

REPORT ON A CREOLE ENGLISH READING EXPERIMENT INFORME SOBRE UN EXPERIMENTO DE LECTURA EN INGLÉS CRIOLLO

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Resumen

En 1982-84, se hizo un experimento con niños en una escuela secundaria (junior high school) en la isla de Carriacou, Grenada, para comprobar la hipótesis de que aprender a leer su variedad del criollo inglés (CIC, criollo inglés de Carriacou) iba a ayudarles en el aprendizaje de la lectura del inglés metropolitano (IM). Durante tres semestres, los estudiantes tuvieron acceso a su lengua materna por intermedio de una ortografía fonemática. Los materiales utilizados incluyeron textos, cuentos y anécdotas personales. En intervalos regulares, los estudiantes fueron sometidos a pruebas en CIC y en IM y se hizo una comparación con un grupo de control a que se administró una prueba en IM.

Las cuestiones específicas a las cuales se buscó respuestas fueron:

- ¿Cuántas dificultades tendrían los hablantes del CIC para aprender a leer su idioma materno a partir de una ortografía fonemática, y cuáles serían sus reacciones?
- ¿Cómo se podría proporcionar materiales de lectura a estos niños criolloparlantes?
- ¿Los estudiantes serían capaces de leer otro tipo de texto que cuentos folklóricos y canciones en CIC?
- ¿Cuál sería el efecto de que hubieran aprendido a leer su idioma materno para su aprendizaje de la lectura del IM?

Como respuesta a la pregunta 1, los resultados de la investigación sugieren que los hablantes del CIC no tienen dificultad para aprender a leer su lengua con una ortografía fonemática. Las reacciones a los materiales en CIC fueron muy positivas: incluso niños que no estaban vinculados al proyecto siguieron pidiendo copias. Respecto a

la pregunta 2, el proyecto demostró que es posible producir materiales de lectura localmente en lugares como Carriacou. Los intentos de contestar la pregunta 3 fueron limitados hasta cierto punto, pero los niños fueron capaces de leer anécdotas personales contadas por otros niños y textos contruidos por el autor y otros profesores. Varias causas hicieron que fuera igualmente difícil contestar a la pregunta 4, incluso los sucesos políticos que culminaron con la invasión a Grenada por parte de los Estados Unidos. Mientras no es posible afirmar de manera inequívoca que saber leer en CIC facilitó el aprendizaje de lectura del IM, se puede decir que no les hizo daño. El grupo que participó en el experimento mejoró en su lectura del IM de una manera comparable al grupo de control, aunque tuvieron menos tiempo para practicar su lecto-escritura del IM en el aula.

A partir de esta investigación, el autor recomienda la alfabetización inicial en inglés criollo utilizando una ortografía fonemática. El alfabetismo es un saber sicolingüístico holístico que se adquiere una sola vez en la vida de un individuo y que se puede aplicar a cualquier otra lengua en seguida. Para niños, lo más fácil y lo más rápido es adquirir ese saber en su lengua materna. Una ortografía fonemática hace uso de los conocimientos (inconscientes) que los niños tienen sobre su lengua materna. Por último, la alfabetización en criollo inglés puede sensibilizar los criolloparlantes a las diferencias entre su idioma y el IM y por ende motivarlos a adquirir el IM.

Introduction

In this paper, I want to briefly describe three ways in which reading has been approached on Carriacou, Grenada. The first came from the capitalist world; the second was developed out of a socialist revolution; the third was part of an applied linguistics research project.

Earlier Readers

Nelson's Readers

An example of how the differences between CCE (Carriacou Creole English) and ME (Metropolitan English) language patterns can be ignored is provided by Nelson's New West Indian Readers (Borely, 1978). These readers provide a series of graded reading exercises beginning at the "infant" (age 5) level. Infant Book One introduces children to reading. The first full sentences children are expected to read are listed in (1) (ibid, page 11):

- (1) 1. The dog has a pup.
2. The boy has a cat.
3. Dad has a big pig.
4. Pat the pup, Dad.
5. The dog bit the cat.
6. The cat got a big cut.
7. Bad dog.
8. Get the bat, Pat.
9. The bat is on the bed.
10. The pup is on the cot.

The startling fact is that although this book was specifically designed for West Indians, not one of these sentences matches the normal speech of Carriacouan children. The problems occur on the lexical and morpho-syntactic level, and are summarized below.

