

Coming soon: a nation of illiterates

The issue of literacy – the ability to read and write – is fundamental to the development of any country. So, in a week that saw the annual International Literacy Day, what is the situation in Suriname? One man with lengthy hands-on experience in the field is Robby ‘Rappa’ Parabirsing, a linguist and teacher who has spent much of his life helping to develop skills in this most basic and vital of subjects.

“There’s no data,” he says as we sit in his informal library off Coppenamestraat. “The last census was incomplete.”

A rough estimate, he thinks, would be that between 80 and 90% of the people in urban areas are literate. “But in the interior it is very poor. A whole generation was damaged by the war in the 1980s; there is no tradition of going to school and often no access to schools. It’s an ‘us and them’ situation.”

And it got worse when the gold boom started, Rappa says, because the prospect of earning relatively good money in a trade that required no education just added to the impression that literacy wasn’t important.

Part of the problem, he feels, is that in Suriname there is no tradition of reading: storytelling has always been mainly oral.

Perhaps, too, the mixture of ethnicities complicates matters. While Sranan Tongo competes with Dutch as a mainstream language, and many people have a good grasp of English, the sheer number of people of Chinese and Indian heritage, along with the Indonesians and others, might add to the richness of the overall culture but also adds options and thereby diffuses focus.

The worldwide dominance of English as the language of business is threatened by the rapidly-expanding Spanish-speaking community in the USA, while the huge population of China and the willingness of its people to live and work abroad makes it likely that one day in the not-too-distant future, we will all have to learn some kind of Chinese.

At the same time, while lesser-spoken languages are under threat and even disappearing altogether, there are moves in many countries to preserve these tongues, and there are people in Suriname dedicated to teaching children in the interior the languages of their own people. As admirable as that might be in terms of preserving cultures, again it means moving the focus away from international relations for the benefit of communication within a small community.

It is a problem Suriname has struggled with for centuries, with well-meaning organisations including religions spurning Dutch in favour of Sranan Tongo, only to be challenged and eventually brought into line by those with a wider perspective.

But the real problem is the national lack of a tradition of reading and writing, as Rappa illustrates when he talks about having the library built onto the side of his house. “We had a mix of local workers and some from Guyana,” he recalls. “At lunchtime, the Guyanese would pick up a book, but the local ones would just lie back and rest.”

There is another challenge to literacy, though, and it affects the whole world: the fact that the computer screen has taken over from the printed book, and that written communication is often achieved by texting on a mobile phone, rather than using a pen and paper, means that habits have changed and young people grow up not even really being aware of what is missing.

“To many of these kids, handwriting is something extra,” Rappa says. “They don’t see it as being important.”

This is an issue that isn’t going to go away, but it also begs the question of whether it is simply the shape of things to come and those of us who grew up with textbooks and notebooks, pens and pencils, are merely trying to hang onto what we know. Maybe in the future things will just be different. After all, when

someone uses 'u' in a text message, we know what they mean. It just, to the traditionalist, looks wrong and lazy.

But in the meantime, while schools and universities still operate on systems that involve students being able to read and write, literacy as we know it remains vitally important. Although Rappa's library is not an official public resource, it is well known in certain circles and he gets youngsters and, more often, parents, calling him in a panic, desperate to get hold of some of the printed gold dust that has suddenly, at the last minute before an examination, been revealed as absolutely necessary.



By Chris Morvan