The Writing Performance in English of African Heritage Students in Two Urban Environments: Birmingham, England and Kingston, Jamaica

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the writing performance in English of African heritage students in Birmingham, England and Kingston, Jamaica. The study explores the effects of language use on the written production of English among African heritage students in two geographical locations, Birmingham, England and Kingston, Jamaica. Particular attention is drawn to the effects of Jamaican Creole usage in Jamaica and Creole/Black British Talk in England, on the achievement levels of African heritage students. The paper argues that students’ use of language may be a contributory factor to their attainment levels in English General Certificate of Secondary Education examinations in England, and Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate of the Caribbean Examinations Council in Jamaica.

Introduction

Performance in written English has long been accepted as an important foundation for educational success in regions where English is the official
language. This has been an issue for language teachers especially those working with students who use stigmatised varieties of English because as Siegel (2007, p. 67) asserts, speakers of vernacular English generally “do not do well in the formal education system”. Once this view is being considered, the proficiency of Creole-related speakers of English has to be examined. This view has also been supported by Caribbean language educators such as Craig (2001, 2006) who asserts that only a small percentage of students reach the required level to attend secondary school and an even lesser percentage of those who do, pass the CXC exams in English. These results have resulted in considerable discussions in the Jamaican media and educational circles.

Many reasons are put forward to identify the cause of the failure in English and other writing-based subjects. Less attention has been focused on the writing itself that has been produced; or on the kind of discourse analysis that would allow appropriate strategies to be put in place to enhance levels of written competence. Nevertheless, it is recognised that in this milieu the teacher’s role in developing competence in English is very important. However, the subject has been taught in a somewhat highly-charged political atmosphere. The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of speakers’ language use on academic performance in general, and, in particular, on written performance in English in the two environments of Kingston, Jamaica and Birmingham, England.

The Research Context

Language in Jamaica

The vernacular or mass language of Jamaica is Jamaican Creole (JC) which is the first language of significant numbers of students, whilst Jamaican Standard English (JSE) is the official language. Students often code switch between JC and English or move between different varieties of the vernacular. Creoles, such as Jamaican, which are found throughout the Caribbean, developed out of the contact situation between European slave owners and West African slaves. However, the nature of that contact has inevitably been contested by scholars (Holm, 1988). JC can be distinguished from SE in a number of ways. Craig
The writing performance in English of African Heritage Students (2006) citing Bailey (1966) drew some of those contrasts. For example, JC uses the unmarked verb, with consequently no requirement for agreement with respect to number. ‘Pastness’ is indicated through context; and plurality marked with the particle ‘dem’. Other grammatical structures reveal retentions from West African languages such as Twi (Alleyne 1980, 1989; Roberts 2007). Retentions are also reflected in other aspects of the language, such as phonology and lexicon.

The development of JC has been the focus of considerable study by Creole linguists. In more recent times research has indicated that the language has been influenced by the speech patterns of Rastafarians (Pollard 1994) and by American English (Christie, 2003). One often-used characterization of the language situation in Jamaica has been the description of the environment as a continuum with Standard Jamaican English (acrolect) at one end and features furthest removed from Standard English, (basi lect) at the other end, with the mesolect or intermediate level in between (Winford, 1993). Alleyne (1989), however, simply labelled the language “Jamaican”, asserting that its development was the result of normal second language contact. Some scholars have focused on the pervasive influence of the vernacular and its influence on what was at one time unequivocally the dominant language, English (Christie, 1982, Shields, 1989). Others have focused on the role of Creole as a national language reflecting national identity (Devonish, 1986). This contentious debate has also figured in educational discussions about the appropriate role for Creole in the language classroom (Bryan, 2004, Craig, 1976, 2002, Siegel 1999, 2007).

Negative attitude towards Creole particularly in relation to schooling is evidenced in the literature on Caribbean Creoles. These attitudes in the Caribbean have a long history that have been attested to by writers such as DeCamp (1971) and Winford (1994). The terms ‘speaking bad’ and ‘bad English’ aptly describe attitudes towards the language that have prevailed. It is seen as a marker of illiteracy and lack of intelligence (Carrington and Borley 1977; Christie 2001). Negative attitudes of non-standard varieties are not solely confined to the Jamaican or Caribbean context. Similar findings have been reported elsewhere. (See for instance, Perry and Delpit (1998) for a discussion on the Ebonics case
in America, and Matheson and Matheson (2000) for an analysis of Scots and its relationship to schooling in Scotland.)

More recently, in Jamaica, there has been a marked change in attitudes towards the use of Creole marked by socio-economic and cultural changes in the country that began with independence, the Black Power movement of the 1970s, the cultural dominance of Rastafarian ideology and the development of a black middle class with JC as the mother tongue (Bryan, 2001). Much of this development has been captured in the media and analysed in the work of Shields (1989, 1992, 1999, 2002) showing how the voice of the folk, and the vernacular have gained prominence. Theoretically, it has been named in the literature as 'nation language' by Brathwaite (1984) and popularized in dance hall culture (Cooper, 2004). Further impetus has been provided by other projects such as the translation of the Bible into Creole, an initiative that started in the late 1990s. Another was a recommendation from Professor Devonish, of the University of the West Indies, to the Joint Select Committee of the Charter of Rights Bill which proposed the setting up of an agency charged with investigating formally and popularizing a system for writing Creole.

