



Research Article

Antony Hoyte-West*

A return to the past? The Spanish as the First Foreign Language policy in Trinidad & Tobago

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Abstract: Situated close to the coast of Venezuela, the small twin-island nation of Trinidad & Tobago is geographically South American, but culturally Caribbean. Despite colonisation by various European powers, years of British rule and the ensuing dominance of English have meant that the country's rich ethnic and cultural heritage is currently not paralleled by equivalent linguistic diversity. Building on the country's natural position as a bridge between the English and Spanish-speaking worlds, the government launched the Spanish as the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) policy in 2005, with the aim to enhance trade links with Latin America through increased use of Spanish in the education system, civil service, and wider society. After outlining the historical and sociocultural background underpinning the SAFFL policy, this study examines the initiative's implementation and surveys its impact, seeking to evaluate the policy's effectiveness as a whole.

Keywords: Trinidad & Tobago, Spanish language, SAFFL, language policy, language revitalisation

1 Introduction

Located just a few kilometres off the South American mainland, the islands of Trinidad & Tobago were once remarkable for their linguistic diversity. Owing to colonisation by various European powers, the modern nation has a mixed population of primarily African and East Indian descent. Though languages such as Spanish, French, Hindi, and French Creole were once part of everyday life on the islands, years of British rule and the ensuing dominance of the English language have meant that the country's rich ethnic and cultural heritage is currently not paralleled by equivalent linguistic diversity. In this regard, however, Trinidad & Tobago is not exceptional. Indeed, despite their varied histories, as well as their vastly different social and cultural heritage, all of the independent nations within the Anglophone Caribbean share one common feature: they all have English as their sole official language.

This study, therefore, explores the Trinidad & Tobago government's Spanish as the First Foreign Language policy (SAFFL), which was the direct consequence of the 2004 decision to recognise Spanish as the country's "First Foreign Language." As such, a brief historical and sociocultural overview of the nation's Spanish heritage will be outlined, before analysis of the rationale, implementation, and effectiveness of the policy is conducted. Subsequently, potential developments regarding the possible future of the initiative are detailed.

* **Corresponding author: Antony Hoyte-West**, Independent Scholar, United Kingdom, e-mail: antony.hoyte.west@gmail.com
ORCID: [Antony Hoyte-West 0000-0003-4410-6520](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4410-6520)

2 The Spanish presence in Trinidad & Tobago: A brief historical overview

The Republic of Trinidad & Tobago is a small twin-island nation with around 1.3 million inhabitants. Of around 5,100 square kilometres in area, the country's capital is Port of Spain. Trinidad, the larger of the two islands and where the main political and economic power is concentrated, is located at the mouth of the Orinoco river just eleven kilometres from the Venezuelan mainland. The much smaller island of Tobago is located in the Caribbean Sea thirty kilometres from Trinidad. Geographically, although the islands are part of the South American continent, the country's complex sociocultural and linguistic heritage means that Trinidad & Tobago is considered to be culturally and politically part of the Caribbean. Previously a British colony, the country has been independent since 1962, and a republic within the Commonwealth since 1975 (Robinson et al. 2020).

At this juncture, it is worth noting that the economy of Trinidad & Tobago is overwhelmingly dependent on the energy sector, notably due to the availability of significant oil and natural gas deposits. According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators, it is classified as a high income country (World Bank 2020). In addition, given that the English-speaking Caribbean is a region of small island nations, Trinidad & Tobago possesses the necessary economic and administrative capabilities to perform as a regional representative of the Caribbean at international congresses and fora (Braveboy-Wagner 1989, 38). Furthermore, as a founder member of CARICOM, the Caribbean Community, it has also been responsible for a large part of that organisation's finances (Braveboy-Wagner 1989, 42).

To focus specifically on Spanish-related aspects of the country's past, the very names of the islands and the country's capital city, as well as many other geographical toponyms, highlight the linguistic legacy of the first colonisers. Originally inhabited by Amerindian tribes, Columbus had claimed both islands for Spain on his third voyage to the Americas in 1498. In the case of Trinidad, though, the island remained a rather neglected and underpopulated colonial possession, administered largely from the mainland until the late eighteenth century (Fergus 2008, 77). It was not until 1783 when the *Real Cedula de Población y Comercio* was authorised by the King of Spain, Charles III (Sevilla Soler 1988, 195). This royal decree made provision for foreign immigration to Trinidad, provided that the new immigrants swore allegiance to the Spanish crown and were also of the Catholic faith. Eager to encourage the colony's agricultural development, grants of land and money were offered to the new incomers, and further assistance was available to those who brought their slaves with them. Given the large number of French colonial possessions in the region, many of the new immigrants – consisting largely of wealthy planters and their slaves, as well as free persons of colour – were Francophone in origin and thereby were able to supplement the presence of Spanish with not only French, but also *patois*, a French-based creole used for everyday communication. Nonetheless, Spanish administrative structures still provided the backbone of everyday life in the colony (Gómez 2019, 67; Winer and Aguilar 1991, 154).

