

Perceptions of French and Creole Among First-Generation Adult Haitian English Language Learners

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Abstract: This basic interpretive study investigated the literacy experiences of seven first-generation Haitian English language learners. During interviews and focus groups, participants expressed ambivalent feelings toward Creole and French and explained how their knowledge of these languages supported their English language learning.

Cummins' (1979) developmental interdependence hypothesis assigns crucial importance to native language (L1) literacy in achieving second language (L2) competence. Although this hypothesis is very influential in bilingual education research, few studies investigated the role of L1 in the L2 learning of adults (Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005; Jiang, 2011; Kamhi-Stein, 2003; Klassen & Burnaby, 1993; Upton & Lee-Thompson, 2001). As a teacher of adult English language learners (ELLs) preparing for their college careers in the United States, I have noted various levels of former education and varying degrees of L1 literacy skills among my students who are first-generation Americans. Students from Haiti come from a particularly interesting literacy background, but research focusing on adult Haitian students is also scarce: one study examines the role of adults' Creole literacy skills in learning English (Burtoff, 1985). Given this gap in the literature, it is not surprising that adult ELLs' L1 literacy skills are not accounted for in their English course placement and are seldom considered in instruction. Little is known about the literacy experiences of Haitian students in particular. Therefore, in this basic interpretive qualitative study, I wanted to understand the literacy experiences of first-generation adult ELLs from Haiti.

Review of Literature

This section describes (a) the languages of Haiti, (b) the role of native language literacy in second language learning, and (c) the role of Creole literacy in learning English.

Languages in Haiti

In Haiti, French, the language of government and education, enjoys a societal prestige, a lingering reminder of colonial times. Creole has only been recognized since 1987, when the Constitution declared it the second official language of the country (Cadely, 2012). However, the official recognition was not followed by a societal one, and recent reports are still concerned about the pervasive social prejudice against Creole, the native language of most Haitians (Berrouet-Oriol, 2011; Degraff, 2010; Hebblethwaite, 2011). Teachers choose to use French in school even if they are not quite proficient themselves (Berrouet-Oriol, 2011; Hebblethwaite, 2011). Youssef (2002) wrote, "90% of the population remains monolingual in a basilectal Creole; individually teachers informally accommodate the Creole, but French remains the language of 'enlightenment' and learning, excluding the majority" (p. 182). Not having access to education in the mother tongue exacerbated by poverty has severe consequences. In 2010, for instance, UNICEF reported a low literacy (defined as the ability to read and write) rate of 74% for 15-to-20-year-old boys and 70 % for 15-to-20-year-old girls in Haiti (UNICEF, n.d.). For the

entire Haitian population, the World Bank reported a 53 % literacy rate for males aged 15 and above and a 45% literacy rate for females aged 15 and above in 2010 (World Bank, 2011).

The Role of Native Language Literacy in Second Language Learning

Native language literacy plays a key part in second language acquisition. According to the developmental interdependence hypothesis, there is an interaction between L2 competence and L1 literacy skills acquired prior to second language exposure. If children have high levels of L1 literacy skills at beginning of L2 exposure, they are likely to develop similarly high levels of L2 competence (Cummins, 1979). Other studies found some evidence to support that the linguistic interdependence existed in adult learners as well (Burt et al., 2005; Kamhi-Stein, 2003). That is, adult students also benefit from a rich L1 literacy background. Instruction for second language learners should not only scaffold the transfer of existing L1 literacy skills but should also assist students in bridging L1 literacy deficiencies.

Further evidence for the supporting role of L1 literacy in L2 reading in particular was provided by Upton and Lee-Thompson (2001). In studying the ways in which L2 readers use their L1 in the L2 reading process as an aid to understanding L2 general expository text, the authors found five specific approaches in using L1 to aid L2 comprehension. Overall, intermediate-level English language learners were found to use their L1 61% of the time and advanced learners 43% of the time, suggesting that L1 literacy skills provide tremendous support in L2 reading comprehension. The implication of these findings is that the lack of L1 literacy could be rather detrimental to adults' L2 reading comprehension and to L2 acquisition in general.