In spite of the shift in attitudes towards the place of Creole in education, there still remains strong reaction against its use in school, as a medium of instruction with all materials translated into it. The reasons put forward for keeping Creole out of the classroom range from concerns that formalizing Creole would endanger the continued use of English as a medium of education and destabilize standards in English (see Craig, 1978, Siegel 2007), to the more frequent charge that such a scheme is designed to keep Jamaicans at the bottom of the economic and global ladder (Christie 2003, Craig, 2002).

In terms of the research on Jamaican Creole and student performance in writing, the studies have been limited. Bryan (1982) looked at the writing produced by second chance Jamaican-born adults in a London further education college and found many instances of transference from Jamaican to English but also many examples of errors made by inexperienced writers of English. Bryan (1999) took the research further and compared JC speakers in London to Twi speakers in London acquiring English. The errors revealed, in the first instance
suggested, some common errors of transfer which might have confirmed the commonalities between JC and Twi. However, further reading of the data suggested the presence of developmental or intralingual errors related to how all learners acquire English. Both pieces of research would lead to implications for intensive writing programmes.

Corrodus (1988) studied the writing of Jamaican children. She identified and compared errors made by students at their exit and entry from the formal education system. She identified some influences on error-making and their consistency with the acquisition process. She found that these influences were either interlingual based on rule-making from the first language or intralingual, based on the innate processes of second language acquisition.

Pollard (1999) examined the errors in scripts of children sitting the basic proficiency examination of CSEC. She classified the errors into four categories: phonology, lexicon, grammar and idiom. The discussion showed the influence of Creole pronunciation on phonological errors; the use of Rasta words in the lexical category; transfer of Creole syntax in the grammar category; and the translation of Creole phrases to English through idiomatic inaccuracies. The writer promotes an orientation to language that moves “beyond grammar”.

Whilst it is acknowledged that Creole has some influence on children’s texts, Christie (2003) cautions that errors in children’s work are often misdiagnosed, and that the role of Creole is exaggerated. She claims it is probable that it is not just JC, but also ungrammatical English spoken by parents and so-called educated people who believe they are speaking English that may be the reason for the children’s failure. This assertion is pointing to the notion of hypercorrection, particularly in the use of verbs, which has been reported by writers such as Pollard (1999). (See also K. Shields-Brodber, Requiem for English in an English-speaking community.)

**Language use among African Caribbean Students in Britain**

Much had been written about the use and effects of Creole on the performance levels of second generation British-born black children whose parents primarily came from the rural parts of Jamaica and
tended to use the basilectal forms of JC (Edwards, 1979, 1986, Sutcliffe, 1982). Echoes of the negative attitudes that surrounded the use of JC in Jamaica have been reported in the early literature on black British children (Edwards 1979). Research in the 1980s and 1990s indicated that the linguistic repertoire of black children was complex. In London, Rosen and Burgess (1980) first named JC’s interaction with other languages and the local variety London Jamaica (LJ). Sebba (1993) proposed that LJ was used as a marker of identity. Edwards (1986) provides evidence for code-switching behaviour among black British people in her data. However, to broaden and identify the scope of the language used throughout the country, Sutcliffe (1992) referred to the language of young blacks in London, the West Midlands and elsewhere as British Jamaican Creole (BJC), drawing attention to the degree to which it diverged from rural Jamaican speech. Sutcliffe’s research suggested that the children used BJC, their respective local dialects and or Standard English. JC is the focus of attention in the literature as the Jamaicans are the largest Caribbean population in Britain, and the British variety of the language appears to be the most commonly used, not only among young black people, but in varied forms by young people across the ethnic spectrum (Rampton, 1996). The use of JC in both Jamaican and British classrooms to fashion consent or mark opposition was reported in Bryan (1998, 2001) in studies which focused on comparative discourses in schooling, especially language use.

Generally, attention has been on Jamaicans, although there are other young people of Caribbean heritage who speak other Caribbean Creoles. More broad-based research is needed. As the minutes of evidence presented to the House of Commons (2003, n.p.) states:

there is little comprehensive research on African Caribbean Creole/Patois speakers and the impact of Creole/Patois on educational experiences and achievement of African Caribbean students. The Department is not aware of any research which proves a negative impact…. The variety of English which is spoken by Caribbean families in the home and on the street deviates from standard English in vocabulary and grammar. The majority of UK born speaker of Patois/Creole also speak Standard English and switch between the two depending on context.
The evidence suggests that second generation black children were affected academically by the use of Creole. However, the degree to which the proficiency in English of the third or fourth generation is influenced by Creole cannot be determined, in spite of the House of Commons’ summation. In the area of children’s writing, one study by Edwards (1986) drew attention to Creole influence in children’s writing in British schools.