Table 1. Comparison of ME forms in Nelson's New West Indian Readers Infants Book One and CCE forms

ME forms	CCE forms
has	av
bit	bayt
got	gyet
get (retrieve)	gou fo
is (locative)	dei
pup	popi
dad	dadi
bad (ill-tempered)	kras

Nelson's Readers are slickly produced, with colorful pictures depicting happy middle and upper class West Indians playing cricket, working in the kitchen, visiting a zoo, and so on. They are attractive books and children enjoy looking through them, but they do not find their language in them.

The Marryshow Readers

In 1982 the Curriculum Development Unit of the National in-Service Teacher Training Program unveiled a plan to deal with the differences between Creole English and ME. The plan included a series of books called the Marryshow Readers. The idea was to give children the chance to use their own speech at the beginning of their school career, without stigmatizing them, while introducing ME structures in a controlled, systematic sequence. Ideally, as they progressed through the Readers, children would read only language which they already knew. Spelling was to be in traditional orthography, with non-ME items like *dei* 'to be located' respelled on analogy with ME patterns, in this case "dey" (they). The language experience approach was to be used to supplement the material in the Readers. Some sentences from the first book in the series are presented in (2).

- (2) Look at Daddy and the baby on the step.
Come, Patsy, come and sit down.
Come and sit down with us.
Let us call Mama.
All of us.

There are several problems with this material. For one thing, these sentences are too simple. Five year olds can say far more than this. They can manipulate their tense/aspect system to say interesting things; yet these sentences contain no tense or aspect. There are not enough syntactic or semantic cues in these sentences to help children develop a model of reading. The reason for this is that the developers of the Readers were consciously including only utterances they felt were shared between ME and CCE:

"The language of the Marryshow Readers matches, as far as possible, the speech patterns of the children who are going to use them. This is not to say that they are written in Creole. There are grammatical patterns in Creole that are the same as English, and so these are the patterns we begin with." (Hodge, quoted in Searle 1984:81-82)

Another problem here is that the sentences already, at this level, contain things that most rural Grenadian children would not say, such as "let us" (*le wi*) and "all of us" (*al a wi*). "With us" in the context of "Come and sit down with us" would more likely be *bay wi*.

A third and final problem with the Readers was their insistence on introducing ME forms as early as possible. As I have said before, there seemed to be a feeling that time spent not working on ME was time wasted. This feeling, of course, is a symptom of the linguistic insecurity produced by the larger mythology about language and culture and is still a major component of language ideology in the Caribbean (see Devonish 1986).

Despite all this criticism, it must be added that the cultural content of the Readers was excellent. For the first time, a relatively coherent set of reading materials was being planned which depicted West Indians in their real environment living, working, playing, and solving problems together. In line with the goals of the Grenada Revolution, social goals such as equality of women and cooperation were promoted in the readings.

The Carriacou Experiment

In 1982-84 I carried out a very modest literacy experiment with a group of Carriacouan children who, in the judgement of their teachers, were marginal in their literacy skills. For this project I used a phonemic spelling system as illustrated in the following:

Vowels	i	u
	ei	ou
	e	o
	a	

Consonants	b	d	j	g
	p	t	dh	k
	v	z	zh	
	f	s	sh	h
	m	n		ng
	w	l/r	y	

The rationale for phonological, as opposed to etymological, spelling is discussed more thoroughly in Kephart (1992). For now I want to stress the decision between minimizing and maximizing the differences between the creole and metropolitan languages. Etymological spellings imply a minimizing approach; phonological spelling implies a maximizing approach. I felt that a maximizing approach would enhance students' awareness of the differ-

ences between CCE and ME and might eventually make it easier for their teachers to call attention to what patterns of ME they need to learn.

Children were introduced to the spelling via a primer which contained simple drawings of familiar objects and animals used to illustrate the phonemic spelling, as in (3):

- (3) maniku 'opossum' hou 'hoe'
 gwana 'iguana' kotlas 'machete'
 tatu 'armadillo' fok 'garden fork'

Following this, language experience texts, personal anecdotes, and folk tales were collected from the children and given back to them, first on the chalkboard, and then on paper. For example, asked to tell what happened over the weekend, children offered:

- (4) Wi beik bred Satodei.
 'We baked bread on Saturday.'

Pipl kil pig.
 'People killed pigs.'

A bin an fishnin an a en kech notin.
 'I went fishing and didn't catch anything.'

