Analyzing students' writing in a Jamaican Creole-speaking context: An ecological and systemic functional approach

Shondel Nero *, Lillian Stevens

Department of Teaching and Learning, Program in Multilingual Multicultural Studies, Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, New York University, 239 Greene St., New York, NY 10003, United States

A B S T R A C T

This article examines the language and literacy practices of Creole English-speaking children in Jamaica. Situating the study within an ecological framework, we use a systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approach to analyze students' writing in two Jamaican schools. Data collection included interviews with teachers, classroom observations, instructional materials, and focal students' writing samples. Data analyses revealed vastly different language ecologies between the schools owing to sharp socioeconomic stratification, the structural organization of schools, and the pervasiveness of standard language ideology, which stigmatizes Jamaican Creole (JC) and privileges Standard Jamaican English (SJE) in schools. Functional analysis of students' writing showed that the nature of the writing tasks at the schools created different affordances for exploiting lexico-grammatical choices for meaning making – enhancing them in the case of one school but severely restricting them in the case of another – perpetuating the academic disadvantage for JC speakers. Recommendations for structural and attitudinal changes through teacher training and implementation of approaches that engage students' bidialectal competence for learning are made as important first steps towards addressing educational inequities in Jamaican schools.

1. Introduction

The last thirty years have witnessed a proliferation of studies on academic writing at the elementary and secondary school levels and a concomitant recognition that writing is situated in a social context. Specifically, several studies have looked at the writing of English Language Learners (ELLs) as well as that of speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Caribbean Creole English (CCE), and other non-standard varieties of English from various perspectives – linguistic, sociocultural, and functional, the latter based on Halliday's (1994) systemic functional linguistics (SFL) theory. However, many of these studies have been conducted in North American, British, or Australian contexts with linguistic *minorities* in English-dominant contexts. This study, by contrast, examines the language and literacy practices of a language *majority* population – Creole English speakers in an English-based creole context where English is the official language and the medium of education, but is "neither a native nor a foreign language" (Craig, 2006). We use a functional approach to examine 5th, 6th, and

9th grade students' academic writing in Jamaica—a prototypical case of an English-based creole context. Situating our study within the perspective of ecologies of language (Barton, 2007; Norton, 2013), we argue that writing practices in Jamaican schools must be understood within the larger context of Jamaica as a postcolonial society, manifested in sharp social stratification, especially in schools (Evans, 2001), which (re)produce particular types of language, literacy, and instructional practices. To contextualize our study, an overview of the Jamaican context is necessary.

2. Background – the Jamaican context

The colonial history of plantation slavery in Jamaica, a Caribbean island formerly controlled by the British, left a rigidly socially stratified society in which the wealthy, lighter-complexioned minority upper class had access to better education and upward mobility, while the poor, dark-complexioned masses were deprived of access to education beyond the basic level, and therefore trapped in a cycle of poverty (Sherlock & Bennett, 1998). Although this state of affairs has improved in the post-independence era, with more access to primary and secondary education for the masses (Márquez, 2010), Jamaica remains a sharply socially stratified society. Furthermore, the colonial legacy has forestalled social mobility for masses of poor

* Corresponding author.
    E-mail addresses: shondel.nero@nyu.edu (S. Nero), lillycita@gmail.com (L. Stevens).

people because of classism and deterministic educational policies and practices.

2.1. Language, identity, and education in Jamaica

In Jamaica, two dominant forms of language, Jamaican Creole (JC) and Standard Jamaican English (SJE), have co-existed, with the latter variety being the official language (Carrington, 2001; Christie, 2001). Historically, JC and SJE have been positioned along a continuum of speech varieties ranging bidirectionally from the *basilect* (most conservative creole) to the *mesolect* (mid-range mix of Creole and English) to the *acrolect* (a local standardized form of English) (DeCamp, 1971). In everyday language use in Jamaica, "pure" forms of JC or SJE are rare. Rather, there is a seamless mixing of both forms, what scholars now term *translanguaging* (Canagarajah, 2013; García, 2009), with a greater proportion of the population more JC-dominant. Yet, despite wider use and acceptance of JC in the public sphere in the post-independence era (Jamaican Language Unit, University of the West Indies (UWI), 2005), most Jamaicans self-identify as native speakers of English because (a) the colonial legacy there has given more prestige to English, thereby delegitimizing JC as a language in its own right; and (b) English is the only official language, and only public linguistic identity available.