To date, no national empirical study has been undertaken concerning the number of black children who speak BJC or any other Creole, and the type of language used by these children. In the absence of data, the writers will discuss the present language situation based on their observations and knowledge as members of the African Caribbean speech community. An important trend in research on black diasporic communities is the idea of community nomination where an insider’s perspective is utilized in the analysis (see Foster 1991). The significance of community nomination as a methodological tool is that it attempts to explore the perceptions of the community from within. Using community nomination as an analytical tool to describe the language among young people in this speech community (Foster, 1991), we propose that the language spoken by black children today in Britain is a hybrid of the respective local dialect, standard English, interspersed with BJC or more precisely JC words and vestiges of the phonology of African American Vernacular English.

It is worth noting that JC usage by these young people, come from a variety of sources including the dancehall music genre of Jamaica, and older Jamaicans residing in Britain, particularly those who belong to black churches with which significant numbers of the young people have some affiliation. The JC language used by the older generation, has had an impact on the speech patterns of the second generation and to a lesser extent on the current third and fourth generations both in terms of content and form. Many young people socialised in these churches are affected by the black language style of older Jamaicans, even if they do not tend to use the grammatical features of JC (Tomlin, 1999). In addition to the influences of rap music or the hip hop culture which has pervaded all youth cultures globally, young black people are also influenced by American speech transported to Britain from both
black and white preachers and African American gospel singers (Tomlin 1988, 1999).

We call the current language or dialect used by many young black people in Britain, Black British Talk (BBT). This dialect is sometimes referred to as ‘slang’ by the young British black population. Interestingly, BBT is used by black young people irrespective of whether their parents or grandparents come from the Caribbean or directly from Africa. In spite of the lack of empirical data, most casual listeners of young black British speakers are able to distinguish between these speakers and those from other ethnic groups. However, this is not always the case in urban areas such as London or Birmingham where some young people irrespective of their ethnic background utilize BBT.

The Study

The study is based on a research project funded by the British Academy/Association of Commonwealth Universities (ACU). Concerned about the national reports of underachievement of Black students, including their underperformance in the subject of English, the researchers wanted to explore the part that language played in the performance of black students. The overall aim of the study was to examine the role of language on the achievement levels in English of Key Stage 4 black students in Birmingham, England and the equivalent CSEC examination in Kingston, Jamaica. One of the research objectives addressed in this paper is the degree to which the spoken language of African heritage children in Britain and Jamaica affects written texts and their levels of achievement in English. Other aspects of the research will be addressed in future papers.

This paper focused on the following research questions:

1. What are the differences between the Grade 10-11 English syllabuses used by British and Jamaican students?
2. What is the impact of English performance on the overall performance of British and Jamaican Grade 10-11 students?
3. What are the differences between the features of language found in the written texts produced by the British and Jamaican students?
4. What features of JC and JC/BBT influence the written texts of Jamaican students and British students respectively?

**Methodology**

The fieldwork for the study was carried out in four case study secondary schools, two each in Birmingham, England and Kingston, Jamaica. The schools in Birmingham will be referred to as Merryhill and Sandmere, and the two in Kingston as Windgale and Towers. All the schools are located in urban areas. Merryhill is situated in a fairly suburban area and most students, including those in the study, come from upper working class and lower middle class backgrounds. Sandmere is located in an area of relative social and economic deprivation, although the students selected for the study came from working class and lower middle class backgrounds. The schools in England were selected because they were reputed to work well with black students. Both schools in Kingston are located in fairly affluent areas but the students were drawn from a range of socio-economic backgrounds. As Jamaica has a multi-track, selective schooling system, it is important to note that these were secondary high schools, where children would have performed well in their primary leaving exams, known as the Grade Six Achievement Test (GSAT). However, for the purposes of the study the pupil profile in both locations were similar. The participants remain anonymous and invented initials will be used to record responses from educators. Observations and responses from students will be referred to as Pupil MA or SF based on the first initial of the schools above and the letters of the alphabet A-F. Specific comments from respondents will be verbatim.

A mixed method design was implemented which allowed for the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data. The research design primarily entailed a series of interviews with a variety of stakeholders including students, teachers of English, heads of English departments and head teachers. The interviews and focus groups for the fieldwork which took place in the four case study schools were tape-recorded and participants were briefed about the research purposes. Focus group interviews were carried out with a total of 24 students with an equal number of boys and girls. There were four interviews with students,
consisting of six in each group (3 girls and boys), which lasted for approximately 40 minutes each. The students came from across the range of academic abilities. Focus group interviews were conducted to elicit the students’ views on their use of Creole/BBT and its influence on the written production of English.