Indeed, legal and other aspects of the imperial Spanish administration remained in force for several years after 1797, the year that the British conquered Trinidad. The initial coexistence of Spanish laws in a British colony led to some unusual situations. Most notably, this included the 1803 trial, held in London, of the island's first British governor, Sir Thomas Picton, in which the interpretation of Spanish law played a crucial role (Epstein 2007). Under British rule, major changes to the socioeconomic composition followed the emancipation of the slaves in the 1830s. During the nineteenth century, further waves of immigration to Trinidad included a small number of Spanish speakers from the mainland, the so-called *cocoa panyols*, who became well-known in Trinidadian culture owing to their characteristic *parang* music; however, their numbers were dwarfed by the large scale immigration of indentured labourers from the Indian subcontinent which took place from the 1840s onwards (Gómez 2019, 67–8). The colonisation of Tobago was significantly more chequered, however, with the island passing from Spanish rule into British, French, Dutch, and Couronian¹ hands during early colonial times. British sovereignty over the island was

¹ For further information on the latter, please see: Sooman et al. (2013).

recognised by the Treaty of Paris in 1814, and in 1888, Tobago was linked administratively with Trinidad as one colony, with the seat of power at Port of Spain (Robinson 2001, 4).

Building on the islands' complex history, it is unsurprising that the colonial legacy is reflected in the diverse ethnic and religious composition of Trinidad & Tobago's citizens. As such, no one ethnic group predominates, but people of African, East Indian, and mixed descent are the most numerous, with smaller groups of people of European, Amerindian, and Chinese heritage. In terms of religions, the most widespread in terms of number of adherents are Christianity (Anglican and Roman Catholic), Hinduism, Islam, and Spiritual Baptist, the latter a syncretic faith based on the merging of Christian and African beliefs (Robinson et al. 2020).

However, as mentioned previously, the country's current ethnic and religious diversity has not been mirrored in linguistic terms. At one point colonial Trinidad boasted a rich tapestry of different languages, including French, Spanish, Hindi, and Trinidadian French Creole, leading a British bishop visiting in the nineteenth century to describe the ensuing multilingualism as "the scouring of Babel, a negro commixture of French, Spanish, and African" (Brereton 1979, 164). However, this linguistic diversity has disappeared over time. The legacy of British rule means that the modern Republic of Trinidad & Tobago boasts only one official language, English, with much of the population using its creolised variant, Trinidad & Tobago Creole English, for everyday communication (Romaine 2017, 390).

3 The SAFFL policy in Trinidad & Tobago: An overview

On 9 September 2004, the government of Trinidad & Tobago inaugurated the SAFFL policy via a cabinet directive. This move was accompanied by the creation of a relevant government department, the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (SIS), as well as the official public launch of the policy in March 2005 (Valley 2005). Entrusted with the promotion and promulgation of the SAFFL initiative, the SIS was originally part of the Ministry of Trade and Industry; however, at the time of writing, the Secretariat is now under the auspices of the Tertiary Education Division of the country's Ministry of Education. According to its website (Ministry of Education 2020), the aims of the SIS include facilitating "a new learning environment through which the citizens of Trinidad & Tobago will learn and effectively utilise SAFFL by the year 2020." In addition, the Secretariat aims to "promote fruitful and effective intercultural dialogue," as well as "public awareness and support for the SAFFL initiative." As outlined in Carter (2009, 48), the SIS has a full-time director and staff, as well as a steering committee appointed by the Cabinet, which comprises civil servants from relevant ministries, as well as representatives from institutions linked with Spanish-language provision. These include the University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine, which is the country's leading university, as well as other tertiary establishments.

