”



# Company B: Techniques for dealing with FLs

- ▶ “We have in-house two foreigners who are employed with us that speak fluent Spanish as well as fluent English. They are bilingual. They live in Trinidad. They are Trinidad residents and we... in our export department we had people who speak both French and Spanish, of course local so they did French and Spanish at UWI and all of that, so to say we have a problem, a language barrier, it doesn't exist.”

# Company A: On foreign language learning

- ▶ “I did Spanish actually through the Venezuelan embassy... what I, what I got from that programme was they were teaching you culture and not a language...(but) the easiest way to learn the foreign language is to have a two-legged dictionary.”

# Company B: On foreign language learning (FLL)

- ▶ “Schools, honestly, need to enforce that (FLL), because as I said, I went to a school where it was enforced. You had to do it. You had to, no two ways about it and at Form 4 and Form 5, you either choose one, and depending on the group you’re in, sometimes you end up with two.”

# Company B: On foreign language learning

- ▶ “You understand...and I do not know why schools don’t enforce it now...and then on top of that, why not? Because, if you’re on social media, you’re on Facebook, a lot of the videos are Spanish, French, German, all different kind of things, so why would I want to restrict myself to just pure old English...”

# Company B: On foreign language learning

- ▶ “(On having a bilingual website) that’s the way of the world.. I mean, even in Trinidad, look at how many people speak Spanish, look how many people are bilingual...You look at children going to school and you want to know why they not doing a foreign language, why? You know they are doing Modern Studies and no foreign language and I could never understand that.”

# Common language management techniques



Language management techniques	Company A	Company B
Employing external translators/interpreters	✓	✓
Adapting websites to foreign markets	✓	✓
Foreign language training & cultural briefing seminars	✓	✓
Staff with specific language skills	✓	✓
Employing native speakers FT	x	✓
Using local agents and/or distributors	✓	✓
E-commerce involving multilingual operations	x	✓

# Next steps





# A Language Management Strategy (LMS)

- ▶ A language management strategy is “the planned adoption of a range of techniques to facilitate effective communication with clients and suppliers abroad.” (Hagen et al., 2006)

# Company A: Big picture

- ▶ “...Especially if you want to grow regionally because there is only so much business Trinidad could give to you at any point in time.”

# Company B: Big picture

- ▶ “The thing is you always have to focus on what your objective is. Right? Our objective is to roll out our product in Latin markets.”

# Next steps: country focus

- ▶ “The oil minister in Dubai, when you interview them (sic), he say we figure we have 23 years of oil. What we do after that? Just diversify. The only country in the world not diversifying is Trinidad. They say do so and so and so. We do the exact opposite.”

# Next steps: university focus

- ▶ “Universities have an essential role to play in the Government’s growth plans. University research and innovation encourages investment, exports and a more balanced economy, and university research environments create the highly-skilled and innovative workforce that will underpin the future success of our knowledge-based economy.” (University Alliance, 2014)

# UWI in the new Caribbean economy

- ▶ “There’s a view of many social scientists that Caribbean development has ground to a halt. Our industries are not as competitive, sufficiently diversified and some of our mature and developed industries are in need of refurbishing. These challenges create an opportunity for The UWI to reinsert itself in those developments in the Caribbean in the search for competitiveness and greater diversification. The University has an important role in the development of the new Caribbean economy.”  
(Beckles, 2016)

# And from another Caribbean intellectual

- ▶ Prof. Orlando Patterson, the John Cowles Professor of Sociology at Harvard, in his keynote to the 40<sup>th</sup> annual CSA conference suggested that given the shortcomings of our current developmental models premised on a purely economic rationale, Caribbean societies needed to rethink our approaches.
- ▶ The study reported here aspired to do that by showing how research into linguistic and intercultural competence can have an agentive role in country competitiveness.



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- ▶ Xie xie

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