

Fi Wii News A Creole Writing Experience

Resumen

Este artículo está basado en la experiencia de creación de un periódico escolar bilingüe (inglés, creole y español) para el colegio Flowers Hill Bilingual School en el año 2004. "Fi Wii News" nació como una forma de investigación interpretativa que intentó aportar a la reflexión sobre bilingüismo y cultura de esta institución educativa. Los intentos de escritura de la lengua criolla de San Andrés Isla fueron hechos por sus estudiantes, proceso que deja conclusiones relevantes para la reflexión sobre la educación en la isla. El resultado de este proceso no pretende proponer una forma de escritura de esta lengua criolla sino contribuir a una mayor comprensión de la situación sociolingüística y educativa de San Andrés isla.

Introduction

This document is based on the dissertation called "Going Up and Down The Hill with Fi Wii News or the Production of a Bilingual Newspaper for Flowers Hill Bilingual School, San Andres", which was carried out during the year 2004 under the direction of Alberto Abouchaar and the support of Raquel Sanmiguel and Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Sede San Andrés. The dissertation was an attempt to approach the community of Flowers Hill Bilingual School –one of the most representative public schools of the island for the native people-, through a way of participatory action research and with the purpose of contributing to the reflection about bilingualism and culture that was taking place at the school with the "Bilingual Program 2004" that Universidad Nacional de Colombia had offered to develop with the school at the time.

The objective of the project was the creation of a bilingual (understood as two languages or more) newspaper in Flowers Hill Bilingual School which would also help shape an understanding with regard to the educational and sociolinguistic situation of San Andres Island. Thus, diversity in culture and language, some historical facts and educational policies on the island were discussed in the document so as to give the reader a wider view of the education and sociolinguistic situation of a particular school in San Andrés Island.

In this paper, I want to discuss briefly what the experience of creating a newspaper in which *Creole* was written with the students and by the students was like, as well as what conclusions I came up with after being

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involved in a kind of research that gave voice to the students and teachers and empowered them to be active participants and owners of it.

Flowers Hill Bilingual School

“Going Up and Down the Hill” was literally a journey around The Hill, the neighborhood where Flowers Hill Bilingual School is located. But it was also an attempt to understand San Andrés Island as another educational Colombian setting in which diversity, languages in contact and policies come together to make of it a very complex environment to work for English teachers.

Many factors seem to affect teachers’ job and routines strongly. Everyday aspects such as climatic conditions and infrastructure; requirements of local and national laws of education, union protests; mixed ability classrooms, and students’ lack of discipline, low motivation and lack of support, were all issues I saw that pushed teachers to the limit of their capacities. Big classrooms with students coming from monolingual schools and mixing up with native bilingual students was one of the most important issues to consider when talking about bilingualism in this particular school and probably in most of the schools on the island. As a result, there was a constant code-switching from Spanish to English or *Creole* in the classrooms which reflected the reality of languages in contact.

However, what language should be used to teach, and how to do it seem to be the questions that have been asked for a long time. The Ethnoeducation Office in San Andrés Island has suggested the use of English from 1st to 3rd grade during 100% of school time. From grades 4th to 11th English and Spanish should be used simultaneously in a 50/50 way. However, bilingualism was not developed as such in this school. The presence of English was quite poor, what prevailed was *creole* and Spanish. Cultural activities and public acts were tried to be developed in English, but discipline and attention were lost, so Spanish had to take over to regain control. Bilingualism in this school was thus a mixture between what the ethnoeducation office expected, and what teachers and students actually faced when trying to develop it in their every day experiences.

Students came from different places. Their family roots were spread in the Great Caribbean (mostly Nicaragua) and the United States, or in the mainland (mainly Chocó, Barranquilla, Cali, Medellín, and Bogotá). To some extent, their origins seemed to be important in order to understand the underlying intercultural conflicts on the island which were reflected on the expressions used at school to characterize the different groups of people who live in San Andrés.

Mainlander, fifty-fifty and raizal, are the type of students found in Flowers Hill School. *Mainlander (continental)* describes those whose parents are not natives to the island, who neither speak nor understand *Creole* and live in certain areas of San Andres especially, in the neighborhoods located in North End or downtown of the island. There is however, another common and much stronger expression used to describe this group of people on the island: *panya*, which is associated to the word *Spaniard (hispano)* and refers to the flood of mainlanders (Spanish speakers) who came to live on the island as it was officially declared a Free Port. Thus, it is common to find people who were not born on the island but who have lived all their life there. These people may have married a native person and have had children born on the island and are commonly depicted as *fifty-fifty*. Some of them do not even speak *creole* even though they had one *creole* speaking parent. They are not addressed as *panya*, but they are not *raizal* either. The *raizal* is the native student characterized by living in one of the most traditional areas of the island (San Luis, Barrack, Cove), who speaks *Creole* at home, whose parents were born on the island or the Archipelago and whose

religion is mainly Protestant. This is how the Raizal community is acknowledged: by their language, phenotype, costumes and religion¹ as the ethnic group which has its long time back generational roots there. They are identified then by their foreign sounding last names, by their protestant beliefs, by their mother tongue, *creole*, and by the way they settled on the island.