Structured interviews were carried out with heads of English departments and class teachers from the participating schools. The interviews were undertaken to assess teachers’ view on the overall academic abilities of the students and significantly teachers’ view on the language needs of the children and their views on the effect of Creole/BBT on written texts. Discussions were held with key personnel from the participating schools in the two geographical locations including the deputy head of Merryhill and the head teachers of Sandmere (Birmingham), Windgale and Towers (Kingston). These discussions pertained to the general standards of achievement in the school with a particular focus on English. The researchers also had an informal interview with the Deputy Head of the Ministry of Education and Culture for Jamaica which centred on English in the Curriculum.

The investigation also entailed an analysis of written texts to determine the features of writing, and to explore any possible transfers from Creole in the case of Jamaica and transfers from BBT/Creole among the British sample. Analyses of texts were conducted by two teachers in both geographical settings. Samples of students’ work were analysed by two teachers, one from each geographical location. A range of written texts were analysed based on the purpose of the writing. The word ‘purpose’ is used to describe genres or text types, under two broad categories: fiction and non-fiction texts. The fiction texts were recounts, response to literary texts and letter writing (formal/informal). The non-fiction category included persuasive writing, argument and information texts.

An analysis of documentary evidence of the English Curriculum in both settings was also undertaken. This was useful to address points of similarities and differences in the content of the syllabuses. Twelve video recordings (three in each school) of classroom discourse were also undertaken. The content analyses of the syllabuses in both countries
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will be undertaken in greater depth in a further paper, together with the video recordings, which will focus on teaching approaches.

Findings

What are the differences between the Grade 10-11 English syllabuses used by British and Jamaican students?

The English Syllabus in England and Jamaica

The first research question considered the differences between the syllabuses in the two environments. The English Curriculum in both England and Jamaica offer English Language and English Literature through an integrated approach or unified course of teaching. In turn, English Language and Literature are offered as a double certificate, referred to as Paper 1 and 2 in England and Paper A and B in Jamaica. In England there are a number of English examination boards which are all informed by the English National Curriculum (DfEE, 1999) and the GCSE Subject Criteria for English. The Northern Examinations and Assessment Board is the syllabus for the two case study schools in Birmingham. In Jamaica, the Caribbean Examinations Council for English is the only board for Jamaica and other English-speaking Caribbean islands that include islands such as Barbados and Trinidad. In Jamaica, Paper A replaced the ‘O’ Level examinations in English Language in 1979, and Paper B which tested the Literature component of the syllabus has been in operation since 1981.

In looking at the content of the syllabus, the assessment objectives in England are comprised of three components: Speaking and Listening (En 1) Reading (En 2) Writing (En 3). The Caribbean English syllabus gives attention to Reading and Writing in particular but they are articulated under the two broad categories: Understanding and Expression. The literature component is also divided into two components: Knowledge and Insight, and Organisation of Response, focusing on the structure and coherence of paragraphs and grammar and the mechanics of writing. The Caribbean curriculum seems to place more emphasis on the functions of writing compared to the curriculum in England. Additionally, there is slightly more attention given to grammar in the Caribbean syllabus than in the syllabus used in
England. A range of genres are taught in both geographical locations. These include letter writing, persuasive texts, responses to literary texts and comprehension.

A major difference between the two syllabuses is that the curriculum in England includes coursework whereas in Jamaica the focus is solely on examinations. Additionally, the British students’ texts were both handwritten and typed to accommodate the coursework component, whereas Jamaican texts were only handwritten.

**Attainment in English**

What is the impact of English performance on the overall performance of British and Jamaican Grade 10-11 students?

The second question considered the impact of performance in English on overall performance in the secondary exams. As the English Language and Literature form part of the general English curriculum although they are discrete exams, the GCSE/CXC results are aggregated to give a holistic picture of the achievement levels in English of the students in both geographical locations. In relation to English, 66.7% of the British students at Merryhill gained A-C grades in English Language and 75% of students at Sandmere gained A-C. For the Jamaican sample 83.3% of the students at Windgale gained A-C in English and 91.7% at Towers gained A-C grades.
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Table 1: A comparison between English Performance and Overall Performance of the Grade 11 students in Kingston, Jamaica, and Birmingham, UK.
Based on the findings of the overall GCSE English results, the score of the British students is approximately 17% lower (70.8%) than their Jamaican counterparts (87.5%). Significantly, the CXC English scores for the Jamaican children are higher than the GCSE English scores for the British sample.

**GCSE/CXC Attainment**

It is necessary at this point to assess students' overall levels of GCSE/CXC achievement to provide some correlation between general levels of achievement and attainment in English. In the British data, 58.5% of the students at Merryhill and 73.5% of the students at Sandmere gained 5 +A-C* grades totalling 65.7% of students gaining five GCSEs. In the Jamaican data 75% of students at Windgale and 79.1% of the students at Towers gained 5 or more CXC at grade C or above making this a total of 76.8%, approximately 11% more than their British counterparts.