The Role of Creole Literacy in Learning English

Limited L1 literacy was in the focus of Burtoff's (1985) study, whose participants had limited literacy in Creole and received English as a second language (ESL) instruction. One of the two groups received Creole literacy instruction in addition to ESL instruction. Although statistically significant difference between the means of the two groups' final English exam scores was not found in this study, the relationship between adults' L1 literacy and L2 learning should be further investigated for two reasons. First, Burtoff observed higher levels of motivation and self-confidence in the L1 literacy group than in the regular ESL group, and these variables are extremely important to language learning. Second, the treatment in Burtoff's study was only 24 weeks long, too short a period for L1 study to make a significant difference.

Method

Design

According to Merriam's (2002) classification of qualitative inquiries, the present study is basic interpretive. In basic interpretive studies, researchers "seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, the perspectives and world views of the people involved, or a combination of these" (p. 6). In this study, I sought to understand what Creole and French meant to the participants and how they consciously used their first two languages in learning English.

Research Questions

Three broad research questions guided the study: (a) What literacy foundations did the participants receive in Haiti? (b) What are the participants' perceptions about Creole? (c) How do participants consciously use their knowledge of Creole and French when learning English?

Participant Selection

I intended to select the participants in this study using purposeful sampling. I decided to interview my former Haitian students whose academic performance was below average, hoping to find some common perceptions shared by these individuals. Two of the four former students I contacted responded to my invitation. Although I did not intend to use snowball sampling, some

participants invited their friends. In the end, I interviewed seven students who had all been deemed not college ready by various placement tests they had taken. For the sake purpose of this study, I accepted this as evidence of being a below average performer.

Participants

The six women and one man were all first-generation, nontraditional students. First-generation is used in this study to refer to individuals who were born in another country and immigrated to the U.S. after the age of 16. Nontraditional students are most commonly defined as students over the age of 24 (National Center for Educational Statistics, n.d.). I used pseudonyms when quoting them to protect their privacy. All participants completed their schooling in Port-au-Prince, the capital of Haiti, although at least four participants were from other cities. See Table 1 for additional information about the literacy background of the participants.

Researcher Subjectivity

In dealing with the imperfections of the research instrument, I followed Peshkin's (1988) advice. I was constantly examining my subjectivity using a research journal. I felt a great deal of empathy for the participants. Furthermore, I began this study with some assumptions regarding L1 literacy and L2 learning based on previous training and personal experience as both a L2 teacher and a nonnative speaker of English. Finally, based on Rubin and Rubin's (2012) suggestion on the importance of being knowledgeable about the topic, I learned about the educational system in Haiti before I began interviewing so that I could listen to the participants with a prior understanding of the official educational structure.

Trustworthiness

Merriam (2002) recommended several strategies to enhance the validity of qualitative studies. In the present study, I used a research journal to note my assumptions about the topic and to reflect on the literature. Furthermore, qualitative researchers try to "objectively study the subjective states of the subjects" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 37), so I used member-checking during the interviews and once after all the interviews were completed.

Data Collection

I planned to have one-on-one interviews with three participants to get an in-depth and honest picture of how the participants perceived their languages. In planning the interviews and writing research questions, I relied heavily on Rubin and Rubin's (2012) advice and planned to conduct interviews structured what Rubin and Rubin called "main branches of a tree" (p. 124). Although I had only planned interviews, I also conducted two focus groups with two and four participants, respectively, because the participants invited friends to join the conversation. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) defined focus groups as "group interviews that are structured to foster talk among the participants about particular issues" (p. 109) and explained that they were useful when researchers wanted to stimulate talk about the topic from multiple perspectives.

Data Analysis

After the first interview, the transcript was coded, with preliminary categories emerging from the data. Participants' words were not edited so the reader can get a sense of participants' oral English accuracy.

Findings

"What I have realized right now is that we don't have an identity because they force us to speak French. We are not French! We are Creole," Louis commented at the beginning of our conversation. Although he spoke of a lack of identity, the phenomenon Louis explained should more properly be referred to as an ambivalent identity, manifesting itself in the mixed feelings

participants expressed about Haiti's educational system and the two official languages. This section discusses findings regarding (a) literacy foundations of the participants; (b) mixed feelings toward the educational system and the languages in Haiti; and (c) participants' conscious use of their prior languages in learning English.