Language and origins seem then to be closely related. *Creole* is the language of traditions and of native family ties. Spanish on the other hand is the language of the mainland, the language of 'the outsider', the language of business. And English is just kept at church and at school. So, we could characterize a *mainlander* and a *raizal* by their first language. But, it does not seem so simple with a *fifty-fifty*. If these students were born in a bilingual setting, why do they speak more Spanish than *Creole*, or not *Creole* at all? Is their first language then Spanish? If so, why is not *Creole*? These questions came to me when being in this school setting, but I still do not have the answers and do not attempt to develop them yet. *Mainlander*, *fifty-fifty* and *raizal* students are all challenged in the school scenery, they are all part of the diverse context in the classrooms of Flowers Hill and San Andrés Island. They all have to be taken into account when implementing a curriculum in the school, when talking about bilingualism or when ethnoeducation is attempted. They all bring to school different experiences, different mother tongues, different cultures, which make them diverse and with different needs.

A Bilingual Newspaper

Getting the idea of developing a newspaper for Flowers Hill Bilingual School in San Andrés Island, in which the English-based *Creole* was to be written, had lots of implications. Introducing *Creole* at school, talking about it as a language, suggesting writing it, all these in San Andrés requires time, discretion, and care. I found that people on the island had different opinions regarding the status of *Creole* and their views concerning writing, and processes of learning and teaching it were also quite diverse.

The English-based *Creole* of San Andres Island is part of a wide group of English-*Creole* languages spread in the Caribbean region. These belong to the Atlantic branch of English-based pidgins and *Creole* languages in the world. The other branch is the Pacific which is formed by English-based pidgins of China and Melanesia and *Creole* languages of Hawaii and Australia (Patiño, 2000). The *Creole* of San Andres and Old Providence is related and has similarities with the ones in Jamaica, Miskito Coast (Honduras and Nicaragua), Puerto Limón, Portobelo and Bocas del Toro, in Central America. It has been said that there is a possibility that all these *Creole* languages come from common English-based ancestors formed in western Africa, which were brought to these coasts by slaves and traders. The African linguistic heritage seems to have come from languages like Yoruba and Bambara spoken by the Kwa and the Mande groups in that order (Holm 1988; Alleyne 1980 quoted by Patiño 2000).

The *Creole* of San Andrés has been considered a linguistic continuum (O'Flynn de Chaves, 1991) described by native *Creole* speakers as a *broken* English, a *faster* English, or a badly spoken variety of English. This could show that the two languages, *Creole* and English, are not psychologically and socially perceived as two separate languages, but as one with gradual differences.

Creole as well as English and Spanish has an important role in islanders' life. Native people are closely related to it and keep it to themselves. They feel it as part of their identity, as another way to create native family and friendship bonds. It starts with an "*all right*" way of greeting and then spreads on the streets, on the beaches, at parties with stories and at home with traditions. It is also

1. See Corte Constitucional, Sentencia No. 053-99.

at school among the students and the teachers, in the classrooms and outside them. And that is where I tried to find it. I wanted to hear it, to learn some of it, to invite students to try to write it as part of a process of reflection, learning and as a way to come closer to a community that also belongs to the Colombian educational reality.

I started introducing *Creole* in the classroom with the students in 8th 7th and 10th grades, which had the majority of *Creole* speaking students. We had some workshops to discuss about the history of *Creole* and the use of it on the island. They did some role plays as a result of the reflections towards the presence of *Creole* in San Andres and it was interesting to see how they know about the sociolinguistics of the island, and how they usually reflect and are aware of *Creole* stereotypes and the social problems they can cause on the island. Some of the products they developed as part of the workshops were included in the newspaper later. I decided to bring some pieces of writing in *Creole* to grades 8th and 7th to start encouraging them to write in *Creole* and reflect upon writing. I used the book *You Can Read and Write Kriol* which was the result of a process developed in 2002 in Belize called The "Belize Kriol Project" (Decker, K. 1996).