The context for the discussion of the results must be noted. This comparison of attainment levels is between countries where different models of examinations and assessments are utilized. This particular set of Jamaican students compared favourably to their English counterparts. The fact that Jamaica does not enter all that are age-eligible may have some bearing on the favourable result. However, one common feature that must be noted across all cohorts was the confirmed link between success in English and achievement in other areas, except, perhaps, student C at Jamaican Windgale who failed to do as well as her success in both English A and B would have suggested. Deeper analysis of students' performance through the work produced is important in providing further evidence of performance; further insights into the language and literacy development of both sets of students; a good sense of the achievement of individual students and in providing a focus for discovering how oral language impacts on writing.

**Differences in Students' Writing**

*What are the differences between the features of language found in the written texts produced by the British and Jamaican students?*

The third research question considered the differences between the features of language found in the written texts produced by the British
and Jamaican students. The analysis began with an examination of the teachers’ views of those differences.

**Teachers’ Views**

As previously mentioned, samples of students’ work based on a range of genres were analysed by two teachers, one from each geographical location and the present writers. A Jamaican teacher referred to as Ms Mare, from Windgale assessed the British data and a British teacher from Merryhill, Ms Hill, assessed the Jamaican data. We specified to the teachers that they should focus on key areas of writing including punctuation, grammar, structure/organization, expression and significantly any Creole influences. The few studies that had been produced had indicated that Creole transfer was an important factor in students’ writing, but not the only factor.

Ms Hill assessed the work from the Jamaican students and after making some general comments noted that the writing exhibited:

- A narrow range of types of writing with an emphasis on discursive, argumentative and letter writing.
- Formal English as the register of choice.
- Limited creativity, which was possibly due to the ‘lack of opportunity due to restricted tasks’.
- Little or no ‘colloquial / dialectical interference’.

She also noted that it was ‘difficult to understand what the marks/ticks were given for’, indicating a differing perspective in the two environments, about what were the essential components in good writing.

The Jamaican teacher, Ms Mare, who assessed the work produced by the British students, made a number of observations. In commenting on expression, she reported that the ideas for their course work ‘are presented quite simply and in some instances, in a too informal manner.’ In terms of usage, she stated that the ‘errors in grammar and punctuation are similar to those made by students in Kingston, Jamaica’. She specified these as:
Concord problems where verb endings were omitted or ‘s’ added where it was not required, as a kind of hypercorrection.

The lack of past tense markers where required.

She also stated that spelling errors were similar to those made by Jamaican students. The comment made by Ms Hill about the lack of colloquial or dialectical interference in writing appeared to contradict the comments made by Ms Mare that both the Jamaican and British students made similar dialectical errors in writing. The difference is suggestive of the teachers’ level of language awareness and also their tolerance of the kinds of errors that students make.

**Examining Categories of Writing**

To get at the differences, further analysis of the children’s writing, was carried out based on the following main categories or indicators:

- Expression
- Vocabulary
- Structure
- Grammar

In terms of grammar we wanted to explore whether or not there were influences of Jamaican Creole in both the Jamaican and British data, or BBT in the British data. The terms high, middle and low achieving or attaining will be used as the designated descriptors for pupil achievement in English (Tomlin and Coles, forthcoming).

**Expression:** The high achieving students in both countries had a more sophisticated writing style consisting of skilled use of well developed language. In a response to a statement as a precursor to a persuasive piece, TA from Jamaica extols the virtues of teachers and scientists whilst admonishing Jamaicans for placing entertainers in high regard:

> Teachers and scientists are long term assets to the development of our nation.
In another extract from the same piece TA writes:

*For too long we have viewed teaching and science as morbid and out
dated professions…. Have you realized how many hours a teacher invests
into his or her occupation, compared to an entertainer who only thrives
on popularity for personal fame and success.*

In another extract from a persuasive text from a high achieving student a
good expressive style is displayed on the role that national television
should play in promoting Jamaican culture:

*In conclusion, I think it would be a very abhorrent decision to reduce our
national television of its foreign content.*

In the British sample a high achieving pupil, SA, in response to the
books *A Modest Proposal* by Jonathan Swift and *Talking in Whispers* by
James Watson writes with a measure of confidence:

*The purpose of this book is to enlighten and widen the perspective on
Law and human rights and to gain the knowledge and understanding of
democracy.*

*The purpose of the structuring of the novel and proposal in this way is
to give the readers the opportunity to engage in the story and immerse
our emotions and personal feelings on the situations in both these
countries.*

Similarly, a fairly well developed language style is evident in the
extract from a high attaining British pupil, MA. The extract below is a
response to an argumentative essay comparing the broadsheet with
tabloid newspapers and entitled: ‘How do newspapers influence
readers’?

*In contrast to the tabloid newspaper, the broadsheet has long
informative sentences in which the language is more controlled and
less dramatic. “Up to 500,000 healthy pregnant sheep and lambs could
be culled”. The actual language used is more complex than in the*
tabloid and is designed to appeal to better educated and or higher social status people.

The style of the tabloid is created for a more emotional effect. The first paragraph is reportage which means it has an overview of the article in the first few lines. After the first paragraph the story is repeated and embellished with detail based only on speculation and opinion.