Literacy Foundations of the Participants

The participants' recollections of their educational experiences are important because they provide the context in which their ambivalent feelings toward their languages developed. Participant accounts generally supported the literature about Haitian schools and revealed similarities and differences between institutions.

Similarities. The participants attended private institutions because getting into public schools in Haiti was difficult. The only exception was Nora, who went to a public elementary school. French was the primary language of instruction in Port-au-Prince schools. However, in Cap-Haitien, where Vivienne attended elementary school, instruction was delivered in Creole. This finding was consistent with the other participants' knowledge about schools located in the countryside. Tania, for instance, explained that "[i]f the school is in a city, they speak French. If the school is not in the city, they don't speak French all the time or fluently." Vivienne, who was also the youngest participant, had the opportunity to take Creole as a language course in her Port-au-Prince high school. "But when we transfer to Port-au-Prince, then we started with French and they give us one hour a day Creole. Most of us who come from the country, we know more Creole than those from Port-au-Prince." Others were punished for speaking Creole in school. In addition, participants reported the widespread use of memorization and recitation as well as corporal punishment as pedagogical tools regardless of the prestige of the schools they attended.

Differences. There were major differences in teachers' attitudes toward students and the availability of support systems. Frances, Nora, and Vivienne attended affordable elementary schools and "colleges" (private high schools), while Louis, Fredeline, Nerlande, and Tania went to elite schools. I talked to Frances, Nora, Fredeline, and Louis about their schools at length.

Although Berrouet-Oriol (2011) and Hebblethwaite (2011) reported that in some schools teachers might not be proficient in French themselves, all participants perceived their teachers as competent French speakers. Teachers' attitudes toward students were, however, rather poor in some schools. Nora spoke about frustrated teachers who punished students: "[S]ometimes they can't get paid, sometimes they take it out on you. Sometimes they don't come in to work to teach you. You don't have nobody, they need to send you home or send you to a different class."

In the less expensive schools, participants had very little support to learn. Although Frances's teachers used "realia" to teach French in the early grades, later she had to do her own "research," looking up unknown words in the monolingual French dictionary. The dictionary was a form of support most participants mentioned. The second most common form of support was asking the teacher or another expert. For Nora it was her father, and for Frances a tutor her parents could sometimes hire. The tutor's main role was to make sure Frances could recite her homework. Frances had no access to a library. Nora and Frances reported that children sometimes went to school hungry or had no money for lunch. Often, their parents could not afford the books they needed.

Louis and Fredeline were more fortunate although they were the only ones out of several children in their families to be able to attend renowned, prestigious schools. When asked about how these schools contributed to their success, both Louis and Fredeline thought of the rigor and discipline first. As in Nora's school, the use of Creole was strictly penalized. However, Louis's and Fredeline's schools were equipped with libraries. In Fredeline's school, students had to

maintain a B average, which she felt was motivating. Louis's teachers were well qualified, and hands-on learning was part of the curriculum. Students were required to present in class and church and to work for the school even if they could afford the tuition. Louis felt that students in his school were motivated by the presence of higher grades up to the university and by the clean, inviting landscape. "When you are in, you don't feel like you are in Haiti. It's something else."

All participants, except Tania, who attended a boarding school, reported using Creole at home. Vivienne and Louis discussed regional differences in the Creole language. Louis explained that "Creole in Cap-Haitien is different from the Creole in Jacmel and so on."

Mixed Feelings toward the Educational System and the Languages in Haiti

Mixed feelings about the educational system. Participants expressed feelings of dissatisfaction as well as acceptance as they were talking about the Haitian system of education and their own educational experiences.

Dissatisfaction. Generally, participants rejected corporal punishment. In addition, Tania thought that memorization was a "waste of time," and the other three participants in her focus group readily agreed.