The announcement of the Trinidad & Tobago government's decision to recognise SAFFL attracted considerable attention from the international media. Indeed, the news was misreported by *The Independent*, a British broadsheet newspaper, which ran an article stating the country was looking to completely replace English with Spanish, citing economic reasons as a prime motivator (Davies 2005). Though this dramatic case of language shift was merely a journalistic misinterpretation, nonetheless it highlights the unusual step of a government choosing to declare a nation as having an official "foreign" language.

Bearing in mind Trinidad & Tobago's varied linguistic history, the situation regarding the selection of Spanish as the "First Foreign Language" does not sit neatly within established frameworks of language revitalisation. Taking the notion of revitalisation as a return to regular usage and transmission of the language as a mother tongue between different generations (Spolsky and Shohamy 2001, 349–50), then the aims of the SAFFL policy certainly do not conform with this objective. This is unlike, for example, the well-known case of Hebrew. With ancient roots as classical Hebrew, the language was then originally reserved for liturgical usage for many centuries. It grew in transmission and importance during vigorous revitalisation attempts starting from the late nineteenth century onwards, and eventually became, in the form of Modern Hebrew, the official language of the state of Israel following the country's creation in 1948

(Grenoble 2013, 806–7). Revitalisation efforts were also noted in the case of Irish in Ireland where, after centuries of decline in both prestige and number of speakers, the language became the first official language of the Republic of Ireland (Ó Laoire 2005, 251).

Yet both of these cases refer to the restoration of atavistic, heritage languages, rather than to a policy encouraging use of a foreign language to become widespread within the populace of a given country. In this regard, the situation could be regarded as analogous to the previous omnipresence of Russian as a foreign language in the Soviet-oriented world. In addition to being the language of interethnic communication within the Soviet Union itself, as Moser (2011) states, the influence of Soviet politicians also ensured Russian was a compulsory subject at schools across the Warsaw Pact countries. After 1989, however, the language quickly lost popularity across central and eastern Europe, with teachers of Russian often retraining to teach English (Moser 2011, 109). It is also important to note that this experience was not unique to the Soviet Union's European satellite countries. In Asia, close ties between post-war Vietnam and the Soviet Union meant that Russian previously played an important role in the educational and economic life of the country. However, by the end of the twentieth century, the *Doi Moi* development initiatives ensured that English had all but supplanted it (Nguyen 2012, 259–61). Indeed, in a similar vein to the SAFFL initiative, the Vietnamese authorities have made a formal commitment to increase the use of English in the country's education system and civil service (Nguyen 2017, 33).

4 Methodology and research questions

Given the preliminary historical and theoretical overview outlined above, it was decided to investigate the rationale, implementation, and effectiveness of the SAFFL policy in greater detail. Accordingly, the following three research questions were advanced:

- (i) What were the reasons underpinning the creation of the SAFFL Policy?
- (ii) How has the SAFFL policy been implemented?
- (iii) Can the SAFFL policy be said to have been a success?

The exploratory nature of this research study, together with the logistical challenges of organising travel to Trinidad & Tobago during the global COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, meant that it was decided to conduct a purely literature-based analysis, focusing primarily on sources written in English, with some limited Spanish-language material used. The resources consulted included pertinent scholarly literature relating to the history and culture of Trinidad & Tobago, as well as a selection of relevant documents published online by the country's government and other public institutions. This was also supplemented with information from the online archives of two of the main newspapers, the *Trinidad & Tobago Guardian* and the *Trinidad & Tobago Newsday*.

As mentioned previously in other studies conducted by the author (Hoyte-West 2019, 2020), the limitations of a purely literature-based study were also clear. In ideal terms, the research findings would have been supplemented by interviews with policymakers and government officials involved with the SAFFL initiative; in this regard, it is hoped to be able to conduct relevant fieldwork in the future. However, owing to the paucity of previous research projects on this topic, it was noted that a literature-based review could still give an exploratory outline of the subject matter, thus ensuring a solid foundation for future work.