Both environments thus produce high achieving writers with good control of language who are able to convey their ideas with facility, as is the “Expression” requirement of CXC.

Vocabulary: Further analysis of expression required a deeper attention to vocabulary, which revealed some differences. The Jamaican teacher who assessed the written samples of British children described the language used as ‘simple’. This is in contrast to the formal register of the Jamaican students which sometimes led to some awkward word choices ‘teaching and science as morbid and out dated professions’ or the use of the term ‘abhorrent decisions’. Apart from these observations, there was little difference found in terms of vocabulary between the high achievers in both geographical settings, but there were more significant differences in the scripts produced by children in the middle ability range. A textual analysis of the data revealed that the Jamaican students of average written ability used language effectively and had a greater vocabulary range compared with their British counterparts. A Jamaican pupil of average ability (WP) states:

... Britain has a very impressive educational system.

Another middle attaining pupil (WS), in an expository essay entitled: “The most pressing problem facing our country today” wrote:

Overall crime and violence affects Jamaica in many ways and has a negative impact on the economy both directly and indirectly.
The extract below is drawn from the writing of a pupil (TC) whose essay was also about the challenges facing contemporary Jamaican society:

There are many reasons why persons commit crime. Some because of unemployment, insanity or stupidity, neglect in childrearing from early years and also because of time wasted in school years.

Interestingly, Jamaican writers tend to use the word “persons”, for “people”, which is not the practice of British writers. The use of people by British writers confirms the orientation towards the use of a less formal vocabulary.

Below is the writing of a British pupil (MC) who, by the teacher’s evaluation, was described as being in the middle ability range. Note the word the things which was corrected.

The time in which this play Inspector Calls was written things which were [taking] place around this time were world war two, this time [were] world was two. But the author set the play at an earlier date of 1912, before world war one. Around this time many changes had taken place within England such as trade unions had started, who represented workers rights. This play is based on a family in which all members took part in the death of a woman called Eva Smith but when investigated the family blames each other and hesitate over their actions.

Linked to expression and vocabulary is the literary turn of phrase. A focus on the ‘literary turn of phrase’ is based on the work of Barrs and Cork (2001). It is used to denote phrases and parts of sentences that have a literary nuance or exhibit a rhetorical flourish. It is where emerging writers experiment with literary effect (see Fox 1993). Some of the texts in the Jamaican data made use of the literary turn of phrase, which was more noticeable than any usage found in the British data. Ironically, the British teacher observed that there were fewer opportunities for creative writing in the Jamaican scripts.

It was apparent that the British teachers set more imaginative or fiction narratives than the Jamaicans. Clearly, the Jamaican students had to write text types that were more ‘restrictive’ in nature which
tended to focus on persuasive texts, formal letters and discursive writing. Yet, it was still possible for the Jamaican text to be infused with the literary turn of phrase. The examples demonstrate the formal register and the tendency towards the ornate style of writing, bolstered by opportunities for wordplay which is part of the Jamaican oral tradition. This stylistic distinction is emerging as one of the main differences between the best writing from both settings.

Examples of these literary turns and flourishes can be seen in the following extracts from WB’s expository essay entitled: ‘Jamaica has no Culture’:

Our culture spans the globe and everywhere is painted with many colourful brush strokes of music, language and food.

So strong are our rhythms that people come searching for our limitless talent and culture in music, cultivated from a strong African background.

Our food are as strong as they are spicy. They are the kind that would kill your tastebuds and send them to heaven.

Another extract from TC also illustrates the point:

She knew the boys’ heads were hard as the cocoa ground during March and as stupid as the mountain sheep she had.

**Structure**

This is the area of writing which focuses on organisation and coherence. The Jamaican students in the sample were taught to structure persuasive texts in an explicit manner, thus affecting the organisation of ideas. The following is from WC:

Opposing

I strongly disagree with the statement that says, national television should reduce its foreign content and play a more significant role in the promotion of national culture...
I ineradicably believe that we shouldn't be locked away to only the things that are happening culturally in Jamaica.

Proposing

We as a people need to be up to date with our culture. Because of international television channels, we tend not to pay much attention to the cultural activities that are taking place in our country.

British students on the other hand were given titles, but there was no indication in the present data that they were taught to structure their writing using such specific organising principles. In a previous study that one of the present researchers has carried out on the writing of African Caribbean children in four Key stage 2 primary schools in Birmingham, teachers used the above format to enable students to structure persuasive pieces (Hatcher, Tomlin and Cole, 2005).

Significantly, students in the Jamaican data were explicit about the genre of writing and wrote the text type on each piece as a main heading, particularly in language pieces, for example, expository writing or persuasive writing; whereas this was not always the case in the British scripts. It was not necessarily a conscious reflection of Hallidayan principles of genre discourse but it could be that Jamaican teachers were aware that writing the text type in this way guided the students in structuring their essays.