Acceptance. Nora, however, thought that memorization was helpful. "Memorize everything. That's how we do it. That's a better help." Frances, although she was scared to go to school sometimes, thought that corporal punishment was actually a way to encourage the students to perform better. "When you don't do your homework they whop you and then it's like they make you focus." When Nerlande, who attended an elite school, was asked what made her school better than others, she responded, "Discipline. Every teacher can hit you like a parent, and you cannot say nothing."

Mixed feelings about French. Some participants expressed contradictory feelings—admiration and ownership on the one hand and condemnation and disavowal on the other—toward the language, supporting Louis's idea of ambivalent identity.

Admiration and ownership. French is undoubtedly the language of power. People aspire to learn the language because as Nora explained, "When you speak French, especially in Haiti, people are going to respect you." When asked about desired change in her native land, Nora's response was to provide support for everyone to learn French, not to eliminate it. Fredeline, like Nora, thought that it was necessary to keep French in schools as one of the primary languages of instruction, and schools "should have more libraries with more books, French and Creole. They have to balance it." Fredeline and Vivienne both referred to French as "our language."

Condemnation and disavowal. When Vivienne was asked to further explain her "our language" comments, she self-corrected, "being occupied with the French people, we keep French as a second language, but it isn't our language." In fact, she did not think French should be the language of instruction at all. Louis shared this sentiment. In his view, if the language of instruction was Creole, the Haitian people would find it easier to learn. Louis expressed sadness over the fact that Haiti is divided along the lines of language proficiency. "Our country is divided by French and Creole," he said. The participants also talked about the discriminatory use of French in Haiti. The powerful and well-to-do elite make an effort to reinforce French at home so that their children can grow up fluent French speakers. Nora remarked, "[t]hey start speaking French from the crib. They are different from you, and they know that." Nora also associated being fluent in French with being light-skinned. "You know, that's why they speak French. They have light color; they have money. They know French in the school they went to. Of course they have to speak French!"

Mixed feelings about Creole. Creole was present in the participants' everyday life. It was the language of informal use. Only in Vivienne's Cap-Haitien elementary school was Creole the language of instruction. In Frances's Port-au-Prince high school, the teachers used it to explain concepts sometimes. In other institutions, its use was penalized. Participants expressed feelings of appreciation for Creole and a longing for literacy in their native language. At the same time, their words conveyed tones of indignation and frustration.

Appreciation and longing for literacy. When Frances explained the difference between French, *a* language, and Creole, *her* language, her preference was evident. "French, it's a language. If you don't use it, you're not gonna be able to talk, you know? But Creole is my language. I will always be able to speak it." Louis, too, preferred Creole. "Because if you speak Creole, it's your own language, you speak it at home, you are friendly. When I speak Creole, I'm friendly. When I speak French, I am a bit limited." Some wished they could read and write Creole properly.

Some thought that Creole should play a more significant role in education although their ideas differed with regards to the extent of the desired change. Frances said that "if they have a course in Creole, it would be better" while others did not think one course would be sufficient. Fredeline called for a balanced approach and thought students should be provided with a choice. "Exams should be in Creole and French and it should be up to the student to take it in either Creole or French." Vivienne would rather get rid of French altogether. Louis thought that Creole should be the language of instruction and French taught as a second language.

Indignation and frustration. There was a tone of indignation in some voices as they were describing discrimination against Creole speakers. "If you speak French, they appreciate you, but if you speak only Creole, you are nothing," Louis said. Nora explained, "...sometimes I feel like discrimination. When you go to a bank and start speaking Creole, they look at you in a different way. [...] you need to speak French and dress properly and everybody is going to respect you."

Those who received some literacy instruction in Creole expressed some degree of frustration over the lack of uniformity between everyday Creole and academic Creole. In Vivienne's words,

...I write it my own way, but then the teacher who really knows tells you this is not the right way to write it. Then they will teach you. They also have the verbs in Creole which is a total surprise because all we learn was French. It was something new when you have. They will tell you the Creole has verbs, grammar. It's really new when you are used to something and now they come up with a new different thing.