It is said that this Belizean *creole* English is very similar to the one in San Andrés. The development of a standard way of writing Belizean *Creole* started in 1996 with an orthography committee that had looked at alternative approaches to systematically write their language. This committee decided that this *Creole* should be written following what is called Rule-based Phonemic Model which aims to maintain the more common spelling conventions of English.

In San Andrés there was an orthography committee which followed the Belizean example. With mother-tongue education in mind, in 1997, the Christian University of San Andres, Providence and Santa Catalina arranged discussions on the foundation, essentials, and pros and cons of beginning education in the mother tongue. Several meetings were held with Island leaders (both political and religious), educators and representatives of the media. Those talks led to proposing trilingual education for Islander English-speaking children using Islander English, English and Spanish as languages of instruction. Three public schools, all housed in Baptist Church facilities, were chosen as experimental schools to develop and implement a trilingual education curriculum (Morren 2001). Their hypothesis were that native San Andres, Providence and Santa Catalina Islands' children -i.e. children who learn to speak Islander English at home as their first language- who, during their pre-first and first grade of school are taught in their mother tongue and are given mother tongue support in subsequent grades, will do better academically in content areas such as mathematics, social science and natural science. Further, upon completion of primary school these children would be able to speak a second and third language (i.e. English and Spanish) as well as or better than other native Island children who had not received instruction in the mother tongue. The tangible results of this proposal were 32 Big Books written in *Creole*. Nine of the Big Books were especially intended for Social Science, four for Natural Science, and three for mathematics.

I however did not work with the orthography already developed by this committee since it has not been made known officially to the island. I started with samples of Belizean orthography because it was the only available tool I had, but this writing system changed as students tried it out. The Belizean orthography also follows a phonemic model. The benefits of such a writing system is that it takes advantage of the fact that human language is composed of a small number of meaningless sound units (phonemes) which are combined and recombined to form meaningful utterances

(words, sentences, etc.). Thus, people learning to read phonemically need learn a small number of symbols, which they can recombine endlessly to write anything they want (Kephart, 1992).

We created our own school committee in which there were about 10 students from levels 8th and 11th who spoke different languages. Many of them did not speak either *Creole* or English. Students from 11th grade were encouraged to lead the project. They were in charge of organizing the meetings and gathering all members. With the students from 8th level, the main emphasis of the gatherings was to agree on an orthography system for *Creole*. With the groups, we had discussions related to the newspaper and the possible articles they could write or look for. As time advanced, it became hard to motivate students to write articles in *Creole*. There was also a high number of mainlander students who wanted to join the process. Thus, the presence of Spanish and English became necessary in the newspaper in order not to leave these students out of it, and to keep the bilingual core of the school. The newspaper became then trilingual. This was due to the diversity of students present at school and to the fact that *Creole* was not the only language existing at this school or on the island. Discussing trilingualism was at this time common for the teachers and therefore the timing seemed appropriate to develop a project in which Spanish, English and *Creole* could come together.

We began looking for things in *creole*, and thus they started recording stories, recipes and dialogues in *Creole*. Then, they found themselves in a predicament every time they heard those *Creole* recordings and tried to transcribe them for the newspaper. Even though we had worked on an agreement about vowels and consonants, they kept on transcribing in a standard spelling system. Standard English became our constant reference, and then this orthography system created by the students seems to follow a phonemic model which needs Standard English knowledge in order to be read and understood.

Some prepositions like *of*, *to*, the articles *the*, *a*, and conjunctions like *and* were kept in the standard written system. The vowel sounds and graphemes [a] and [i] in Standard English were changed into the diphthongs “e” and “ai” in that order. Standard sounds like [ð] and [θ] as in *them*, *this*, *three*, are represented in *creole* by “d” and “t” as they do not exist in *Creole*. The explosive sound [k] is written “k”. Some Spanish words are also there in the *Creole* orthography for the newspaper. Words like *prof* which mean *teacher* are constantly used. Students also used to add common English endings to Spanish words that they did not know in Standard English. This seems to have become frequent in *Creole*. Probably a strategy commonly used among them as a way to “creolize” Spanish. And so *Creole* was acknowledged in this school as it was Spanish and English. The newspaper made it possible for trilingualism to be visible in this particular school of San Andrés Island.