5 Results

The initial research question aimed to examine the reasons underpinning the genesis of the SAFFL policy. As hinted at in the otherwise inaccurate article by Davies (2005), the SAFFL initiative was introduced

primarily for trade reasons. In his speech launching the SIS in March 2005, the then minister for trade and industry, Ken Valley, stated that “one of the most important abilities we can develop as a nation is proficiency in both the English and Spanish languages,” adding that this would “provide prospective investors with a workforce that can communicate effectively and conduct business in the two dominant languages of this hemisphere” (Valley 2005). At that time, a Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) was mooted, which aimed to create a single free trade area that would encompass all of the countries in the Western Hemisphere, with the sole exception of Cuba (Charnock 2016). As such, Trinidad & Tobago sought to host the headquarters of the planned organisation. With so many nations in the Americas having Spanish as their official language, the SAFFL initiative aimed to bolster Trinidad & Tobago’s candidacy through the development of the linguistic skills. Ultimately, however, the FTAA was never realised, but the SAFFL policy nonetheless remained in force, aiming to improve the nation’s Spanish language skills and thereby deepening commercial links with Latin American markets (Ministry of Education 2020). However, it is important to note that the key aims of the programme remain somewhat imprecise, an aspect also highlighted by Molina Morales (2013, 149).

To this end, the SAFFL policy was incorporated as part of Vision 2020, the country’s ambitious socio-economic development plan for Trinidad & Tobago to become a developed country by that year, which ultimately did not happen. Indeed, the first interim report on the Vision 2020 initiative underscored the importance of SAFFL to the country’s economy, stating that Spanish language skills “will enhance the ability of exporters to exploit opportunities in the Latin American market” (Republic of Trinidad & Tobago 2007, 143). At that time, too, the country was also enhancing its links with the Spanish-speaking world, as demonstrated by hosting the Fifth Summit of the Americas in Port of Spain in 2009 (Summits of the Americas Secretariat 2020). In that same year, King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sofia of Spain also undertook a state visit to Trinidad & Tobago. However, as also outlined in Gómez (2019, 70), the royal visit also led to criticism in Spain of the SAFFL policy. Under a headline stating that the Spanish language in Trinidad was a “500 year-old fossil” (Granda 2009), an article in a leading Spanish newspaper, *El País*, noted that only 6,500 people in Trinidad & Tobago could speak the language of Cervantes. In addition to decrying the country’s lack of proficiency in the language, it also lamented the fact that Spanish was a compulsory subject only during the first 3 years of secondary school, as well as the need for the King to address the country’s parliament in English (Granda 2009).

Regarding the second research question, one of the aims of the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish has been to promote and promulgate the learning of Spanish. In this regard, it can be argued that it has been successful. A 2006 study of the teaching of the language in Trinidad noted that free Spanish classes had been organised, and it had also been made mandatory at primary schools. However, despite the implementation of training courses for teachers, no detailed records had been kept regarding the number of such programmes. In addition, it was also observed that there had been increased enrolments in Spanish language programmes at UWI, St Augustine (Grau Perejoan and Gea Monera 2006, 209–10). At university level, this increase in popularity has been maintained, and growing awareness of the importance and use of Spanish among younger Trinidadians was also noted in a later small-scale survey, which found that 86% stated that knowledge of Spanish was important for international relations and commerce. Of those studying Spanish, more than three-quarters stated that they were doing so in order to improve their employment prospects (Molina Morales 2013, 148).

To provide a brief overview of Spanish language provision at university level, the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at UWI, St Augustine, offers a full undergraduate degree in Spanish as well as a minor in Spanish; in addition, it also collaborates with the interdisciplinary BA in Latin American Studies. Postgraduate provision includes taught (MA) and research (MPhil) master’s degrees, as well as doctoral research programmes. The Department also offers a postgraduate diploma in interpreting techniques, where Spanish is one of the languages offered for simultaneous and consecutive interpreter training (University of the West Indies, St Augustine 2020a). At the UWI Centre for Language Learning (CLL), the implementation of the SAFFL initiative has been of key importance (Carter 2009, 51). To that end, six semesters of extramural Spanish language courses are currently offered, with provision for a further two semesters of study subject to demand (University of the West Indies, St Augustine

2020b, 2020c). In addition, the internationally accredited DELE examinations, which measure Spanish language proficiency in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference, are also available at CLL (University of the West Indies, St Augustine 2020d). These initiatives complement Spanish-language provision available at other tertiary institutions in the country, such as the University of Trinidad & Tobago, COSTAAT (College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago), and the University of the Southern Caribbean (Gómez 2019, 71).