Grammar

This is the area of writing, where it might be expected that there would be most evidence of first language/Creole features. Grammatical features might not be as salient to students as they respond to the urge to write. The study sought to ascertain the influences of JC and JC/BBT on the written texts of Jamaican students and British students respectively.

Jamaican Sample

In the focus group interviews with the Jamaican students many of them stated that they spoke patois and were aware of the differences between JC and SE and the contexts for the language use of both varieties. As
discussed earlier, there are differences between JC and SE. The challenge with analysing texts which focuses on JC is that the two systems are so closely interrelated that it is often difficult to detect Creole influences and grammatical mistakes. However, as previously stated the distinguishing features of Creole are the invariability of verbs, nouns and number system recognized in such as the use of the unmarked verb, application of concord and the treatment of plurality.

In the Jamaican texts below, there were clear instances of Creole influences, particularly among the low attaining students. The Creole influences are underlined. One student, WE, wrote:

*We when dun (JC)*

‘We had finished’

*We see a man (JC)*

‘We saw a man’

The first of WE’s constructions is reminiscent of a very basilectal Creole feature, namely the particle ‘en’ indicating ‘pastness’ (Pollard, 1989). The second example is a more simple construction using the unmarked verb, with no indication for time.

Another girl, TE, wrote:

*He stop talking (JC)*

‘He stopped talking’

*One day they just stop talking and Plum come friend with us once more (JC)*

‘One day they suddenly stopped talking and Plum became friends with us once more’

In the first example pastness is not marked and this is repeated in the second example. The construction *come friend with us* could also be interpreted as the invariable tense form *come* for became and a deletion of ‘s’ to the plural noun *friend*. However, there is also the interpretation where *friend”* is being used as a verb in a way common in JC (Alleyne, 1989 - *‘im mad me’; im rudeness mi”*). We would then
have moved further from English to a serial verb construction (go, see), which is an African retention (Sebba, 1993).

There were instances of Creole influences even with middle attaining students. As one girl, WD wrote:

*There was a dance that was going to keep over at Plum’s yard (JC)*

‘There was a dance that was going to be held/take place at Plum’s house’

Apart from the unmarked verb, Jamaican versions of English words ‘keep’ and ‘yard’ are used, following a pattern and usage discussed by Pollard (2003). She also produced the following:

*Accidents occur continually, where both young and old have been victims because motorists refuse to slow down and give them a bly.*

Note the word *bly*, which is a Jamaican idiomatic expression meaning to grant a favour or unearned concession.

**British Sample**

In the focus group interviews with the British children the students claimed to speak ‘slang’ (BBT) most of the time. The students said that they did not much Creole other than when they were angry, or if they were quoting a proverbial expression or to ‘curse’ an individual. However, in the British texts students’ grammatical errors were similar to those found in the Jamaican data. Examples include differences in verb endings and subject verb agreement. There were possibly less direct Creole than BBT influences. However, one pupil, MD, stated that she did use Creole quite frequently which was evident in her work, as the following extract demonstrates:

*The message for teenage girls is to caution teenage girls not to fall pregnant too early in age...*
Costume shows that the baby shows purity and innocence, as it is naked and you can only see the mothers’ face

In the first extract, there is the fronting of ‘teenage girls’ and the Creole-like ‘too early in age’ rather than ‘at too early an age’. The second extract uses the generic rather than the specific subject and as in Creole the definite article is omitted (Bailey, 1966). However, the incorrect use of the apostrophe is a common error of students irrespective of ethnic or language background. It shows the need for revision. Commenting on the work of MD her English teacher said that: “She occasionally misses the endings from words and needs to revise both plurals and apostrophes to make her writing more accurate and easier to read.”

BBT was evident in students’ work, as the following two extracts illustrate:

*The structure is lay out good*  
‘The structure is well-laid out’

There is no concord between subject and verb and ‘good’ is a BBT word for ‘well’. There was evidence of BBT in another extract from another girl, SE, who wrote:

*Jonathan Swift write this text as a serious pamphlet*  
‘Jonathan Swift wrote this text as an important pamphlet’

The use of the word serious in BBT has a distinct meaning, which is different from the way it is used in white British English. The word *serious* often denotes something of a high quality and importance.

**Discussion**

On the matter of language competence and educational success, the study confirmed earlier findings showing the well-established relationship between language competence in Standard English and academic success. The students who performed creditably in both their English exams also performed well overall.
The investigation revealed that there were some differences between the features of language found in the written text produced by Jamaican and British students. Concerning expression or style of writing, it would appear that the language of the Jamaican students in the sample was more varied, particularly in terms of vocabulary, compared to the British children, especially among middle attaining students. There may be several reasons for this. It could be that Jamaican children are encouraged to read a wider range of texts, although, there is no support for this in the present research. Another explanation is that the Jamaican children have inherited a rich oral tradition, characteristic of Black cultures in Africa and the diaspora (Tomlin 1999). The oral culture encourages rapping, punning and wordplay. Also, the Jamaican children are exposed to a vibrant, colourful and creative language style widely used across the society. There is also Roberts’s (2007) contention about Caribbean people’s love of ornate language, manifested popularly as the love of the ‘lyrics master’ – one who can perform powerfully with words. It could be that these factors combined mean that Jamaican children are more confident in experimenting with language and this is then transposed to written texts.