An example of a folk tale collected from the children is the story in (5) about a lajables, the mythical woman with one cow-foot who can waddle your brain:

(5) A story about Lajables

Dis stori iz about a man an a lajables.

This story is about a man and a lajables.

Wan dei i av a man from Belmont,

One day there was a man from Belmont,

i pik op a laja- a likl chayl in di roud.

who picked up a laja- a little child from in the road.

Sou i di 'n nou dat waz a [lajables] chayl,

So he didn't know that it was a lajables's child,

sou i pik it op. Di chayl kray kray kray.

so he picked it up. The child cried and cried.

I gi di chayl ti, chayl dou want.

He gave the child tea, (but) the child didn't want any.

I gi di chayl kon-bif, i dou want.

He gave the child corned beef, he didn't want any.

I giv it, eniting i giv-in it, an, i no tekin i.
 Whatever he gave the child, it wouldn't take it.
Sou wan dei i sei, i go bring di chayl in dakta.
 So one day he said he would take the child
 to the doctor.
Wen i liv gouin an bring di chayl in dakta,
 When he left to take the child to the doctor,
dem oda lajables stei op an di hil an dei sei:
 those other lajables stayed up on the hill
 and said:
 "Deziwei, we yu a gou?"
 "Desiree, where are you going?"
 "Dei sei dei a bring mi a dakate ou!"
 "They say they are taking me to the doctor!"
An, an den di man drap-dong di chayl an i, i stat tu ron.
 And, and then the man dropped the child
 and he, he started to run.
An afta di wan antap de, di litl chayl tel im,
 And then those up (on the hill) there,
 the little child told him,
 "Yu loki, yu loki tudei, yu loki!"
 "You're lucky, you're lucky today, you're lucky!"
Wi da dans tunayt, wi da dans tunayt!"
 We would have danced tonight,
 we would have danced tonight!"

When enough of these were collected, they were gathered together into a modest stapled reader, printed at the school, which was given to each child in the project. The children practiced reading these together in class, and also took them home. Some of the readers contained phonics and other exercises.

The research set out to investigate four questions which I think are crucial for educational planning in creole and other nonstandard language speaking areas of the world. These questions are set out, briefly, in (6):

- (6) a. How much difficulty would speakers of CCE have in learning to read their native language with a phonemic orthography, and what would be their reactions to it?
- b. How could reading materials be provided for CCE speaking children?
- c. Could children read material other than folk tales and songs in CCE?

d. What effect might learning to read their native language have on children's reading of ME?

I will give brief answers to these questions, so far as the research results permit, since they are relevant to the ecology of the language. A far more detailed description of the project and its results is found in Kephart (1985).

With regard to question (6a), the evidence collected during the research suggested that it is easy for speakers of CCE to learn to read their language with a phonemic spelling system. The only problem that I observed frequently was the reading of *i* as ME *I* which reflects the high frequency of occurrence of *I* as the spelling for the ME first person singular pronoun. In most cases this confusion cleared itself up within a few minutes at the most.

The children in the research group, who were poor readers, were performing better on word recognition tasks in CCE than in ME by the second month of the project. By the end of the second 13-week term, they were doing better in CCE than in ME on semantic sentence completion and comprehension of a short written passage.

Children who were already literate were even more startling. After three exposures to the orthography they were easily reading material which was not known to them previously. They, as well as most adults who were already relatively fluent readers, had no problem with the CCE orthography.

It was not possible to work extensively with younger children, but one seven year old girl was able to read the anecdote (13) in chapter seven all the way through. She had not seen the language spelled this way (or indeed in any way) before. She used the unfortunate strategy, taught in many West Indian primary schools, of spelling nearly every word before she said it, and she pronounced the indefinite determiner *a* as [e]. She was very slow and methodical in working through the text, but later I heard her telling parts of the story to her older brothers and sisters, with obvious enjoyment. That same day, she and her family sat down with a proof copy of a "reader" in CCE, and read it cover to cover. They had not seen the system before, either. Again, the laughter and comments that

accompanied their reading showed that the content was meaningful to them and that they were enjoying being exposed to it.

Since the CCE orthography works for Patwa as well, several Patwa speakers were shown it and asked to read. After a few minutes of adjustment they had no trouble. It should be mentioned that other West Indians, particularly from mainland Grenada, Trinidad, and Jamaica, were shown the CCE materials and had no more trouble reading them than the Carriacou people had, although sometimes a word or phrase might be puzzling. However, the CCE materials were virtually opaque to speakers of General North American English, as would be expected.