There has been a long history of JC-dominant speakers being ostracized in schools, their language, commonly referred to as "Patois," treated as deviant or "broken English" in need of repair or even eradication. At the heart of the matter is the fact that for JC speakers, SJE is neither a mother tongue nor a foreign language. This means that JC speakers are not likely to *perceive* English as a second or foreign language because their oral language is dominated by a largely English lexicon (albeit with syntax akin to West African languages). There is also a significant amount of English input in the environment through schooling, print, and official media, which enhances their receptive knowledge of English. They are therefore less likely to attend to English as an entirely different language in the way a traditional ELL would, even if their *actual* productive ability in SJE does not match their *perceived* ability. This creates a unique challenge for language and literacy learning and instruction.

Still, despite the complex linguistic landscape in Jamaica, SJE remains the primary medium of instruction, and developing proficiency in SJE as a basis for success in school and beyond is taken as a given. The question then becomes how best to accomplish this goal in a Creole-dominant environment where (a) most people speak a language they do not write, and write a language they do not speak; and (b) a significant disparity in school based literacy practices and general academic performance among different types of schools continues to be cause for concern among Jamaican educators and the public at large (Jamaica Ministry of Education (MOE), 2011).

3. Theoretical framework

School-based language and literacy practices may be best understood within a theoretical framework that considers their meaning as the result of broader social and historical conditions that shape the environment. Therefore, an ecological framework (Barton, 2007; van Lier, 2004), which examines the dynamic interrelationships between the individual and their surroundings, allows us to examine how these larger social structures play out in pedagogical, language, and literacy practices.

An ecological framework emanates from the sociocultural tradition in that the multi-layered context within which humans operate is believed to shape their behavior and cognition. In that vein, van Lier (2004), following Vygotsky (1986) cast language as the primordial tool responsible for mediating human experience. An ecological focus on language learning considers how text

(language use) and context (classroom ecologies) become mutually enacted as learners draw upon a range of semiotic resources to *do schooling* in response to the practices and expectations of their environment. In Jamaica's post-colonial context where sharp socioeconomic divisions index social status through language use (Nero, 2009), school-level stratification simultaneously reflects and reproduces that same organizing framework. In other words, language behavior is constituent of, and partly accounts for, how Jamaica is socially organized, a phenomenon visibly enacted in schools.

As Barton asserts, "school consumes a large part of children's lives and forms a significant reference point for their values and attitudes," (2007, p. 176). Following suit, the attitudes surrounding a child's language use in the classroom, which may fall somewhere along the continua from vernacular (e.g., JC) to standardized dialect, can potentially act as a mediator of their academic experiences. Thus, an ecological approach allows us to critically examine Jamaican students' schooling experiences through their writing pieces along with the concomitant values and expectations for literacy achievement embedded in the curriculum.

Such an examination of student writing requires a commensurate analytical approach that addresses context-embedded meanings at the level of text production. Systemic functional linguistics (SFL), a sociocultural theory of language, can serve such a function. The theory positions language forms as directly linked with their contexts of use, part of a broad social semiotic approach to language, which is seen as, "a network of systems, or interrelated sets of options for meaning making" (Halliday, 1994, p. 15). It assumes text and context mutually enact the genres associated with academic literacy practices (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In this functional approach, the components of language assume flexible roles in the discourse, given that the context (or genre) in which they appear determines the purpose for communication (Martin, 2009). In SFL, register dictates the lexical and grammatical choices available to the speaker/writer in order to meet the genre-specific expectations of the audience (Schleppegrell, 2004). Within the culturally mediated environment of formal schooling, a vernacular-speaking student must therefore be apprenticed in the norms of genre and register if s/he is to be successful.

The use of a meaning-making approach to investigate Jamaican Creole-speaking students' academic writing signals our deliberate attempt to replace value judgments tethered to "native-speaker" norms by exploring the language of students who complicate such norms. The combination of an ecological and systemic functional approach to the examination of Jamaican Creole students' writing is warranted because they help us capture the interaction of environmental influences on students' semiotic tools in the course of their literacy development.

4. Literature review

Postcolonial contexts, such as Jamaica, defined by linguistic pluralism and sharp social stratification, provide scholars a rich opportunity to explore the interrelationship between environment and language. Specifically, the ecology of bi/multilingual or bi/multidialectal language practices, the identity, and schooling experiences of vernacular English speakers in these contexts are constantly tested against pervasive linguistic ideologies including what Lippi-Green (1997) calls "standard language ideology"[1] – a legacy of colonization.

---

[1] Lippi-Green (1997) defines *standard language ideology* as the pervasive belief in the superiority of an abstracted and idealized form of language, based on the spoken language of the upper middle classes – the "standard language" (p. 64).