Conscious Use of Prior Languages in Learning English

The third research question was how participants consciously used their existing knowledge of Creole and French when learning English. The participants were below average performers according to their college placement test scores. Except for Vivienne, they lacked L1 literacy skills, a prerequisite to L2 competence according to the developmental interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1979). Had they received more solid L1 literacy foundations, they might have fared better in college because they could consciously build on their existing linguistic knowledge. However, Creole did seem to subconsciously influence the participants' speech as evidenced by the lack of past tense conjugation in their conversational English.

The participants discussed different types of support in learning English as well as certain strategies they utilized when reading and writing in English. When asked about language connections, the participants tended to think of French first, associating *support* with *dictionary*

which was only available in French. No one reported having access to an English-Creole dictionary. In addition, a teacher or a peer was often associated with support.

In reading and writing, participants spoke about a balanced reliance on both prior languages. They reported the use of Creole for mental translation of texts in reading and writing. Nora explained that her teachers in the United States encouraged her to translate English to Creole rather than to French. Fredeline reported using Creole for brainstorming and planning before writing in English. However, when getting ready to write, she accesses her writing skills in French. In reading, she uses Creole for clarification. “When I’m taking a reading test and I have some questions, at first I have to translate in Creole because I know Creole more than French. Even though I can’t write in Creole that well, I translate it in Creole.”

Discussion and Implications

In this basic interpretive study, participant accounts supported the literature regarding common educational experiences in Haiti and, to an extent, Cummins’s (1979) developmental interdependence hypothesis. The participants who did not have access to prestigious educational institutions seem to have less solid literacy foundations in French. Louis and Fredeline, who did attend elite schools, are dissatisfied with their academic literacy skills in Creole, but in learning English they compensate for the lack of Creole literacy with advanced French cognitive academic language proficiency (Bernhardt, 2011; Cummins, 2008). Frances and Nora do not have academic language proficiency in another language readily available. Kamhi-Stein (2003) found that when students’ attitudes were favorable toward their L1, their L2 comprehension was better. Although the participants of this study admittedly lacked sufficient L1 literacy foundations, most of them demonstrated favorable attitudes toward Creole. In spite of their insufficient literacy skills, Frances, Nora, Fredeline, and Louis make conscious connections to Creole when reading or writing in English.

Future studies should explore how connections between native language and second language are made. Another area for future research is the identification of particular areas of second language development and production where insufficient L1 literacy foundations among adult learners are especially detrimental. The findings point to the need for helping students who might be struggling with their English courses due to the lack of L1 literacy foundations by incorporating simultaneous L1 literacy instruction or peer tutoring.

The findings also suggest a need for print materials in Creole. Some participants were unaware that a Creole-English dictionary existed. To nurture feelings of pride for the native language, community events that promote literacy and raise awareness should be sought out and promoted. In conducting this study, I gained a deeper understanding for the culture and the people, and these insights will guide me as I set up the learning experiences in my future courses.

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Table 1
Participants' Literacy Backgrounds

Background	Participants						
	Frances	Nora	Vivienne	Louis	Fredeline	Nerlande	Tania
Hometown	Port-au-Prince	Jeremie	Cap-Haitien	Jacmel	Jacmel	unknown	unknown
School location	Port-au-Prince	Port-au-Prince	Cap-Haitien Port-au-Prince	Port-au-Prince	Port-au-Prince	Port-au-Prince	Port-au-Prince
School type	private	private & public	private	private, elite	private	private, elite	private, elite
Home language	Creole	Creole	Creole	Creole	Creole	Creole	French
Perceived ability to speak Creole	excellent (native lg.)	excellent (native lg.)	excellent (native lg.)	excellent (native lg.)	excellent (native lg.)	excellent (native lg.)	excellent (native lg.)
Perceived Creole literacy	insufficient	insufficient	excellent	sufficient	insufficient	insufficient	insufficient
Language of instruction	French	French	Creole; French	French	French	French	French
Perceived ability to speak French	sufficient	intermediate	intermediate	excellent	excellent	excellent	excellent
Perceived French literacy	insufficient	intermediate	intermediate	excellent	excellent	excellent	excellent
Comments		Some Creole instruction in a vocational school	1 hour/day French in Cap-Haitien 1 hour/day Creole in Port-au-Prince		One semester of Creole in high school		