Reactions to the CCE materials were very positive. The readers, which were collections of stories and anecdotes told by the children, were in constant demand even by children not engaged in the project. Children in the research group who read the materials for family at home reported that they enjoyed the stories and in many cases read them for themselves. All the children had favorite stories which they especially enjoyed reading and there was no problem in getting them to do so either before the class or on tape. Indeed, there were times when it was hard to restrain them from reading in the class.

Children like these rarely have the opportunity to laugh at something they are reading; it is simply too laborious a process to arouse enjoyment. The CCE materials got people, children and adults, to laugh, even when they were reading them for the first time. This is important, because it shows that meaning was being extracted from the materials and that this meaning was relevant to their lives and experiences. This suggests that there is a potential for the development of "critical" literacy, i.e. a personal relationship with print, in creole languages and that people exposed to the materials were immediately demonstrating this.

Regarding question (6b) the research showed that materials for the teaching of reading could be produced at the local school level in places like Carriacou. Except for a couple of things done at the University of Florida, all the materials were produced and printed on a Gestetner mimeograph typi-

cal of those available in communities and schools throughout the West Indies. Some of the materials were enhanced by the availability of an electronic stencil cutter. In December 1982, sixteen-page readers were produced, on Carriacou, for about US \$0.34 each. More important than the cost, however, is the fact that the materials presented material which was immediately relevant, linguistically and culturally, to the children. This was because the words and texts were collected from the children, and then given back to them in printed form. Content was controlled naturally: whatever the children could talk about, I assumed, they could also read about. Thus not only were the materials cheaper than those obtainable from metropolitan sources, they were also far better suited to their intended audience.

Attempts to answer question (6c) were limited somewhat, mostly because of the political events which occurred in late 1983. Certainly the children were able to read personal anecdotes given by other children. They also read a short passage on spider monkeys, a South American monkey which does not occur in Grenada or Carriacou. After they read it, the children were asked questions about it in class and were able to answer readily.

I had hoped to devise several lessons in, say, geography, history, and perhaps science, in CCE to further test learning of content but time did not permit this. Nevertheless, I think the results obtained suggest that there should be no difficulty for children in this area.

The attempt to answer (6d), i.e. to trace the effect of reading CCE on the children's reading of ME, was impaired by a number of factors. Perhaps most significant was the loss of four of the fastest improving children in the research group when they were promoted to a higher class. At the same time, the maintenance of a valid control group was difficult, as there was a tendency for the poorer readers in the control groups to drop out of school because they were reaching the age when it was more profitable for them to spend their time farming, fishing, or sailing than to stay in school. These two factors, combined, make answering (6d) difficult and tentative at best.

Conclusion

To summarize, the research and control groups began the project in January 1983 with no significant difference between them in their ability to perform on a simple reading test in ME (.05 level of significance). By July 1983, after two 13-week terms, the research group had improved significantly (.01 level). The control group had also improved, but only at the .05 level. I was unable to test them at the end of the third term (December 1983) because of the coup and US-intervention. I was absent from December 1983 to June 1984, during which time only two sessions were held with the children. By July 1984, a final evaluation revealed no significant change for either group, and in fact both groups scored lower on this test than on the last one I had given them.

Thus, while it can not be clearly stated that reading CCE helped the children in their reading of ME, it can be stated that it did not hurt. The research group showed a similar improvement pattern in ME to that of the control group, even though they received less classroom time practicing reading and writing ME.

From the perspective of education, and particularly acquisition of literacy, I believe that initial literacy in CCE using a phonologically based approach to spelling makes sense for a number of reasons, which I will outline briefly here (for more detail, see Kephart 1985; 1992).

First, literacy is a holistic psycholinguistic skill which needs to be acquired only once in an individual's life. People may go through life learning many languages, but they only have to learn to read and write, i.e. what reading and writing are, once (Goodman 1973; Spiro et al. 1980).

Second, initial literacy is most easily and rapidly acquired in children's first language, which in Carriacou is CCE. This is the language in which their experiences and knowledge of their psychological, social, and physical world are represented for them.

Third, to make full use of children's (unconscious) knowledge of their native language for literacy acquisition, initial literacy is best done using a phonologically based spelling system. This is especially important in the creole context, because a minimizing (etymological) approach makes it more difficult for children to be aware of what they know (in CCE) and don't know (in ME) and therefore more difficult to motivate when it comes time to learn ME (see Craig 1977).

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