In Britain, the current black British children are the offspring of second and third generation British born blacks, whose parents, in turn came mainly from lower socio-economic backgrounds in Jamaica. Whilst they too have inherited a rich oral culture (Edwards, 1979), these children may not have such transferable language skills because of their exclusion and lack of social and economic participation in mainstream British society. In Britain, accents and dialects are linked to social class (Trudgill, 1990) which some writers hypothesise affect the degree of cultural and economic capital available for the schooling process (Bourdieu 1986, Barone 2006). Since, British black children do not possess the cultural and economic capital as they tend to belong to lower socio-economic groups; they may not be capitalizing on the language and literacy skills so necessary for academic success.

It would appear based on this study that the students in the Jamaican data are more aware of the different purposes of language compared
to their British counterparts. Significantly, the Jamaican students' awareness of their use of Creole possibly makes them approach writing in Standard English as writing in a separate system. Discussions about the language issue in Jamaica have reached the level where increasingly both teachers and students are aware of the differences between SE and JC. In the Caribbean, there has been some accommodation to Creole varieties in creative writing and literature. This is confirmed by Christie (2003, p. 46) who argues: “students should be allowed to express themselves freely, employing whatever variety makes them comfortable in the classroom and outside”.

When examining for first language transfer, an analysis of the samples demonstrated that the degree of Creole influences was more noticeable among the Jamaican children of lower ability. Additionally, Creole speech patterns were present in the Jamaican scripts, especially when students wrote in dialogue for certain creative pieces. In the CXC syllabus students are encouraged to be conversant with language use for certain situations and as such are not penalised for using Creole speech in genres such as narratives or poetry.

It should be noted that the British and Jamaican children made some similar errors in their writing. This confirmed the Jamaican teacher’s assessment of the British children that:

> errors in grammar and punctuation are similar to those made by students in Kingston, Jamaica.

These included JC verb usage, for example; the lack of concord between subject and verb and the formation of the noun. It is not surprising that Jamaican students are influenced by Creole, especially as JC is the popular language. However, the preponderance of JC influences together with BBT, in the written texts of black British children, calls attention to the need for greater research in this area.

**Concluding Remarks**

It is worthwhile mentioning that there has been insufficient public discussion in the Caribbean on how language use affects the academic achievement of Jamaican students (Christie 2003, p. 40). The same is
certainly the case for African Caribbean students. Yet, the data confirms the interrelationship between academic attainment and use of language. This examination also compared the types of errors these two groups made and found some evidence of transfer and inexperienced writing. These tentative conclusions are already suggesting some writing strategies drawing on text-based language teaching and language study for further exploration.

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The Writing Performance in English of African Heritage Students


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Carol Tomlin & Beverley Bryan


Championing the very best arts, culture & heritage in the West Mids and beyond - Contact: info@brmpic.com. Tweets by @MrDaveOram. Birmingham Bab. Birmingham was a national centre for the manufacture of japanned goods in the nineteenth century. Japanning is a process whereby a hard black varnish coating was applied to metal wares, in imitation of lacquerwork. This large ornamental japanned metal tray was probably made by one of the japanned metal wares manufacturers in the Birmingham area, around 1815-35. The Writing Performance in English of African Heritage Students in Two Urban Environments: Birmingham, England and Kingston, Jamaica. Article. Jul 2016. Jesus and the streets: A hermeneutical framework for understanding the intraracial gender academic achievement gap in black urban America and the United Kingdom. Article. Full-text available. Tomlin, C., Bryan, B. 2009 The writing performance in English of African heritage students in two urban environments: Birmingham, England and Kingston, Jamaica. Paper presented at the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, University of Manchester, 2-5 September 2009. http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/187888.pdf. See full details. University in Birmingham, England, United Kingdom. The University of Birmingham. Coat of arms. Motto. Latin: Per Ardua ad Alta. Motto in English. Through efforts to heights[1]. Type. Persons unknown (including students of the University of Birmingham) entering or remaining upon the buildings known as No. 2 Lodge Pritchatts Road, Birmingham at the University of Birmingham for the purpose of protest action (without the consent of the University of Birmingham).[37]. A Skillful Piece of Work. Once Birmingham and Sheffield, two of the largest towns in England, began to quarrel. The quarrel started as each of them claimed to be able to produce the most skillful piece of work. A special jury was chosen to decide which city would show the greatest skill. The day arrived. Then a sewing needle was laid on the table by representatives of Birmingham. A smile appeared on the lips of the jury when the needle was noticed. Then the top of the needle was screwed off and 4 needles were drawn out, one from another. The first needle, as it was, had been the case of the four other needles. The needles were handed over to each member and examined with great interest. In whose favour did the jury decide? Write the correct words into each sentence.