A further aspect of the SAFFL policy involves raising awareness regarding Spanish-related aspects in wider Trinidad & Tobago society. To that end, the Facebook page of the SIS regularly highlights relevant initiatives such as conversation classes, competitions, and cultural events organised by training institutions, embassies, as well as certain private sector organisations (Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish 2020). Aside from this project, though, the most visible presence of SAFFL has been in the changes to Trinidad & Tobago's linguistic landscape. This has involved widespread use of bilingual Spanish-English signage for street names in Port of Spain, as well as on the country's highways (University of the West Indies, St Augustine 2020c). However, this project has proved controversial due to issues regarding the accuracy of the translations, with concerned citizens writing letters to newspapers citing grammar and spelling mistakes in the Spanish versions (Johnson 2007; Percy 2008). With regard to the bilingual signage for street names in the country's capital, the decision was made simply to translate the current English names into Spanish. This is in spite of the fact that the colonial Spanish names for certain streets in the capital remain well-attested (Moodie-Kublalsingh 2012, 49).

Building on the results obtained in examining the first two research questions, it becomes clear that the SAFFL policy has had limited success, with the initiative condemned as “unrealistic” (Gómez 2019, 71). Indeed, it can be argued that, following the country's abortive candidacy for the headquarters of the FTAA, SAFFL lost its initial impetus, and thus its focus moved from economic to educational. This shift in priority was demonstrated, too, in political terms, with the SIS moving from its original home in the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Ministry of Education. In addition, this situation may have also been complicated, too, by the financial crisis from 2008 onwards, which rocked the global economy and affected Trinidad & Tobago greatly. Indeed, as a resource-rich economy, the country was the hardest hit of the Caribbean nations, with its foreign direct investment contracting significantly (Gold et al. 2010, 2). This deterioration of the domestic economy was also reflected by wider economic instability in neighbouring Venezuela, where the situation continues to remain dire.

6 Concluding remarks

Through presenting this unusual form of linguistic revitalisation, this exploratory study has analysed the rationale, implementation, and effectiveness of the SAFFL policy in Trinidad & Tobago. In short, the SAFFL initiative was well-intentioned, and it has led to increased uptake and awareness of the Spanish language in the country, as exemplified by growing university enrolments and the presence of bilingual signage. However, its impact has been weakened by the change in the policy's original focus – from economic to educational – as well as the absence of clearly defined and measurable aims. Furthermore, as with all political initiatives, it can be argued that due to the post-2008 economic crisis and its aftermath, the SAFFL policy has proven vulnerable to socioeconomic changes in wider Trinidad & Tobago society.

It is perhaps for these reasons, therefore, that suggestions for further integration of the Spanish language in the Trinidad & Tobago context have not been implemented. For example, Molina Morales (2013, 149–50) calls for further efforts to be made by the government, as well as by other stakeholders to support the initiative. With regard to educational institutions, he advocates the creation of a postgraduate teacher-training programme specialising in Spanish as foreign language. He also supports greater cooperation with native Spanish-speakers residing in the islands, which would help to move the use of the language out of the classroom and into the real world.

Unlike the conclusions drawn by Gómez (2019, 71), the outlook for SAFFL in Trinidad & Tobago is not necessarily negative. Indeed, improved economic conditions could lead to greater use of Spanish in public and commercial life. Yet conversely, further impetus may also arise owing to the humanitarian situation in Venezuela. With large numbers of refugees and undocumented migrants from the country making their way to Trinidad & Tobago, together with issues arising from the current (at the time of writing) COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, a corresponding increase in the need for Spanish-speaking personnel has been noted. This has been exemplified by a recent call by the Ministry of Communications for Spanish-English translators (Fraser 2020). In addition, Spanish-speaking law enforcement staff are also in demand (Super-ville 2020), and over 300 civil servants have completed language training courses since 2017, in programmes organised jointly by the Ministry of Education together with the embassies of Colombia and Chile (Espinet 2020).

Although it is of course impossible to predict the future, it can be argued that, as the Spanish language becomes part of everyday life in Trinidad & Tobago, its increased prominence could lead to increased uptake of SAFFL-based initiatives. However, much depends on political and educational management of the policy as a whole. In fact, its prospects are perhaps best summarised in a letter published in the *Trinidad & Tobago Newsday*. Citing the 2019 government amnesty for undocumented Venezuelans, the writer of the letter opines that owing to increased migration, Spanish proficiency in Trinidad & Tobago is “no longer an abstract goal” but rather “a matter of survival as we usher in what can only be described as our new normal” (Blackburn 2019). To that end, irrespective of policies and initiatives, it appears certain that the Spanish language will play an increasingly important role in Trinidad & Tobago as the twenty-first century progresses.

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