Conclusions

For the last few years, ethnoeducation has gained importance in the Archipelago. Documents, policies and projects related to education have had to take this concept into account. But it is rather a new concept. It was introduced in the Constitution of 1991, and studied and regulated by laws 70 from 1993², 115 from 1994; decrees 804 from 1995, and 1122 from 1998, and by the social indigenous associations of the 70’s and 80’s. Under the scope of ethnoeducation, the government has

2. Ley 70 de 1993: Art. 2,5 – “Comunidad Negra. Es el conjunto de familias de ascendencia colombiana que poseen una cultura propia, comparten una historia y tienen sus propias tradiciones y costumbres dentro de la relación campo poblado, que revelan y conservan conciencia de identidad que las distinguen de otros grupos étnicos”.

acknowledged the multiethnic and multicultural character of Colombia, and has aimed at leaving behind homogenizing models of education.

Ethnoeducation is then part of the efforts to protect and acknowledge identity. It entails decision making by the ethnic communities, students and teachers understanding of ethnic differences in the classroom, cultural competence, and bilingual, bicultural or multicultural education programs (respecting native languages). It also demands including afrocolombian culture in education and fighting against ethnic discrimination.

However, *Creole* still seems to be seen on the island as a marginal language spoken by a minority. The teachers, the community and the scholars *do* consider this context as a special one that needs distinctive ethnoeducation policies and programs. Scholars have claimed that the island might still be assumed as a context that needs more investigation and reflection to preserve the local traditions and that favors the understanding of the Great Caribbean and the rest of the world (Alleyne 1994). Acknowledging *Creole* as a native language and giving people the right to favor it, has been an important achievement on the island. The Colombian Constitution has given them this right. However, I think that Colombia is still a homogeneous country. Ethnoeducation favors native cultures, native identities and languages. But, do islander people want to preserve these ideals? People usually want to leave for the mainland or for other countries, and that in fact influences their thinking towards *Creole* languages and standard forms. As a result what seems most important and respected are standard forms. Their special local conditions stay on the island, and these conditions are then vanished for the people to become part of a globalizing country and world.

There are teachers who agree on writing the language and base their arguments on the need to better proficiency in standard forms of English and Spanish. Nevertheless, their opinions about the best ways to develop and fulfill the process of literacy at school diverge. Whether to start in pre-school and finish in third grade or to continue in high school levels is not certain yet. Also, the possible consequences and benefits of literacy in *Creole* for the students do not seem clear for the teachers. Students and teachers seem to have different views about *Creole* and thus, its writing does not look feasible for them. Most teachers think that implementing *Creole* in the curriculum could cause problems to the native students when they face other social contexts in the mainland or abroad. The native people have been constantly challenged to leave the island in search of a job or better opportunities. In the mainland they would need a high level of proficiency in Spanish. Abroad, they would have to communicate properly in English. They will not find *Creole* speakers or *Creole* contexts in which they could use their mother tongue. So, all the efforts and investment to write it seem unnecessary to the teachers and to the concerned educative entities. These efforts just seem worthy to keep the local conditions and traditions of the islander for a short time at school. The main targets for them are again English and Spanish, and *Creole* might just work as a channel to reach them.

But, what is Sanandreaan People's first or second language?, what is the proper bilingual program to follow?, what are the needed and accurate materials to use at school?, what kind of training do teachers require?, and specially what do we have to believe in regards to *Creole*?, all these have no straightforward answers yet to improve the conditions of education on the island. Teachers claim that *Creole* is the native people's first language. *Creole* is what native students bring to school and what they have as their best tool to communicate. They argue that it is necessary to use *Creole* orally in the classrooms from the very beginning of the learning and teaching stages

and through high school in order to help students understand and learn. But when talking about literacy in *Creole*, teachers differ in opinions. It is better for some of them to keep it orally. They assert that *Creole* should work as a bridge to reach higher levels of Standard English and Spanish. It is an oral language for them and this condition is what keeps their traditions and culture alive. Learning to write it and to read it represents for them the cause of confusions for students. What they consider useful and important is to clarify differences between *Creole* and Standard English to favour and make emphasis on the learning of the latter.

So, the interest in the English-based *Creole* and in the creation of a bilingual newspaper in one of the public schools of San Andres Island was an attempt to approach their people and to learn about their language and education issues, which are related to the cultural, social, political and economic situations of the island. The study of the language *per se* was not the concern of this document. "Fi Wii News" was a new space for the students to reflect upon *Creole* and to learn from it and from their culture. Standardizing this orthography system that arose through a cooperative process of awareness, self-reflection and research with the students seems to be quite pretentious. I believe writing the English-based *Creole* of San Andres is necessary, but it requires a longer-term process of research. "Fi Wii News" newspaper was just an experience we lived with the students and an effort to contribute to the reflection about bilingualism at Flowers Hill Bilingual School.

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